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Islamic Education in Belgium: Past, Present, and Future — [Source link](#)

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Islamic Education in Belgium: Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

This article focuses on Islamic education in Belgium. First, attention is given to the organization of Islamic classes in state schools, where some important problems occur, such as the lack of appropriate teachers and inspectors; the mono-confessional content of the curricula; and the absence of state control. Next, the content of RE classes in Catholic schools, which are also attended by many Muslims, will be addressed. Finally, the author argues that a shift within the current RE classes is not sufficient today. Based on autonomy-based, epistemological and societal arguments, the author proposes a shift from confessional to non-confessional RE.

Keywords: Islamic education – Belgium – non-confessional RE – radicalization – citizenship education

1. Pillarization, RE and Islam in Belgium: Facts and Figures

As a result of history, Belgium has a pillarized education system¹: most schools are private, Catholic schools which are extensively funded by the state, and state schools are in a minority position. Even though other religious groups can also establish their own schools, the number of recognized – and thus subsidized – Protestant, Jewish, non-confessional and Islamic private schools is very small.² Presently, only five Islamic schools are recognized and thus subsidized: four in the French Community (Brussels-Capital) and one in the Flemish Community.³ In these schools, the regular curriculum is taught and in addition, two hours of Islamic RE are scheduled on a weekly basis.⁴

Given this small number of Islamic schools, these schools are rather an exception. More important are the subsidized Catholic schools, which count for 62% of the primary schools and students in the Flemish Community and for 75% of all secondary schools and students in this part of Belgium. In the French Community, 42% of all primary and 61% of all secondary schools are Catholic.

For a long time, Catholic schools were schools *from and for Catholics*, but as a result of secularization and religious plurality on one hand, and of the high number of Catholic schools on the other, these schools are no longer mono-religious. At present, about 50% of the Muslim students are enrolled in Catholic schools, but in cities and their agglomeration, the number of Muslim students in Catholic schools is sometimes over 90%.

¹ 'Pillarization' refers to denominational/political segregation in social organizations, media, trade unions, and schools. This kind of segregation in social life was (and is) typical for the Low Countries. The process of depillarization started in the 1970s but is not yet finished.

² There are also a number of subsidized private schools with a particular pedagogical view (e.g. Steiner and Freinet schools).

³ Belgium is a federal state, with three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital) and three Communities (Flemish, French and German). Since the constitutional revision of 1988, the different Communities have autonomy over education.

⁴ Also noteworthy are the 'Lucerna colleges'. These schools, which are managed by the Turkish Gülen movement, do not have the status of *confessional Islamic schools*, but they have, officially, the status of *non-confessional private schools*. In practice, however, all the students in these schools are enrolled for Islamic RE.

In Catholic schools, Roman-Catholic RE is a compulsory school subject.⁵ This is probably the main reason why state schools, which also organize Islamic RE, are more attended by Muslims: approximately 50% of the students with a Muslim background are enrolled in state schools, but because these schools form a minority, there are, in relative numbers, more students with a Muslim background in state schools than in Catholic schools.

For several decades, Islam in state schools was, like Protestantism, orthodox Christianity and Judaism, a minority religion that was only taken by a few students. Last years, however, we see an increasing number of students taking Islamic RE: in the Flemish Community, Islam is taken by 20% of the students in state schools (primary and secondary education)⁶, but in large cities, this number is significantly higher. In Brussels for instance, Islam is now the *main* subject in state schools, taken by approximately 50% of the students:

	Roman-catholic RE	Non-confessional ethics	Islam	Other ⁷
Primary state schools	21.3	24.3	47.5	6.9
secondary state schools	14.9	33.9	44.7	6.4

Table 1: Religious classes in Brussels Capital (state schools), 2013-14

Given the fact that several regions (like Brussels Capital) have a high Muslim population, and that parents can choose Islamic RE in state schools, it is not a surprise that the number of Islamic RE classes increased significantly. The implementation of Islamic RE classes was, however, not without any problems, which has repercussions up until today.

2. Islamic Education in Belgian state schools: an uneasy History⁸

2.1 The Recognition of Islam and the Creation of the Executive of Muslims in Belgium (EMB)

⁵ In primary Catholic schools, Roman-Catholic RE is scheduled 2-3 hours a week; in secondary Catholic schools, it is scheduled 2 hours a week.

⁶ <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/onderwijsstatistieken/2015-2016/statistischjaarboek2015-2016/publicatiestatistischjaarboek2015-2016.htm>

⁷ Protestantism, orthodox christianity, Anglicanism and judaism.

⁸ Currently, Islamic RE in Belgium is rather unexamined. The following paragraphs are mainly based Kanmaz et al 2004; Shadid & Van Koningsveld 2008; Christians 2008; and on Fadil 2012; Fadil et al. 2015.

Since 1974, Islam is officially recognized in Belgium.⁹ Accordingly, the state pays the wages, retirements and housing of imams, mosques are subsidized, Islamic chaplains are paid by the state, and Islamic education is, conform the Belgian Constitution¹⁰, organized in state schools.

The implementation of Islamic classes in state schools did, however, not go smoothly. One of the reasons was the difficulty for Islam to establish an official mediator between the state and the Islamic community. In 1968 (and thus a few years before the official recognition of Islam), the Islamic Cultural Centre (ICC) in Belgium was the first mediator between the Islamic community and the Belgian state and once Islam was recognized, this Centre, which is known for its (financial) connections with the Islamic World League¹¹ and thus also with Saudi-Arabia's conservative Wahhabism, was still seen as the official mediator between the Islamic community and the Belgian State.

For many years, the Belgian Government was not much concerned with Islam in Belgium. At the beginning of the 1990s, when the right-wing party (Vlaams Blok) with its anti-Islam program was very successful in Flanders, things changed and several initiatives were taken by the Belgian Government, among them the creation of a 'new' representative body for Islam. However, as a result of internal differences within the Islamic community, the lack of a hierarchical structure, the different languages in Belgium, and too much state involvement, this initiative was not successful.

In 1993, a provisional Executive was established, but several state-controlled attempts (for instance in 1999 and in 2005) to establish a *definite* Executive for the Muslims in Belgium, failed. Since In 2014, the Muslim community decided to organize elections for a new Executive and since then, the third – and present – Executive of Muslims in Belgium is a fact.

2.2 Teacher Training

As a result of the longstanding indolent policy with regard to the implementation of Islam, and as a result of the prominent role of the ICC, Islam in Belgium was largely influenced by conservative Wahhabism. From 1978 to 1990, the ICC was responsible for Islamic education in state schools, and thus also for the recruitment, inspection and appointment of teachers. Between 1993 and 1999, the provisional EMB established a 'Technical Committee' that was responsible for Islamic education, but

⁹ At present, 6 religions and one non-confessional worldview are recognized in Belgium: the Roman-Catholic Church, Protestantism, Anglicanism, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and the Community of non-confessional freethinkers.

¹⁰ According to constitutional law (art.24 §1), Belgian state schools are required to organize RE in the recognized religions and in non-confessional ethics: "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."

¹¹ The Islamic World League or Muslim World League is an international, Islamic, non-governmental organisation, of which the centre is located in Mecca. The League promotes Islam in an active way: it coordinates and educates imams and RE teachers; it edits, prints and distributes its own Qurans and Quran interpretations; and it finances mosques, Islamic schools and Islamic RE worldwide. Because the World League is mainly financed by the government of Saudi Arabia, it is an important exponent of Wahhabism.

due to tensions and problems within the provisional Executive, this committee could not be maintained. In 1999, the responsibility for Islamic education was given to the then established Executive. In the Flemish Community, the CIO (*Centrum Islamonderwijs*)¹², which is established and controlled by the EMB, is responsible for Islamic education in state schools.

When the first Islam classes were organized in 1975, there were not enough well-educated Islam teachers. In order to solve this problem, teachers were imported from abroad (mainly from Turkey and Morocco), but most of them did not speak the Belgian languages and did not have enough knowledge of and affinity with the Belgian (and western) culture. A small number of teachers were educated in Belgium, but since there was no specific teacher training for Islam, their educational background was also insufficient. In 1992 (and thus almost 15 years after the implementation of Islamic RE), the Flemish Government¹³ took action and required that all Islamic RE teachers must either succeed in a language test organized by the Flemish Department of Education; or obtain a pedagogical degree.

Up until today, Islamic teachers in primary schools must at least (1) have a degree of Higher Secondary Education; (2) have a degree in pedagogics; and (3) have succeeded for the examination in Islam, organized by the EMB. For teachers in secondary education, there are comparable conditions. They must at least (1) have a professional BA degree; (2) have a degree in pedagogics; (3) have succeeded for the examination in Islam, organized by the EMB. In addition, those people who obtained a degree in Islamic education in a regular teacher training program (BA), can start as an Islamic RE teacher in secondary schools.

This last possibility is quite recent: in 1998, Islam was for the first time organized in a teacher training program in Brussels and ten years later, this was also the case in Leuven. Since then, some more initiatives have been taken, but mainly for teacher training of primary school teachers and for teachers of the lower years of secondary education. In 2009-10, the University of Antwerp organized a post-academic training in Islamic religion for one year and since 2014-15, a program *Islamic Theology and Religious Sciences* (MA) is organized at the Faculty of Theology (Catholic University of Leuven). However, in spite of these initiatives, the average level of Islamic RE teachers is still very low: in the Flemish Community, only 38% of the present teachers in primary schools obtained the required degree and in secondary schools, this is only 16%.¹⁴

In response to these dramatic numbers, the EMB and the Flemish Minister of Education signed a statement of engagement in 2016, in which it has been stated that the criteria for Islamic

¹² Website: <http://www.centrumislamonderwijs.be/> (accessed 2017-02-28).

¹³ In this part, I will mainly focus on the Flemish Community, which is the largest Community in Belgium. In the French (and German) Community, problems and solutions are often comparable.

¹⁴ 'Slechts 16% islamleerkrachten in basisonderwijs beschikt over het vereiste diploma' [Only 16% of Islam teachers in primary schools has required degree], *Knack* 12-04-2015.

teachers will be more stringent.¹⁵ This requirement is more than welcome, but it is questionable whether this is the most desirable way to solve the current problems. Is it, in a context of religious pluralism, but also of religious radicalization among several youngsters, desirable to organize RE in a confessional and segregated way? And is it appropriate to leave teacher training, inspection and appointment up to the religious community, without any interference by the state? This brings us to another important issue within Islamic RE: curricula and inspection.

2.3 Curricula and inspection

For many years, there were no curricula for Islamic education and before 2005, there were no official inspectors. In the French Community, there is since 2013 a curriculum or '*Référentiel des Compétences*' for Islamic RE¹⁶, but this document contains only sixty pages, of which the first nine are merely a historical and legal introduction in the complex Belgian RE system. As a curriculum for Islamic education in *primary and secondary* schools, this is insufficient.

In the Flemish Community, the first curricula were developed in 2001, but these were, as a result of the ICC's influence, very traditional. In 2013-14, the curricula were substantially transformed.¹⁷ Since then, there is some attention for religious diversity, for fundamental rights and freedoms, and for (the dangers of) religious fanaticism. In addition, several controversial issues such as the status of women within Islam, internal diversity within Islam, the tension between religion and science, and the importance of text interpretation, are no longer excluded.

Notwithstanding these improvements, several problems remain. A close reading of the curriculum for secondary education reveals that Sunni Islam gets almost all attention, while attention for Shia and other Islamic traditions is very low. Besides, there is almost no attention for 'other' religions and worldviews. Within the new curriculum, most time is given to "(Islamic) doctrine" (92 teaching hours), "(Islamic) decency" (79 teaching hours) and "(Islamic) worship" (77 teaching hours). "Life of the Prophet" and "the Quran" take both 61 teaching hours and for "religion and culture", where most attention to other religions is given, but where the focus is also on the specificity of Islamic culture, only 62 hours (on a total of 432 teaching hours) are scheduled.

Equally important is the fact that 'other' worldviews are always presented from an Islamic point of view. Judaism and Christianity are first and foremost seen as the predecessors of Islam and they are, like other worldviews (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism) always

¹⁵ 'Islamleerkrachten moeten specifieke opleiding volgen' [Islam teachers required to take specific training], *De Redactie* 09-11-2016.

¹⁶ Available at <http://www.religion-islamique.be/referentiel-competences-du-cours-religion-islamique/> (accessed 2017-02-28)

¹⁷ In this paper, I will focus on the Flemish curriculum for secondary education, which is accessible at <http://www.centrumislamonderwijs.be/> (accessed 2017-02-28)

approached from an Islamic *insider's perspective*. An impartial, religious-studies based perspective, is, as in the other religious classes in Belgium, absent.

Besides, non-confessional western worldviews (e.g. free-thinking atheism, agnosticism, a-religious humanism, nihilism, militant atheism) are almost absent in the curriculum. This negligence is probably related to one of the anthropological presuppositions of the curriculum. As stated in the introduction (p. 11), religion and spirituality are innate to humankind and one of the aims of Islamic RE is the “development of insight in the innate desire of humankind to believe.” (p. 132) In this context, the exclusion of non-religious worldviews is not a surprise. However, given the importance and popularity of these worldviews, both in Belgium and in the rest of the world¹⁸, it is problematic that non-affiliated people, but also atheist and/or humanist movements, get almost no attention.¹⁹

Also problematic is that the curriculum, like the other RE curricula, needs no approval from the state, but from the religious community, which is, in case of Islam, the EMB. Even though the curriculum must officially be in accordance with the international and constitutional requirements concerning the rights of men and of children in particular, this religious autonomy facilitates education of ideas that are opposed to the principles of liberal democracy, or education of religious theories such as creationism, under the guise of a true scientific theory. As a result of the separation between church and state, it is almost impossible for the state to intervene here. Another consequence of this state-independence is that there are no general, state-controlled aims with regard to RE. Accordingly, students' knowledge of religion is often inadequate. This 'religious illiteracy' often leads to misunderstanding, intolerance and a non-nuanced view on religion – not the least on Islam.

A related problem is the lack of qualitative, actualized and context-related textbooks. Up until today, the few Flemish textbooks for Islamic RE are merely translations from Turkish textbooks, edited by the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet).²⁰ Thus far, there are no textbooks for Islamic RE written by Belgian Muslims, or edited in Belgium. Accordingly, teaching Islam in a way that is adapted to the Belgian (and European) societal, political and educational context, is not so evident.

Another problem is the number and appointment of Islamic inspectors. Even though Islam is taught in state schools since 1975, there were no official inspectors before 2005. At present, there are six inspectors for Islamic education in Belgium: three in the Flemish and three in the French Community – a number that is far insufficient for the increasing numbers of Islamic teachers and students. With the aforementioned statement of engagement, the Flemish Minister of Education

¹⁸ According to the PEW research report on religion, 16% of the world population belongs to the category 'non-affiliated'. In Belgium, 33% of the population does not identify with a particular religion or worldview, while 9% explicitly identifies as humanist or atheist (cf. Dobbelaere, Billiet & Voyé 2011, 145).

¹⁹ The term 'atheism' is only mentioned once in the curriculum: in the chapter of 'mankind and religion', atheism, Gnosticism and agnosticism are mentioned as three viewpoints on the world, but there it ends.

²⁰ For an overview of these textbooks, see <http://www.centrumislamonderwijs.be/leerboeken.html> (accessed 2017-02-27)

promised the appointment of one more inspector in the Flemish Community, but it is questionable whether this is the right answer to the aforementioned problems: do we really want that RE classes are autonomously organized by the religious communities, without any state interference? Or is a minimal form of state control required? Is it, in an era of religious diversity and radicalization, 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?

3. Islam in Catholic schools

As a result of the large number of Catholic schools in Belgium, many students with an Islamic background are enrolled in these schools, where Roman-catholic RE is a compulsory school subject. In theory, these students are free to go to a state school, where Islamic RE classes can be organized, but in practice, this is not always possible: given the high number of Catholic schools on one hand, and the growing number of Muslims on the other, the freedom to choose a particular (non-Catholic) school is not always guaranteed *in practice* (cf. Franken 2016a&b).

In response to the increasing number of non-Catholic students (including Muslims), 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 of its pedagogical project. In order to meet the religious diversity in a positive way, there is 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)²¹; and that the wearing of non-Christian religious symbols such as the veil is allowed.²²

In 2000, the curricula for Roman-Catholic education were reformed and since then, they are no longer catechetical, but ‘dialogical’, ‘pluralistic’ and ‘inter-religious’. Notwithstanding this evolution, Christianity still has a “priority position” as a point of reference (Roebben 2000, 60) and philosophical and ethical themes are always approached “more or less from within a confessional

²¹ At present, a few primary Catholic schools with a high number of Muslim students organize one optional hour of Islamic RE, but this is rather exceptional. Currently, there is a discussion about Islamic classes in Catholic schools, but it is not sure what the future policy will be.

²² 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 often not allowed over there.

point of view” (Derroitte, H., Meyer, G., Pollefeyt, D. and Roebben, B. 2014, 50). Besides, the Recognized Authority of Roman Catholicism is still responsible for teacher training, appointment and inspection of the subject and syllabi are still designed by this Authority.

Because Roman-Catholic RE is still a denominational subject, attention for Islam is, like the attention for Christianity in Islamic RE classes, rather restricted. In schools with a high Muslim population, Islam gets often more attention than in other schools, but in fact, teachers are free to decide how many teaching hours they will spend to Islam (and other religions). Accordingly, the content of RE is mainly dependent on the teacher’s goodwill and interests.

Without any doubt, the changes in the curricula of Roman-Catholic RE were, like the changes in the curricula for Islamic RE, a great improvement. At present, however, they are no longer sufficient. The aforementioned modifications are still situated *within* the current – confessional and, in state schools also separative – RE model, which is no longer adapted to the 21st century. This model supposes that students need, first and foremost, information and reflection on their *own* tradition and that RE contributes to the religious socialization of students. However, as a result of the ongoing secularization and diversification of the school population (including Muslim students), this aim of ‘nurturing faith’ is no longer evident.

In addition, there is the problem that Islamic students are, in Catholic schools, *obliged* to take Roman-Catholic RE, without the possibility of opting out. Does the Catholic school of dialogue, with this compulsory, denominational subject, take the ‘otherness’ of Islamic (and other non-Catholic) students really into consideration?

4. The Future of (Islamic) RE in 21st Century Belgium

4.1 RE and Autonomy

In the current curricula for Islam (p.10), some important, general RE aims are formulated: “acquiring knowledge”; “thinking in an autonomous and critical way”; “making the right choices”; and “giving sense to life”. In addition, it has been stated that the aim of RE is “to enable youngsters to make autonomous choices, particularly with regard to religion and the way of life [...]. Starting from these aims, religious education contributes to autonomous reflection and the positioning of oneself between other beings” (p.7-8).

These aims are, without any doubt, core aims in a liberal education (cf. Gutman 1999; Levinson 1999; Callan 2000; Macedo 2000; Brighouse 2006a&b; Jawoniyi 2015). I am, however, not convinced that they can be reached when RE is autonomously organized by the religious instances and when religion is always approached from an insider’s perspective. Certainly, this approach can,

for several students and in several contexts, be relevant, but it should not be the *only* approach for dealing with religion at school.²³

In a liberal-democratic state, education should ascertain that children freely explore life options transcending those sanctioned by their parents, families, and communities (cf. Brighouse 2006b, 528). Because “autonomy with respect to one’s religious and moral commitments requires exposure to alternative views”, the public education curriculum should include “a range of religious, non-religious, and anti-religious views in some detail.” (Brighouse 2006a, 24) If children and youngsters are, as regards religion, only educated within one particular view (either in an exclusive, catechetical way, or in an inclusive, dialogical way), they will miss important knowledge and skills for autonomy. It is therefore up to *the state* – and not to the recognized religions – to organize pluralist or non-confessional RE in an open and integrative way, so as to provide students with the ability to make informed and independent decisions about their way of life – also with regard to religion.

4.2 Epistemological Burdens of RE

In addition to this ‘*autonomy-based*’ argument, there are several other arguments for state-organized, integrative²⁴ and non-confessional RE. First, there is a philosophical or *epistemological argument*. Different from scientific or empirical claims, religious or metaphysical claims cannot be falsified. Accordingly, the truthfulness of these claims is a matter of disagreement. In a mono-confessional setting, this would probably cause few problems because all students believe in the same truth claims (even though we should not underestimate differences and conflicts *within* one particular tradition). In a plural and secularized society, however, the exclusive view that *one particular religion* is true and should therefore be taught at school, is no longer acceptable. But also a more inclusive approach (such as in Roman-Catholic RE in Belgium today) is no longer attainable: even though attention is given to different traditions, which are seen as ‘other’ truth claims, the focus on one particular tradition as a point of reference for the study of religions does not respect these other traditions in the most open and extensive way.

4.3 RE, Radicalization and (In)tolerance

In addition, there is a *societal need* for non-denominational, pluralistic RE for all students. Today, society is more than ever characterized by religious pluralism and secularism and last decades, we are also confronted with cruel terrorist attacks against ‘heretics’ and, in a broader way, against the core ideals of our liberal democracy. These attacks are inspired by a radical, one-sided interpretation

²³ As argued elsewhere (Franken 2016a&b), confessional RE classes can, under certain conditions, be organized (and subsidized) as optional classes in state-supported schools.

²⁴ For this term, see Alberts 2007.

of Islam, which unfortunately leads to misunderstandings, intolerance, racism and violence against Muslims.

Also in this regard, non-denominational, integrative RE might be helpful because it could be one of the ways to prevent and detect radicalization among students: if *all* students are well-informed about Islam (and other religious traditions), and if they can, in an open and respectful way, discuss with teachers and co-students about their faith, radical interpretations can be detected, questioned and criticized and this can, in turn, lead to the awareness that these interpretations and the related terrorist attacks are not in line with Islam and, more important, with humanity and civilization. In a recent article on global citizenship education and worldview education, Miedema and Bertram-Troost point in a similar way at this issue:

These problems [of radicalization] *do not ask for exclusive particularistic approaches or for an exclusive focus on national or even regional identities*. On the contrary, these problems do concern every human being, humankind and humanity in its broadest global sense. The current global constellation is, in our view, triggered by the question of the necessity *to think and act more globally in religious education and worldview education* in order to prevent, for example, the development of narrow minded or radicalized children and young people. (Miedema & Bertram-Troost 2015, 47-48 [emphasis mine])

Next to the possibilities of anticipating and detecting radicalization, plural, integrative RE has also another benefit. Even though most Muslims do not identify with IS or with violent extremism in name of Islam, many people see 'Islam' as a violent and dangerous religion and identify all its adherents as possible terrorists. Not surprisingly, this attitude is also visible among students. Since Belgian students are often uninformed about Islam, prejudices are common and intolerance toward Muslims is not unusual. Also at this point, the state has an important role to play: if the state organizes non-confessional RE classes in which *all* students – whatever their religious affiliation may be – are well-informed about the diversity of worldviews (including Islam), prejudices might disappear and an open and tolerant attitude towards co-citizens with another religious affiliation, may be achieved.

4.4 Worldview Education, Human Rights Education and Citizenship Education

The aforementioned idea of open, integrative and state-organized RE is closely related to the idea of 'worldview education', as outlined by van der Kooij, de Ruyter and Miedema (2013). As argued by these authors, "one of the core concerns of schools is the formation of a student's personal identity"

(van der Kooij et al, 2013, 224; also Miedema 2014) and hereto, “attention for personal worldview education” is required.

In order to achieve this, students can be stimulated “to base their personal worldview in one specific organized worldview” (van der Kooij et al, 2013, 224), but another, more open and diversified approach is also possible:

The goal of the second approach is to stimulate pupils to develop a personal worldview without transmitting the norms, values and beliefs of one particular organized worldview. Pupils are being introduced to several organized worldviews and these may be taken by the pupils as a starting point for discussing and reflecting on the views and beliefs they have themselves. They are stimulated to form their own personal worldview on the basis of this reflection and discussion. This is similar to what Grimmit (2000) calls learning *from* religion. (van der Kooij et al 2013, 224)

If RE teachers do not only pay attention to ‘imparting knowledge’ (learning and teaching about religion) and ‘identity formation’, but also to the development of skills and attitudes which encourage active participation in and defence of human rights, a link can be drawn between (inter) worldview education, citizenship education and human rights education. This threefold combination can bring about or at least promote mutual respect and understanding, and stimulate the development of democratic citizenship formation, worldview citizenship formation, and human rights formation (cf. Miedema 2014, 97; also Miedema and Bertram-Troost 2015).

In the same vein, Meijer (2011, 210) argues that “learning about different religions” is of public relevance “because it contributes to citizenship education for the culturally and religiously diverse societies of present Europe.” And also in several European policy documents as well as in diverse academic contributions, the current link between RE, human rights education and citizenship education has been specified: a good and well educated citizen must be able to discuss in a reasonable and rational way with his/her co-citizens and must have developed a certain empathy for its co-citizens, whatever their religious affiliation may be. And in order to realize this empathy and the related virtue of reciprocity, a minimal form of “religious literacy”²⁵ is required.

If we take into account the fact of religious diversity, the freedom of religion and education, the need for dialogue, the importance of correct and nuanced information about religious and non-religious worldviews, and the development of students into critical, autonomous citizens with a personal identity, the current RE model in Belgium is no longer sufficient and a *thorough* reform of the system is required. It is no longer appropriate to teach religion only from an ‘insider’s perspective’, to

²⁵ For this terminology, see Wright 2001; Prothero 2008.

separate students according to their religious conviction (state schools), or to teach about 'other' religions from a particular religious perspective (state schools and private schools).

Different from for instance Lafranchi and Van Crombrugge (2013-14), I consider the mere adaptation of some problematic aspects *within* Islamic RE in Belgium (e.g. organizing better teacher training; approving and upgrading curricula; appointing extra inspectors) as unsustainable and, from a pedagogical point of view, insufficient. The problem with these solutions is that the current, separative and denominational RE model, which is the primary cause of many problems, is not questioned at all. However, in order to solve the aforementioned problems in an exhaustive way, the *entire* Belgian RE system should be thoroughly reformed. It is up to the *state* – and not to the recognized religions – to formulate final achievements with regard to religious literacy, to inform youngsters in an open and nuanced way about diverse religious and non-religious traditions, to learn them the required skills for a critical stance toward these traditions, and to make them aware of the big questions of life in a reflexive way.

5. Paris, 2015 – Brussels, 2016

On November 13th, 2015, the world was shocked by the cruel IS attacks in Paris. Quite soon, it appeared that these attacks were connected to a network of terrorists in Belgium and that some of them were born and domiciled in Belgium. A few days after the arrest of one of the leading people behind these attacks (March 2016), more than 30 people died in Brussels, after two IS bomb attacks, one in the national airport and one in an underground station. Once again, the terrorists were domiciled in Belgium. Not surprisingly, Belgium is, since these events, labelled abroad as “the breeding ground for international terrorism”, “a failed state” and an “incubator of jihadism” , with Brussels as “one of the epicentres – if not *the* epicentre – of jihadism in Europe”.

Even though these accusations lack some nuance, it is, more than ever, time to reconsider the role of RE in the fight against terrorism and radicalization. At present, young people in Belgium are, as regards RE, dependent on the recognized religions and on their RE teachers, who can teach religion in a state-independent way. Particularly for young, uprooted and easily influenced adolescents, this can be problematic.

As a result of the segregated RE system in Belgium, and the autonomy of the religious communities with regard to RE, it is possible in Belgium to have 12 years state-funded (but not state-controlled) RE, without being informed about different religious traditions in a nuanced and objective way. In fact, it is even possible to have *no RE at all*, because exemption for RE at request is possible in state schools.²⁶ In an age where religious diversity is a permanent fact, where religion, and

²⁶ In the Flemish Community, where exemption is possible from the 1990s, there is no alternative for exempted students. In the French Community, where exemption is allowed since 2015, an alternative subject is currently under construction.

particularly Islam, becomes more and more visible in the public sphere, where living together with Muslims, Jews, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, Jains, atheists and so on is not an option but an obligation, and in which radical interpretations of Islam, but also of other religions, can lead to irrational and horrifying deeds against humanity and democracy, correct and nuanced information²⁷ about the different religions and worldviews is an absolute requirement.

The state should take initiatives here and the idea of state-controlled, integrative education about (and not into) religion, combined with ethics, philosophy and citizenship education opens a lot of opportunities here (see for instance Loobuyck and Franken 2011; Franken and Loobuyck 2013; Franken 2014). Even though this idea is opposed by several (religious) stakeholders, this kind of RE is not only a must in Belgium, but in every multicultural and multi-religious society, where respect for pluralism and democratic ideals should be given priority.

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²⁷ By this I mean information based on the academic discipline of religious studies, with particular attention for religious history, religious doctrines and practices, internal and external religious differences, hermeneutics, and critical text-reading.

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