

A Milestone for Religious Education in Europe

CoGREE Consultation on “Learning about and Learning from Religion.”

The Role of Religious Education for Living Together in a Europe of Conflict.

Religious Education in schools can contribute to a successful living together in Europe. Pupils and young adults can develop tolerance for the beliefs of others, develop their own religious identity and learn how to have a constructive encounter with conflict and differences; this enables them to participate actively in the building of a plural and democratic Europe. Reports about experiences with Religious Education provided evidence for this view.

They were part of the programme of a European Consultation, held in Vienna from 02nd to 5th of May 2002. Representatives of six organisations from 16 countries in Europe gathered for the first time to work on the situation of education and Religious Education in Europe. The consultation was sponsored by the Robert Bosch Foundation/Germany.

It was regretted that in the official statements of European policy Religious Education is merely not recognised in a positive way, if mentioned at all. Reasons for this can be seen in the plural situation in the different countries as well as in the different understanding of the role of religion and religious communities in the public and political sphere. Also the fact that the member states have the overall responsibility for the content of school education promotes the trend that there is no sense of a European responsibility in these kinds of issues. It is only when violent events disturb the apparent harmony, that demands on schools concerning values education and the prevention of violence can be heard in public. Also Religious Education is then asked to contribute.

The programme dealt with four major issues:

- The situation of Religious Education in Europe
- Examples of good practice of schools and Religious Education
- The contribution of education and Religious Education for the future of Europe
- The planning of further cooperation projects.

The consultation was organised by the Coordinating Group for Religious Education in Europe (**CoGREE**), an alliance of six organisations, active in the field of Religious Education in Europe:

- EAWRE – The European Association of World Religions in Education
- ECCE – The European Conference on Christian Education
- EFTRE – European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education
- ICCS – Intereuropean Commission on Church and School
- IV – International Association for Christian Education
- RE - Network
- (Common web-site: www.cogree.com)

At the consultation the following common understanding was expressed:

- Schools should prepare children and young adults for the living together in a plural and democratic society. It is the children's and young adult's right to experience what religion and religions can contribute to a successful living together. Therefore no school system should be organised without Religious Education.
- Democracy is in need of religions as collaborators and sources of meaning and common values. But religions in Europe exist only in plural forms, in the variety of Christian, Jewish, Islamic and other traditions. Simplistic solutions are not useful, they are not an adequate response to the existing plurality.
- Our co-operation in Europe is directed to the whole of Europe and not limited to specific existing political structures. In Europe different perspectives exist and all perspectives should provide space for the peaceful solutions of conflicts. Furthermore Europe has also to be seen in the global context.

These basic commitments need further clarification:

- How can we deal constructively with the existing challenges in our societies? (e.g. secularisation, globalisation, the dominance of the economy, the relationship between religions and state, the multi-religious composition of society).
- School and other forms of education should be more aware of the experiences of pupils and teachers and provide safe spaces for the expression of experiences and for further personal development. They should promote a holistic view of education, which recognises the whole pupils with all their senses and dimensions, encouraging spiritual development and integral ways of thinking. We should emphasis four pillars of education (Delors report to UNESCO: Learning: The Treasure within): learning to know, learning to do, learning to live with others and learning to be. This includes in the view of the participants learning from and learning about religions, which has to be organised in different ways in different contexts, just as learning in general.

The programme of the consultation included the following contributions:

Peter Schreiner, co-ordinator for research in education at the Comenius-Institut in Muenster/Germany and one of the organisers of the consultation, presented an overview of the current debate on Religious Education in Europe, identifying the consensus reached so far as well as the differences remaining and the challenges for the future.

Dr. Michael Weninger, policy adviser to the European Commission and EU President Prodi, responsible for the dialogue with the Churches, Religions and Humanisms, called for these groups to work out an organisational structure, which would enable the European institutions, to involve them more actively in the decision making processes.

In working groups the representatives of the CoGREE organisations presented examples of good practice in Religious Education and school development, which documented the contributions they make to dealing with conflicts in society.

A group of experts and advisers from various areas of education in Europe commented on the contributions and the outcome of the consultation from the perspective of (among others) the NGOs at the Council of Europe, the World Council of Churches, the initiative "A Soul for Europe", teacher in service training and research in education.

All the contributions made and the outcomes of the consultation will be presented on a CD-ROM, which will be available in Autumn 2002.

CoGREE has produced a reader for the consultation and the ongoing activities:

Committed to Europe's Future. Contributions from Education and Religious Education, edited by Peter Schreiner, Hans Spinder, Jeremy Taylor and Wim Westerman, Münster 2002, 128 pages.

Orders through: Comenius-Institut, Schreiberstr. 12, D-48149 Münster, at a price of 12 plus postage.

The reader includes important texts and documents of the current debate about the future development of Europe, education and Religious Education.

More information about the consultation is available through:
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