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Different Approaches - Common Aims? Current Developments in Religious Education in Europe

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1. 'Biographies' of RE

In most countries of Europe religious education is part of the curriculum in public schools (Schreiner 2000) but the regulations are different.

RE in Europe is grounded in factors like the

- religious landscape of the country,
- the role and value of religion in society,
- the structure of the education system, and its history, and politics.

Each approach to religious education is shaped by a specific composition with different layers.

Where you have a Catholic dominated population as in Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Poland Catholicism is deeply embedded in the culture. Any kind of RE there will be influenced by that. Even if legal rights guarantee the freedom of religion, which is the fact e.g. in Italy, Spain and Portugal, the dominance of one religion is obvious in culture and society. This is the reason why the small Protestant churches in Italy don't use the legal opportunity, to provide religious education for their pupils in schools. The dominance of Catholicism nurtures resistance against any kind of denominational RE in schools. In Poland the small Evangelical church has also criticised the Catholic majority church for using their influence in public schools, but now they have reached an agreement with the government which allows the church to provide RE in the areas where their members live.

Where you have a mixed religious situation as in Germany, the Netherlands or in Switzerland a Protestant and Catholic RE exist in public schools or other provisions are made through Christian schools like in the Netherlands. Where you have a strict separation of state and religion, and France is an extreme example for that due to the basic principle of *laïcité*, religion has no place in public schools. And if you take into account the fact that France has a well developed area of private (Catholic) schools, where 20 % of all pupils attend, you can follow the argument, that there seems to be no remarkable discussion about RE in public schools. However over the last few years a serious discussion has started about the need of 'religious knowledge' in school. Teachers have become increasingly aware that pupils do not understand history or art or even French without a basic knowledge of religion(s). Additionally Islam has an increasing influence on the French society. Initiatives were developed providing opportunities for teachers to include religious knowledge in different subjects (Kaempf 2000).

Also in other countries the relationship between public and private schools influences the status of RE. A majority of 2/3 of all schools in the Netherlands are still Christian schools and 1/3 has a "neutral status" according to religion and worldviews. When in the last century an emotional and serious discussion took place in society about the value and place of religious education, a solution was found in the 'pillarization' of the country where nearly all parts of the

society were structured according to religious or non-religious world views. The state guaranteed the same rights and support for "private" schools which were then founded mainly by initiatives of parents. A denominational RE exists in the 2/3 Christian schools and in general no religious education takes place in the "neutral" public school. Increasingly parents in public schools ask for options in RE and worldviews which are then provided by the Reformed church or the Humanistic Union.

Speaking about 'biographies' of religious education in Europe shall encourage a careful look and the readiness to explore different understandings about RE. It can sharpen one's own view about RE and it can provide opportunities for dialogue among RE practitioners and scholars without nurturing the perspective to develop *the* European RE approach, which would ignore the richness of cultures and religions in Europe. But it should not hinder discussion of some common or specific challenges to RE.

2. Dimensions and Models of Religious Education

a) Dimensions

Religious Education
Ultimate questions
Shared human experiences
Living faith systems

At the last European conference of the European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education (EFTRE) (August 2001 in Edinburgh) this triangle was used as a kind of common understanding and a framework for discussion RE in Europe. It was shared by many of the participants. It includes the dynamic element of RE and its actors. Ultimate questions and shared human experiences can be contributed by the pupils themselves and the teachers by sharing their stories. Living faith systems include both the traditions of religions and world views but also the current value and importance of these views for their believers. Every kind of RE should be aware of these dimensions. It says something about RE before we deal with concrete models.

b) Existing models of Religious Education

Following John Hull (2001) existing models of RE can promote education into religion, education about religion or education from religion.

Education into religion introduce pupils into one specific faith tradition. It looks that in many central and eastern European countries this form of RE is given a high priority. But it should be mentioned that the implementation of RE is taking place with different speed and in different contexts. And it is hard to say in how far the negative image, which was given to religion by the official ideology, has still an impact for the external and internal conditions in (re)establishing religious education.

Education about religion refers to religious knowledge and religious studies. Pupils should be learning what a religion means to an adherent of a particular faith tradition. It involves learning about the beliefs, values and practices of a religion but also seeking to understand the way in which these may influence behaviour of individuals and how religion shapes communities.

Education from religion gives pupils the opportunity to consider different answers to major religious and moral issues, so that they may develop own views in a reflective way. This approach put the experience of the pupils in the centre of the teaching.

This rough differentiation is idealistic because a good RE can include elements from all these perspectives. In this respect it would be more sensitive not to label too quickly existing models of RE in Europe but to look more carefully to theoretical discourses and to the practice of RE (Heimbrock et al. 2001).

c) Two main approaches to RE

Neglecting the need for a more specific description we can roughly differentiate between two main models of RE in Europe: the religious studies approach and the denominational or confessional approach, being well aware that this simplification can nurture prejudices and stereotypes.

The differentiation between 'confessional' and 'religious studies' refers to the fact, that the contents of RE, the training and facilitating process of teachers, the development of curricula and teaching material are mainly in the responsibility of religious communities or of the state.

Where RE is denominationally oriented, it must be emphasised that this approach is not understood as the consequence of a state church or of a majority religion. Rather it is considered the realisation of state neutrality and the individual freedom of religion. The state does not have to influence the contents of the subject, but to be neutral in religions and world-views. Where RE is denominationally oriented (e.g. in the south of Europe, partly in Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Germany, central and eastern Europe) different kinds of religious education are offered. In Austria, Belgium and partly in Germany denominational religious education is not limited to Catholic or Protestant teaching but it includes also Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and other forms of religious education. In many cases there is an opportunity to opt out and to choose alternative subjects such as ethics or philosophy.

Most of the countries with a religious studies approach (e.g. Denmark, Sweden, Norway, England and Wales, Scotland) do not have a general right to opt out, although in some countries it is given to members of religious minorities. General aims are to transmit religious knowledge and understanding, as well as to deal with human experiences. The neutrality of the state and the right of religious freedom are to be guaranteed with this approach as well. In this case, however, it occurs in a different way than with denominational religious education. The religious studies approach is carried out under the sole authority of the state. Instruction is not to be neutral in respect to values but must be neutral in respect to worldviews including religion, a demand which corresponds to the religious neutrality of the state. From this perspective, this neutrality guarantees that this kind of religious education is equally acceptable to all denominations and religions.

d) Schematic overview

A schematic overview of the place of RE in the school system and the different responsibilities might look like the following:

Responsibility: religious communities	In cooperation between religious communities and the state	Responsibility: schools (state agencies)
denominational/confessional confessional/non-confessional religious studies		
Voluntary subject Voluntary/Compulsory subject Compulsory subject		

3. Aims of Religious Education

Different approaches have different aims. The more denominationally oriented RE has a focus on the identity formation of the pupils concerning the religious dimension. The more religious studies oriented approach refers more to the knowledge and understanding of religion.

Some examples of aims of RE from different countries:

(1) Religious Education should:

- enable pupils to achieve knowledge and understanding of religions with particular reference to Christianity and the other principal religions in the country and of the influence of these religions on people's lives and in society.
- contribute to the spiritual and moral development of pupils:
- by developing awareness of the fundamental questions about life raised by human experience;
- and encouraging pupils to
 - investigate
 - reflect on
 - evaluate
- and respond to such questions in the light of the teachings of the world's great religious and ethical traditions.
- promote respect for the rights of other people to hold beliefs different from one's own.

(England, Manchester's Agreed Syllabus in Religious Education (May 1996))

(2) To give the student a many-sided religious and ideological all-round education. In such a way that the student

- familiarises herself with her own denomination and religion and its cultural inheritance in order to get stimuli to form a personal outlook on life
- she studies other religions and value and belief systems with the aim of learning to respect people who carry different convictions and coexists with them in a multicultural society and
- develops an ethically responsible attitude to life in order to be able to choose her own values, take responsibility for the future, and influence decisions made in society.

(Finland, Framework Curriculum for the Senior Secondary School 1994: 87, according to Markku Pyysiäinen, 1999, 44)

(3)

- To make sensitive for religious meanings and questions as a kind of introduction to religion
 - Orientation and advice in questions of an ethical responsible life
 - To pass on religious knowledge and religious experiences
- (Germany, Association of Protestant and Catholic RE teachers in Wurttemberg, 1997)

When we compare the aims of religious education from different national contexts (Schreiner 1999) we can find certain similarities.

Many catalogues of aims of RE include:

- To deal with questions of meaning from the perspective of different world views and religions
- To enable pupils to clarify their own values and to give reasons for them.
- To encourage pupils to question their own value based decisions

Looking to the different RE classrooms in Europe I would argue that there is a tendency that practice is converging in spite of the different 'theories'. This can be underlined by an increasing awareness about the relation of religion and the pupils, their own individual religious practice, their religiosity and their 'religious needs'.

This view includes a recognition of the active-meaning capacity of the students going along with a dynamic understanding of religion.

Looking for reasons for this convergence one can say that there is a central awareness of religious education as a pedagogical enterprise. Another reason is an increasing awareness of the experience and the day-to-day situation of the pupil.

This change of perspectives includes a different understanding of religion and culture. Both are seen as dynamically interwoven areas and every definition has no more than a provisional status. There is no religion or culture that has not changed in history. More emphasis is given to the concrete 'gestalt' of religion within each of the individual.

In summarising the development of RE in Europe it seems to be obvious that a change in the perception of religion from an institutionalised tradition to personal aspects of believers, the religiosity of pupils and the acceptance of the 'Children's right to religion' (Schweitzer 2000) can provide a new stimulus for a European oriented discussion about RE.

4. Challenges

- **Secularisation in a global context**

HABERMAS has spoken about faith and knowledge, about secularisation and modernity, about the limits of Enlightenment

He has mentioned on the one hand a kind of secularity, that demands from the Islamic world a painful rapid modernisation without compensation for the loss of traditional ways of living and religious meaning processes; and on the other hand a period of enlightenment in the west that last for centuries, which at least declared religion as a private matter and refused the religion's absolute demand concerning moral standards without having an effect against the creeping loss of meaning in life. *A successful secularisation, according to Habermas shall not destroy what a religious tradition once has offered.*

I appreciate Habermas sceptical view concerning the dominant rationality and economic thinking and his careful rehabilitation of religion in the sense of a resource for meaning making. He demands our self-reflection in the project of modernity. What is the enlightened western culture in the eyes of the non-western world? And how do we see us in the mirror of our cultural products?

- **Adequate dealing with the situation of Plurality**

At a consultation of the World Council of Churches the participants dealt with the challenge of "Teaching Christianity in Dialogue with other faith traditions", an increasing need and challenge for a Christian affiliated RE. The final statement says:

"In societies where religious indifference, cultural intolerance and rapidly changing norms and values seem to prevail, RE can be the space in which young people learn how to deal with challenges to identity, manage conflict and develop sensitivity in interacting with difference. The task of conceptualising RE, in dialogue with other faith traditions is an essential way forward." (WCC 2000)

This somehow ambitious understanding of RE can be used to question any model of RE how it contributes to the following tasks:

- To deal with questions and challenges of identity formation
- to develop way of handling conflicts and to
- to encourage ways how to deal with differences.

This list makes clear that we cannot separate RE from school and school development even if the role and place of RE is contested in some education systems. The issues of a religious dimension in general education and of RE school seem to be unavoidable in the context the following questions, which mean challenges for the whole education system:

- How can school contribute to a necessary understanding between the existing cultural and religious traditions and views in a society?
- How can religious and ethical education be organised to deal with the existing plurality in society in an appropriate way?

In this respect RE becomes 'popular' for the general debate about education.

- **Expectations**

RE is confronted with expectations that it should work as a problem-solver for conflicts in society, to contribute to a peaceful living together of people with different cultural and religious background.

Parents expect that school shall provide religious education which they cannot or will not provide for their children at home. And there is also the expectation of religious communities that the way religious traditions are presented in RE is authentic and in coherence with their self understanding. But: Who represents the religion(s) in the classroom? This can lead to the situation that RE is confused with catechetics and religious instruction which should be done by the religious communities themselves for their believers.

Also *politicians* have expectations towards RE especially by referring to the inherent ethical potential of religion. However education and religious education cannot be seen as magic healers for problems and conflicts which are rooted in other areas of society. It is a somehow charming but nevertheless dangerous temptation when politicians claim from religious education to solve existing problems of living together in Europe.

- **A need for exchange and cooperation**

Common challenges and a convergence of aims stress also the significant value of exchange and cooperation of religious educators in Europe about this issues. The triennial conferences of the Intereuropean Commission on Church and School (ICCS) or the European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education (EF-TRE) provide good opportunities for deepening European RE concerns and exchanging about national developments.

A general theme in this framework can be the *relation between education and religion* which is valued differently in the different approaches. In RE circles 'education' and 'nurture' have been used in polarising phenomenological and confessional approaches. Increasingly it seems that this distinction is not always helpful, but combining these different roles is a challenge faced by the teachers.

Another area deals with *the meaning and significance of pedagogy for RE*. Religious education is an educational task first. This view is increasingly shared also by those who encourage a denominational RE approach. Dealing with RE needs to be aware of the underlying pedagogy, the understanding of teaching and learning, the aims, methodologies and contents.

Teaching RE is an exacting and complex process which requires approaches to teaching and learning to be informed by pedagogical principles which draw upon psychological theories of learning and human development. (Grimmitt 2000, 15).

How can religion(s) and education be brought into a relationship to the situation and the needs of the students? How can we deal with the tension between encouraging open-mindedness and seeking to transmit values through RE? The relation between a more content-centred approach which transmit knowledge from a teacher who knows to a student who should know and a pupil-centred approach which takes students as the active meaning-makers serious and provide him a safe space for his/her own development is also a debate for RE. Paulo Freire has called the 'transmission' approach the "banking-method" where the educator making 'deposits' in the educatee. He and others argue for a transformation approach where learning and teaching is mutually interwoven, where teachers become teacher-learners and learners become learner-teachers (Wardekker & Miedema 2001). Religious education is a decisive area where critical contributions can be made to this ongoing debate.

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