

## Religious education in a post-secular and post-Christian context

Lieven Boeve\*

*Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium*

In 1999, a new curriculum for Roman-Catholic religious education was introduced in Flemish primary and secondary schools, taking into account both the growing de-Christianisation and religious pluralisation of pupils in the classroom. Recently, this new curriculum has been subjected to diverging criticisms: first it is considered still too Christian, and therefore not able to appropriately deal with religious plurality, and, second, quite contrary to the first criticism, because it deals too much with religious plurality the curriculum is criticised for being no longer sufficiently Christian. In view of this double criticism, in this contribution I first shed some light on the analysis of the current post-Christian and post-secular religious situation, upon which the Religious Education (RE) curriculum is based – i.e. an analysis in terms of detraditionalisation and pluralisation (rather than secularisation). Afterwards I evaluate whether the fundamental goals, which were set 10 years ago, are still adequate to this analysis. In order to do so, I enquire how these goals relate to the double critique: on the one hand, that Roman Catholic RE is no longer an adequate way to prepare pupils for the post-Christian and post-secular society, because they are still too Christian, and, on the other, that they are not Christian enough. In doing so I will accentuate the integral nature of these goals, taking the present religious plurality as a dynamic given which opens up new opportunities for a more reflexive identity construction, while at the same time providing new space to bear witness to the Christian offer of meaning. I conclude with a short reference to the preconditions which need to be fulfilled in order to facilitate the implementation of such RE programme.

**Keywords:** post-Christian; post-secular; detraditionalisation; pluralisation; religious education

### Introduction

More than ten years ago, in 1999, the Roman-Catholic bishops of Flanders initiated a new curriculum for Christian religious education in primary and secondary schools. This new curriculum not only took into account the reality of the growing de-Christianisation of pupils, but it also reflected the new challenges to religious education introduced by religious pluralisation. In general, the new curriculum assessed the new situation as an opportunity to re-conceive religious education (RE): RE would now focus on raising pupils' reflexive and communicative competencies by immersing them in the challenging reality of interreligious communication. By stimulating the conversation between Christian faith and other religions and convictions, RE hoped to let pupils reflect on their own religious identity, whether this identity was Christian or not. This was supposed to result in a more mature religious identity, for

---

\*Email: [lieven.boeve@theo.kuleuven.be](mailto:lieven.boeve@theo.kuleuven.be)

both Christians and non-Christians, while giving pupils the competency to live in a multi-religious society. They would become much more conscious of the specificity of their own religious identity, while being respectful of religious others. In this systematic-theological contribution, I would like to reflect on the fundamental principles of this curriculum, in view of some recent developments, because since 2010 this curriculum has been subjected to a twofold criticism.

On the *one* hand, some venture that the project of a confessionally organised religious education is out-dated, due to de-Christianisation and religious pluralisation, since it no longer suits the present post-Christian and post-secular context. Rather than confessional courses, our society today needs a comparative introduction to diverse religious traditions and other world views. In the discussion, this proposal has been labelled the ‘active-pluralist’ alternative to the current situation. In short, their criticism of the RE curriculum under consideration is that the curriculum is still ‘too Christian,’ and thus no longer appropriate to introduce and prepare youngsters for the multi-religious culture and society of the future.

On the *other* hand, precisely the opposite criticism resounded in the context of the *ad limina* visit of the Belgian bishops to the Holy See, in the spring of 2010: Roman Catholic RE, it was said, provides too little introduction to the Christian faith and places too much emphasis upon religious plurality. Too much Christian illiteracy remains at the end of the process: ‘Our children learn about everything and more in religious instruction, except our own religion.’

In view of this double criticism, coming from very different sides, first I now shed some light on the analysis of the current religious situation, upon which the RE curriculum is based. Afterwards I will evaluate whether the basic objectives, which were set more than 10 years ago, are still adequate. In order to do so, I will enquire how these objectives relate to the double critique that Roman Catholic RE is no longer an adequate way to prepare pupils for the post-Christian and post-secular society, because on the one hand, its basic objectives are still too Christian, and, on the other, that they are not Christian enough. I will hereby accentuate the integral and dynamic character of the basic objectives of the 1999 RE curriculum. I will conclude with a short reference to the preconditions which need to be fulfilled in order to facilitate the implementation of such an RE programme.

### **The 1999 RE curriculum 10 years later: does the underlying analysis still apply?**

According to the basic analysis supporting the 1999 RE curriculum, the then-current context could no longer be adequately described as one of modernisation or secularisation (Boeve 1999). It could better be spoken of in terms of detraditionalisation, individualisation and pluralisation. After all, the overlap between the Christian faith and the cultural horizon, which had always been present, eroded faster than expected. Although this overlap formerly made it possible to presume Christian contents and frameworks of meaning – whether people shared them or not – it increasingly appeared no longer to be the case, resulting in the actual collapse of modern correlation theology and correlation didactic. At the same time, the religious field pluralized, and people became increasingly aware of religious diversity, otherness and difference.

What was growing in the culture then as trends has become even more visible today. We live in a context that can be described as *post-Christian and post-secular*

(Boeve 2004, 2007). In both categories the word ‘post’ does not mean simply ‘after’ (as if both realities and their effect have disappeared), but rather that, culturally speaking, our relation to the Christian faith and to secularisation has changed. The term *post-Christian* then indicates that, although the traces of Christian faith in our society and culture, in our collective and individual identity formation, are still present in abundance, at the same time the Christian faith is no longer the obvious, accepted background that grants meaning. The term *post-secular*, for its part, points to the fact that the presuppositions of the secularisation thesis no longer apply: modernisation of society does not lead simply to the disappearance of religion, but rather to a changed way of dealing with religion, as well as to its pluralisation. The zero-sum theory, honoured by the secularisation thesis, which holds that the more modernisation there is the less religion remains (and the opposite, the more religion there is the less modernized a society is), no longer holds. Even more: whoever claims today that the outcome of social processes necessarily leads to a situation where religion may no longer have any public meaning, and at best can be but a private matter, is unmasked as being ideological: i.e. as an adherent of secularism, which in itself is just one of the possible positions present in the current pluralized religious field.

The *change in perspective*, brought about by this analysis of our context in terms of post-Christian and post-secular, is crucial however: from an analysis in terms of secularisation (that extends religious positions on a continuum between ‘practising Christian’ and ‘convinced atheist’) we move to an analysis in terms of detraditionalisation, individualisation and pluralisation of religion, in which these three processes take advantage of and strengthen each other. The result of which is not a continuum between two extremes, but a plural field of a multitude of positions, which are related to each other, which possibly influence each other, learn from each other, question each other, conflict, even repudiate and fight (see also Taylor 2007).

In light of the contemporary discussion about Christian religious education, it is very important to point out the *fundamental difference* that must be made between the *social processes themselves* (‘-isations’) and the *various ways by which these processes are evaluated and handled* (‘-isms’). Because in the discussion unnoticed shifts often occur between analysis and evaluation, between ‘description’ of the current context and a ‘programme’ to deal with it.

- (1) *Detraditionalisation* concerns the process by which traditions, religious as well as other traditions (gender, family, professional context), no longer naturally transfer from one generation to another – a process that presses ahead in our society independent of individual preferences and decisions. However, detraditionalisation is not necessarily the same as the loss of tradition and/or *nihilism*. Traditions often remain, in changeable forms, as horizons of meaning in which identity is devised and found. What detraditionalisation does express is the fact that people’s relation to tradition changes. Since tradition no longer has an obvious character, it becomes potentially more reflexive. This applies also for those who make traditional, classical choices today, for example in partner relations, child-rearing, ethical and religious positions. These choices are also no longer simply self-evident. It is precisely this refusal of the reflexive character of belonging to a tradition, which contains a combination of involvement and distancing (Ricoeur would speak of a ‘second naivety’), which characterizes a neo-traditionalist or fundamentalist association with tradition.

- (2) The other side of detraditionalisation is *individualisation*, the structural given that identity is no longer assigned, but that it should be actively taken on in increasing measure (i.e. constructed). This process should be distinguished from *individualism*, which stands for a specific way of dealing with the process of individualisation, namely one in which the individual's preference constitutes the all-determining norm. For individualisation does not preclude the possibility that individuals, in constructing their identities, might choose precisely against individualism. For that matter, individualisation does not at all mean that there are no hidden influences or environmental factors which determine identity construction – the media and market forces are just two very pertinent examples of such influences.
- (3) *Pluralisation* is also not the same thing as *pluralism* and/or *relativism* (with *neo-traditionalism* or *fundamentalism* as counter reactions). Pluralisation implies that each identity is structurally challenged to conceive of itself in relation to difference and otherness – especially to the effect of other truth claims to its own claim. This is a necessary step to be taken by all religious positions, and has also implications for the organisation of the public realm in a multicultural society. It is precisely here that the question of equal and mutual recognition of religious positions poses itself, and where the different reactions of intolerance, passive and active tolerance manifest themselves.

These three processes also both determine and apply to classical religious and atheistic positions. Against a background of detraditionalisation and pluralisation identity construction occurs also here in an individualized manner. At the same time, this does not preclude that what is analyzed individually–structurally as an individualised choice is experienced on a religious–spiritual level, for example, as a vocation (a being chosen).

### **The programme of the 1999 RE curriculum, and the active-pluralist alternative**

It would seem that the fundamental principles of the 1999 RE curriculum still address the current situation of a further developing post-Christian and post-secular culture and society. The curriculum's programme consists of bringing young people through the *awareness of religious plurality to a reflexive identity in dialogue with the Christian tradition*. In a post-Christian and post-secular context, RE strives after the religious growth of young people to maturity, starting from within the Christian tradition. As far as this is concerned, the basic objectives of the curriculum for secondary education cannot be more clearly formulated (*Leerplan rooms-katholieke godsdienst voor het secundair onderwijs* 1999, 49).

Being open towards and appreciative of what Christian belief can mean in a world that is experienced and understood as radically plural.

- (a) Becoming aware of, and ideologically challenged by, the plurality of fundamental life options in our present-day life and society.
- (b) Being able to situate the offer of meaning supplied by the Christian faith in the context of a plurality of fundamental life options.

- (c) Acquiring the capacity to render account for one's own ideological profile from an insight into the plural ideological character of human speech, thought and action, and in dialogue with the meaning supplied by the Christian faith in this context.

However, based on roughly the same analysis of our current post-Christian and post-secular context, some think that the 1999 RE curriculum, with its preferred option for Christian faith, has been outstripped, and that the time has come for a *non-confessional religious education that introduces the various religions/fundamental life options* that the pluralised field recognizes. Defining themselves as the active-pluralist position, they propose a shift from 'education into religion' to 'education about religion(s).'

Although such proposals have been formulated in considerable variety (Loobuyck and Franken 2009; de Groof et al. 2010), they all lead to the same conclusion: it would be better to replace the confessional RE courses provided by the Roman Catholic Church, and by other religious groups; or at least to complement them with a general religious education that no longer has a privileged tie to one specific religious tradition. Such a new curriculum, it is said, would be the logical consequence of the changed religious context, because only in such a course can young people be adequately prepared for an active-pluralist society. Against, on the one hand, secularism (which has no place for religion in the public space) and, on the other, religious intolerance, active pluralists plead for a reciprocal and active recognition of plurality and difference.

A decent society asks along with reciprocal recognition of secular and religious views for forms of reciprocal recognition which go further than passive tolerance. [...] No one has to give up his/her own truth, but a reciprocal willingness to listen and learn is certainly a condition for a peaceful coexistence and social cohesion. (de Groof et al. 2010, 8, own translation)

Put succinctly: *such general religious education should deal with the religious illiteracy of the pupils and assist them in identity development*, so that they will not fall into religious indifference.

Naturally – and this remains all too often in the background or is forgotten – such proposals fit just as well in a value-laden programme. It is precisely at this point that a warning applies, namely that *such a programme does not necessarily follow from the analysis* proffered, but that it is already one specific answer to the current situation. From this perspective, these alternative proposals are *no less value-laden* than the 1999 RE curriculum.

### **Active-pluralist non-confessional religious education: a better alternative?**

In the proposal of organizing active-pluralist RE that aims at introducing pupils to all of the religious traditions, a *shift from description to programme* is operative (often in an unnoticed manner). Indeed, the proposal is not neutral with respect to religions and fundamental life options, because it holds very clear ideas regarding the way in which religions should deal with their own truth claims. It presupposes fundamental life options and religions which are already able to deal with plurality and difference. Although in my own theological work I am also involved with such questions (Boeve 2009), it should be clear that such approach is *not neutral*: it pre-

supposes a *very specific set of values* in which *dialogue, openness to others, recognition of plurality, respect for singularity and difference*, are central. Moreover, this set of values principally distinguishes itself from secular neutrality, religious indifference and relativism, and religious fundamentalism. However, there are a number of questions to ask regarding the value-laden nature of the active-pluralist proposal.

(1) *Where do these values actually come from?* Are they simply present in the religious field as a kind of meta- or intermediate level above or between the various fundamental life options and religions? Or do they themselves belong to a single tradition, or originate from several traditions? Is this set of values a kind of common wisdom, constructed out of the conflicts between fundamental life options in past decades? Is it something that has grown – or rather: is busy growing – within the religious traditions as a way of dealing with the current situation? Or does it demarcate one position within the religious field? Does this set of values exist apart from the traditions out of which it grew? Or does a bond with these traditions remain necessary to sense these values, to learn them, to foster and to strengthen them? Moreover, in our present societies, it certainly does not suffice to assume that there would be a consensus concerning this set of values.

(2) *In order to practice this set of values, is RE by way of 'education about religion' sufficient?* Is RE that is limited to learning about religious traditions not *too narrow*, if it is not paired, at the same time, with a reflection on one's own religious position and the manner in which one deals with diversity and difference (both on the level of knowledge and of commitment)? If the latter does not occur, such RE curriculum can lead just as well to religious relativism and indifference. The ultimate question then is whether such a general RE about the various fundamental life options and religions ultimately is not a *variant of the neutral-secular way of dealing with religious plurality: one which forgets one's own value commitment*. Or does such RE aim precisely at contributing to a specific religious position of its own kind – a position that fits with a kind of vague religiosity which is cobbled out of a plurality of traditions? This would mean that, once again, this results in a kind of confessional RE in its own right (serving a post-Christian and post-secular religiosity). An answer to the following questions might be telling in this regard: who is considered to be able to teach such a course, and who can do so in reality? Can it be someone who him- or herself adheres to one particular religious tradition? Or does it have to be someone that keeps him- or herself out of particular religious affiliations? Is such a position even possible? Or at least: is this desirable, in view of the interest active-pluralists attach to the religious engagement of citizens in an active-pluralist society? To expect pupils to be challenged to form a religious reflexivity by teachers who cannot testify to such themselves seems to be an impossible task.

(3) Further in this direction: what about the apparent *tension between individualised identity construction and adherence to a tradition* which surfaces in active-pluralist RE proposals. Do such proposals really take sufficient account of what individualisation means? Often it is suggested that there is a large majority of highly individualised persons who put together their own identity, freely and autonomously using material from classical traditions and other sources, in contrast with a smaller group of 'orthodox' people whose identity then would be determined by a single religious tradition. The first group is thought to have a constructed, not tradition-bound identity, while the second group belongs to just one tradition. On closer inspection: it is as if a new version of the secularisation thesis is at work here, with

an adapted zero-sum theory: the more individualisation, the less tradition, and the opposite: the more tradition, the less individualisation. However, as was already said, detraditionalisation and individualisation do not simply mean the loss of tradition; rather, they indicate that tradition is no longer quasi-automatically passed on, and that our belonging to a tradition structurally becomes much more reflexive. In this sense a split between (a majority of) individualised people and (a minority of) orthodox people is far too simple a representation of the situation. Certainly there are people today who reflexively glean their identity from only one tradition. From their own perspective they will not consider themselves to be any less orthodox than traditionalists think of themselves, or this tradition to be any less individually appropriated than the construction of individualised religious identities from many traditions or sources. It would seem that in the proffered representation of the situation there is no place for such reflexive belonging to one tradition; while it will be precisely that kind of religious position that will have acquired the ability to deal with difference, dialogue and mutual recognition from the perspective of its own religious tradition. Again: if the active-pluralist position entails that individualisation leads to a constructed, non-traditional identity and that because of this a general RE curriculum must be created, then this cannot be claimed as a neutral position with regard to religious traditions. It is rather a *position of its own kind, itself to be situated as only one position in the field of religious diversity*. The difference, then, is simply the target audience: not the 'orthodox' Christians, Jews, Muslims, etc., but a so-called 'individualised post-Christian and (often also) post-secular audience.' Is such RE curriculum, then, the active-pluralist solution it was proposed to be?

(4) A final observation concerns the popular statement that *there is very little real identity construction going on* in our days due to detraditionalisation and individualisation, and that our time would be one of moral and spiritual emptiness. Market and media all too easily take over identity formation. Also in order to counter this, some call for the need for a general non-confessional RE curriculum. Once again, a *tension* comes into play, now between, on the one hand, this *lack of identity formation* and, on the other hand, the conditions for the possibility of an active-pluralist conversation, which in one way or another *already presupposes a degree of identity construction*. Moreover, in order to be able to participate in a dialogue between religions and fundamental life options, and, thus, to be able to come to a dialogical identity construction in mutual recognition, diversity and difference must be recognisably present. In Flanders such diversity is most obvious when people from religions other than Christianity are involved in the conversation, but it is, in principle, to be made no less visible among Christians, post-Christians, atheists, agnostics, the indifferent, etc. However, if the conclusion should be that the majority of people today do not arrive at a well-formed identity, pluralism – let alone active pluralism – is out of the question, and interreligious, dialogical identity construction remains but a beautiful dream. People only gain a dialogical, reflexive identity by bringing their own identity into relation with that of the other. Pupils should learn to see their own truth claims in relation to the others: on the one hand, without absolutising their own truth claims and, on the other, without falling into relativism. Plurality and difference, therefore, must be recognizable and brought into a dialogical learning process, in the course of which each one's religious position is at issue, including the teacher's and the school's. To say it differently, the remedy for religious illiteracy provides no solace for religious indifference, but remains knowledge without commitment if not involved in such dialogical learning processes.

When one takes all of these points together, it is no longer clear why the proposed active-pluralist alternative should be the necessary – let alone superior – conclusion coming out of the analysis made regarding detraditionalisation, individualisation and pluralisation, and of the set of values it wishes to realize. In principle, *all RE* should be able to do so, when engaged in the dialogue of one's own tradition with the current context of plurality and difference. An additional advantage would be that the set of values mentioned above would themselves be supported by reflexive traditions, while the foundation of these values in the alternative proposal hangs in the air.

Therefore, the fundamental question here runs as follows: *does the 1999 RE curriculum not strive after realising the same goal – educating to citizenship in a post-secular, pluralist society – and possibly in a more credible manner?* Also in this curriculum pupils are led to become conscious of the inescapably religious character of every manner of human thinking, acting and living, and of the plurality which this involves. From this, they are invited to think about their own identity in interaction with other witnesses, with a preferred position for the Christian faith, which is brought into the religious communication in a reflexively-engaged manner (at least by the teacher). All pupils are therefore stimulated to arrive at religious maturity and interreligious conversation, whether they now are Christians, post-Christians, agnostic, Muslim, indifferent...

If all (non-)confessional RE curricula did this as well, there would be the additional advantage of also including the organised religions and world views in becoming more reflexive. Because all of them then would be challenged *to work at reflecting upon their own truth claims in relation to diversity and difference*. This would offer most probably an effective antidote against tendencies toward neo-traditionalism and fundamentalism, which are often present in all of them.

### **The second criticism: not Christian enough?**

When Roman Catholic RE is considered too Christian by the active-pluralist proponents, then the critique 'from the other side' is precisely that this RE is not Christian enough. This critique is *twofold*: (1) On the one hand the 1999 RE curriculum would be too much influenced by a kind of *religious constructivism*, and run the risk to result in individualism, relativism, indifference. (2) On the other hand, there seems to be *too little transfer of knowledge* of the Christian tradition: at the end of secondary education, after 12 years of Roman Catholic RE, pupils have become too little familiarised with Christianity. This latter critique is formulated under two different aspects: (2a) *Culturally* speaking, pupils would know *too little* about Christianity, something which remains important in a society and culture which historically have been framed by the Christian tradition. (2b) From an *ecclesial* perspective, pupils would not be properly initiated into the Christian faith. RE is not *catechetical* enough, and thus is not able to make up for the weakening of other initiating milieus, such as the family or the parish. In each case, it is argued, RE classes should focus much more on a thorough introduction to Christianity.

It would seem that this criticism, which is precisely the opposite of the criticism stemming from active-pluralist voices, together with the latter, may lead to a polarisation in the discussion about RE. However, from the perspective of the basic objectives of the RE curriculum, *one should not look for an antithesis where there*

is not necessarily one. There need not be a contradiction between giving additional attention to an adequate presentation of the Christian faith in religious education, on the one hand, and calling for respect for religious plurality and concern for the growth of detraditionalised and individualised pupils, on the other. Even more: it is precisely within the context of religious plurality that the Christian faith may be presented in a new way, especially in a culture which no longer is pre-determined by a Christian horizon of meaning. Precisely to be operative in such context the 1999 RE curriculum has been constructed. Whoever reads together both the first and second basic objective cannot overlook this conclusion:

- (a) Becoming aware of and ideologically challenged by the plurality of fundamental life options in our present-day life and society.
- (b) Being able to situate the offer of meaning supplied by the Christian faith in the context of a plurality of fundamental life options. (*Leerplan rooms-katholieke...* 1999)

At the same time, the basic objectives of the 1999 RE curriculum hint at more than simply a presentation of Christian content and practices. It seeks not ‘merely’ a transfer of knowledge about Christian tradition, but aims at a *learning to appreciate what Christian faith can mean* for people of today, whether they are Christians or not. Of course this requires much knowledge about the Christian tradition, its content and practices, and the developments these underwent. At the same time, however, the curriculum intends to make clear that Christian faith concerns *the lives of people*, and that it is precisely at that point that it may speak to people of today, challenging them in their deepest existence, and providing them with an appealing offer of meaning. The task of RE, therefore, is not just to transfer a body of cultural knowledge (the exteriority of Christian faith), but at the same time – no matter how difficult – to show that this body of knowledge has to do with life itself, especially also with the life of youngsters. Obviously in today’s detraditionalised, individualised and pluralised classrooms the immediate objective can no longer be promoting the growth of the Christian faith in all of the pupils – although it will certainly do this for those who are open to such, and/or are willing to work on this. But Christian faith could definitely appear – for the non-Christian pupils as well – as a religious position that does not belong simply to the past, but can potentially motivate and inspire people of today. This is indeed what the main basic objective of the 1999 RE curriculum aims at:

Being open towards and appreciative of what Christian belief can mean in a world that is experienced and understood as radically plural.

The third basic objective then focuses on the service such kind of education offers to the religious formation of all pupils, whether they are Christians or not:

- (a) From an insight into the plural ideological character of human speech, thought and action, *and* in dialogue with the meaning supplied by the Christian faith in this context takes meaning. The capacity to render account for one’s own ideological profile is acquired.

It is precisely at this point that the 1999 RE curriculum may claim to realise in its own way the programme of the active-pluralist alternative, precisely by appeal-

ing hereby to its own tradition. Our society would indeed benefit if many people, of no matter what tradition or denomination, would obtain a more reflexive identity. This then is an identity by which one not only pays respect for one's own position (and/or tradition) and its truth claims, but, at the same time, actively recognises other religious positions (and/or traditions) and the truth claims these make. Even more: it is precisely the dialogue between one's own position and the other positions that can trigger the development of a more reflexive identity. Therefore, such education certainly is an important task – but it also must be clear that merely overcoming religious illiteracy is not sufficient to remedy religious indifference.

What does this mean for the role of the RE teacher? In line with what was just said, the teacher should not only present Christian contents and practices (the exteriority of Christian faith) to pupils, but, at the same time, a personal witness (thus giving a sense of the interiority of Christian faith). Of course, this can only occur in an open and dialogical manner, with respect for the teacher's own religious position, as well as the pupils'. The goal then is to introduce the Christian faith in its breadth and depth, in such a way that it takes seriously the pupils' religious quest in all its diversity, and spurs pupils on to make responsible choices, challenged to this end by the Christian offer of meaning.

Let us now deal with the various points of critique with which this paragraph began, in reverse order.

(2b) As was already the case with the RE curriculum preceding the 1999 one (*Leerplan godsdienst. Vijfde en zesde jaar* 1985), an overall *catechetical* approach is no longer appropriate to conceive of religious education in a context of detraditionalisation and pluralisation (Bulckens 1987). Nevertheless, since the curriculum takes individualisation and pluralisation seriously, religious education will – better than before – appeal especially to Christian pupils and to those who are open to the Christian offering of meaning. Since RE is no longer taking for granted that all pupils are already Christians, it also challenges the Christians among them to reflect upon their own religious positions. It is precisely in examining the Christian faith in relation to other religions and world views that Christian pupils may learn to experience and to think their faith. As a matter of fact: they should also learn what the other's truth claim does with their own truth claim, without falling into relativism or neo-traditionalism.

At the same time, one should warn *against too exaggerated expectations regarding religious education*, at a time when the other initiating milieus (such as the family and the parish) apparently have lost their efficiency. Just as in many other cases (for example etiquette, literature, historical consciousness, physical condition), education at school cannot solve all issues which are seemingly no longer sufficiently covered by the other pedagogical milieus.

(2a) The critique that religious education does not provide *enough cultural knowledge* about Christianity is of another kind. In our commentary on the analysis of the current cultural context, we already stressed the fact that detraditionalisation is more recognizable today than it was 10 years ago. This counts not only for the transfer of Christian tradition but *also for a lot of other cultural information*. It is no surprise, for example, that in other domains of knowledge (such as history, literature and national identity) people also are looking for a kind of canon of cultural knowledge, with which pupils should familiarise themselves in school. This alone already shows that also in these areas the canons of the past have lost their unquestioned self-evident status. Moreover, as I mentioned already, especially with regard

to the Christian faith, *all other initiating milieus have eroded*: much cultural knowledge was previously handed down through religious initiation in the family, participation in parish life, catechesis at first communion and confirmation, etc. It is therefore certainly legitimate to ask that greater attention be given to this cognitive cultural dimension of religious education. Whoever wishes to function in Western European society and to participate in its cultural life needs to know something about the history, the sources and stories, the contents and practices of the Christian faith. To this socio-cultural concern an ecclesial one can be added: all too often clichés circulate about the Christian faith and the Church, which deserve to be driven out via more adequate knowledge.

Because it appears to happen nowhere else, it is therefore advisable that pupils, regardless their religious affiliation, learn at school, e.g., that Easter is the Christian celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, who the Good Samaritan is, that confession is one of the seven sacraments, and that the Church is not (always) the reactionary other-worldly monolith that the media makes of it. However, we should not be mistaken. When such knowledge remains superficial (and bears not the least existential meaning), it often continues to be situated on the level of 'trivia' that do not sink in. Just as pupils 'forget' after the geography class that Vilnius is the capital of Lithuania, and which European capitals the Danube passes on its way to the Black Sea, so pupils can also 'forget' religious knowledge that is hardly integrated into their lives. Of course whoever has ever visited Vilnius on a school trip, or made a geography class presentation about the course of the Danube is less likely to forget. In this respect, a religious didactic that presents the Christian faith starting from diversity and difference, while paying attention to both the exteriority and interiority of Christian faith, possibly offers better opportunities for allowing the contents and practices of the Christian faith to evolve from superficial knowledge (trivia) to deep knowledge (Saines 2009).

(1) A critique that was already formulated earlier with respect to the 1999 RE curriculum was that identity was presented too often as a free, individual choice – as if one simply would be able to construct one's identity without any external influences at one's own discretion. By introducing the many religions side by side, it is argued, young people are brought to the point of putting their own identities together from the diverse traditions. Such copy/paste attitude then would prevent them from really growing into the Christian tradition. A further point of critique concerned the question how one can enter into conversation with other religions if one has yet to obtain an identity for oneself. Such a procedure must lead to relativism and indifference. Only a serious introduction to the Christian tradition can remedy this, it is then said (De Dijn 2004). Although this critique also deserves to be criticized, nevertheless it indicates the *ambitious character* of the 1999 RE curriculum in our current context: bringing detraditionalised, individualised and pluralised classes of pupils into dialogue with the Christian faith in order to cultivate the coming to a more reflexive identity.

When then criticizing this critique it should be observed that it passes over the *difference* between the *description* ('-isations') of the processes changing the context and the various *ways of dealing with these changes* ('-isms'). It is not because the curriculum takes seriously the processes of detraditionalisation, individualisation and pluralisation which influence religious identity formation today, that it adds respectively to the loss of tradition (religious illiteracy) and nihilism, to individualism and subjectivism, and to relativism and indifference. One should keep in mind

that each identity formation today is in one way or another in relation to plurality, otherness and difference, and that *the nature of this relation is determinative for the manner in which identity takes form*. The mentioned ‘isms’ do this by allowing one’s own identity and truth claim to merge into plurality and (in)difference. Other ‘isms,’ such as neo-traditionalism, nationalism and fundamentalism, seek to protect one’s own truth claim by precisely doing the opposite: they close themselves off from the contextual challenges, and turn away from plurality and difference, because these are perceived to lead precisely to nihilism, subjectivism and relativism.

That said, although pupils are not religious blank slates, as they enter class, the curriculum’s challenge is precisely to avoid contributing to religious illiteracy, subjectivism and relativism, while educating pupils towards religious maturity and the ability to enter in interreligious communication. To the extent that this critique and the solution it suggests form a mirror image with the active-pluralist alternative, the answer given there is also applicable here: pupils do not come to a reflective identity purely through transferring knowledge, but by being concretely challenged in their religious convictions, whether these are Christian or not.

In short: due to the progressive realisation of the processes of detraditionalisation and pluralisation, there is certainly something to be said for the idea that the cognitive dimension of the Christian faith should receive more attention in RE classes. However, this does not imply that we need to return again to catechesis. Such does also not follow from the critique that the 1999 RE curriculum would educate pupils towards individualism and relativism. It however does take into account that the other channels of transferring Christian knowledge – the family, the parish, and also the media and socio-cultural environment – contribute less and less to the transfer of Christian knowledge. Certainly in a school context, and with pupils from various religious backgrounds, Christian RE has the important task of informing them adequately, however always with a view to educating towards a more reflexive religious identity, whether this is Christian or not.

### **What about implementation? And preconditions?**

Of course, the curriculum’s ambitious objectives are not reached in daily practice simply because this is the curriculum’s goal. At least *three preconditions* should be fulfilled for a good implementation. I close this contribution with a short reference hereto.

- (1) The first precondition concerns *well-trained and motivated RE teachers*. We already mentioned that the person of the teacher is an important factor in the eventual success of RE as intended by the curriculum. The teacher’s three-fold role (as expert in religious knowledge, as witness to the Christian tradition, and as moderator of the interreligious conversation) requires much motivation, expertise and skill. A good initial education and the continuing training of the RE teacher remains, therefore, a necessity.
- (2) Especially in case of confessional schools a second precondition is that the *school itself comes to terms with its own confessional identity*. The new style of religious education can only succeed if the school also reflects upon its own identity profile in relation to the increased detraditionalisation and pluralisation of its staff and audience. The confessional identity of the school

then is no longer based on a too-easily assumed overall Christian consensus to which everyone supposedly is committed (a kind of project of Christian values). On the contrary: because of the consciousness of plurality and difference, also the school seeks from the dialogue with other religions and world views to present the contribution of Christians to the formation of identity, society and culture. At the same time, Christians so-doing are becoming themselves more aware of the fact that the Christian faith is no longer simply culturally conveyed, but that it demands a specific, individualised engagement (which from the perspective of Christian spirituality may be interpreted as a personal response to a prior calling by the God of Jesus Christ). A confessional school then conceives of its confessional identity as delivering a service of Christians – and their organizing ecclesial community – to society, even though they constitute no longer necessarily a majority within that school (Boeve 2006).

- (3) The last and possibly most important precondition is of course a *credible Christian faith, propagated by a credible Church*. In a time when faith and religious community appear to be in retreat, where classical structures and patterns of behaviour come under pressure, the risk always exists that Christians and their communities will withdraw within themselves. Identity is then profiled against diversity, and the challenge of the other's truth is seen as detrimental for one's own truth. It would be too bad if the Church steps into this trap, and cuts itself off from culture and society in order to protect its 'treasure of faith' – because it is precisely then, if there is no room self-critique and reform, thus for a more reflexive Christian faith, that this treasure is in danger of being lost. In many countries of Western Europe, the Church's credibility and trust is challenged precisely upon this point by the paedophilia scandal. This has set loose a deluge of reactions, not only in public opinion, but also and especially among many believers who are questioning their church commitment. Their shaken trust will not be immediately repaired: a church that is called to stand up for the little ones, the 'least of these,' cannot mistreat precisely the powerless and victims without paying a considerable loss of credibility and relevance.

### Conclusion

Current religious education is challenged in two directions: on the one hand it cares for the future of the Christian tradition, and on the other hand it wants to live up to a context that steadily recedes from the Christian culture and that pluralises religiously. It is within this tension that the 1999 RE curriculum has entered. The actual manner in which the curriculum mediates this tension must be critically investigated, time and again, and where necessary adjusted. Accents can hereby shift, and, as said, today this may include more attention for the cognitive presentation of Christian faith. However, care for the identity of RE classes, on the one hand, and for the pluralised class situation, on the other, need not be played off against each other, but rather offer unique opportunities for an informative and authentic religious education today. Finally, this presupposes well-trained teachers, and a school and Church that helps to support the credibility of this ambitious programme.

## Note

The present contribution is a considerably modified version of a lecture which I gave at the occasion of the 10th anniversary of implementation of the 1999 RE curriculum in Flanders (Boeve 2012). Translation by Philip Davis.

## Notes on contributor

Lieven Boeve is Professor of Fundamental Theology at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium, where he currently also serves as Dean of the Faculty. Since 2000, he is the co-ordinator of the Research Group *Theology in a Postmodern Context*, and since 2010 of the Research Group *Anthropos*. His research concerns theological epistemology, philosophical theology, truth in faith and theology, Christian faith and contemporary culture, tradition development and hermeneutics, and theological anthropology. From 2005 till 2009 he served as the international President of the European Society for Catholic Theology.

## References

- Boeve, L. 1999. Godsdienstonderricht op school als oefenplaats. Achtergronden bij het nieuwe leerplan S.O. *Collationes* 29: 287–311.
- Boeve, L. 2004. Beyond correlation strategies. Teaching religion in a de-traditionalised and pluralised context: A playground for socio-cultural and theological renewal. In *Hermeneutics and religious education* (BETL, 180), ed. D. Pollefeyt and H. Lombaerts, 233–54. Leuven: Peeters Press.
- Boeve, L. 2006. The identity of a Catholic university in post-Christian European societies: Four models. *Louvain Studies* 31: 238–58.
- Boeve, L. 2007. *God interrupts history: Theology in a time of upheaval*. New York: Continuum.
- Boeve, L. 2009. Theological truth, particularity and incarnation: Engaging religious plurality and radical hermeneutics. In *Orthodoxy: Process and product* (BETL, 227), ed. M. Lamberigts, L. Boeve, and T. Merrigan, 323–48. Leuven: Peeters Press.
- Boeve, L. 2012. Het leerplan revisited – 10 jaar later. In *Tegenwoordig. Jeugd en geloofscommunicatie vandaag*, (Nikè-reeks, 59), ed. D. Pollefeyt and E. de Boeck, 229–258. Leuven/Den Haag: Acco.
- Bulckens, J. 1987. *Godsdienstonderricht op de secundaire school*. Leuven: Acco.
- De Dijn, H. 2004. Godsdienstles moet christelijke vorming bieden. *Tertio* 29 September 2004, p. 15.
- De Groof, J., W. van de Donk, G. Lauwers, P. de Goede, and T. Verhappen. 2010. Reflecties op de omgang met religieus en levensbeschouwelijk verschil in het onderwijs in Vlaanderen en Nederland. *Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsrecht en Onderwijsbeleid* 45, nos. 1–2: 3–35.
- Leerplan godsdienst vijfde en zesde jaar*. 1985. Brussels: Licap.
- Leerplan rooms-katholieke godsdienst voor het secundair onderwijs in Vlaanderen*. 1999. Brussel: Licap. Also available through the Thomas-project website, sponsored by the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies (KU Leuven): <http://www.godsdienstonderwijs.be>.
- Loobuyck, P., and L. Franken. 2009. Het schoolpactcompromis in vraag gesteld: pleidooi voor een nieuw vak over levensbeschouwingen en filosofie in het Vlaams onderwijs. *Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsrecht en Onderwijsbeleid* 44, no. 1–2: 44–64.
- Saines, D. 2009. How do students learn theology? *Teaching Theology and Religious Studies* 12: 333–47.
- Taylor, C. 2007. *A secular age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.