In its beginnings Belgian sociology of religion was predominantly sociographic and particularistic, with a pastoral aim. A Belgian National Socio-Religious Center was established by the Roman Catholic bishops in Brussels in 1956, with affiliated centers in a couple of dioceses. Its studies, basically motivated by a pastoral concern, analyzed the impact of the changing society on the life of the Catholic Church. This did not imply that one was not at all aware of the scientific studies on religion by such sociologists as Comte, Durkheim, Mauss, and Weber, but their studies were suspect since one defined himself as religiously “un-musikalisch,” and the others were stigmatized as positivists. There was also a marked suspicion by church leaders, not only in the Catholic Church (Dobbelaere 2000: 435–438), who wanted to control such centers. Theologians and moralists also were afraid of induction instead of deduction. However, this gradually changed when sociological research on religion was developed at the Catholic universities. An important step in this direction was the integration of researchers of the national Socio-Religious Center into the two Catholic Universities in 1964. This meant that the reference group of these newly integrated researchers gradually changed from the Church to researcher colleagues in sociology and to those in sociology of religion who met at international scientific conferences in Europe and the USA. Consequently, the sociography of the life of the Catholic Church was gradually transformed into a sociology of religion.

Two preliminary remarks should be made: Among the different Belgian universities, it is only in the two Catholic universities—the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL), which is francophone, and the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL), which is Flemish—that the sociology of religion was systematically developed. It should however be stressed that for a long time, as we shall see, the sociologists of religion at these universities were almost entirely interested in the study of Catholicism. In the other universities, there are limited Ph.D. curricula in the field. One exception, for example, is the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB, the Free University of Brussels, which was established in oppo-
sition to the UCL) where there has been a research unit on Judaism, and there still is a “Centre interdisciplinaire d’étude des religions et de la laïcité” (CRIEL). This program succeeded the Institut d’Etude des Religions et de la Laïcité in 2003, and is part of the Department of Philosophy and Sciences of Religions. Its aim is to study the religious phenomenon in all its dimensions and in its relation to free thinking, as well as in its ancient and contemporary dimensions. It is an interdisciplinary center, composed mainly of philologists, historians, philosophers, art historians and ethnologists. The list of recent Ph.D. theses indicates that the historical dimension is predominant, though some however do have a sociological slant—in particular that of Caroline Sägesser (2013), about the financing of the religions and laïcité in Belgium.

The Founders of Sociology of Religion in Belgium

Nabor De Volder and the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

In the academic year 1944–1945, a course on sociology of religion was officially established in the program of the School for Political and Social Sciences of the KUL. Nabor De Volder, a Friar Minor, was the first titular. He was aware that the sociology of religion could offer valuable help to the Church. However, he was confronted with incomprehension and distrust within his Church and, on the other hand, the existing sociological theories and conclusions were incompatible with his views on religion. He reacted against Comte and Durkheim (and their followers), whom he blamed for adhering to a positivistic reductionism and accused Jean Haesaert (University of Ghent) and Eugène Dupréel (Free University of Brussels) again and again of atheistic a priori in their courses on general sociology. He opted for the Formal Sociology of Georg Simmel, which in his eyes did not affect the supernatural character of religion, hence he could study social forms of interaction in the church and their relations with other social structures. Besides the study of the observable structures, however, one had to aim above all at a comprehensive interpretation of the sense and the inner inspiration of these structures. His reference here was to the Verstehende Sociologie of Max Weber, which he interpreted as coming to a psychological understanding of feelings and experiences. This point of view compelled him to posit “that the sociology of the church could only be scientifically done by

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1 Organized “laïcité” is legally recognized in Belgium and receives state subsidies like the officially recognized religions: Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Anglicanism, Orthodoxy and Islam (Voyé and Dobbelaere 2012: 13–14, 34–37).