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## **Toward Integrative Religious Education in Belgium and Flanders Challenges and Opportunities**

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### **Abstract**

This article describes the way in which RE has been organised in Flanders and Belgium, and gives attention to the problems and challenges that arise these days. We argue that the *Schoolpact* of 1958 which implies separate RE in different religions in public schools needs a revision. Therefore we propose an alternative system, within the boundaries of the Belgian Constitution, that makes room for integrative RE as a new compulsory school subject in all schools.

Keywords: Belgian Constitution, integrative RE, secularization, religious pluralism

### **1. Introduction**

Over the last decades, the idea of religious education (RE), as an integrative, non-confessional and pluralistic school subject has received positive attention in literature. Wanda Alberts (2007) for instance argued at length that the introduction of integrative RE as a compulsory subject is the best way to make sure that all children have the chance to learn about the diversity of religions from an educational, non-confessional perspective (see also Jackson 2004; Jensen 2008). In addition, the UNESCO, the European Commission (REDCo project), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (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 integrative RE has already become part of the school curriculum. RE is no longer organised as confessional education *in* religion, but as a non-confessional course that teaches pupils *about* religions. This is the case in Scandinavia (except

Finland), England and Wales, a small part of Germany (Brandenburg) and Switzerland (Zurich). This article will explore why and how integrative RE could be introduced in Flanders.

## **2. The Organisation of RE in Belgium**

The political system in Belgium is the result of an ongoing process of state reform, based on regionalism and federalism (Hooghe 1993; Farrell and van Langenhove 2005). Since 1988-9, Belgium has had 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. The Communities have jurisdiction over ‘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.

Additionally, Belgium has a peculiar system that organises the state-church relations (Torfs 2005). Belgium officially recognises and subsidises six religions (Catholic, Protestant-Evangelical, Anglican, Orthodox, Jewish and Islamic) as well as the non-religious humanist community (organised laity). Salaries and pensions are paid for ministers of these worldviews and they may designate ‘chaplains’ in prison and army. Furthermore, recognised worldviews are entitled to free public radio and television broadcasting time. In addition, article 24 §1 of the Constitution says that public schools must offer a choice between instruction in one of the recognised religions and instruction 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. As a result, the Community must pay confessional RE in non-public (confessional) schools as well. In 1988, when the Constitution was revised, the central paragraphs concerning RE were stated as follows:

Art. 24

§ 1. Education is free; any preventative measure is forbidden; law or decree only governs the repression of offences.

The Community offers free choice to parents.

The Community organizes neutral education. Neutrality implies notably the respect of the philosophical, ideological or religious conceptions of parents and pupils.

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

This constitutional article is the result of a compromise after a long 'school struggle' between Catholics and liberals: the so-called *Schoolpact* of 1958, sealed in the schoolpact-law of 1959. This compromise guarantees financial support for non-public (mainly Catholic) schools and the choice for education in recognised religions and in non-confessional ethics in public schools. In 1988, these principles were implemented in the revised Belgian Constitution (art. 24) – as mentioned above.

Furthermore, the Constitution (art. 24 §1) states that education is free. This does not only mean that parents can choose a school for their children, this freedom also implies that (non-)religious communities are free to set up their own schools with state support if they meet the 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. There are a few Jewish schools and almost no Muslim schools. In fact approximately 70% of all Flemish and 60% of all Walloon schools are non-public, Catholic schools, which is an almost unique situation in Europe.

In Flanders, the decrees concerning education require that all schools have to offer at least two hours of RE in their curriculum. Non-public schools are free to offer one or more recognised religions, non-confessional ethics and/or a subject called 'cultural views'. Because most of these schools are Catholic, they almost all offer Roman Catholicism. A few Catholic primary schools with many Muslim pupils made an exception in offering Islam courses as well.

The public schools on the other hand, have to offer education in all the recognised worldviews. Together with Austria, Belgium is one of the few European countries that give the opportunity to minority religions to organise confessional education in public schools (Potz & Schinkele 2006, 117-142). In Flanders, pupils can choose between Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Judaism, Orthodox Christianity, Anglican Christianity and non-confessional ethics. Except for Anglican Christianity, the same subjects are organised in the French and German speaking Communities. For example, during the school year 2008-9 26,2% of the pupils in the secondary schools of the Flemish Community chose Catholic RE, 57,5% non-confessional ethics, 12,8% Islam and 3,5% something else (Vlaamse Gemeenschap 2009). Since 2008, all schools – public and non-public – have been funded by the Flemish Community on an equal basis, except for some objective differences like

transport for pupils and the organisation of confessional RE, which is indeed much more expensive in public schools.

### **3. Current Problems and Challenges for the Schoolpact Compromise**

#### ***3.1. Practical and juridical Problems with the Schoolpact System***

A first problem that arises within the Belgian system is the artificial distinction between recognised and non-recognised worldviews. The Constitution only requires that education in recognised worldviews is offered in public schools. Although Jehovah Witnesses and Buddhists form a larger religious minority than the adherents of the Anglican Church, only the latter is recognised and can organise RE.

A second problem is related to the organisational and financial impact of the Belgian system. The fact that public schools have to offer education in all recognised religions and in non-confessional ethics, even if only small amounts of pupils request education in one of these worldviews, makes the system very expensive. Offering separated parallel courses in different worldviews, also makes it difficult for school principals to find enough classrooms, to fix schedules and to find appropriate teachers. Moreover, we can expect that in the near future new worldviews (e.g. Buddhism) will be recognised which gives them the right to organise their own courses of RE. This will increase the financial and organisational problems.

Another problem is the question of exemption. In the French and German Community exemptions are not allowed, but the policy of the Flemish Community, which is in line with the jurisdiction of the Council of State of Belgium (1985, 1990), makes it quite easy to get exemption from RE. A small part of the pupils (0.37% in 2007-8) was exempted from RE because they were not satisfied with the choice between recognised religions and non-confessional ethics. Consequently this regulation makes RE not a compulsory school subject in Flanders any longer. Much has to do with the perception of the subject non-confessional ethics. In principle, and along the lines of the *Schoolpact*, it had to be a neutral course, but *de facto*, it has never been neutral and has always had an atheistic content. Since 1993, the Union of Associations of Humanistic Freethinkers (UVV, *Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen*) in Flanders has been responsible for the organisation of the subject non-confessional ethics, which confirms the non-neutrality. This non-neutrality is the reason why pupils or their parents who do not agree with the content of non-confessional ethics and the confessional religious subjects, can get exemption from RE. There is no valid alternative for them.

### **3.2. *The new sociological situation***

The society and the religious landscape have changed enormously since 1958, the year of the Schoolpact. Firstly, there has been the evolution of depillarisation, whereas the Schoolpact was a typical compromise for a pillarised society. Since the 1960's, many organisations with a previously religious (Catholic) signature have evolved to more or less secular organisations, 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 organisations. Catholic, socialist and humanist 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, many Catholic schools struggle with their Catholic identity.

Parallel with depillarisation, the sociological secularisation and a massive decline of institutionalised religion have emerged (Dobbelaere 2002). Since the 1960s, church attendance has decreased enormously. Even though most people still subscribe some Christian values and call themselves Catholic, more and more people do no longer identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church. It seems that, in the words of Grace Davie (1994), also in Belgium many people 'believe without belonging'. The number of active church-members has decreased and it has been estimated that only 7% of the Catholic population regularly attends religious services (DRL 2009). Until the 1960s, weekly church attendance was an important part of social life. Nowadays 'Catholics' only go to church for important rituals (baptism, religious marriage and funeral) and even these *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 2000, 117-152).

Because of depillarisation and secularisation, more and more people are no longer actively involved in religion and religion has become less important for their daily life. This is for instance visible in the parents' school choice in Flanders, where 75% of the pupils go to Catholic secondary schools. For many parents, this choice for Catholic schools is no longer based on religious reasons and many of these parents are secularised citizens. Often, the location and the (perceived) quality of education are decisive factors for the school choice. Also the pupils' choice for a particular religious subject in the public schools is often based on

non-religious reasons: because of the teacher, because of their friends or because the subject is labelled as easy by other students. Sometimes Roman Catholic RE is chosen only because of the main rituals, but when the children passed their first Holy Communion or Roman Catholic confirmation, they are free to choose what they like. It does not matter anymore whether the children take a subject in religion or in non-confessional ethics.

As a result of these choices, the classroom of Roman Catholic education (in public and in Catholic schools) is increasingly populated by 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 secularised Flanders take Roman Catholic RE (Vlaamse Gemeenschap 2009). Most of these pupils confirm that they 'are raised with Catholicism or Christianity', but only 25% of these pupils affirms to believe and 86% admit that they seldom or never go to church (Pollefeyt 2004, 258-9).

Next to depillarisation and secularisation, post-1960 Belgium is also characterised by an increasing religious diversity. The *Schoolpact* is a product of the struggle between liberal humanists and Catholics, but it has also given the opportunity to the other recognised religions (especially Judaism and Protestantism; Anglicanism was not explicitly mentioned in the pact) to offer confessional education in public schools. However, after the *Schoolpact*, two new religions became recognised by the Belgian government: Islam in 1974 and Orthodox Christianity in 1985. Especially the former is of great importance. The compromise of the *Schoolpact* was made before the labour migration programmes of the 1960s and 1970s, which attracted many people from Turkey and Morocco. Due to the immigration from these countries – a migration that is still going on by family and marriage migration – Islam has become a significant and visible minority religion, especially in the cities. With its 400,000 adherents (4% of the Belgian population), it is the second largest, but also, in the eyes of many citizens, the most 'problematic' religion today (Bousetta and Jacobs 2006). Because of globalisation and immigration, other religions are increasing as well. Although there are no official statistics about the religious demography, on top of the recognised religions we can speak about approximately 50,000 Jehovah Witnesses, 10,000 independent Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, 5,000 Hindus, 4,000 Mormons, 3,000 Sikhs, 2,000 Seventh Day Adventists and 1,500 Hare Krishna adherents. Additionally, New Age and new spiritual movements are very attractive today, while at the same time, many Belgians call themselves atheists or agnostics. It is estimated that approximately 900,000 people – or 9% of the Belgian population – are non-believers (DRL 2009).

All this means that the religious background of the pupils can no longer be compared with that of earlier generations. This is also true for Catholic schools, where most of the pupils hardly can be called Catholics: 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.

### ***3.3. Coping with depillarisation, diversity and secularisation***

Contrary to these religious and sociological evolutions, the organisation of RE has not changed substantially since 1958. This makes that the 50-year-old system of RE may be no longer in accordance with the increasing diversity and secularisation, and a discussion about an alternative system of RE would be useful. Indeed, religious plurality and secularisation are important challenges for RE (Skeie 1995; 2002), but these challenges have not been fully considered yet in the Belgian debate. If RE is part of a secular 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 (Jackson 2004, 57; 161-2; OSCE 2007; Council of Europe 2007).

In public schools, there is indeed positive attention for all recognized religions and non-confessional ethics. Nevertheless, if we agree that RE aims at stimulating the capacities for dialogue, mutual understanding, respect and religious tolerance, then a system in which pupils always have confessional RE in separate classes does not seem to be the most appropriate way to cope with these tasks. In this kind of separate RE, the confrontation with and dialogue between different worldviews and religions is almost absent. Although we can see some local initiatives to stimulate cooperation between teachers and pupils of diverse worldviews, there is no structural support or policy for these initiatives. Moreover, these initiatives are not in accordance with the spirit of the *Schoolpact*, according to which pupils of diverse worldviews are separated and get confessional RE. Therefore, it seems that the new challenges for RE from the secular and religiously diverse society cannot easily be accommodated within the compromise of the *Schoolpact*.

Although the system of RE has not changed since 1958, we can see an attempt to cope with this new situation within the curricula of several RE subjects. The new curriculum of Roman Catholicism is a clear example. Because the previous curriculum did not fit in the reality of secularism and diversity, it was transformed in 1999. More attention is given now to the reality of religious diversity, (the dialogue with) non-Christian traditions and inter-

religious learning. Roman Catholic religion is taught now in a ‘communicative’ way. However, the 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 ‘deconfessionalisation’ has led to a paradox: on the one hand, the religious plurality is taken seriously and pupils get information about non-Christian religions, 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 2000a, 60). As a result we could say that Catholic RE now is neither confessional, nor integrative, but something hybrid. Although in Flanders, the subject *Roman Catholicism* is formulated very openly, it is still inspired by a ‘catholic-ecclesiastical’ tradition, which is visible in the syllabus, supervision and inspection (Roebben 2000b, 100). This is an unclear situation and not satisfying neither for the defenders of confessional RE, nor for the defenders of integrative RE. Maybe, it would be better to make a clear distinction between confessional and integrative RE, each with its own teacher training programme and teaching material.

#### **4. Toward the Introduction of non-confessional, integrative RE**

In general, RE in Catholic as well as in public schools suffers from the same deficits: every pupil is mainly educated in one (not always his own) tradition and RE is given from a confessional perspective. As an alternative, the introduction of a non-confessional course about (non-) religious worldviews (comparable with Wanda Alberts’ integrative RE), could be considered in which information about worldviews is taught and dialogue between these worldviews is stimulated in classrooms with children of various religious and non-religious backgrounds. Such a course, for instance called ‘Worldviews and Philosophy’, has many advantages in comparison with the current situation. In this subject, pupils in public schools will no longer be separated according to their worldviews. Pupils of one class with different worldviews will stay together, they will get the opportunity to learn from and interact with each other and they will be able to ask questions about their own and other worldviews. In short, inter-religious and intercultural dialogue will be stimulated.

Integrative RE also 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. This can lead toward intolerant attitudes and difficulties to respect other beliefs, practices and rituals. The purpose of integrative RE is to inform pupils about religious and non-religious worldviews, to reduce the prejudices against (adherents of) other religions and to develop a respectful and tolerant attitude toward cultural and religious differences.

Of course, some people might be persuaded that RE does not fit in a curriculum of secular, public schools anymore. However, we are convinced that the need for (integrative) RE is still there. We agree with Robert Jackson (2004, 57; 161-2) when he argues that ‘*all schools should promote social justice (including religious tolerance), knowledge about religions, the development of the pupils’ skills of criticism and independent thinking, and also the dialogue and interaction between pupils of different backgrounds’*.

Religions remain important public actors and are a source of many discussions in the public sphere. Well-known examples are the debates concerning bio-ethics, euthanasia, creationism and Intelligent Design, religious fundamentalism and the headscarf. Moreover, the question of how people can live together in a religiously pluralized society is also an important part of public and political debate. Neglecting these facts in education would be a shortfall. When pupils enter the labour market and as such take some responsibility in the society of tomorrow, they will probably deal with religious phenomena and religious diversity. Moreover, if we expect them to understand our culture and history, RE is very important: diverse worldviews and philosophical theories and insights are significant, because they have shaped our society and our way of thinking. We can agree with Tim Jensen (2008, 130) when he writes:

Religion, one way or the other, is and has always been a more or less important part of human life and world history, of social, political and cultural formations and discourses. Scientifically grounded knowledge of humankind, of cultural, social and cognitive constructs and mechanisms, of the history and evolution of man and culture, etc., all imply and necessitate studies and knowledge of what is called religion. Of religion in general, of various religious traditions and phenomena, and of the various ways religion and religions interact with and influence other human, social and cultural formations and discourses.

Integrative RE also deals with the fact that a substantial number of the younger generation is still interested in religions and worldviews. Although our society is characterised by a decline of institutionalised religion, many people are still interested in the ‘big questions’ of meaning and belief. Neglecting this would be a deficit. Furthermore, a course about philosophy and worldviews can stimulate critical thinking and can play a role in the moral and civil upbringing of pupils.

## **5. The Implementation of integrative RE in Belgium: Possibilities and Difficulties**

The introduction of integrative RE as a compulsory subject in all Flemish schools raises many questions. Quite often the discussion on the reform of RE is blocked by the argument that, due to the Belgian Constitution, nothing can change. Nevertheless, the introduction of integrative RE is legally possible within the constitutional framework because it must not be seen as a substitute for confessional RE (Loobuyck & Franken 2009). We propose a double-system (see also Alberts 2007, 385): integrative RE becomes a compulsory subject in all schools, besides optional confessional RE. This double-system is already implemented in Zurich, where *Religionskunde* is a compulsory subject and pupils are free to take *religiöser Unterricht* optionally (Frank and Bochinger 2008, 210). In the German federation Brandenburg, there is also the possibility to take confessional RE, next to *Lebensgestaltung-Ethik-Religionskunde (LER)*, which is part of the standard curriculum. However, exemption from LER is possible there (Hillerich 2003; Alberts 2007, 338-9).

### **5.1. Public Schools**

Belgian history is characterised by different periods of ‘school struggle’ and RE has always been a controversial subject. Since the compromise of 1958 seems to pacify the political situation, hardly anybody wants to question this compromise. Nevertheless, during the last decades some proposals have been made for a reorganisation of RE in public schools. A first suggestion is the introduction of integrative RE as a *substitute* for the education in recognised religions and in non-confessional ethics. An amendment of the Belgian Constitution is needed here because public schools are obliged to offer education in non-confessional ethics and in the recognised religions. Because such an amendment is controversial and not possible in the short term, this proposal does not seem feasible.

A second suggestion is the *reduction* of the traditional religious courses to one hour a week. During the other hour, integrative RE could be educated. Because the scheduled time of RE is not a constitutional matter, an amendment of some decrees is sufficient. However, several problems arise here as well. Financial and organisational problems, the problem of discrimination of non-recognised religions and the problem of exemption remain. Furthermore, and more important, teaching philosophy and worldviews in a course that is scheduled only one hour a week, is not really feasible. The sheer volume of this subject is

enormous and therefore it seems impossible to organise it in a qualitative way, when only one hour a week is scheduled.

As the first proposal is impossible without an amendment of the Constitution and as the second implies some practical problems, we are in favour of a third proposal. In this proposal, integrative RE becomes a compulsory subject, while the recognised religions and non-confessional ethics should be offered as well, but as optional, non-compulsory subjects. By doing this, the pupils' right to have a religious upbringing would be fulfilled and at the same time the constitutional duty of public schools to offer education in the recognised religions and the non-confessional ethics would be satisfied.

This proposal has many advantages. First, we do not need a revision of the Constitution. The implementation 'only' needs a revision of the education decrees in the three Communities. Second, the problem of exemptions will vanish because confessional RE becomes optional. Nobody is obliged to take these confessional subjects anymore. Moreover, there will be no need for exemptions concerning the new integrative subject: knowledge about worldviews and philosophy is seen as an element of common education and that is why it will be organised in a regular and compulsory manner (Alberts 2007, 383). Third, if this new subject is scheduled two hours a week, it can reach a high quality. Moreover, integrative RE is appropriate to meet the societal need for more knowledge about religions, inter-religious dialogue, respect, mutual understanding and tolerance. Instead of separate confessional education, people will stay together and can speak, think and discuss with each other. Eventually, only pupils who are interested in their own religion will participate in optional confessional courses. These courses can regain their specific confessional and non-neutral character. Unlike today, only really interested and engaged pupils will choose these optional subjects.

## ***5.2. Non-public (Catholic) Schools***

The juridical situation in non-public schools is different because the Constitution does not require from these schools to offer all the recognised religions and non-confessional ethics. The decrees of the Flemish Community stipulate that all schools have to organise confessional RE, non-confessional ethics and/or cultural views, for at least two hours a week. Actually, the government can decide, by an amendment of these decrees, to organise an inclusive course about worldviews and philosophy in non-public schools as a compulsory subject within the curriculum. When, as a result, education in recognised religions, non-confessional morality or

cultural views is eliminated from the obligatory curriculum, an additional change of the decrees will be needed. The reason for this is that the decrees related to primary and secondary education – in public and non-public schools – state that education in recognised religions, non-confessional ethics and cultural views is organised as a part of the *obligatory* curriculum. When the appropriate decrees are adjusted, non-confessional schools can freely choose how and when they will organise confessional subjects, next to an inclusive course about worldviews and philosophy. Catholic schools for example, will still be free to offer education in Roman Catholic RE, but they can choose whether this subject will be organised as a compulsory or an optional subject.

### ***5.3. Expected Critiques and Difficulties***

One of the critiques on this proposal will be that the organisational and financial problems mentioned above, will not decline. On the contrary, the introduction of a new compulsory subject, while retaining additional confessional instruction, only increases the financial costs and the organisational burdens. On the other hand, we can foresee that many pupils will be satisfied with the new subject and will no longer choose confessional education, which can lead to a decline of financial and organisational problems.

Another possible critique is related to the fact that the new subject will be organised in a non-confessional, integrative and pluralistic way. According to some people, this kind of RE will create indifferentism and agnosticism among pupils. However, the purpose of integrative RE is exactly the opposite. Denise Cush and Robert Jackson use the notion of ‘positive pluralism’ at this point. Positive pluralism does not teach that all faiths are equally valid – as relativism does, or that all worldviews are paths to the same goal – as universalism does. It takes the differences and incommensurability of worldviews seriously, but approaches them from a viewpoint of ‘epistemological humility’ (Cush 1999, 384 ; 2001; Jackson 2004, 166).

Furthermore, critics may be very doubtful about the ‘neutral’ character of this subject and will emphasise the lack of teacher training programmes. Indeed, we do not have the required teacher trainings for this subject in Belgium yet, but it must be possible to organise them at universities and high schools in the near future, which also happened in other countries where a non-confessional course about religion was organised (Jensen 2008, 139-142). The practice of integrative RE also shows that it is possible to organise a course about worldviews in a religiously ‘neutral’ way. If the Flemish (or French or German) Community – and not the religious communities – together with experts in RE, will be involved in

organising this subject, making syllabuses and training teachers, religious ‘neutrality’ within this subject must be possible. On the other hand, this neutrality does not imply that the teachers have to forget their own worldview. Teachers have to teach openly and with a critical distance. However, well educated teachers may reveal their own religious or secular commitments to pupils without the intention of persuading or converting children. Analogously, we can say that nobody can teach English literature in a strict neutral way. What we need is a ‘secular’ and ‘objective’ approach of religions and worldviews. This is clearly distinguished from an approach based on ideological atheism or relativism. Integrative RE should not be religious, a-religious or anti-religious, but ‘ir-religious’ or ‘trans-religious’ (Jensen 2008, 129, 134).

## **6. Conclusion**

Due to depillarisation, secularism and increased religious diversity, the Belgian society has changed significantly after the *Schoolpact* of 1958. The pillarised and mainly Catholic society of the 1950’s, does not exist anymore. Despite these evolutions, the Belgian organisation of RE has remained almost the same since 1958. This raises many questions and challenges for the organisation and the content of RE in Belgium. To meet these challenges, the introduction of integrative RE as a compulsory subject in all schools would be an interesting option. In Catholic as well as in public schools, religious diversity and secularism will be taken seriously, pupils will be well-informed about diverse worldviews, and dialogue and tolerance will be promoted. When, in addition, optional subjects in recognised religions and non-confessional ethics are offered in public schools, and confessional RE in the interested non-public schools will be paid by the Community government, we do not need a constitutional amendment – only some decrees need to be changed.

However, we know that the introduction of pluralistic RE will not be easy at all. Questioning the separated, confessional approach is something like a taboo in Belgium. Despite the sociological needs, the legal possibilities and the convincing educational arguments, the introduction of non-confessional integrative RE as a compulsory subject in all types of schools is nothing but a hypothesis or a dream today.

Short biographical notes on all contributors

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