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Religion: A Legitimate Anomaly in Education?

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Introduction

From its very beginning, education in Europe was closely related to religion: in order to nurture children and young adolescents with the Christian faith, the Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican churches have established schools all over Europe. Although this Christian education system steadily secularized, old traces of the Christian approach are still to be found in education: Christian (and other) faith-based schools are (partly) subsidized by the state in most European nations and in addition, a substantial number of state schools offer denominational religious education. In this contribution, I will show that this kind of *religious* education or education 'into' religion is, as regards organization, aims, content, and methodology, substantially different from liberal education and is therefore an anomaly in education. Moreover, even in a more 'modest' critical form, religious education, which starts from a

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O. Franck, P. Thalén (eds.), *Powerful Knowledge in Religious Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-23186-5_8

partisan insider's perspective rather than from an impartial outsider's perspective, is hard to defend. Alternatively, *religion* education or education 'about' religion is, with regard to organization, aims, content, and methodology, better in line with the liberal education paradigm.

In order to make this clear, this contribution proceeds as follows: after a general outline of the organization, aims, content, and methodology of liberal education (§2), the same will be done for denominational religious education (§3). Subsequently, I will argue that this latter kind of education is, even in its 'modest' critical form, hard to defend (§4). Alternatively, I argue that non-denominational *religion* education should have a fierce place in liberal education (§5). Finally, attention will be given to 'big questions' and the 'semantic potential of religion' (§5): notwithstanding the secular, scientific methodology of religion education, there is, within this kind of education, room for discussing core religious beliefs, ethical issues, and existential questions. These issues, however, need to be approached in a methodologically different way than in denominational *religious* education classes.

Liberal Education: Organization, Aims, Content, and Methodology

> Many European school systems have their roots in a religious system, in which a religious perspective, for a long time, used to be the unquestioned framework for education. These systems have become increasingly secularized, but religion itself as a subject matter seems to have been exempted from that process. (Alberts, 2019, 68)

For a very long time, education in Europe was the responsibility of the different national or local Churches (Roman-Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these education systems steadily secularized: education became the responsibility of the state, which is in charge of developing and approving curricula and teaching manuals, training and hiring teachers, and controlling the quality of education. However, even though education no longer aims at conquering 'the soul of the child', education remains value-laden and is

therefore not a 'neutral' initiative. Indeed, in liberal democratic societies, education is considered to be one of the means which can assure that all individuals have at least the opportunity "to form, to revise, and rationally to pursue a conception of one's rational advantage or good" (Rawls, 2005/1993). Education is thus in liberal democracies not value-neutral, but based on the idea that what makes human beings truly human is their *capacity for autonomy*. Whatever one's personal worldview may be, all citizens in liberal democratic states should at least have the opportunity to lead a life according to their own conception of the good life, and it is up to the state to facilitate this, amongst others by the organization of *liberal or autonomy-facilitating education*. As said by Gutmann (1999/1987, 30), "[t]he same principle that requires a state to grant adults personal and political freedom also commits it to assuring children an education that makes those freedoms both possible and meaningful in the future." In a similar vein, Levinson (1999, 144, emphasis mine) states that "[t]o educate for autonomy, is taken to be the *primary educational aim* of all schools in the liberal state."

In addition to this educational aim of providing children's "right to an open future" (Feinberg, 2007), schools also have a 'civic mission'. Since people are not born as autonomous and democratic citizens, they have to learn to become citizens, "who have a sense of justice, are law-abiding, can form critical judgments about politics, are willing to participate in civic associational life and politics (…) and can display the civic virtues of reasonableness, tolerance, and respectful deliberation with citizens embracing different viewpoints" (Boucher, 2018, 600). Hereto, 'dialogical contexts' (Callan, 1997, 117) where students can discuss with others and where they learn, through dialogue, the practice of reciprocity and reasonableness are needed. This education for citizenship is not only required "for individuals' exercise of autonomy" (Levinson, 1999, 104), but it is at the same time "a precondition for the maintenance of a healthy liberal democracy" (Levinson, 1999, 104).

If we agree that education in liberal democratic states should aim at the development of individual autonomy and foster citizenship and mutual understanding, this has its repercussions for the school curriculum. According to Levinson (1999, Ch. 5), three core aims of education are: (1) economic competitiveness; (2) democratic self-reflection; and (3)

equality of opportunity. In order to realize these aims, which are also articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC art.28 and 29), curricula should contain general information, based on the most accurate scientific and academic knowledge (e.g. geography, history, biology, chemistry, etc.). In addition, students should be able to cultivate their mental, physical, and creative capabilities (e.g. in sports; drawing lessons; music lessons); learn specific skills that are required for an active life in the future society (e.g. counting; writing; informatics; rules of politeness; basic economical skills); and become familiar with different options in society. Finally, and as an all-covering aim, students should learn to reflect in a critical way on their conception of the good life and on their future role in society.

In order to guarantee these aims of liberal education, (sub-)national governments cooperate with experts in drawing (sub-)national curricula, organizing (in) teacher training programs and designing core educational standards, sometimes supplemented with standardized tests. Inspectorates, established by the Ministry or Department of Education, are responsible for the evaluation of schools. If the required educational standards have not been met, these inspectorates can advise the Ministry or Department of Education to close one or more schools.

Religious Education: Organization, Aims, Content, and Methodology

According to the CRC (art. 29) education is, among others, directed to "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society". At the same time (and in accordance with the UDHR (art.18) and the ECHR (art.9)), the CRC (art.14) emphasizes the "right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion". In order to guarantee this right in an educational setting, most European states subsidize faith-based schools with public money. Additionally, many European member states organize and subsidize denominational religious education in governmental schools, provided a right to exemption is granted (cf. *ECtHR, Mansur Yalçın and Others v. Turkey, Appl. No. 21163/11; EctHR, Papageorgiou and*

others v. Greece, Appl. Nos. 4762/18 and 6140/18). Remarkably, this kind of religious education is often anchored in national constitutions. In Belgium for instance, the Constitution (art.24, §1 and §3) stipulates that

> §1 […] Schools run by the public authorities offer, until the end of compulsory education, the choice between the teaching of one of the recognised religions and non-denominational ethics teaching. […]
>
> §3 […] All pupils of school age have the right to moral or religious education at the community's expense. […]

In a comparable way, the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany (art.7, §2–3) reads:

> Parents and guardians shall have the right to decide whether children shall receive religious instruction.
>
> Religious instruction shall form part of the regular curriculum in state schools, with the exception of non-denominational schools. Without prejudice to the state's right of supervision, religious instruction shall be given in accordance with the tenets of the religious community concerned. Teachers may not be obliged against their will to give religious instruction.

Another example is art.16, §2 of the Greek Constitution, which reads as follows:

> Education constitutes a basic mission for the State and shall aim at the moral, intellectual, professional and physical training of Greeks, the development of national and religious consciousness and at their formation as free and responsible citizens.

A final example can be found in the Spanish Constitution (art.27, §3), which stipulates:

> The public authorities guarantee the right of parents to ensure that their children receive religious and moral instruction that is in accordance with their own convictions.

All these constitutional provisions share the same idea that *religious* education, like education in general, is a basic right: children in Belgium,

Germany, Greece, and Spain[1] do not only have a right to education directed to their full development as future citizens, but they also have a fundamental right to denominational (and therefore mainly confessional) religious education/instruction.[2]

Although religious education is often part of the regular school time, its curriculum is—different from other, 'secular' school subjects—not designed by the state, but by the respective religious communities. In the same vein, teacher training programs are not organized by the state but by religious communities, for instance at faculties of theology, at dioceses, or in (foreign) madrasahs. In order to respect the separation of church and state, the content of religious education is not controlled by the state, but by a separate religious inspectorate. Religion is, in other words,

> systematically excluded from the 'normal' curriculum that attempts to provide the pupils with a balanced and multi-faceted perspective on important issues of current societies. […]. The otherwise generally secular educational perspective on social and cultural issues in secular democracies is not applied to religion […]. (Alberts, 2019, 64)

Given this absence of state involvement and the related absence of a 'secular educational perspective', religious education classes *can* be organized in a generally critical way, but this is not always the case (cf. Alberts, 2019, 63). In the new (provisional) educational standards[3] for secondary

[1] This list is not exhaustive. Comparable ways of organizing religious education in governmental schools can be found in other European states, for example in Austria, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.

[2] In order to grant the *de jure* freedom of religion, moral or ethics education is also included in most constitutions and laws concerning (religious) education. In practice, however, *religious* education—and not moral or ethics education—is often the default position.

[3] At the time of writing, the implementation of these new standards is a contested issue. According to the Flemish Catholic school network, which is with about 70% of all schools in Flanders the largest provider of education in the Flemish Community, these new standards are considered too detailed and, accordingly, do not leave sufficient space for the schools' pedagogical projects—and thus for the schools' freedom of education. Therefore, a large number of Catholic schools, but also several Steiner schools, requested the Constitutional Court to suspend and annul the new standards. In June, 2016, the Constitutional Court ruled that the new standards for the second and third degree of secondary education were not in line with the freedom of religion. As a result, these new standards were to be suspended (https://www.const-court.be/public/n/2022/2022-082n-info.pdf) (access 07-07-2022).

education in the Flemish Community (Belgium) for instance, the general aims of education are captured in what is called 'key competencies'. These competencies include among others the ability to: argue in a reasonable way; differentiate facts and reality from meaning and fiction; obtain insight in the basic elements of lived organisms (including their evolution); apply scientific, technological, and mathematical concepts and methods; reflect in a critical way (e.g. about historical sources; about the role of the state); examine research problems and search for their answer(s); and make personal choices.[4]

Unfortunately, these competencies are sometimes miles away from what is to be found in religious education classes. In textbooks for Islamic religious education in the Flemish Community for instance, the content is sometimes irreconcilable with the general aims of liberal education. Although the present curriculum for Islamic religious education for secondary schools (Centrum Islamonderwijs, 2012, 15) starts with the assumption that "during the process of development of the program, scientific information and [information] based on enquiry has always been the starting point", this seems to be nothing more than lip service, as the following excerpts from the currently used textbooks (last year of secondary education, emphasis added)[5] make clear:

> If we look at our knowledge about the construction of the universe, we remark that everything, from atom to cell, from the earth we live on to the gigantic galaxy, *is maintained according to a particular planning and order*.

[4] The 16 key competencies can be found (in Dutch) at: https://www.klascement.net/thema/16-sleutelcompetenties-informatie-en-lesmateriaal?filter_enduserrole%5B%5D=11 (access 04-05-2021).

[5] These books (edited by the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs *Diyanet*) are, at present, the only available textbooks for Islamic Religious Education in Flanders (Belgium) which cover all grades in primary and secondary schools. On its website, the Centre for Islamic Education, which is responsible for this school subject, "highly recommends these books for all our (Islam)teachers in the Flemish Community". (Information online available from: https://www.centrumislamonderwijs.be/leerboeken.html [accessed 04-05-2022]). At the time of writing, a new initiative has been taken in order to develop new textbooks, which would be more critical and nuanced and which would be better adapted to the needs of Flemish Muslim students.

> Moreover, *they prove not to be without purpose*. For instance: the fact that the ozone layer filters particular harmful rays for mankind and that the earth is stocked with the materials mankind needs in order to continue his life, shows us *that the creation was created with a particular purpose*.
>
> This designates the *real fact* that the divine religions are sent by one and the same God, namely Allah.
>
> Knowledge about *the fact of resurrection*, in combination with a responsibility for [our] performed acts, has an important influence on our present life. Making this belief part of our life will lead to an increase of good deeds and a decrease of bad deeds.
>
> Islam has abolished everything that obstructs knowledge, rational thinking and freedom of expression.
>
> The prophet Muhammad has always been lovingly, merciful and tolerant in his deeds towards other people.

Needless to say, what is at stake here is *not* the development of basic knowledge and of critical thinking, but rather the contrary: it has been *asserted* that life was created by god and that there is a purpose in the cosmos (as opposed to Darwinian evolution theory, characterized by coincidence); resurrection is presented as a *fact* and not as a belief; historical evidence about Muhammad's violent acts is ignored; and Islam is wrongly represented as a religion that is nowadays characterized by openness for knowledge, critical thinking, and freedom of expression. If liberal democratic states take the aims of education seriously and care about the formation of its future citizens, this kind of uncritical religious education should not be on the regular curriculum in governmental schools.

Critical Religious Education: A Better Alternative?

Although the abovementioned example of religious education is a very recent example, it is, fortunately, not representative for all religious education classes in Belgium and abroad. Indeed, triggered by increasing secularization and religious diversity, religious education is in many European nations 'on the move' (cf. ter Avest et al., 2020): overall, there

is increasing attention for 'other' religions and worldviews and for inter-religious dialogue, and religious education no longer aims at proselytizing, but rather at identity formation.[6]

In this regard, it is noteworthy to mention that the textbooks quoted above will soon be replaced by new, critical and nuanced textbooks that are adapted to the Belgian/Flemish (school) context. In order to assure the quality of these textbooks, an interdisciplinary reflection group has been established. However, notwithstanding this as well as comparable initiatives, *religious* education still starts from an *insider's perspective*. Other religions and worldviews are thus always approached from within this perspective and not from a 'neutral', religious-studies-based perspective. This insider's perspective does, however, not imply that religious education teachers cannot be critical. A teacher of Roman Catholic religious education in Belgium, who is not only considered to be an 'expert' and a 'moderator', but also a 'witness' of the Roman Catholic faith,[7] can for instance discuss the church's official doctrine concerning homosexuality or celibacy, without doing injury to the authenticity of the Roman Catholic faith and to the related aims of Roman Catholic religious education. But can this same teacher be equally critical with regard to 'core' beliefs of this same religion, such as the holy trinity or the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Is this possible without doing injury to the authenticity of Christianity and to the aims of Roman Catholic *religious* education? Is this possible without giving up the insider's perspective?

According to Ludwig Wittgenstein (2003/1953), language use is different in different contexts and the meaning of words or statements is therefore dependent on the 'rule' or 'game' being played. Taking this into consideration, one can interpret science and religion as two different language games, which approach reality in a different way: while science is looking for an *explanation*, religion is looking for *meaning*. In a comparable vein, Stephen Jay Gould (2002/1999) considers science and religion to be two *non-overlapping magisteria* which are logically independent and of a different epistemological order. Following this approach,

[6] See for instance Franken (2021a) for a general overview and (2021b) for recent developments in Flanders (Roman-Catholic religious education) and in Germany (Protestant religious education).

[7] See for instance https://www.kerknet.be/kerknet-redactie/artikel/7-vragen-over-nieuw-leerplan--godsdienst-j%C3%BCrgen-mettepenningen (access 04-05-2022).

religious stories such as Genesis or the story of Jesus' resurrection should not be understood literally, but symbolically. It is, however, questionable whether such an approach does not, in the end, undermine the 'core' of particular religions and, by extension, the importance of the insider's perspective in religious education. What—if anything—will be left over if religious texts only have a symbolic meaning? Shouldn't we interpret at least *some* texts or passages in a literal way, in order to avoid the reduction of religion to a merely symbolic phenomenon or a human construct?

This brings us to the literal approach, which is equally problematic because of its irreconcilability with the aims and methodology of liberal education (cf. supra). After all, if religious texts are interpreted in a literal way, the question remains how religious beliefs which firmly contradict insights based on science (e.g. the creation of earth in six days; the resurrection of Jesus; the revelation of the *Qur'an*) can be reconciled with the abovementioned liberal education paradigm. Apparently, it seems impossible to solve this problem without giving up either the scientific (outsider) or the religious (insider) approach.

Religion Education as a Truly Liberal Alternative

Organizing religious education in a denominational and confessional way may lead to unresolvable tensions between this kind of religious education on the one hand and *liberal* education on the other hand. Even though a modest critical approach can also be included in confessional and denominational religious education, a stronger critical approach, wherein religious texts are merely seen as symbolic, is less evident. Moreover, as the textbook example of Islamic religious education in Flanders makes clear, even a modest critical approach is not always guaranteed in practice.

However, the mere fact that some religious claims are, if taken literally, irreconcilable with liberal education does not imply that we should entirely exclude 'religion' from school. After all, there is, in a liberal educational setting, no problem if all students learn, in a critical and

objective way, about religion (*ECtHR, Kjeldsen, Busk Madsen and Pedersen v. Denmark, Appl. no. 5095/71; 5920/72; 5926/72; ECtHR, Folgerø and others v. Norway, Appl. no. 15472/02*). The problem is, however, that this critical and objective stance is often absent in schools. Once religion is at stake, this impartial perspective has been exchanged for a partial and therefore often less critical insider's perspective. In Germany for instance,

> the position of one particular religious community that has the right to organize that particular way of RE is the one and only perspective that one gets on one's own religion during one's own school life. This may be in a generally critical way, but this is not a necessity. Given the fact that teachers for confessional RE have been trained merely in the confessional perspective of their own religion, issues like the role of religion and the state, etc., are never studied from a critical outsider perspective but from the perspective of a religious body who has the power to train teachers and offer RE in school (i.e. a privilege that a large number of religious communities do not have). That particular perspective on religion is not questioned anywhere in school, but is generally taken as sufficient framework for communicating knowledge about religion. (Alberts, 2019, 63)

That being said, we should not throw the baby with the bathwater. While the inclusion of *religious* education in the regular school curriculum may lead to what Alberts (2019) calls 'small i indoctrination', the exclusion of *religion* education—that is education about diverse religious and non-religious worldviews, based on the academic study of religion—may in a comparable way lead to what Nord (2010, 5, 87) calls *secular indoctrination*. In order to be truly 'liberal', governmental schools should neither promote religion (by organizing *religious* education classes as the default position), nor should they promote secularism (by abstaining from any kind of education about religion). Alternatively, all students should be able to learn, in a critical and objective way, about the phenomenon of religion. Hereto,

> RE must be emancipated from theology and religious interests and be the responsibility 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. (Kjeldsen, 2019, 15)

Different from *religious* education, *religion* education is not organized by religious communities but by the state. Teachers are not supposed to 'witness' from their own religion and to study at theological faculties or departments. Alternatively, they are trained in the academic study of religion and their own religious affiliation should not be an issue: what matters in the classroom are the teachers' academic and pedagogical skills, not their (non-)religious affiliation. In line with this, religion education does not aim at socialization in a particular religious tradition, but at socializing students in the broader, liberal-democratic society which is characterized by reasonable pluralism. Particular religious traditions are therefore not portrayed as 'true' or 'authentic', but different religious and non-religious worldviews are, in a critical and comparative way, presented as different life options, without prioritizing one of these options. Or, in the words of Nord,

> [t]here are many reasons for taking religion seriously in public schools and universities. A liberal education requires it. Because religion continues to be such an influential force for good and for evil one simply can't be an educated person without understanding a fair amount about it. Even more important, because we disagree so deeply about the merits of various religious and secular ways of making sense of the world and our lives, students must be introduced to the religious as well as the secular alternatives if they are to think critically.

Like for instance history and literature, religion education can contribute to the students' *Allgemeinbildung* (cf. Jensen, 2011, 137; 2019, 34) and, more specific, to what Stephen Protero (2008) calls *religious literacy*. Many citizens lack correct and non-stereotypical knowledge of religions, which can lead to intolerant attitudes and difficulties in respecting other beliefs, practices and rituals. One of the aims of *religion* education is therefore to inform pupils about religious and non-religious worldviews, to reduce the prejudices against (adherents of) other religions and to develop a respectful and tolerant attitude towards cultural and religious differences. Moreover, if we expect students to understand our own culture and history, religion education is also important: diverse worldviews and philosophical theories and insights are significant, because they have

shaped our society and our way of thinking. We therefore agree with Jensen (2008, 130) when he writes:

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

Religion education also deals with the fact that a substantial number of the younger generation are still interested in religions and worldviews. Although our society is characterized by a decline of institutionalized religion, many people are still interested in the 'big questions' of life. Neglecting this would not only be an educational but also an existential and intellectual deficit (cf. infra).

If organized in an impartial and academically embedded way, *religion* education can also foster

> the developing of the pupils' analytical and critical thinking competencies and knowledge. This includes the ability to analyse, discuss, and explain religious and non-religious discourses on religion(s) and examine religious diversity in relation to social and historical developments, power, politics, social conflicts, and other factors. (Kjeldsen, 2019, 16)

In order to reach these analytical and critical skills (which are common in liberal education programs), religions should not be studied as true or false comprehensive doctrines, but as "human-socially and culturally constructed, negotiated and changing phenomena" (Kjeldsen, 2019, 15–16). Hereto, an *outsider perspective* is required. This secular study of religion

> chooses to interpret, understand and explain religion in non-religious terms. It confines itself to analytical models grounded in a view of the

> world based on the insights and achievements of the natural sciences. The study of religion, obviously, is not a natural science. 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)

As pointed above, this has implications for some core religious beliefs, in particular when they oppose secular science. If the secular study of religion is taken seriously, teachers in religion education must, like all teachers, respect the "boundary conditions established by the methodologies and substantiated knowledge of the natural and social sciences" (Wiebe, 2016, 192), on which the liberal education paradigm is founded. However, since science cannot explain everything (e.g. what was 'out there' before the big bang? What is the meaning of life? What is good and what is bad?), teachers should be aware of the limits of the scientific paradigm. At this point, the methodological stance of agnosticism could be helpful: as argued by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1781/1999), knowledge is restricted to the *phenomenal world*, which is structured by time and space. Given the limitations of the human brain, it is impossible to do pronunciations with the same epistemic (scientific) value about what (if anything) lies beyond time and space—the so-called *noumenal world*. Therefore, a stance of *methodological agnosticism* is recommended here. However, while this stance makes sense where the current limits of science are reached, this stance should not be applied *if there is sufficient scientific evidence for a particular theory* (e.g. the evolution of mankind; the impossibility of resurrection), even if this theory opposes (core) religious beliefs. At this point, religion education teachers should, like teachers of other secular school subjects, make clear that scientifically proven theories are the best provisional theories, even if they sometimes oppose religious 'explanations' and core religious beliefs. This is what Jensen (2019, 36) labels as the 'religion-critical', but therefore not necessarily anti-religious or atheistic, approach.

Big Questions, Ethics and the Semantic Potential of Religion

Critics may argue that the abovementioned scientific—and thus critical—approach rejects our true human existence. After all, human beings are not only looking for explanations, but also for *meaning* and a merely objective, scientific study of religion neglects these 'big questions'. However, even though the current answers to 'big questions' fall behind the scope of the natural and social sciences, this by no means implies that they should be excluded from *religion* education classes. Different from *religious* education, however, these questions should not be discussed from within one—religious or atheist—perspective, but they should be "approached from a more distanced perspective than in the case of the different life-world approaches" (Kjeldsen, 2019, 20).

With regard to ethics education, it is also important to underline the difference between 'thin' or 'political liberal' moral views on the one hand, and different 'thick' or 'comprehensive' moral views, on the other hand. While the former can, in Rawlsian terms, be accepted by all 'reasonable and rational' citizens and form the normative basis of our liberal democratic societies, the latter (which are often part of confessional and denominational religious education) are not necessarily accepted by all 'reasonable and rational' citizens (Rawls, 2005/1993, 78, 175, 217) and should therefore not be approached in the same normative way as the former. In a similar way, van der Kooij et al. (2015) make a distinction between 'narrow' and 'broad' morality. The former "focuses on the basic rules and principles that make it possible for human beings to live and work together" and is thus "about duties and obligations to others". The latter, by contrast, "focuses on living a flourishing life and surpasses moral rules necessary to live together" (van der Kooij et al., 2015, p. 83). Broad morality is thus connected with "someone's most important aims in life" (van der Kooij et al., 2015, p. 83) and is related to personal and/or institutional worldviews, which is not necessarily the case for narrow morality. In *religion* education classes, attention should therefore be given to both kinds of morality, but from a different perspective: while the ('narrow') political liberal paradigm should be taught as the default position

that is required to live together in liberal democratic societies, different 'broad'—probably religiously inspired—ethical positions should not be taught as equivalent default positions, but as different ethical possibilities, which can in a best case scenario be reconciled with the political liberal paradigm.

Finally, a few words about what Jürgen Habermas calls the *semantic potential* of religion. Even though teachers of religion education are required to reject the *literal* interpretation of for instance Genesis because this opposes scientific evidence, this by no means that this story should have no place in the classroom—rather the contrary. As argued by Habermas (2006; see also Carr, 2007), religious stories and traditions have "a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life" (Habermas, 2006, 10), which cannot be found in a comparable way in the secular, scientific discourse. Without believing that for instance the story of Genesis is true, one can understand the moral and existential message of this story and, accordingly, students can learn something from this religious text (cf. Habermas, 2002, 73–74). In the words of David Carr (2007, 669): "the truth of evolutionary theory need not invalidate Genesis. It remains a distinct possibility that both Genesis and evolutionary theory have something to contribute to human understanding of the world and our place in it." In all probability, one of the most challenging tasks of the religion education teacher today is to make students aware of this semantic potential and of the *big questions* in life, without favoring one particular religious or non-religious worldview.

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