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# Religious Education and non-affiliation in Belgium and in Germany: Roman-Catholic and Protestant Evangelical Perspectives

von  
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## Abstract

Based on the EKD report *Religiöse Bildung angesichts von Konfessionslosigkeit* as well as on the new curriculum for Roman Catholic RE in the Flemish Community (Belgium), the recent recommendations concerning Protestant-Evangelical RE in Germany will be compared with the recent developments in Roman-Catholic RE in Flanders. A brief sociological sketch makes clear that in both contexts, an increasing number of students enrolled in RE are non-affiliated. Taking this into consideration, I will scrutinize how the Roman Catholic Church in Belgium (Flemish Community) as well as the EKD responded to this new societal situation. To conclude, the new developments in RE in both contexts will be briefly evaluated and suggestions for further comparative research will be made.

*Keywords:* EKD – Protestant-Evangelical RE – Roman Catholic RE – Belgium (Flemish Community) – Germany – secularization – Christian identity

## 1 Comparing RE in different National Contexts

In 2020, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD – *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*), published its report *Religiöse Bildung angesichts von Konfessionslosigkeit*, which focuses, among other things, on the future of Protestant Evangelical RE in a context of secularization and non-affiliation (*Konfessionslosigkeit*)<sup>1</sup>. The report clearly shows that Protestant Evangelical RE in Germany is, as RE in many other European nations, ‘on the move’ (cf. Avest et al., 2020). According to the Norwegian RE scholar Oddrun Bråten (2013, 2015), it is interesting in this context to examine how similar societal challenges such as non-affiliation and secularization, lead to similar as well as to dissimilar national RE practices. Comparing these practices is not only important in order to understand developments in single nations, but it can also enable us to learn from ‘best practices’ in different contexts, to take a critical stance, and to do suggestions for improvement where needed.

Taking Bråten’s thoughts into consideration, I will therefore compare the EKD’s recommendations concerning Protestant Evangelical RE, with the recent trends and evolutions in the field of Roman Catholic RE in Belgium (Flemish Community).<sup>2</sup> In order to do so, the structure of this contribution is as follows: in a first part (§2), I will

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<sup>1</sup> In this contribution, I will use the word ‘non-affiliation’ for the German term ‘Konfessionslosigkeit’, which is in EKD 2020a (p. 14) defined as follows: “Das Attribut ‘konfessionslos’ meint in diesem Text, bezogen auf Individuen, zunächst nur dies: Jemand wurde nicht getauft (bzw. in eine andere Religionsgemeinschaft aufgenommen) oder jemand ist aus der Kirche (bzw. einer anderen Religionsgemeinschaft) ausgetreten.” Numerous non-affiliated people are atheists and agnostics, but there are also non-affiliated people which can be labelled as “religiously (interested)”, “spiritual” or “close to the church” (cf. EKD 2020a, p. 59).

<sup>2</sup> Belgium is a federal state, with a complex structure, containing three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital) and three Communities (French, German and Flemish). The different Communities are responsible for education, which is organised in the respective language of the Community. In what follows, I will focus on Roman Catholic RE in the Flemish Community, but similar challenges and evolutions can also be found in the other Communities.

focus on the societal trends of *secularization* and *non-affiliation*, which trigger RE in Belgium as well as in Germany. In both nations, these trends resulted in an increasing number of non-affiliated pupils in Catholic (Belgium) and Protestant Evangelical (Germany) schools and in their respective RE classes (§3). In a fourth part (§4), I will scrutinize how the Roman Catholic Church in Belgium (Flemish Community) responded to this new societal situation in its schools and in the school subject Roman Catholic RE. In the next part (§5), I will make the same exercise for the EKD in Germany: how did this Church respond to the increasing number of non-affiliated pupils in its schools and, more specific, in its RE classes? In a final part (§6), the new trends in RE in both contexts will be briefly evaluated and suggestions for further comparative research will be made.

## 2 Secularization in Belgium and Germany

*In Deutschland gehört gut ein Drittel der Menschen keiner Kirche oder Religionsgemeinschaft an. Insgesamt haben Kirche und Religion in den westlichen säkularisierten Gesellschaften ihre bisherige gesamtgesellschaftliche Bedeutung und Integrationsfunktion früherer Zeiten verloren. Religion ist für den einzelnen zu einem Deutungsangebot geworden, das er annehmen kann, aber nicht muss. Diese sogenannte Konfessionslosigkeit ist für die Kirchen eine mindestens ebenso große, wenn nicht noch größere Herausforderung als der religiöse Pluralismus* (EKD 2020a, 5).

These are the opening words of the report *Religiöse Bildung angesichts von Konfessionslosigkeit. Aufgaben und Chancen*, written by the EKD. According to the report (p.25), 56% of the entire German population adhere to a Christian denomination and one fourth of the population are a member of the EKD – a number that decreased over the past years from 34% in 1995 to 25.5% in 2017. In addition, 9% of the population adhere to Islam (Alevi included)<sup>3</sup>, 0.12% belong to a Jewish community, and 0.6% belong to another religious community. With 36% of the entire population, the number of non-affiliated people is high, especially in the eastern part of the nation, where 70%-90% are non-affiliated.

A similar trend of secularization and non-affiliation can be observed in Belgium, which was until the 1960s a predominantly Catholic nation. Last decades, however, this societal situation changed <sup>4</sup>: in addition to a decreasing number of official – baptized – church members (96% of the Flemish newborns were baptized in 1967, but this was only 45% in 2016), there is also a large decrease in the other *rites de passage* (confirmations; weddings; funerals) as well as in the attendance of Sunday mass. Besides, the Catholic Church lost its impact on political and ethical issues: For several decades, the once so powerful political party of Christian Democrats is no longer the leading political party in Belgium (and especially in Flanders) and this has, amongst others, led to a decline of the church's influence on controversial ethical issues such as the use of anticonception; IVF treatments; abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriages. At the start of the third millennium, several scandals of child abuse in the Catholic Church made the situation even worse since many Belgian citizens lost their faith in this once so powerful institute.

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<sup>3</sup> Maybe this number is somewhat exaggerated: according to Stichs (2016) and the Pew Research Center (2017), Muslims in Germany account rather for 4.1% to 6.1% of the total population.

<sup>4</sup> The following numbers are based on Botterman & Hooghe 2009; Dobbelaere, Billiet & Voyé 2011; Billiet, Abts & Swyngedouw 2013 and De Redactie 2018.

Along with this secularization, Belgium is, since the 1960s, also characterized by increasing religious diversity. In 2009, almost 50% of the Belgian population identified as Catholic, while 2.5% identified with another Christian (mainly orthodox and protestant) denomination. In addition, 7% of the Belgian population have a Muslim background and also other non-Christian religions (e.g. Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Judaism) are part of the Belgian religious landscape today. Besides, 9% of the Belgians identify with atheism, while 33% do not identify with a particular religion or worldview. Seen from this perspective, the Roman Catholic Church in Belgium is no longer a major influential institution, but rather a minority church.

### 3 Education in Belgium and Germany: Catholic and Protestant Schools for non-affiliated Pupils

Notwithstanding the tendency of secularization and the decreasing impact of the Catholic Church on society at large, this Church remains a very important player in the field of education in Belgium, where most schools are, up to the present day, state-funded Roman Catholic schools: in the French Community, 41% of the primary school pupils and 60% of the secondary schools pupils are enrolled in state-funded Catholic schools and in the Flemish Community, the numbers are respectively 60% (primary schools) and 74% (secondary schools).

Given the increasing secularization in Belgium on the one hand, and the high number of Catholic schools on the other hand, most pupils enrolled in these schools do not have any affiliation with the Catholic tradition: the number of baptized pupils in Catholic schools decreases<sup>5</sup> and less than 50% of the pupils in Catholic schools self-identify as Catholic.<sup>6</sup> In relation to this, pupils' support for the Catholic faith is low: most pupils in Catholic schools take a rather 'neutral' (38.4%) or 'critical' (33%) stance towards the Catholic faith, 15% claims to have an *aversion* towards the Catholic faith, and only 6.2% explicitly supports this faith. Also notable is the fact that, in spite of the mandatory school subject Roman Catholic RE in Catholic schools, 7.1% of the pupils in these schools declare not to know what 'Catholic faith' actually means.<sup>7</sup> Particularly in large cities and their agglomerations, the identity of the Catholic school is no longer in accordance with the identity of many pupils and their parents: "Even within Catholic schools many of the students do not consider themselves Catholic anymore, even if they are baptized Catholics. Practicing students belong to the absolute minority even within their own schools" (Derroitte, Meyer, Pollefeyt & Roebben, 2014, pp. 47–48).

In Germany, the situation is, to a certain extent, comparable. Although Protestant Evangelical schools have, with 2.6% of all the schools in Germany (cf. EKD, 2020b, p. 7), not the same monopoly as the Catholic schools in Belgium, there are nevertheless an increasing number of non-affiliated pupils enrolled in these schools. One of the consequences is that an increasing number of non-affiliated people are enrolled in

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<sup>5</sup> In the last years of secondary education (16-18 years), 86,7 of the pupils were baptized between 2008 and 2015, but this number decreases, in particular among the younger pupils. In the same period, 68.5% of the pupils in primary Catholic schools were baptized. (cf. <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/onderzoek-katholieke-identiteit-scholen/>)

<sup>6</sup> Information available from: <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/onderzoek-katholieke-identiteit-scholen/>

<sup>7</sup> Information available from: <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/onderzoek-katholieke-identiteit-scholen/>

Protestant Evangelical RE, which is a mandatory school subject in Protestant Evangelical schools. Besides, a substantial number of non-affiliated pupils are enrolled in Protestant Evangelical RE in state schools, where it is on the optional curriculum. Given this new sociological situation, the following questions (EKD 2020a, 17) rise: (1) what is the mission and the offer of the EKD with regard to non-affiliated people? (2) what kind of response can the EKD expect and hope for from these people, without being unrealistic? (3) what can the EKD ‘tell’ these non-affiliated people?

In response to these questions, the EKD published its report *Religiöse Bildung angesichts von Konfessionslosigkeit*, which I will further analyze, with a particular focus on RE in state schools and in Protestant Evangelical schools. However, before I come to this analysis, I will illustrate how the Catholic Church in Belgium (Flemish Community) responded to the same questions and challenges.

#### **4 Roman Catholic Schools and Roman Catholic RE in a secularised Context: the Flemish Case**

One of the main challenges of the Catholic schools in Flanders today is how to handle with the changed sociological situation, without giving up their Catholic identity. As a response to this question, Flemish Catholic schools profile themselves today as ‘Catholic dialogue schools’ (*Katholieke dialoogscholen*): schools wherein pupils with different religious and non-religious backgrounds are welcome and wherein all the pupils are challenged to think about their own identity and to enter into dialogue about this identity with their fellow pupils. The Catholic dialogue school is an “an inclusive school” which “invites everybody to engage in dialogue and to search for being a (fellow) human being. In order to do so, [the Catholic dialogue school] brings together Christians, Muslims, Jews, people with a different worldview [and] secular humanists with all those who will find meaning in life and in living together” (Mission text Catholic dialogue school).<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding this open student policy, Catholic dialogue schools are still *Catholic* schools, *founded on the Biblical-Christian tradition*. In these schools, charity, “as exemplified in the Bible and in Jesus’ life”, is the guide “for education, living and living together” (Mission text Catholic dialogue schools). In order to facilitate this, Catholic schools can, and do, organize mandatory and/or optional liturgical activities (e.g. moments of prayer; mass celebrations; religious retreats). In addition, all Catholic schools in Flanders (but also in the French and German Communities) organize RE classes in Roman Catholicism, which are scheduled 2-3 school times on a weekly basis and are mandatory for all pupils. However, given the non-Catholic background of most pupils in these schools, the programme for Roman Catholic RE has been modified in 2019<sup>9</sup>, so that its content and aims are better adapted to the mission of Catholic schools and to the present school population.<sup>10</sup> As in Germany, RE in the recognised religions (including Roman Catholicism) is also organised as an optional

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<sup>8</sup> Available from: <https://pincette.vsko.be/meta/properties/dc-identifier/VSKO-20150626-katholieke%20dialoogschool> (accessed 20-11-2020)

<sup>9</sup> For primary education, there will be a complete new syllabus (not only for RE, but for all the subjects) and Roman Catholic RE will be integrated in this new syllabus.

<sup>10</sup> The program was designed by a working group which was established in 2016. The group was chaired by the Recognized Authority for Roman Catholic RE (Erkende instantie Rooms-katholieke godsdienst) and composed of inspectors for Roman Catholic RE, Roman Catholic RE teachers, theologians, and teacher trainers from Catholic university colleges.

school subject in state schools and also in this class context are students often non-affiliated and secularised. Hence the following four aims of the new Roman Catholic RE program: (1) an improvement of the pupil's religious literacy; (2) the integration of 'interreligious competencies'; (3) self-positioning of the curriculum within the project of the Catholic dialogue school; and (4) an adaptation of the school subject to the plural context.

In order to realize these aims, the new program starts from an interplay between the 'Christian faith', the 'pluralistic context' and the 'pupil's multi-dimensional identity'. Without going too much into detail, one could say that, compared to the previous programs (1999), more attention is given now to 'religious' and, more specifically, 'biblical' literacy. Another development is the inclusion of the *Interreligious Competencies* in the RE program. These competencies (ILC)<sup>11</sup> were formulated by the Commission of RE subjects (which is composed of delegates of the different recognized religions/worldviews<sup>12</sup>) in 2012, with the aim of stimulating interreligious dialogue between different religions and worldviews. These ILC are subscribed by all the recognized religions/worldviews and must, according to a revised Flemish Decree on Education<sup>13</sup>, be respected in all the RE subjects and in non-confessional ethics. In state schools and in Catholic schools, the recommended time to spend on the ILC is six hours a year. In order to do so, teachers of the different RE subjects and of non-confessional ethics in state schools are encouraged to organize common projects, wherein teachers and students of the different classes co-operate. In Catholic schools, Roman Catholic RE teachers can realize the ILC for instance by inviting a humanist consultant, a rabbi, an imam or a pastor; or by organizing an excursion to different places of worship.

With this renewed program and the inclusion of the ILC, the Roman Catholic Church tries to find a nuanced balance between the secularization and increasing religious diversity in the classroom on the one hand, and the Catholic tradition on the other hand. In order to find this balance, the program emphasizes the Catholic tradition and its meaning-giving potential for the students' identity formation: pupils with different religious and non-religious affiliations are challenged to reflect on and form their *own* identity and hereto, they are not only triggered by the plural context, but also – and more explicitly – by the Christian faith and the Catholic tradition, which have a 'priority' position as a source of reference in Roman Catholic RE.

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<sup>11</sup> The ILC are online available (in Dutch) from: <https://www.levensbeschouwelijkevakken.be/interlevensbeschouwelijke-competenties/> (accessed 05-10-2020). An English translation can be found in Franken & Loobuyck, 2020, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> In Belgium, there are currently six religions and one non-confessional worldview recognized by the Belgian state: Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodox Christianity, Anglicanism, Judaism, Islam and the association of humanists. These religions/worldviews have the constitutional right to organize their own RE subjects in state schools (cf. Belgian Constitution, art.24). In addition, the state pays, amongst other things, the wages and retirements of clergy and moral consultants and chaplaincies, as well as the construction and reparations of their places of worship. According to the present Federal Government Agreement (2020-2024), the Buddhists will soon be recognized as a second 'non-confessional' worldview. Once recognized, it will also be possible to take Buddhist RE in Belgian state schools.

<sup>13</sup> Online available from: <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=13255> (accessed 18-11-2020).

## 5 Protestant Evangelical Schools and Protestant Evangelical RE in a secularised Context: the German case

As in Belgium, many non-affiliated pupils in Germany are enrolled in a religious school subject. According to the EKD report (2020a, 113), 20% non-affiliated students are voluntarily enrolled in Protestant Evangelical RE in the western *Bundesländer*, and 50% in the eastern *Bundesländer*. Especially in the eastern part of the nation, the participation of non-affiliated students in Protestant Evangelical RE is often their first ‘confrontation’ with religion, faith and belief (EKD 2020a, 42-43). Since the 1970s, Protestant Evangelical RE is, like Roman Catholic RE in Flanders, open for all students, whatever their religious affiliation may be (EKD 2020a, p. 46). It is, however, a big challenge to remain the Protestant Evangelical identity and mission in RE classes on the one hand, while at the same time non-affiliated students should feel ‘at home’ in these classes.

As a response to this challenge, there are, according to the EKD (2020a, pp.125–128), three tasks for Protestant Evangelical RE: (1) to foster a confrontation with secular positions (e.g. by paying attention to church-state relations; critics of religion and (new) atheism; dynamics of religious communities) as well as with the possible meaning of interpretations, practices and traditions; (2) to take into account the presence of secular students in a didactical way (e.g. by allowing experiences with the Christian faith; by paying attention to existential questions; by allowing space for and dialogue with positions which are critical towards religion; by fostering students to change perspectives; and [in state schools] by common projects between pupils enrolled in the school subject ‘ethics’ and pupils enrolled in ‘Religion’). Finally (3), RE teachers should be aware of the fact that not only in the classroom, but also outside the classroom, many people are secularized and that, accordingly, some kind of conceptual promotion of ‘*Religionsunterricht in der Konfessionslosigkeit*’ is needed.

From a comparative perspective, it is interesting to see how confessional cooperation gains increasing attention (cf. EKD 2020a, 55). As in Belgium, interreligious dialogue has become an important aim for RE in Germany and in order to foster this dialogue the EKD report (e.g. p. 115; 127) stimulates interreligious projects, in particular with the ‘non-confessional’ school subject ethics in state schools: “*Wünschenswert ist deswegen zweitens eine verstärkte Kooperation von Religions- und Ethikunterricht als ordentliche Lehrfächer, welche die evangelische Kirche schon seit langem als ‘Dialogpartner’ versteht.*” This reminds us to the *interreligious competencies* (ILC) in the Flemish Community, which were recently developed in order to foster more cooperation between different (recognized) religious and non-religious communities.

Another remarkable development is the emphasis on *religious literacy* as part of ‘*Allgemeinbildung*’. This kind of religious literacy is, as in Belgium, seen as knowledge of the Christian tradition and of the “cultural testimonies of the Christian western world” (EKD, 2020a, p. 122), as well as knowledge of ‘other’ religions and worldviews. As in the Programmes for Roman Catholic RE in Belgium, both kinds of *literacy* are seen as triggers for reflection on and formation of one’s personal identity. With regard to this personal identity formation, the EKD report (2020a, p. 59) makes an interesting distinction between non-affiliated pupils which are ‘religiously (interested)’, ‘spiritual’ or ‘close to the church’ on the one hand; and non-affiliated pupils which are ‘atheist’ or ‘agnostic’ on the other hand: while the communication of the Gospel is considered to be a realistic and worthwhile aim for the former group of non-affiliated pupils, RE seems to be less ‘ambitious’ with regard to the latter group,

where “an evangelical perspective on relevant themes and questions” is at stake, without the aim of converting pupils. However, in spite of this rather ‘moderate’ aim of Protestant Evangelical RE, the EKD nevertheless hopes that, with its RE as well as with other forms of *Bildung*, non-adherents will be inspired by the Gospel and will be inspired to find (back) their way to the Church. After all, this is still one of the primary aims of *religious Bildung*:

“Demgegenüber mag innerhalb der Kirche eingewendet werden, dass es doch aber vorrangiges Ziel oder jedenfalls Gradmesser des Erfolgs bildsamen Handelns sein müsse, konfessionslose Menschen für den (Wieder-)Eintritt in die evangelische Kirche zu gewinnen. Gewiss ist zu hoffen, dass Menschen das Evangelium als Orientierung für ihre Lebensführung und -deutung erfahren und sich zur Taufe bzw. zum Wiedereintritt in die Kirche entschließen. Ebenso ist es ein theologisch legitimes Interesse der Kirche und der Theologie, sich selbst und vor allem die Kommunikation des Evangeliums gerade gegenüber skeptischen, kritischen oder auch wenig informierten Menschen positiv zu präsentieren.” (EKD 2020a, p. 95; also 92)

Perhaps this is the most remarkable difference with Roman Catholic RE in Flanders, which seems to be less ‘hopeful’ with regard to the (re)confessionalization of non-believers. In its new programmes, the main aim is the development of the pupils’ religious identity and hereto, the Christian faith is conveyed as a particular source of inspiration. However, whether pupils remain atheist or agnostic, convert to Christianity, or ‘chose’ to adhere to another tradition, is considered less important. As stated by Van Rentegem, who is the chief inspector for Roman Catholic RE in Flanders, the new program’s aim is *not* to ‘win souls’ and/or make disciples of non-believers: “We will absolutely not reconfeessionalize from a defensive reflex, but rather show how Roman Catholic RE can be meaningful for all students.” (Tertio, 2019). Hence the following core aims in Roman Catholic RE: recognizing and valuing plurality; knowing and being able to place the Christian faith within this plural context; and developing a thoughtful personal view. For the EKD, however, ‘the promulgation of the Gospel’, ‘mission’ and ‘*Bildung*’ are closely related to each other and, accordingly, the (re)confessionalization and (re-)adherence (*Wiedereintritt*) of non-affiliated people still seems to be an important part of its *mission*. But is this a *real* difference between Roman Catholic RE in Belgium and Protestant Evangelical RE in Germany? Or is the same mission and the same hope for ‘(re)confessionalization’ also relevant for the Roman Catholic Church, where it is rather part of its ‘hidden curriculum’?

## 6 Evaluation

In this short contribution, the EKD recommendations for Protestant Evangelical RE in Germany were placed in a comparative perspective with the new program for Roman Catholic RE in Belgium (Flanders). Interestingly, similar challenges of secularization and non-affiliation lead in both contexts to comparable changes in the respective RE subjects, which increasingly emphasize the importance of religious (and in particular Christian) literacy, interreligious dialogue and identity formation. At the same time, these school subjects are still of a denominational and confessional character and they are still embedded in particular, respectively Catholic and Protestant Evangelical, (theological) traditions. In both school subjects, pupils with different religious and non-religious backgrounds are invited to reflect on and form their own identity and in order to do so, the Christian faith is presented as a meaningful source of inspiration.



This contribution is only a brief theoretical exploration, based on what Bråten (2013; 2015) calls the *institutional level*: the EKD document *Religiöse Bildung angesichts von Konfessionslosigkeit* on the one hand, and the new program for Roman Catholic RE in Flanders on the other hand. From a comparative perspective, it would be interesting to focus also on the *instructional level* (i.e. the way *teachers* plan and deliver the curriculum) as well as on the *experiential level* (how do *students* experience the teaching of RE?) and to see how the EKD recommendations and the new program for Roman Catholic RE, are put into practice. In order to do so, empirical research, focusing on class practice, study material, but also on interviews with teachers and pupils, is also recommended. In all probability, this kind of empirical research will reveal other ‘similarities’ and ‘differences’ than the ones I mentioned here. In addition, it would be interesting to see how the abovementioned *mission* of the EKD is put into practice by teachers, how this mission is perceived by non-affiliated students and whether there is, in practice, a substantial difference with Roman Catholic RE and its (hidden?) mission.

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