19 March, 2009

Religion in Education: Contribution to Dialogue

Policy recommendations of the REDCo research project

From: REDCo (**R**eligion in **E**ducation. A contribution to **D**ialogue or a factor of **Co**nflict in transforming societies of European Countries)

Funded by the European Commission

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To: EU Institutions (Parliament, Commission, Council of Ministers), Council of Europe, United Nations (UNESCO, General Assembly, Alliance of Civilizations), National Educational Bodies of EU-member states, Educational Research Associations, Non-Governmental Organizations, Religious Organisations, Universities and Schools within the European Union.

I. Introduction

Throughout the world, people are increasingly coming to recognise the implications of the renewed importance religion holds for both individuals and societies in national and international politics and public discourse. Growing religious diversity has given the question new urgency, and accordingly 'social cohesion' is a frequently cited policy goal when addressing the role of religion in European societies. This is especially evident in the attention paid to the study of religions as a part of intercultural learning and human rights education and is clearly expressed in international documents such as the Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (Council of Europe 2008) and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE 2007). Both documents stress the importance of dialogue between people of different faiths and convictions in the context of intercultural teaching and learning. This is also the focus of REDCo (**R**eligion in **E**ducation. A Contribution to **D**ialogue or a Factor of **Co**nflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries), a European comparative research project on young people's views of religion, religious diversity and possibilities for dialogue, as well as of classroom interaction and teacher-strategies. REDCo is the first substantial research project on religion and education financed by the European Commission,

running from March 1st 2006 until March 31st 2009. It has carried out qualitative and quantitative research in eight countries (Germany, England, France, The Netherlands, Norway, Estonia, Russia, Spain) mainly focusing on religion in the lives and schooling of students in the 14–16 age group. The students expressed their attitudes about personal experience with religion, the social dimension of religion, and religion in school. The REDCo findings can encourage further policy development in education at a European as well as at a national level.

II. Key research findings of REDCo

- The majority of students appreciated the religious heterogeneity in their societies, although a range of prejudices were expressed.
- The most important source of information about religions and worldviews is generally the family, followed by the school.
- The school population includes a sizeable group of students for whom religion is important in their lives, a sizeable group for whom religion is not important and a sizeable group who hold a variety of occasionally fluctuating positions between these two poles.
- Irrespective of their religious positions a majority of students are interested in learning about religions in school.
- Students are well aware of and experience religious diversity mostly in, but also outside school.
- Students are generally open towards peers of different religious backgrounds. At the same time they tend to socialise with peers from the same background as themselves, even when they live in areas characterised by religious diversity.
- Students often express a tolerant attitude more at an abstract than a practical level. The tolerance expressed in classroom discussion is not always replicated in their daily lifeworld.
- Those who learn about religious diversity in school are more willing to enter into conversations about religions and worldviews with students from other backgrounds than those who do not have this opportunity for learning.
- Students desire peaceful coexistence across religious differences, and believe that this is possible.
- Students believe that the main preconditions for peaceful coexistence between people of different religions are knowledge about each other's religions and worldviews, shared interests, and joint activities.
- In most countries students support the right of adherents to a moderate expression of religious faith in school. For example, they do not oppose in school the wearing of *unobtrusive* religious symbols or object to *voluntary* acts of worship for students who are adherents of a particular religion.
- Students for whom religion is important in their lives are more likely to respect the religious background of others and value the role of religion in the world.

- Most students would like to see school dedicated more to teaching about different religions than to guiding them towards a particular religious belief or worldview.
- Students express their desire that learning about religions should take place in a safe class-room environment governed by agreed procedures for expression and discussion.
- Students generally wish to avoid conflict on religious issues, and some of the religiously committed students feel especially vulnerable.
- Dialogue is a favoured strategy for teachers to cope with diversity in the classroom, but students are more ambivalent about its value since in practice, not all students are comfortable with the way diversity is managed in schools.
- Students generally favour the model of education about religion with which they are familiar.

III. Policy Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of REDCo we support the policy recommendations of the Council of Europe and the Toledo Guiding Principles. However, we suggest a need for a degree of differentiation at the national level regarding the implementation of policies in the educational system. This is due, for example, to different national traditions, norms, legal systems and pedagogical approaches in dealing with religion in education. Each national context needs to be taken into account when policies are applied. At a European level we suggest making room in the classroom for dialogue and discussion about and between different religious (and non-religious) worldviews. Against the background of our research on the views of students we underline the importance of dialogue at classroom level which emphasizes the exchange of different perspectives of students concerning religions and worldviews. Proceeding from this general assumption, the following points should be taken into account both when addressing different national contexts and the European level.

1.) Encouragement for peaceful coexistence

Education policy development and implementation need to focus on the transformation of abstract (passive) tolerance into practical (active) tolerance.

Actions:

- Counter stereotypical images of religions, present more complex images that show the impact of religion on society and the individual.
- Develop and strengthen skills for dialogue between pupils concerning different religions and worldviews.
- Provide opportunities for engagement with different worldviews and religions, (including cooperation with local communities in order to increase exchange between different religious and non-religious groups) and to offer opportunities for encounters between students of diverse positions vis-à-vis religion.

2.) Promotion of diversity management

Citizenship education tends to focus on homogeneity; but in turning from passive to active tolerance, it is necessary to value religious diversity at school as well as at university level.

Actions:

- Offer opportunities for students to learn about and give space for discussions on religions.
- Develop innovative approaches to learning about religions and worldviews in different subjects including RE, history, literature and science.
- RE and learning about religion must incorporate education for understanding and tolerance and take account of children's differing needs as they develop.
- Encourage universities to give fuller consideration to religious diversity in research and teaching.

3.) Including religious as well as non-religious worldviews

School is a place where all students must be respected, regardless of their worldview or religious conviction. Religion is important to some of the students, and their beliefs must not be allowed to become an obstacle to their academic progress.

Actions:

- Inclusion of learning about different religious and secular worldviews in their complexity and inner diversity.
- Inclusion of the religious dimension into general intercultural education, eduction for democratic citizenship and human rights education.

4.) Professional competence

No changes can be made without education professionals and the required competence on their part. Such education would be needed both at initial training level and in the continuing professional development of teachers.

Actions:

- Prepare educators in different subjects to treat religious topics relevant to their subject, ensuring the inclusion of students regardless of their religious or non-religious background.
- Train educators in methods that support and encourage students to be comfortable with difference and to engage with the diversity of their personal experiences.
- The curriculum for teacher training should include the development of skills to organise and moderate in-class debates on controversial religious issues and conflicting worldviews.

For further references see:
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