

Council of Europe – Exchange 29/30 June 2009

“Education for understanding religions and non-religious convictions: bases and pointers for living together as citizens – Teaching about religions and non-religious convictions in diverse socio-cultural contexts: tools and practices as contributions to a mutually supportive society”

Introduction

It is a privilege and a pleasure for me to take part in this exchange on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue. Some of the terms we use in this exchange are complex terms. They are differently used in relation to the perspective and context of the speaker. There is a need to introduce and interpret what we mean e.g. by “religion(s)” or “non-religious convictions” or even “education” and to enable us to understand what the other means when s/he uses this term. An exchange between representatives of religious communities, experts and politicians representing the 47 member states of the Council and observer states provides a rich forum of different perspectives.

It is my impression that we are in a good position to increase mutual knowledge and understanding through this instrument of exchange.

There is a need to **connect** the different discourses and perspectives and to create fruitful **contact points** for dealing with common and different concerns.

My contribution this morning is based on exchange and experiences with scholars, teacher trainers and practitioners in the field of religion in education in Europe. The term ‘religion in education’ is used in the context of the Coordinating Group for Religion in Education in Europe, CoGREE, to demonstrate that concerns about education for understanding religions and non-religious convictions are embedded in a broader context where religion matters. A multi-dimensional approach is needed when it comes to the relationship between religion and education.

Beside this educational context I am also aware to some extent of the concern about education of religious communities in Europe. And also about the rich and diverse context of how teaching about religion is organized in the European states. There is a loose collaboration on the European level among teachers of RE, teacher trainers, academics and policy makers in this field. And there are a lot of common concerns although the approaches are different.

In my paper I will first briefly review some contact points in developments, documents and perspectives of the Council since the last exchange in 2008 I will then make some remarks about issues in religion in education where further dialogue is needed.

Educational mission of the Council of Europe as a starting point for dialogue

The Council of Europe has an agenda where activities of education for understanding religions and non-religious convictions should fit in (see Jackson 2009).

It is an unquestioned starting point that the Council of Europe relates this exchange to its objective to promote and strengthen the Council of Europe's fundamental values: respect for **human rights**, the promotion of **pluralist democracy** and the **rule of law**. This is done in order to foster mutual awareness, tolerance and respect within European society. What does this European society look like? Indicators can be found in the title: **diverse socio-cultural contexts** and the perspective of a **mutually supportive society**. Indeed this is a challenge for education:

How to prepare young people to live together in a diverse socio-cultural context and to actively participate in creating a mutually supportive society?

This expresses a common challenge and a working agenda together of the Council of Europe and the religious communities that have an empathetic concern about education.

Principles, aims and current documents

There is significant development in documents of the Council of Europe about the perception of religion. Whereas in 1993 in a recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly about "religious tolerance in a democratic society" the phenomenon of religion is seen as mainly negative and problem loaded – religion is the trouble maker - in recent years this has changed. I use two quotes to illustrate that:

The recommendation "Education and religion" (2005) is more differentiated and mentions the ambivalent character of religion. In the text it is stated that

"(12) The Assembly observes moreover that the three monotheistic religions of the Book have common origins (Abraham) and share many values with other religions, and that the values upheld by the Council of Europe stem from these values."

And the recommendation: State, religion, secularity and human rights (2007) includes the following statement:

“(11) Governments should take account of the special capacity of religious communities to foster peace, co-operation, tolerance, solidarity, intercultural dialogue and the dissemination of the values upheld by the Council of Europe. “

These are excellent connecting points for exchange and collaboration with religious communities.

The reference book for schools: Religious diversity and intercultural education (Keast 2007) provides a theoretical and conceptual basis for intercultural education that takes account of religious diversity, describes educational conditions and successful methodological approaches and also a whole school approach to this. A summary of main points of the book can be found in the explanatory memorandum of the Rec 2008/12. Reactions to the book have been quite favourable to my knowledge but a more general problem comes up: the dissemination of resources and material of the Council.

The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue “Living together as equals in dignity” launched in May 2008 has set a clear course for intercultural dialogue. The document summarizes the Council of Europe’s work in the intercultural field and describes in detail conditions for establishing further intercultural dialogue. It includes also a chapter on the religious dimension. It suggests five policy approaches to promoting intercultural dialogue and contains for each of the approaches a set of recommendations and general policy guidelines.

These conclusions and recommendations need to be further monitored, and adapted if necessary also with religious communities as important stakeholders.

With the Recommendation No. 12 (2008) of the Committee of Ministers there is now a highly valuable document that underlines the importance of education to develop mutual understanding between peoples and that qualifies the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education. It takes account of the diversity and complexity of religions and non-religious convictions that exist at the local, regional and international level.

The text can be seen as a **lighthouse** that guides those who have a substantial interest in the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education. The first part of the text provides an excellent overview and summary about the activities of the Council in this field over the years. It documents a remarkable process initiated in the field of intercultural dialogue and education.

The text provides a vitally and inspiring basis to continue activities within intercultural education that take into account the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions. It lays the foundation of a more specific exchange with the religious communities.

The recommendation is aimed at a wide range of policy-makers, persons in charge of drafting curricula, and also teacher trainers and other categories of education professionals.

The explanatory memorandum that is part of the document you received is very helpful includes some points for further discussion.

Last but not least. The official inauguration ceremony of the **European Wergeland Centre** in Oslo (www.theewc.org), the European Resource Centre for Intercultural Understanding, Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship at the end of May marks an important and successful development. The idea of such a centre has been discussed for quite a time in the Council of Europe and is also mentioned in several documents such as the Volga declaration from the conference in Nizhny Novgorod in September 2006 or in Kazan in February 2006. Now the Centre exists, thanks to the Norwegian government and the Council of Europe. The Centre's activities will include the active dissemination and discussion of the Council of Europe's work in the fields of intercultural, citizenship and human rights education, including the dimension of religion in these fields. It will also play a major role in networking such as linking up groups across Europe such as research students working on research relevant to educational practice and policy as well as teacher trainers and policy makers.

Issues where further dialogue is needed

Concept of religion

Religions contribute to social and individual life. The policy of the Council refers to religions and non-religious convictions as "cultural facts" such as language and historical and cultural traditions. This is a fair and adequate understanding for a political institution that promotes knowledge and understanding of the main religions and non-religious convictions (philosophical, secular humanist and agnostic) and their role in society. It can be seen as a key condition for including religion as a pan-European topic in education, despite different views on religion at the personal as well as the also societal level. There should be agreement that knowledge and understanding of religion at this level is highly relevant to good community and personal relations. Therefore it is a legitimate concern of public policy. This is not a form of intellectual reductionism, but a pragmatic recognition of the fact of the presence of religions in society as part of human social life.

It may not be enough for religious communities that bear in mind other aspects and purposes of religion. For them religion is a way of life, an embodiment of revealed truth or linked with important ethical convictions. This is also confirmed by the explanatory memorandum (point 17, 18) and it has been obvious in statements during our exchange so far.

Religion is seen at least as a cultural phenomenon that also takes account of non-religious convictions: "This understanding allows the Council of Europe to begin to develop further the implications of religion for intercultural dialogue and to release the potential for considering how religion can contribute to positive intercultural education" (18)

It is vital for different voices within civil society, including religious voices, to ensure that religions should be represented, both through the media and through education, in an accurate, fair and balanced way, showing their diversity as well as their central features.

Questions:

- How to take into account the inner and outer perspective of religion (especially to appreciate that education about religions and beliefs is not in opposition to other forms of religious education within communities)?
- How to take into account individualization and pluralisation as key markers of religion today?
- How to integrate different perspectives of religion in the dialogue? Religion belonging to the private sphere and/or part of the public sphere. This are not “either/or” perspectives but should be seen as “both/and”.

Concept of education

In the explanatory memorandum to recommendation 2008/12 there is a helpful definition about the concept of education that is needed:

“Religious and moral values are a highly sensitive area, involving beliefs and concepts about the world. Such values cannot be taught simply from a narrow curricular perspective, nor can they be reduced to a mere transmission of knowledge. They must be developed gradually, with pupils becoming aware of and acquiring such values individually and to lasting effect.” (point 18, p. 19)

It seems obvious that the issue we are dealing with does not match a traditional understanding of education that sees the **transmission** of values and virtues as the main purpose of education. Research about teaching and learning suggests that this is not wholly effective. For the development of intercultural competence it seems more important to maintain culturally competent attitudes like awareness, the valuing of cultures, and a willingness to make changes than to transmit knowledge. A basis for intercultural competence can be created by openness, respect, curiosity and an exploratory spirit. To promote and encourage these attitudes and skills seems important for educational concepts.

Educational standards

REDCo findings

Between 2006 and 2009 an international 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 was organized. (REDCo = **R**eligion in **E**ducation. **A** **C**ontribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries). The project was financed by the European Commission and carried out qualitative and quantitative research in eight countries running from Spain and Russia to Germany, England, France, Netherlands, Norway and Estonia. One of the key research findings was that a majority of students "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." (REDCo 2009, 2).

On the basis of the findings of REDCo the research team suggested "a need for a degree of differentiation at the national level regarding the implementation of policies in the educational system"

The team puts forward 4 policy recommendations:

- (1) **Encouragement for peaceful coexistence.** Education policy development and implementation need to focus on the transformation of abstract (passive) tolerance into practical (active) tolerance.
- (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 at university level.
- (3) **Including religious as well as non-religious world-views**
- (4) **Professional competence of teachers.**

Intercultural Competence

In the White Paper the need of learning and teaching intercultural competences is underlined. "*The competences necessary for intercultural dialogue are not automatically acquired: they need to be learned, practiced and maintained throughout life.*" (2008, 28).

We face a shift of paradigm in education nowadays that focuses more on what students should have learned than on how teaching is organized. This is often expressed in "competences" that include knowledge, skills and attitudes. Keywords of the debate are: From input to outcome orientation, from teaching to learning, from resources to results. There are pros and cons to this. It definitely encourages a more active concept of learning and more emphasis on the situation of the pupils and students.

“Intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection” (Bertelsmann, 2006, 5).

Following the approach of Dr. Darla K. Deardorff this definition from a project of the Bertelsmann foundation in Germany, goes beyond common models. It is based on the view that intercultural competence develops dynamically. Individuals must learn and master the ability to deal with ongoing processes.

“The acquisition of intercultural competence is a continual, dynamic process, one that moves through diverse dimensions while developing and enriching itself in an upward spiral.” (Bertelsmann 2006, 6)

The model of this dynamic learning process includes four key dimensions of intercultural competence: (1) **attitudes**, of valuing cultural diversity and tolerating ambiguity (2) **intercultural knowledge and skills**, (3) as **internal outcome**: the ability of intercultural reflection, (4) as **external outcome**, skills for constructive interaction. It can be assumed that all four dimensions influence each other. The more dimensions achieved and the more often they are passed through, the higher the degree of intercultural competence.

Conclusion

I have put this model of intercultural competence forward because it might be a further issue of our exchange to discuss Intercultural competence as a key competence for the 21st century and also to discuss how interreligious competence might be developed as part of it.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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