Greece has only recently become a multi-cultural, multi-religious society after almost two hundred years of efforts towards homogenization. Since the 19th century the core of Modern Greek national identity has been the Orthodox Christian identity, but at the beginning of the 21st century this homogeneous religious identity no longer relates to the religious composition of the population. Apart from the influx of migrants with other religious belongings, the Orthodox Christian population has also undergone changes towards a continually more secularized relationship to religion (Petrou 2001: 30). Thus, today the religious orientation of baptized members of the Church of Greece varies from atheism and indifference to nationalistic and/or religious fundamentalism. Recently, there have also been initiatives like the Academy for Theological Studies at Volos, where new voices are heard proposing a rethinking of the attitude and institutional character of the Church of Greece (Willert 2009a; 2012; forthcoming). Hence, today it is impossible to characterize the religious landscape of Greece as homogeneous, neither among the population as such nor among the members of the prevailing Christian Orthodox Church.

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1 Linguistically, ethnically, and to some degree also religiously the early Modern Greek state was highly diverse. The problems related to such diversity were met with a centralised state and educational system and a nationalising programme in which the Orthodox Church as well as the classical past came to play central roles. The diversity that was not homogenized during the first hundred years was framed into specific geographic areas (Thrace, Dodecanese and other) or ‘cleaned’ through the Greek-Turkish population exchange (1923) and the Nazi extinction of Greek Jews (1941–1944).

2 In the international exposure of Modern Greek identity the ancient Greek legacy has received more attention as the nation’s core identity; internally and in the local Balkan context, however, the religious identity of Greek Orthodoxy has played a central role (see also Herzfeld 2002: 201).

3 Effie Fokas (2007: 301) has pointed to the problem of generalizations regarding the role of religion in society and the importance of recognizing the polyphony within Greek Orthodoxy (as within any religious system).
Religious education (RE) is an interesting case study into ways of dealing with religious and cultural diversity in a society with a historical record of factual as well as imagined homogeneity. Greek national identity is an example of the identification of a Christian religious tradition with a specific people and territory. However, the relation between place and culture is not a given but something that needs to be constantly questioned, defied and discussed through ethnographic research (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

The debate over the nature of RE in Greece is closely related to perceptions of the importance of Christianity for Greek culture and for Greece’s relationship with and integration into the so-called European tradition and the European present. The analyses, in this chapter, of proposals for a new RE in a multi-religious society is primarily based on discussions regarding Europe’s Christian heritage and Greece's European heritage.4

Questions of citizenship come to the fore in the debate as a discussion concerning the compulsory nature of RE. One question is whether all citizens are entitled to RE or whether only those citizens addressed in the Greek constitution as ‘Greeks’ with the ‘prevailing religion’ are entitled to such education. Should RE continue to cultivate the pupils’ religious, i.e. Christian Orthodox, awareness or should it help promote inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding among the citizens of the Greek state?

The debate over RE in Greece is a discussion where religious diversity and ‘cultural identity’ are highly at stake. This chapter approaches the debate from the point of view of Christian Orthodox theologians and secondary school religion teachers.5 The aim of the chapter is to disclose the strategies of the ‘original’ religious community in coping with the contested question of cultural (national) identity and the place of religion in times of increasing pluralization and globalization.

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In the Ottoman Empire the Orthodox Church under the leadership of the ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (today Istanbul) had a certain

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4 For another recent article dealing with contemporary developments concerning RE in Greece see Molokotos-Liederman (2004).
5 The inquiry is based on articles published in newspapers and theological journals, published papers from seminars and workshops organized by theologians and on interviews and participant observation with teachers, pedagogical councilors, journal editors and other central actors in the field of RE. Participant observation and interviews have taken place between February 2008 and November 2009. All translations of Greek texts and interviews are mine. For a comprehensive account of the fieldwork undertaken see Willert (forthcoming).