

## The Society for Ecumenical Studies

### Ecumenism in Belgium

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#### ***Belgium and the Belgian Outlook***

The regions which make up Belgium today have been linked by a common destiny for several centuries, but the Belgian state only came into existence in 1830. The provinces which seceded from the Kingdom of the Netherlands to form Belgium brought together a highly diversified population. But in every part of the new state, the overwhelming majority of the population belonged to the Roman Catholic church. The founders of the Belgian state endowed it with a liberal constitution, which assures the separation - without hostility - of Church and State, and guarantees freedom of religion. The first King of the Belgians, Leopold I, himself a devoted Protestant, strove for the protection of the rights of the Protestant, Anglican and Jewish religious minorities. As a result of the demographic distribution of confessions, and legal safeguards for minorities, religious differences never came to be seen as major issues for Belgian society.

Questions of language, on the other hand, tend to be seen as highly divisive, and to overshadow other issues in Belgian politics. Three languages are recognized officially: Dutch., spoken by the Flemish in the north, French, spoken by the Walloons in the south, and German, spoken by a minority along the German border. Questions related to the balance between the major language groups, and to the defence of the rights of each of them have caused major strains on Belgian society, particularly in recent decades. The churches have not always managed to respond to their call to act as a sign of reconciliation in the face of such problems. Linguistic diversity, however, has also been a blessing for Belgium. A small country at the geographical crossroads of western Europe, it has been able to become a European meeting ground, a place of hospitality, as well as the seat of many

international organizations. The fact that Belgians share the languages of their neighbours gives them special insight into political, social and cultural developments in surrounding countries. They have thus been able to play an important role in the movement for European unity.

### ***The Churches***

The Roman Catholic Church remains the majority church in Belgium. With its eight dioceses, 4,000 parishes, 5,000 priests, and numerous religious orders, it has a rather high profile in Belgian life. A large majority of Belgians identify themselves as Roman Catholic. While Belgian Catholics hold a numerically privileged position, they acquired a lively interest for ecumenical matters, long before the Roman Catholic Church entered the international ecumenical scene.

From 1921 to 1926, the Malines Conversations, under the presidency of Cardinal Mercier, brought together Anglican and Roman Catholic theologians in what might today be called a bilateral theological dialogue. In 1925, Dom Lambert Beauduin founded the Benedictine Monastery of Amay (later moved to Chevetogne), the aim of which was to draw Christian churches closer together in depth and in fairness, through prayer, and an objective study of all questions related to Christian unity. Ecumenical awareness became quite evident in both research and education at the Catholic University of Louvain from the time of the Second World War. The work of such professors as Charles Moeller, Gustave Thils, Gerard Philips, Roger Aubert and others showed a real ecumenical concern, and helped to prepare the way for the Catholic Church to take part in the ecumenical movement.

Since Vatican II (1962-1965), Belgian Catholic ecumenical efforts have grown more numerous. National and diocesan commissions on ecumenism were set up to further good relations with communities of other confessions and to arouse interest in ecumenical matters among Roman Catholics. Today, Belgian Catholics are ever more grateful to Christians of other confessions for their specific contribution to the Christian presence in Belgium.

The roots of Belgian Protestantism go back to the Anabaptist and Calvinist movements which had tremendous importance in the Spanish Low Countries at the

time of the Reformation. Violent repression on the part of civil and church authorities led to thousands of Flemish and Walloon Protestants emigrating to the Netherlands, England, Germany, Sweden, etc. By the end of the religious upheavals of the 16th century, only the Roman Catholic faith enjoyed legal status in the provinces which make up Belgium today. A handful of clandestine Protestant congregations survived as the "Church under the Cross".

Only after Joseph II's Act of Toleration in 1781, the Dutch period (1814-1830), and especially Belgian independence in 1830, could Protestantism develop unhampered. The communities which had been part of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands set up the Union of Evangelical Protestant Churches in the Kingdom of Belgium in 1839. A Belgian Evangelical Society was founded in 1837; it became the Belgian Christian Missionary Church (BCMC) in 1849. Other Protestant movements - Methodists, the Brethren, Baptists, etc. – helped to form Protestant communities in Belgium.

The quest for unity appeared early on among Belgian Protestants. In 1923 a Federation of Protestant Churches in Belgium was formed by the Union of Evangelical Protestant Churches and the BCMC; other churches joined later. The University Faculty of Protestant Theology was founded in Brussels in 1950 by the Union of Evangelical Protestant Churches and the Methodist Conference; the BCMC joined in 1955, and the Reformed Churches in Belgium (Gereformeerde Kerken in Belgie) in 1970.

The Union of Evangelical Protestant Churches revised its statutes in 1957 to allow congregations not recognized by the state to join, thus providing for mergers with other churches. At the same time, the name was changed to Evangelical Protestant Church in Belgium (EPCB). The EPCB merged with the Methodist Conference in 1969; the new church was called the Protestant Church in Belgium. From 1970, talks were held with the Reformed Church in Belgium (the new name of the BCMC), and with the Reformed Churches in Belgium. Negotiations for merger were concluded in 1978, and the United Protestant Church in Belgium (UPCB) was inaugurated on January 1, 1979. At present, the UPCB has about a hundred congregations,

organized into six districts. It is a member of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Conference of European Churches (KEK).

In recent decades, the United Protestant Church has deepened its relations with the Roman Catholic in an atmosphere of growing confidence. An important development was the mutual recognition of baptism, in 1971, between the Roman Catholic Church and the churches which were later to form the UPCB. Other Protestant churches and movements are also active in Belgium, for example, Baptists, the Free Evangelical Churches, Mennonites, Pentecostals, the Salvation Army. Some of them take part in ecumenical activities on all levels. Others hesitate to attend large national meetings, but participate occasionally in local ecumenical initiatives. The Anglican Church enjoys legal status in Belgium since 1975. Today, the Archdeacon of Anglican parishes in the Benelux countries is based in Brussels. There are four parishes in Belgium, and Anglican worship is celebrated regularly in eleven towns.

The presence of Orthodoxy in Belgium goes back to 1885, when a congregation connected with the Russian embassy was formed. A century later, in 1985, Orthodoxy was officially recognized by law. The Metropolitan of Belgium for the Ecumenical Patriarchate is the spokesperson for the Orthodox congregations before the Belgian state. At present there are two orthodox bishops and about forty parishes in Belgium. In 1990, a Joint Orthodox-Roman Catholic Committee was established to deal with the various pastoral matters which concern the two confessions. The Oriental Orthodox Churches are represented in Belgium by Armenian, Coptic and Syrian congregations.

### ***A Common Approach to Other Faiths***

There are about 40,000 Jews in Belgium, and the Jewish-Christian dialogue plays an important part in Belgian ecumenism. Commissions on Jewish-Christian relations were appointed by both the United Protestant and the Roman Catholic Churches; the two commissions work in close collaboration. A Documentation Service, staffed by the Sisters of Zion, is managed by a joint group composed of Catholics, Protestants and Jews. Jewish-Christian relations have undergone serious tensions in recent years. The hope has been expressed on all sides that the frankness with which

issues have been raised might lead to a deeper and more candid dialogue' in an atmosphere of mutual understanding.

Recent immigration of large numbers of Muslims has raised a serious challenge to the Belgian churches. On the one hand, in the name of justice they must actively resist the rise of anti-Muslim prejudice, and to strive to create a dignified place in Belgian society for the immigrants. On the other hand, the churches have the opportunity to take part in the dialogue between Islam and Christianity in new and creative ways. Ecumenical cooperation among the Churches on this level has already begun and will surely take on greater importance in coming years.

### ***New Initiatives***

In early 1990, the Anglican, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and United Protestant Churches in Belgium decided to create a joint body called the "Consultation of Christian Churches in Belgium". This consultative body, conceived as an embryonic National Council of Churches, was set up to express the fellowship which exists among the members churches, and to promote both greater unity and a more effective Christian witness. It is to encourage Christians to pray together, and to work together for witness, service and Christian presence in the world.

The Consultation has twelve seats, three for each of the four member Churches. The presidency rotates, changing annually, following the alphabetical order of member churches. Decisions are made unanimously and submitted for approval to the member churches.

A Working Group was appointed, even before the inauguration of the Consultation, for the Ecumenical Process of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. The goal of the Working Group is to promote reflection and action on JPIC theme on all levels of Belgian Church life.

### ***Free Ecumenism***

Despite the lack of proportion among the various Christian confessions in Belgium, non-institutional ecumenism has become very popular. In all parts of the country, Bible study groups, ecumenical prayer and study groups have sprung up. The charismatic movement has had a very positive influence on ecumenism in every-day life. Activities, such as ecumenical retreats and charismatic prayer meetings for

unity, contribute substantially to ecumenical progress through prayer, fellowship and mutual understanding. There are also a number of experimental ecumenical communities in Belgium, such as the *Chemin Neuf*, and ecumenically oriented youth movements like *Jeunesse Lumière*.

