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Religion Education and 'weak' Religious Education: Common Concerns

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Zusammenfassung: Als Reaktion auf die zunehmende Pluralität der Schülerschaft hat es in den letzten Jahrzehnten mehrere Veränderungen im Religionsunterricht gegeben. Nach einer kurzen Skizze dieser Veränderungen wird ein besonderes Augenmerk auf den "schwachen" Religionsunterricht und den nicht-konfessionellen Religionsunterricht gelegt. Dabei wird u. a. auf das Neutralitätsprinzip und auf verschiedene Kritiken an diesem Konzept eingegangen. Anschließend wird der Fokus auf mehrere gemeinsame Anliegen im nicht-konfessionellen und im schwachen Religionsunterricht gelegt: die Notwendigkeit religiöser Bildung, die Bedeutung des (interreligiösen) Dialogs, der Identitätsbildung und der Sozialisation. Um diesen Anliegen in den verschiedenen Schultypen und Religionsunterricht gerecht zu werden, könnte die Entwicklung eines gemeinsamen Lehrplans für Religion und Weltanschauungen eine interessante Option sein. Ein solcher Lehrplan, der sich in den Niederlanden derzeit in einem fortgeschrittenen Stadium befindet und der auch für andere Länder als Anregung dienen könnte, soll näher betrachtet werden.

Schlagwörter: religiöse Bildung, Religionsunterricht, Lehrplan für den Religionsunterricht, Neutralität, religiöse Kompetenz, Dialog, Identität, Sozialisation, Niederlande

Abstract: As a response to the increasing plurality of the student population, there have been several shifts in religious education over the past decades. After a brief sketch of these shifts, particular attention will be given to 'weak' religious education and to religion education. In order to do so, attention is amongst others given to the principle of neutrality and to several critiques on this concept. Subsequently, we will focus on several common concerns in religion education as well as in weak religious education: the need for religious literacy, the importance of (interreligious) dialogue, identity formation, and socialization. In order to comply with these concerns in different school types and in religion education as well as in (weak) religious education classes, the development of a common curriculum for religion and worldviews could be an interesting option. We will have a closer look at such a curriculum, which is at present in an advanced stage in the Netherlands, and which could inspire other nations as well.

Keywords: religious education, religion education, RE curriculum, neutrality, religious literacy, dialogue, identity, socialization, the Netherlands

1. Four Shifts in Religious Education

For many decades, the major religion in most western European nation states[1] was Christianity (Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox). Since the 1960s, this quasi monolithic religious landscape has been changed: all over Western-Europe, the number of (practicing) Christians decreased substantially. In addition, the number of people adhering to a non-Christian religion or worldview increased and a substantial number of Europeans identifies as non-religious. This changed sociological landscape

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[1] In this article, the main focus is on South, West, North and Central Europe. Given its history of communism, which has had important consequences for the presence of religion in society and at school, the Eastern part of Europe is not included here.

is also visible in schools and in particular in religious education classes, where it is no longer evident to suppose that the majority of students are (practicing) Christians. For many decades, it was more or less evident to organize Christian religious education in governmental and in state-subsidized non-governmental schools.[2] Today, however, this (mono-)confessional approach is no longer obvious. Therefore, the organization of religious education classes evolved in most Western-European states.

Generally, we can distinguish four shifts here. First, there are several schools where religious education classes are *reconfessionalized*. In these *strong religious education* classes, which are mainly organized in 'strong' faith based schools[3], one of the main aims of religious education is the socialization of the students in their *own* religious tradition. Hereto, religious education classes are organized in a mono-confessional, catechetical way, with very little attention for other religious and non-religious worldviews. Concrete examples are religious education classes in Jewish orthodox schools in Belgium, in orthodox protestant schools in the Netherlands, and in several Islamic schools in the Netherlands and in France.

Another, more common practice, is the organization of *'weak'[4] religious education* classes. This kind of religious education, which can be found in 'weak' faith based schools[5] as well as in governmental schools where religious education is on the curriculum, aims to find a balance between, on the one hand, the particular identity of the religious education class (and in case of faith-based schools also of the school) and, on the other hand, the different religious and non-religious identities of the students. Like strong religious education, the school subject is organized and supervised by the respective religious community, sometimes in co-operation with the state (*res mixtae*). Different from strong religious education, weak religious education does not aim to socialize students in a *particular* religious tradition, but rather aims at more general (religious) identity formation. Often, attention is also given to religious experiences and to the spiritual development of the students and the teachers (cf. Roebben, 2008; 2015). Different from non-denominational religious education (see below), one particular religious tradition is considered a special, inspiring point of reference which deserves particular attention. Although attention is also given to the diversity of religions and to interreligious dialogue, the 'own' tradition thus remains the *primus inter pares*. The most common example of weak religious education in Europe is Christian (Roman-Catholic or Protestant) religious education in 'weak' Christian schools (for instance in Belgium, in Germany and in the Netherlands) and in governmental schools (for instance in Austria, in Belgium and in Germany).

A third model of religious education is *non-denominational 'religion' education*, based on the academic study of religion. Different from the previous types of education, religion education is solely the responsibility of the state. It is thus up to the state (and not to the churches/religions/worldviews) to design curricula, to approve study materials, to supervise the school subject, to organize teacher training, and to hire teachers. These teachers are not considered to be 'witnesses' of their own faith, but they are

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[2] I will, in line with Maussen and Bader (2015) use the terms 'governmental' and 'non-governmental' schools, as an alternative for 'state' and 'private' schools. While 'governmental schools' are schools "owned, run, and financed by (a flexible combination of) governmental (federal, state, municipal) authorities" and are therefore considered to be neutral, this is not a requirement for 'non-governmental schools', which are "owned and run by (central or local) organisations or associations whether (partly or fully) publicly financed or not". These non-governmental schools can be denominational ('faith-based'), but they can also be secular, or based on a particular pedagogy (e. g. Steiner, Freinet, Montessori).

[3] Strong faith-based schools are non-governmental schools with a strong emphasis on their religious identity. Most (if not all) students and staff members belong to the religious tradition of the school, and particular attention is given to religious education and practice.

[4] The term 'weak' is not used in a pejorative way, but as a term opposing 'strong'.

[5] Weak faith-based schools are non-governmental schools with a religious identity, but this identity is less emphasized than in strong faith-based schools. Students and staff members do not necessarily belong to the religious tradition of the school, and religious practice is (if present) often not obligatory.

supposed to be specialists which are trained in the academic study of religion. In line with this academic background, different religious and non-religious traditions are studied in a 'neutral' or 'impartial' way, without favouring one particular religious or non-religious tradition (cf. infra). Another difference is that *religion education* does not aim at socialization in a particular religious tradition, but at general socialization in liberal-democratic societies which are, amongst others, characterized by religious diversity and secularization.[6] Today, religion education is amongst others organized in governmental schools in Sweden, in Norway and in Denmark (upper-secondary level). In Germany, the school subject *Lebensgestaltung, Ethik, Religionskunde* (LER)[7], which is organized in governmental schools in Brandenburg, and the school subject *Religion*[8] in the federal state of Bremen, are also examples of religion education.

Finally, there are schools in Europe where neither religious, nor religion education is organized in governmental schools. This is for instance the case in France where, in line with the 1905 law on *laïcité*, religion is considered a private matter which does not deserve a place in governmental schools.[9] In the aftermath of the recommendations of the Debray Report (Debray, 2002), education about *le fait religieux*[10] has been incorporated in school subjects such as history, geography and literature, but a separate school subject about religion does not exist in France (cf. Gaudin, 2014; Van den Kerckhove, 2011). In a comparable way, the previous school subjects in Catholicism and in ethics were in Luxemburg cancelled in 2017 and replaced by a new school subject 'Life and society' (*Vie et Société*), wherein basic knowledge of different religious and non-religious worldviews has been incorporated (cf. Braem, 2018).

2. Religion Education and Neutrality

For many decades, Religious Education in Europe was organized in a denominational and confessional way. In 1969, Sweden was the first European nation which introduced a non-denominational religion education subject in its schools as an alternative for the existing Lutheran classes. A few years later, religious education became also deconfessionalized in the UK (1971/1988), in Denmark (1975 – only upper-secondary schools) and in Norway (1997). Although I think there are good arguments for this deconfessionalization (e. g. Franken, 2017; 2021b; 2023), religion education is not uncontested and has often led – and still leads – to heated public and political debates. One of the main disputed issues is the concept of 'neutrality' or 'impartiality', which has been criticized by antagonists as well as by protagonists of religion education. Before I elaborate on these criticisms, it is important to know what is – and what is not – meant by neutrality or impartiality in RE.[11]

According to European jurisprudence (*Folgerø v. Norway*, *Appl*. no. 15472/02, 2002) it is possible to organize religion education for all students (without a possibility to opt out), as long as this subject is taught in a 'critical, objective and pluralistic manner'. This means amongst others that the school subject is

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[6] Last decades, this socialization in society at large is also emphasized in weak religious education classes, where socialization in one's own (religious) tradition is often seen as a prerequisite for socialization in liberal-democratic society. This is, nevertheless, different in 'religion education', where neither *religious* socialization, nor *religious* identity formation is an objective (even though religion education can, like other secular school subjects, influence one's personal religious or spiritual development and identity).

[7] Retrieved from: Lebensgestaltung-Ethik-Religionskunde (L-E-R) | Ministerium für Bildung, Jugend und Sport (MBJS) (brandenburg.de) [02.05.2023].

[8] Retrieved from: https://www.bildung.bremen.de/sixcms/media.php/13/e_04-2014_a.pdf [03.07.2023].

[9] This is different in the department of Alsace-Moselle, which is still regulated by the concordat of 1801 and its organic laws of 1802-1808. Up until the present day, there are four recognized religions in this region (Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism and Judaism) and the state pays the wages of the Ministers of these religions. In governmental schools, these recognized religions organize their own religious education classes, of which the teachers are paid by the state (cf. Franken, 2016, 143).

[10] Retrieved from: https://eduscol.education.fr/1623/l-enseignement-des-faits-religieux [02.05.2023].

[11] For a profound analysis of this concept in different (sub-)national contexts, see the special issue of *British Journal of Religious education* (Franken & Loobuyck, 2017).

organized and supervised by the secular state and not by (recognized) religious communities. In line with this, the subject is not taught from an *insider's perspective* by teachers who are supposed to *witness* of their own tradition, but by teachers who start from an *external perspective* and teach in an impartial way about the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews. This means, in the words of Kjeldsen (2019, 15),

> *"… that RE must be emancipated from theology and religious interests and be the responsibility solely of educational authorities. Well-educated teachers, who, in addition to their pedagogical and educational expertise, are educated in the academic study of religion, should teach the subject."*

The methodological stance of the religion education teacher differs substantially from the stance of the religious education teacher: while the former is an 'expert of' and 'a guide in' different religious traditions, the latter is mainly an expert of and guide in *one particular* tradition. While teachers of religious education are supposed to be 'engaged' and 'affiliated' with their own tradition, this is not the case for teachers of religion education. The overall aim of religion education is to *understand* religious phenomena, to discuss religious claims, to see connections between religion and society, and to develop capacities in order to understand religion and reflect on it (cf. Smart, 1968, 96-97). Hereto, a historical and descriptive approach is used, while the theological or doctrinal approach is dismissed. In the words of Smart (1968, 97): "The fact is that the primary role of the teacher is that of teacher. A Christian or a Humanist is not, as a teacher, a representative of the Church or of the Rationalist Press Association."

3. Why Neutrality is not Neutral: Critiques from Religious Studies and from Theology

3.1 Education is not Secular enough

According to several protagonists of religion education – mainly academics in the field of religious studies – existing religion education classes are not neutral enough. Jenny Berglund (2013; 2021) for instance, argues that Swedish religion education is not neutral, but 'marinated in Lutheranism'. In a similar vein, Bengt-Ove Andreassen (2013; 2019; 2021) and Mette Buchardt (2014; see also Buchardt & Ramsing Enemark, 2021) argue that existing religion education classes in Norway and in Denmark are mainly Christian-oriented. Generally, we can distinguish two main critiques here: (1) in religion education, religions are studied through a Christian – and thus not through a neutral – lens; and (2) in religion education, Christianity is emphasized not only in terms of quantity, but also in terms of quality.

3.1.1 Christian, Western Framework

First, there is the critique that the framework used in religion education classes is a typical Western, Christian framework, which leads to the essentialization of religion and does not take into account internal religious diversity and lived religion. In religious studies as well as in religion education, religions are studied according to the 'world religion paradigm' (cf. Flood, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2000; Cotter & Robertson, 2016), which means that typical Christian / monotheist concepts, such as 'the man, the book, the faith' (cf. Berglund, 2013; 2021) are used to study and compare different religious and non-religious traditions. This, however, is not an objective or impartial approach, but a Western, Christian approach. 'Religions', such as 'Hinduism' or 'Buddhism' are only religious for the western academic who studies them, but not for the people adhering to these so-called religious traditions (see e. g. Cush & Robinson, 2021).

What to say about this objection, raised by academics who are themselves often protagonists of religion education? First of all, we must be aware of the fact that, in its pioneering years, religion education was largely influenced by the phenomenology of religion which was, in its turn, influenced by liberal Protestantism. It is therefore not a surprise that Christian concepts ('the man, the book, the faith') have been used (and are still used) when studying 'other religions'. Besides, it is evident that, when we study and

describe 'religious' phenomena, we use our own concepts and frameworks which are indeed not neutral. Nonetheless, the fact that a view from nowhere is impossible does not mean that we should throw away the baby with the bathwater and thus stop studying religion from a religious studies based perspective. Rather, experts in the study of religion as well as teachers of religion education should be aware of their embeddedness and of the use of their own concepts. In the words of Cush and Robinson (2021, 70):

> *"[…] religion is a heuristic device useful for purposes of analysis and classification […]. So we can both accept that there is no such object as 'religion' out there in reality, and continue to use the term, but always conscious that it is merely a conceptual tool that needs constant critique."*

3.1.2 Quantitative and Qualitative Emphasis on Christianity

Another critique raised by experts in the field of religious studies is that in existing religion education programs, there is too much emphasis on Christianity. According to these critics, this would not be a problem if this is done for objective – e. g. historical, cultural, sociological, geographical – reasons and not because one particular religious tradition (e. g. Lutheranism) is considered 'better' or 'more valuable' than other religious traditions. Quite often, however, it seems that the emphasis on Christianity in current religion education programs is not only quantitative, but also qualitative. This is not neutral and disfavours students adhering to religious or non-religious minorities.

Although there are nowadays reasonable concerns about teaching e. g. history and geography with sufficient attention for the global context – and thus also for minorities and for post-colonialism – it is also reasonable to pay sufficient attention to *national* history and geography. In a similar way, studying different religious and non-religious traditions in the global context, while at the same time attention is given to one or more traditions at the national or local level, should not be considered to be problematic, as long as this is done for objective reasons. In this regard, it is important that there is always room for critical examination of existing curricula and teaching methods. This, in its turn, may lead to substantial changes, taking into account new sociological situations and societal needs.

3.2 Religion Education is not Religious enough

While for the critics mentioned above religion education is, in its existing forms, *not secular enough*, other critics – mainly academics from the discipline of theology – argue that religion education is *not religious enough*. "Begegnet man denn wirklich der Religion, wenn sie nur in einer 'religionskundlichen' und 'bekenntnisneutralen' Aussenperspektive unterrichtet wird?" is a question raised amongst others by Huber (1996, quoted in Kenngott, 2015, p. 96, n. 18). According to Huber and numerous other theologians, the answer to this question is definitely 'no': in order to truly understand religion, we do not need critical, objective and pluralistic religion education, but knowledge *from the inside*, embedded in a particular tradition.

According to protagonists of this position, neutrality is impossible: since we are all embedded in a particular tradition, studying religions in an objective or neutral manner is an illusion. In fact, the criticism raised here is thus similar to the criticism raised above. The lessons to be drawn, however, are different: while the critics mentioned in the previous paragraph still defend religion education, but with an awareness of our own frameworks and concepts, the critics we are dealing with in this paragraph are often against religion education and in favour of (weak) religious education.

3.2.1 Religion Education is anti-religious

Another point of critique raised by antagonists of religion education is that this kind of education is not *a*-religious or secular, but *anti*-religious or secular*ist*. In the Flemish Community in Belgium for instance, there has been a discussion for more than a decade (cf. Franken & Loobuyck, 2021) about a proposed

school subject, focusing on religious studies, ethics, philosophy and citizenship (LEF – *Levensbeschou-wing – ethiek – filosofie*). According to antagonists of this (thus far non-existing) school subject, such a non-denominational, neutral subject would be problematic because "neutrality is a dangerous ideology" (Torfs, Pollefeyt & Lamberigts, 2015) and is "in fact an anti-religious fundamentalism" (Pollefeyt & Lamberigts, 2015). In a comparable vein, the former head of the EKD's legal institute, Axel von Campenhausen, said that the school subject LER in Brandenburg is "eine Fortsetzung der Staatsideologie der alten DDR"[12] which presupposes a "weltanschauliche Einheit in der Schule". A general concern among these critics is that religion education is not neutral at all, but secularist or anti-religious.

However, within this critique, an *anti*-religious or secular*ist* perspective is wrongly put on equal terms with an *a*-religious or secular perspective. In order to better understand this difference, a short examination of different church-state policies can be helpful. In Europe, these policies can vary substantially (cf. Franken, 2016, Ch. 11-14): while some nations (e. g. Greece, Denmark, Finland) have a state church or an established church[13], other nations (e. g. Belgium, Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain), have systems of (more or less) direct state funding for (recognized) religions. Finally, there is the French model of *laïcité*, with a stronger separation of church and state. This French model, which is rather exceptional in Europe, can be described as a system of *assertive secularism* (Kuru, 2009, 106) or *liberal and republican secularism* (Modood, 2010, 6): church and state are largely separated and religions are as much as possible banned from the public sphere. In the same spirit, neither religious education, nor religion education have a firm place in French governmental schools[14]. Another possibility in liberal democratic states is *moderate secularism* (Modood, 2010, 5) or *accommodationism* (Kuru, 2009, 44): state and church are separated, but there is also cooperation between both actors and religion is not necessarily seen as a negative phenomenon that should at best be excluded from the public sphere. Such a system is amongst others compatible with direct forms of financial state support for (recognized) religions, for faith-based schools, and for chaplaincies, as well as with religious and/or religion education classes in governmental schools.

When we return to the discussion about neutrality in religion education, we can conclude that this kind of education is wrongly associated with assertive secularism. Although in religion education, religions are, like in other secular school subjects, studied from a *secular* perspective (and thus not from a confessional insider's perspective), this perspective is not *anti*-religious, but *a*-religious or *non*-religious:

> *"The secular study of religion is understood … to mean the non-sectarian, non-religious study of religion. It is not necessarily an atheistic approach. It simply chooses to interpret, understand and explain religion in non-religious terms. […] It applies methods, theories and models developed in the human and social sciences: history, sociology, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, ethnography and philosophy. It is further characterized by a comparative interest in all religions throughout human history. But its view of the world is secular and humanistic"* (Geertz, 2000, 11, emphasis added).[15]

3.2.2 Religion Education is boring, generalizing and essentializing

Another accusation at the address of religion education is that studying religion in an objective, impartial and thus neutral way leads to boring, generalizing lessons wherein religions are essentialized without taking into account their internal diversity as well as the existence of varying religious practices. In

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[12] https://www.welt.de/print-welt/article581290/Der-LER-Unterricht-ist-nicht-neutral.html [02.05.2023].

[13] Finland does not have one, but two state churches: the Lutheran and the Orthodox Church.

[14] With the exemption of Alsace-Moselle, cf. note 9.

[15] In a comparable vein, Wiebe (1999, 266) notes that "[t]he academic study of religion, then, is not a rejection of the religious ideal in itself; it is rather an attempt to reflect upon that ideal."

the Flemish discussion mentioned above, Torfs, Pollefeyt and Lamberigts (2015) argue that religion education leads to a boring enumeration of religions, which are approached in "terms of general labels, formal characteristics and comparative tables, from an equalizing perspective that is not recognized at all by its adherents". In a comparable way, the German theologian Richard Schröder remarked that "in LER Religionen wie Tiere in einem Zoo vorgeführt [würden]" (Kenngot, 2015, 96), thus suggesting that "Religion im LER-Unterricht zu einem exotischen Phänomen degradiert werde, wobei das Entscheidende, das Proprium der Religion, den Schüler/innen vorenthalten werde" (Kenngott, 2015, 96).

As said above, when we study religion (or any other cultural, sociological or historical phenomenon), we use our own concepts, categories and terminology. This, however, does not mean that religion education would be boring, essentializing and generalizing, nor does it imply that religions are presented as exotic phenomena. Moreover, comparing religious and non-religious traditions (which requires the use of common concepts) can help students to better understand their own as well as 'other' traditions. Even though religion education teachers should indeed be aware of these concepts, of possible stereotypes and of generalizing terminology, this is no less the case for e. g. the Christian religious education teacher who speaks about 'Islamic', 'Buddhist' or 'humanist' traditions and, by doing so, also uses his/her conceptual framework. Thus, religious as well as religion education teachers face the same risk of generalisation and essentialisation.

In order to counter this common problem in a constructive manner, the interpretive approach, as developed by Robert Jackson (1997; 2004), could be inspiring. According to Jackson, the static view on religion should be substituted by a more dynamic view, wherein not only the teachers' knowledge and expertise, but also the students' perspectives play a crucial role:

> *"The "content" of RE is not simply data provided by the teacher, but includes the knowledge and experience of the participants and an interactive relationship between the two. The specialist religious education teacher, working with children from diverse backgrounds, needs the professional skill to manage learning that is dialectical. If teachers can have the right degree of sensitivity towards their students' own positions, as well as to the material studied, and can develop appropriate pedagogies, then a genuinely conversational form of RE can take place which can handle diversity"* (Jackson, 2004, 89).

Jackson thus pleads for a kind of way in between, wherein a balance is found between a static, objective view on religion on the one hand (cf. the phenomenological approach) and a dynamic view on religion on the other, taking into account the diversity within particular religious traditions as well as the students' subjective experiences and their personal worldviews. In order to do so, religion is by the religion education teacher not merely reduced to what it means for the students (for this would lead to relativism and subjectivism), but also a purely objective, reductionist and essentialist view on religion is avoided. Accordingly, the dilemma between insider and outsider is countered in a constructive way: as an outsider, the religion teacher is an expert in different religious traditions, but at the same time, the teacher recognizes the students' insiders perspectives. From within their own traditions and experiences (personal worldviews), students are challenged to modify and nuance the "generalizing" approach of the teacher and the related focus on organized worldviews:

> *"The young people taking part in RE are themselves from a range of religious and non-religious backgrounds, and bring their knowledge and experience, their questions, observations and their own critical edge to the classroom. This is quite different from the parody of religious education as offering fully autonomous pupils choices of religions, as if from the supermarket shelf"* (Jackson, 1997, 129-130).

4. Religion Education and 'Weak' Religious Education: Common Concerns

Notwithstanding the critiques mentioned above, and notwithstanding the fact that religion and religious education differ substantially with regard to organization, academic background, teacher's stance

and subject content, there are also common concerns between the two school subjects, and more in par-ticular between religion education programs on the one hand, and weak religious education programs on the other hand. First, there is a common concern about '*religious literacy*'. As a result of increasing secularization, more and more students are religiously illiterate (cf. Prothero, 2008): "they don't know the difference between Easter and Christmas; they cannot mention the four evangelists; they cannot historically situate the emergence of the different 'world religions'; they are largely uninformed about different traditions within Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc." In order to counter this lacuna, different religion education programs emphasize the importance of learning about religion, with particular attention for the main national/local traditions. In the Swedish curriculum[16], we read for instance:

> "*Teaching in religion should aim at helping the pupils to develop knowledge of religions and other outlooks on life in their own society and in other parts of the world. By means of teaching, pupils should become sensitive to how people with different religious traditions live with and express their religion and belief in different ways. Teaching should in a balanced way illuminate the role that religions can play in society, both in the pursuit of peace and resolving conflicts, in order to promote social cohesion and as a cause of segregation. Teaching should also provide knowledge about and understanding of how Christian traditions have affected Swedish society and its values*" (Swedish curriculum for secondary education, 218).

In a similar vein, the importance of religious literacy has also been emphasized by several theologians, who plead for more religious literacy in weak religious education classes. In the Flemish Community in Belgium for instance, Didier Pollefeyt noticed that "[i]t is impossible that you do not know the meaning of Pentecost at the end of secondary education" (DeMorgen, 2019a). In a similar vein, Johan Bonny (bishop-referent education and president of the recognized authority for Roman-Catholic Religious Ed-ucation in the Flemish Community) argued that religious education should not be some kind of 'small talk' and pointed at the importance of religious literacy: "Religion is like a language: before you can speak, you need to know its vocabulary and grammar. In order to be able to speak about societal themes, you also need such a vocabulary" (DeMorgen, 2019b).

A second common concern in religion education and in weak religious education is the need for *dialogue*. In numerous religion education programs, dialogical skills are emphasised as a requirement for a re-sponsible life in a diverse society. In the school subject *Religion* in Bremen, 'Dialogorientierung' is for instance an important component of the curriculum: „Die didaktische Grundform des Faches Religion ist der offene Dialog, in dem Schülerinnen und Schüler sowie Lehrerinnen und Lehrer ihre religiösen bzw. weltanschaulichen Fragen und Überzeugungen zur Sprache bringen und reflektieren" (Religion – Bildungsplan, 8).

Last decades, this need for dialogue has also been emphasized in weak religious education programs, where *interreligious dialogue, interreligious learning* and *interreligious competencies* have become key con-cepts.[17]

A final common concern is the need for *identity formation* and *socialization*, which has been emphasized for instance in the religion education program of Sweden:

> "*Teaching should encourage pupils to reflect over various issues concerning life, their identity and their ethical attitudes. In this way, teaching should create the conditions for pupils to develop a personal attitude*

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[16] The Swedish program (secondary education) retrieved from https://www.skolverket.se/download/-18.31c292d516e7445866a218f/1576654682907/pdf3984.pdf [05.06.2023].

[17] For Germany, see for instance Fermor, Knauth, Möller and Obermann, 2022. Another example can be found in Belgium (Flemish Community), where the different organizers of religious education and of non-confessional ethics developed 'Interreligious Competencies', which have been integrated in the different religious education programs and in the program of non-confessional ethics. The Competencies are online available from: https://-www.levensbeschouwelijkevakken.be/interlevensbeschouwelijke-competenties/ [05.05.2023].

to life and an understanding of how they and others are thinking and living" (Swedish curriculum for secondary education, 218).

One of the main ideas is that informing students about different religious and non-religious traditions can contribute to their personal identity formation. Students also learn about common norms and values in liberal-democratic society, without abandoning their own (non-)religious identity. Overall, weak religious education classes also aim at identity formation and at socialization in society at large (see in this regard the many publications on religious education and citizenship), albeit with a more explicit focus on socialization in particular *religious* traditions, which is often seen as a prerequisite for socialization in society at large.

5. A Core Curriculum for Religion?

In terms of organization, didactics, content and approach, there are substantial differences between religion and religious education. At the same time, there are also common concerns, in particular with regard to religious literacy, dialogue, socialization and identity formation. Although I am convinced that there are good reasons to have *common and obligatory religion education* in all recognized schools (cf. Franken, 2017; 2021b; 2023) it is not evident to implement such a school subject in the short term.

One of the main reasons is that in Southern and Central Europe (with the exemption of France and Luxembourg), religious education is still organized "within 'old' structures" (Bråten, 2014, 302). Although the content of Christian religious education changed significantly over the past decades (from 'strong' to 'weak'), the institutional models and the related church-state systems remained unaltered. As noticed by Bråten (2014, 306), this is partly the result of the *national imaginaries* of particular nation states, which often have an emotional dimension and are therefore "not easily changed". Hence "there may be good reasons not to press for changes too quickly" (Bråten, 2014, 306). Taking this into consideration, one could, with the aim of fostering religious literacy, dialogical competencies, identity formation and socialization, opt for pragmatic solutions as a provisional second-best option. One of the benefits of such an approach is that educational practices can be adapted to the changing societal contexts, without profound – and often very slow – structural (and sometimes also constitutional) changes (cf. Franken, 2021a).

A possibility in this regard is the creation of a 'core' curriculum for the subject of religion, wherein the abovementioned common concerns are integrated. At present, a working group '*Expertisecentrum Levensbeschouwing en Religie in het Voortgezet Onderwijs*'[18], wherein different religious and non-religious stakeholders, teachers, teacher trainers and academics with diverse fields of expertise (mainly theology and religious studies) cooperate, elaborates on such a core curriculum for the Netherlands (Davidsen, den Ouden, Visser & Lammers, 2017; Davidsen, 2020; 2023)[19]. The curriculum is intended to be used in all recognized secondary schools in the Netherlands, thus in governmental as well as in non-governmental schools. This means amongst others that it could be used in (weak and strong) religious education classes as well as in religion education classes and that, accordingly, attention is given to external as well as to internal perspectives on religion.

The preliminary curriculum mentions three 'learning lines' (*leerlijnen*), which are respectively oriented towards: (1) religious and non-religious traditions, (2) perspectives concerning religion and worldviews

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[18] https://lervo.nl/#:~:text=Het%20expertisecentrum%20is%20een%20platform,voortgezet%20onderwijs%20in%20heel%20Nederland [30.06.2023].

[19] Recently, the different partners agreed to continue cooperation for a second term of 5 years.

and (3) themes concerning religion and worldviews.[20] The first learning line focuses on the 'big five' world religions and on humanism, with particular emphasis on Christianity and Islam. In addition, there is, within the second and third learning lines, also space for societal and comparative themes (e.g. religion/worldviews and sustainability; comparing stories of creation in different traditions).

In order to enable a focus on internal as well as on external perspectives, the preliminary curriculum starts from a 'perspective-oriented approach' (*perspectiefgerichte benadering*), wherein nine perspectives are combined (cf. Davidsen, 2023, 211-212): (1) the perspective of *meaning*; (2) the *phenomenological* perspective; (3) the *comparative* perspective; (4) the *anthropological* perspective; (5) the *historical* perspective; (6) the *demographic* perspective; (7) the *societal* perspective; (8) the *meta* perspective; and (9) the *personal* perspective.

The first four perspectives deal with the question 'what' religions/worldviews actually are and how they can appear in the life of human beings. The perspective of *meaning* deals in this regard with existential questions and with different (non-)religious answers to these questions. Students learn to read (non-)religious texts in a hermeneutical way and to look for the (ultimate) meaning in different religious and non-religious traditions. The *phenomenological* perspective helps the students to see religious and non-religious worldviews as traditions wherein different 'dimensions' – stories, ethical prescriptions, rituals, institutions, … – form a coherent system. This perspective also helps students to describe and analyse religious and non-religious traditions, by using a set of 'common concepts'. The *comparative* perspective in its turn, makes the students familiar with different methodologies to identify differences and similarities between, but also within different traditions. In the *anthropological* perspective, which aims amongst others to stimulate the capacity of reciprocity and the willingness to interreligious dialogue, attention is given to the experience of adherents of different religious and non-religious worldviews.

The next two perspectives – i. e. the *historical* and the *demographic* perspective – focus amongst others on the religious landscape in time and space. From a *historical* perspective, students are not only invited to reflect about the emergence and development of religions and worldviews, but also about religious texts as possible sources for historical knowledge. In addition, the *demographic* perspective gives students a better insight in the statistic part of religions and worldviews and in the presence of religious organizations in their own neighborhood.

Different from the previous perspectives, the *societal* perspective has a more applied approach, as it examines how religions and worldviews are related to societal themes such as diversity, inequality and sustainability. A core question here is what kind of 'religious' knowledge could contribute to a better dealing with these issues. In addition, a comparable – and thus also applied – approach can be found in the *meta* perspective, which gives the students the required tools in order to critically reflect on different themes addressed in the previous approaches.

Although an explicit 'religious' perspective is not mentioned in the preliminary core curriculum, the religious/insider perspective is at least present in two manners. First, the *personal* perspective, which can be seen as a read thread through the different perspectives, gives students the required tools to give their own meaning on the study material. One can think here on e. g. ethical positions in debates concerning controversial issues; the articulation of one's own (religious) perspective; and the possible development of these positions and perspectives, in view of the examined study material and of the learned competencies of reflection. In addition, perspectives 1-8 are not only dealing with the *external* perspective of religions and worldviews, but the aim of the entire curriculum is rather to *understand*

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[20] In Davidsen (2023) four perspectives are mentioned. On June 12, 2023, there was a meeting of the expert group, which decided to reduce the perspectives from four to three. (Information based on e-mail correspondence with Markus Davidsen, June 2023).

religions and worldviews. The program thus aims to develop an insight in the internal perspectives of (individuals and groups within) different worldviews and religions and to learn to move into these insider's perspectives, in order to better understand them (cf. Jackson's interpretive approach).

In order to combine the different perspectives and the different learning lines in a constructive and intertwined way, the curriculum will be constructed in modules. This modular approach will also enable the integration of the curriculum in different school subjects, e. g. in religious education subjects, in religion education subjects, or – in case there is no separate subject dealing with religion – in existing subjects focusing on society and humanities.

6. In Conclusion

This paper started with an elaboration of different shifts in religious education, as a response to the increasing plurality of the student population in the classroom. Subsequently, attention has been given to the principle of neutrality and to several critiques on this concept – both from theologians as well as from experts in the study of religion. It has been argued that, rather than focusing on the *differences* between religion and religious education, it is also possible to look at common concerns, such as the need for religious literacy, and the importance of (interreligious) dialogue, identity formation, and socialization. These topics are not only addressed in weak religious education classes, but also in religion education classes. Although I am still in favor of *religion education for all*, complemented with (state-facilitated) *religious education at request*, the implementation of a non-denominational religion education subject in different European nation states is, due to institutional structures as well as due to national imaginaries, not evident in the short term. Therefore, another, more pragmatic possibility, is the design of a core curriculum on religious and non-religious worldviews which can be implemented in different types of schools and wherein attention is amongst others given to religious literacy, to dialogue, to identity formation, and to socialization. In the Netherlands, such a curriculum is in an advanced stage now. It is my sincere hope that this curriculum will also inspire other (European) nations, where the increasing diversity in the classroom, but also the growing misunderstanding of and hostility towards religious as well as towards secular worldviews, asks for such a curriculum.

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