

Wolfram Weisse

Overview of the EC REDCo-project and impulses for interreligious dialogue in Europe

Abstract

The REDCo-project represents an approach to addressing the question how religions and values can contribute to either dialogue or tension in Europe. Researchers in the humanities and social sciences cooperate in a thematic and methodological approach in order to gain better insight into how European citizens of different religious, cultural and political backgrounds can live together and enter into dialogue of mutual respect and understanding. These differences are studied in their impact on modern Europe and the lives of its citizens. The REDCo-consortium empirically studied how differences within European societies can be addressed without creating conflict or leading to exclusion. Empirical studies, targeting students in the 14–16-year age group, looked into their own perceptions of dialogue or conflict within the different national contexts. These include a dual perspective of, on the one hand, the subjects' own perspectives and, on the other hand, analyses of observed teaching in both dialogue and conflict situations.

REDCo is a project funded by the European Commission for the period from March 2006 to February 2009. It is coordinated by Wolfram Weisse from the University of Hamburg. Eight European countries (Estonia, Russia, Norway, Germany, The Netherlands, France, England and Spain) participate.

This paper provides an overview of the project and presents some of its most important results:

- A finding of the greatest relevance is the great openness of pupils throughout Europe towards religious and cultural differences: The not only accept religious pluralism, they welcome it. In order for this openness to continue and grow and prejudice to be overcome, the education system has a major role to play.
- The role of the school is significant throughout Europe: To provide room and scope for pupils to learn more about religions – not only “their own” religions and world views – and at the same time to identify and address prejudice.

Résumé

Le projet REDCo constitue un processus de recherche visant à répondre à la question suivante : comment les religions et les valeurs peuvent-elles contribuer aussi bien au dialogue qu'à produire des tensions en Europe ? Des chercheurs relevant de différentes disciplines des sciences sociales ont coopéré, tant sur le plan théorique que méthodologique, afin de mieux saisir comment les citoyens européens, relevant d'arrière-plans religieux, culturels et politiques différents, pouvaient vivre ensemble et bâtir un dialogue fondé sur le respect mutuel et la connaissance de l'autre.

Nos travaux ont porté sur les différences d'approches développées dans divers pays européens, tant au niveau de la politique des Etats qu'au niveau de la vie de leurs citoyens. Le consortium REDCo a ainsi programmé des recherches empiriques afin de montrer de quelle manière la diversité des sociétés européennes pouvait être gérée sans susciter des conflits, ni entraîner l'exclusion de certains. Nos travaux empiriques ont ciblé le public des élèves de 14 à 16 ans afin de connaître leurs représentations du dialogue et du conflit, en fonction des différents contextes nationaux. Ces travaux ont impliqué une double perspective méthodologique : d'une part, l'étude des réactions et des représentations des élèves eux-mêmes ; d'autre part, l'analyse des pratiques éducatives dans un contexte fait à la fois de dialogue et de conflit.

REDCo est un projet financé par la Commission européenne sur la période s'étendant de mars 2006 jusqu'à février 2009. Il est coordonné par Wolfram Weisse de l'Université d'Hambourg. Huit pays européens y participent (Estonie, Russie, Norvège, Allemagne, Pays-Bas, France, Angleterre et Espagne).

Cette conférence propose un tour d'horizon du projet et présente certains de ses principaux résultats.

- Un résultat de la plus haute importance est la grande ouverture des élèves à travers l'Europe en faveur des différences culturelles et religieuses. Ils ne se contentent pas d'accepter le pluralisme religieux, ils l'accueillent. Afin de permettre à cette ouverture de se développer et d'empêcher que les préjugés prévalent, le système éducatif a un rôle majeur à jouer.
- Le rôle de l'école est déterminant à travers toute l'Europe pour donner place et envergure à une meilleure connaissance des religions et des visions du monde par les élèves, pas seulement la « leur », et en même temps pour permettre d'identifier et de s'attaquer aux préjugés.

Zusammenfassung

Das REDCo-Projekt beschäftigt sich mit der Frage, wie Religionen und Weltanschauungen sich als Dialog- und Konfliktfaktoren in der europäischen Gesellschaft auswirken können. Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaftler entwickeln gemeinsam einen thematischen und methodologischen Ansatz, der Einsichten in die Potentiale von friedlichem Zusammenleben und respektvollem, gleichberechtigtem Dialog zwischen Europäern mit verschiedenen kulturellen, religiösen und politischen Hintergründen ermöglicht. Diese kulturellen und religiös-weltanschaulichen Differenzen sind in ihren Auswirkungen auf europäische Gesellschaften und das Leben ihrer Bürger auch selbst Gegenstand der Untersuchung. Ziel der empirischen Studien des REDCo Konsortiums ist es, herauszuarbeiten, wie sie innerhalb der einzelnen Gesellschaften thematisiert werden können, ohne Anlass zu Konflikten oder Exklusion zu geben. Als Kernstück des Projektes wurden Erhebungen unter Schülerinnen und Schülern im Alter zwischen 14 und 16 Jahren durchgeführt, die deren eigene Wahrnehmung von Dialog und Konflikt in ihren jeweiligen Kontexten erfassen. Hier ist sowohl die Perspektive der Befragten selbst als auch eine Außenperspektive über Beobachtung von Unterrichtssituationen, in denen interreligiöse Dialoge und Konflikte an die Oberfläche kommen, erfasst worden.

Das REDCo-Projekt wird von der Europäischen Kommission für den Zeitraum von März 2006 bis Februar 2009 finanziert. Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse (Universität Hamburg) ist Projektkoordinator. Insgesamt nehmen acht europäische Länder teil (Estland, Russland, Norwegen, Deutschland, Niederlande, Frankreich, England und Spanien).

Dieser Aufsatz gibt einen Überblick über das Projekt und einige seiner wichtigsten Ergebnisse:

- Vielleicht das bedeutendste Ergebnis der Erhebung insgesamt war die überwältigende Offenheit, die Schülerinnen und Schüler in ganz Europa der religiösen und kulturellen Pluralität entgegenbringen. Sie tolerieren religiöse Vielfalt nicht nur, sie begrüßen sie. In der Erhaltung und Förderung dieser Offenheit und der Überwindung verbleibender Vorurteile kommt dem Bildungssystem eine tragende Rolle zu.
- Die Rolle der Schule ist in ganz Europa von größter Bedeutung. Hier erhalten Schülerinnen und Schüler Raum und Gelegenheit, Religionen kennen zu lernen – nicht nur ihre eigene Religion und Weltanschauung – und Vorurteile können thematisiert und bekämpft werden.



From left to right: Christian Rudolt (Research Management Director of REDCo) and Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse

Wolfram Weisse

Overview of the EC REDCo-project and impulses for interreligious dialogue in Europe

Commissioner Figel, Mr. Öger, representatives of the Hanselmann-office, members of parliament, ladies and gentlemen,

The growing academic as well as public interest in religion and its relevance for intercultural and interreligious understanding (and its potential of destruction) has inspired several recent programmes by international organisations including UNESCO and the Council of Europe. At the same time, major research projects on religion, education and dialogue have been launched and financed in recent years.

In the following presentation, I would like to give you an overview of one of these academic endeavours, the REDCo-project, and sketch an outline of our preliminary research findings. In my conclusion, I would like to establish a European perspective on religion and dialogue in education that might also serve to stimulate the international debate.

1. REDCo – An overview

Religion in Education is the core issue of our REDCo-project. REDCo itself stands for “Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European countries.” (Weisse, 2007). It is part of the “Values and Religions in Europe”¹ section of projects in the EU-programme „Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge-Based Society”. This project is funded by the research department of the European Commission over a period of three years from March 2006 onwards with in total of Euro 1.188.000. Nine projects from eight different European countries are participating.

Objectives: The project's main aim is to establish and compare the potentials and limitations of religion in the educational systems of selected European countries. Approaches and constellations that

1 The task formulated by the EU-commission reads: „European societies have a long history of dialogue and coexistence as well as of tensions between different cultures, values and religions. The objective is to better understand the significance and impact of values and religions in societies across Europe and their roles in relation to changes in society and to the emergence of European identities. STREPs [specific targeted research projects] and/or CAs [Co-ordination Actions] should explore the role of different values, religions and cultures in European societies from an historical perspective; their different perceptions within and across communities (e.g. ethnic, religious, national minorities, immigrant communities) -including gender aspects- either as an enrichment or a threat to their own identities. The processes leading to tolerance or intolerance and xenophobia -and their relation to changes in society- could be examined in this regard. The role of symbols and cultural heritage in the transmission and diffusion of different values (secular and religious) could be examined as well. Research could also explore how religion is sometimes being used as a political instrument and a factor in social mobilisation, solidarity or discrimination. The challenges posed by religious, ethnic and cultural diversity to legal, educational and political systems in European countries and possible ways to ensure peaceful coexistence of different value systems should be examined. The differing ways in which European countries address these issues and implement various policies and practices in this context could be examined in a comparative perspective as well as their degrees of success in achieving them.” Cf. European Commission: FP6 Specific Programme “Integrating and Strengthening the European Research Area”, Priority 7: „Citizens and Governance in a knowledge based society”, Work Programme 2004 – 2006“, 16 f.

can contribute to making religion in education a factor promoting dialogue in the context of European development have been addressed through historical and contemporary studies, and we have published a book on the basis of our research titled “Religion and Education in Europe: Developments, Contexts and Debates” (Jackson/Miedema/Weisse/Willaime 2007).

Participating countries and consortium: The wide religious and societal spectrum covered by our REDCo countries and the challenges of social transition they face can be briefly summarised as follows: Germany, with two established churches (Catholics and Protestants) and Norway with one (Lutheran) are moving towards religious pluralism. The Netherlands and England/Wales both have established churches (Anglican and Reformed, respectively), but can also look back on a long (though not unchallenged) tradition of religious pluralism. Traditionally majority-Catholic France has a laicist system facing a rising number of challenges through the increasing relevance of religion in public discourse. Spain as a predominantly Catholic country is experiencing an increasing religious and interreligious opening with a lively public discourse on new approaches towards Catholic RE and on the introduction of Islamic RE. Russia and Estonia both have strong religious traditions (Lutheran in Estonia, Orthodox in Russia) which have long been marginalised by Communism. In recent years, both societies have become increasingly open towards religious influences.

In spite of a wide range of societal and pedagogical backgrounds, the research group holds a common conviction: religion must be included in schools, as religion is too important a factor in the social life and the coexistence of people with different cultural and religious backgrounds throughout Europe to be excluded there.

The research group (consortium) was selected to include all these countries. All members have previously co-operated fruitfully. Their respective disciplines (theology, Islamic studies, education, religious education, sociology, political science and ethnology) complement each other.²

Theoretical background: We use the *term religious education* in a broad sense. It covers academic teacher training as well as both philosophical and practical aspects of religious and value education at school. Our main focus with regard to schools is the subject “Religious Education (RE)”, but we also include treatments of religion and religiosity in other subjects.

When studying religion, we do not focus on abstract belief systems or ‘world-religions’ but rather concentrate on the forms of religion and belief that are represented by the adherents themselves. With reference to E. Levinas, we are directing our attention to “neighbour-religions” (Weisse 2003), the views of neighbours in classrooms, in the region, in the state, and the whole of Europe. The world religions are present in the “neighbour-religions”, and thus our approach permits us to study them in their current forms and potentials for dialogue and conflict.

Our main theoretical stimulus in the study of RE is an interpretive approach to religious diversity (Jackson 1997). I do not need to explain this approach in depth here, but refer to key terms as developed by Robert Jackson (Jackson 2004, chapter 6; 2006):

Representation: Religions should be presented not as homogeneous and bounded systems, but in ways that recognise the diversity within them and the uniqueness of each member, as well as the fact that each member is subject to many influences.

2 The consortium consists of: Prof. Wolfram Weisse University of Hamburg (D) Prof. Thorsten Knauth, Prof. Robert Jackson, University of Warwick (GB), Prof. Jean-Paul Willaime, Sorbonne University, Paris (F), Prof. Siebren Miedema and Dr. Ina ter Avest, Free University Amsterdam, Prof. Cok Bakker, University of Utrecht (NL), Prof. Geir Skeie, University of Stavanger (NOR), Dr. Pille Valk, University of Tartu (Estonia), Prof. Muhammad Kalisch and Dr. Dan-Paul Jozsa, University of Muenster (D), Prof. Vladimir Fedorov and Prof. Fedor Kozyrev, University of St Petersburg (Russia), Prof. Gunther Dietz and Dr. Aurora Alvarez Veinguer, University of Granada (Spain).

Interpretation: Students should not be expected to set aside their own presuppositions, but should compare their own concepts with those of others.

Reflexivity: Students should maintain an awareness of the development of the interpretive process, reflecting on the nature of their learning.

The subject of our study can thus be best understood in the wider context of *citizenship education*. It has the potential to incorporate European and global ideas of citizenship and help children debate issues increasingly relevant in a plural society (Jackson 2003, 67–92). Religious education in the form of interreligious education has been shown to be able to contribute to intercultural understanding (Weisse 2003).

Methods and methodological setting: We all use the same set of methods. For text analysis, we mainly apply hermeneutical methods. In empirical studies, we all use participant observation, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires (both qualitative and quantitative), and the videotaping of RE-lessons for interaction analysis.

Research foci: All our projects look at religious education for school students in the 14–16-year age group in various countries. We combine analyses of the various designs of RE in the respective countries with surveys of the concrete views of pupils: We observe them, we interview them, we ask for written answers in questionnaires, and we analyse their interaction. Through this combination, we can capture both the perspective from above and from below.

In empirical studies we recorded pupils' views on the societal function of religion, on their experience with religion in education, and their opinions on whether to include or exclude religion from education. All questions ultimately refer to the possibilities for dialogue and/or conflict.

All our projects also look at classroom interaction in our various countries. On the basis of participant observation and the videotaping of RE-lessons, an analysis of interaction patterns in the classroom is possible.

2. Preliminary results of the REDCo-Project

Now allow me to present some of the findings of our qualitative study which underscore the importance of including religion in education at the European level.

The first question is: How do young people perceive religious difference:

Despite all differences the answers to the qualitative written questionnaires show (which is hardly surprising when you consider the variety of countries from Estonia and Russia on the one hand to France and Spain on the other), some features are found in all these countries:

Religious pluralism is not only accepted, but welcomed by the pupils: “The young people shared a vision of a Europe in which religions coexist peacefully” (Bertram-Troost et al 2008, p. 406).

Pupils express criticism of truth claims that exclude people of other religions or world views: “The majority expressed fundamental disapproval of all attempts to undermine the principle of the equality of all religions” (Bertram-Troost et al 2008, p. 407).

Prejudices are mainly directed against Islam “which was depicted as a harsh religion projecting violence to the outside and oppressing its adherents” (Bertram-Troost et al 2008, p. 407).

In spite of being aware of the conflicts caused by religions and the difficulties arising from religious plurality, the majority of young people in our European countries “appeared to share a vision of peaceful coexistence in a religiously plural society. The realisation of this vision was often presented as contingent on the existence of attitudes of tolerance, open-mindedness and respect, and on the exercise of key dialogue skills: learning about each other’s belief; listening to each other; getting to know a variety of views.” (Bertram-Troost et al 2008, p. 408).

As an example for this attitude I would like to quote a young girl with a Muslim background from my home town of Hamburg who points to the principle of universal human equality that allows peaceful coexistence of all:

„I think people can live together since all humans are still equal no matter if they have the same religion or not. Because who thinks they could not live together still has a wrong idea of religions because all religions want peace and once people see that one could live more peacefully on earth.“³

Of course there are other views as well, as we saw in our questionnaires. Some teenagers express severe prejudice against others. Although they do not represent the mainstream, we have to look at them very carefully, as their views could gain ground and/or be instrumentalised to foster a different, intolerant attitude among youngsters in Europe. In the effort to preserve and develop openness and overcome prejudice, the sphere of education plays a major role. This leads us to the next point.

The second question concerns the relevance of religion in education.

In addition to these common beliefs concerning the role of religions in society, our results also show the relevance of our study for the field of education:

1. For pupils who have no ties to organised religions, the school forms the main forum for learning about religion and the religious perceptions of other pupils.
2. For those pupils who belong to a religion, the school provides the main opportunity to come into contact with other religions.
3. Many pupils are prejudiced towards the religions of others, but at the same time are prepared to enter into dialogue with others whom they regard as interesting. The school provides a unique forum for them.
4. Almost all pupils regard religious education and interreligious understanding in the context of the school as necessary and possible. Schools offer the opportunity to realise this potential.

We once more see the ambivalences in the minds of teenagers throughout Europe. On the one hand, they are open to interreligious encounters at school, yet on the other hand, prejudices endanger the intercultural understanding of others. At this nexus, schools have a very important role to play: They provide the space to encounter more religion and religions – not only on “their own” religions and world views – and at the same time to reveal and address prejudice. Both is necessary, especially since we do not know how the public climate will change within the next years. Schools must continuously provide a space of encounter with the other and with other religions in a knowledge-based and respectful atmosphere.

As an example for the desire of young people to enter into dialogue, I will again refer to a girl from Hamburg, this time a pupil with no religious background. She is concerned about the prospect that pupils may be separated along the lines of different confessions, religions and world views in religious education. On this issue, she emphasises:

3 Knauth, T. Better together than apart“: Religion in School and Lifeworld of Students in Hamburg, in: Knauth, T./ Jozsa, D.-P./ Bertram-Troost, G. & Ipgrave, J. (Eds.). Encountering Religious Pluralism in School and Society – A Qualitative Study of Teenage Perspectives in Europe. Muenster: 2008, 207–245, quote 230.

“I would not find it to be so good if they were taught separately. This way one can easier learn about other religions. Besides I think that by this the hatred of people who do not belong to one's own or a specific religion would more easily be reduced. Besides the people belonging to a particular religion can explain certain things in their religion. I think if one would separate the pupils who belong to different religions it makes it seem as if they were different (as if you would teach foreigners and non-foreigners or Blacks and Whites separately).⁴

Without going into a thorough interpretation of what points we can analyse on the basis of our empirical studies, the relevance of the school as an institution of instruction on religions and a venue for interreligious dialogue at class-room level becomes quite clear. The desire of many pupils in these countries to learn more about religions and interreligious dialogue presents a great opportunity for interreligious understanding in European schools.

3. European Perspectives

The findings of REDCo can contribute to a better understanding of how religions and questions of religion and religiosity for children, young people and students can be anchored in the educational process so as to promote an appreciation of the value of difference and an understanding of the values held in common, and to develop mutual respect. The focus of the project is on ways to develop an understanding in the field of religion and value systems that can serve both as an orientation for personal development and as a means to develop an appreciation of the processes of democratic citizenship and social cohesion.

Beyond individual study results, our project opens perspectives for international research. Our findings can cast the differences between countries and their main emphases into sharper profile, thus improving our understanding of the path towards developing a European identity. “Identity” must here, of course, be understood as a plural and dialogic rather than a monolithic concept (Peukert 2005).

The need for this is evident not least from the calls by various European institutions.

Developing education for democracy has been a vital issue in the more than 50 years of the Council of Europe's history. Within this context, education for democratic citizenship and, more recently, intercultural and interreligious education have been playing increasingly important roles. This development can be outlined as follows:

In the Declaration by the European Ministers of Education on Intercultural Education in the New European Context (Athens, Greece, 10–12 November 2003) the importance of intercultural and interreligious education for the development of the unity and diversity of European societies is emphasised.⁵ Theory and practice of interreligious and intercultural dialogue are increasingly

4 Knauth, T. „Better together than apart“: Religion in School and Lifeworld of Students in Hamburg, in: Knauth, T./ Jozsa, D.-P./ Bertram-Troost, G. & Ipgrave, J. (Eds.). Encountering Religious Pluralism in School and Society – A Qualitative Study of Teenage Perspectives in Europe. Muenster: 2008, 207–245, quote 238.

5 The issue was particularly addressed by the launch of the project “The New Intercultural Challenge to Education: Religious Diversity and Dialogue in Europe”. In the course of this, a conference on “The Religious Dimension of Intercultural Education” was held in Oslo on 6–8 June 2004 during which the Director-General of Education, Culture, Youth, Sport and Environment in the Council of Europe, Gabriella Battaini-Dragnoni, pointed out the particular importance of religious education. The different institutional and legislative structures within which religious education takes place in various European countries are not easy to unify, given their different historical developments, but, as she states, “... we

becoming interrelated (Keast 2007). In order to counteract increasing tension and combat the entrenchment of prejudice, opportunities for dialogue and encounter must be supported in schools. This is particularly important for school students still in the process of forming their opinions, for whom encounters with people of different religions and interreligious learning can be an important step towards respecting other positions (even in disagreement) rather than prioritising one's own opinion, not regarding religion and culture as monolithic but rather as determined by a multiplicity of human beings in daily practice and as changeable, establishing barriers against the ideological abuse of religion and its instrumentalisation for political conflict.

Our goal in REDCo is to contribute to intercultural understanding, to respect for otherness, and to coexistence with the help of interreligious dialogue in the public schools of Europe and other continents. Our research focuses on Europe, but we are fully aware that the new discussion on religion in education has global dimensions.

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will I hope find greater commonalities in good practice in the classroom”. Religions matter “because the matter of religion – whatever orientation we each adopt - goes to the heart of our emotions and identities ...” This can often lead to great conflict, but in this respect we, “... even policymakers, can learn from children” (13).

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Religion in Education – a Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict?
Presentation of the REDCo-Project in the European Parliament



Presentation of REDCo in the European Parliament



Auditorium in the European Parliament; REDCo is presented

Jean-Paul Willaime

Religion in the Classroom – the Challenge of a «*laïcité d'intelligence*» in Europe and Findings of the REDCo-Project

Abstract

Though at French schools there is neither a subject specifically dedicated to the study of religions and religiosity nor a body of teachers trained expressly in the field, that does not mean that students are not taught anything on religious issues there. Especially the impulses provided by the Debray Report (2002) on religious education in a laical school have strengthened the study of religion in public schools. Today, we have passed from an abstentionist laicalism that declares itself incompetent to address religion in its sphere towards a laicalism of understanding that takes into account the duty of the public school, cognisant of its strict religious neutrality and educational mission, to address religious issues. This is necessary not only to allow the students to better understand our past and present, but also to prepare them for peaceful coexistence in a society increasingly characterised by great religious and philosophical diversity.

The REDCo survey has shown that, though half of French pupils state that they have no religious affiliation, the majority of them believe that a place must be reserved in the school system for learning about religious beliefs. Yet these same French students also voice concern that this be done in a spirit of secular neutrality and respect for the school's educational objectives. They think the school an appropriate place for addressing religious issues precisely because they can there be addressed with a degree of objectivity and distance. This means that the approach to religion in school can not be reduced to its cultural and social dimension. Rather, we are currently seeing a form of European laicalism emerge across different nations, a laicalism that allows understanding and interreligious dialogue in modes compatible with their various forms of church-state relationship.

Résumé

Bien qu'il n'y ait pas, dans les écoles publiques en France, une discipline particulière consacrée à l'étude des phénomènes religieux et un corps spécifique de professeurs consacrés à cet enseignement, cela ne signifie pas que les élèves n'apprennent rien à l'école sur les religions. L'étude des phénomènes religieux a été renforcée dans l'école publique en France, notamment grâce à l'impulsion du rapport Debray sur l'enseignement des faits religieux dans l'école laïque (2002). On est passé d'une laïcité d'abstention et d'incompétence à une *laïcité d'intelligence* considérant que l'école publique, tout en conservant sa neutralité et ses objectifs éducatifs propres, devait aborder l'étude des phénomènes religieux. Non seulement pour permettre aux élèves de mieux connaître et comprendre notre passé et notre présent, mais aussi pour leur apprendre à vivre-ensemble dans des sociétés caractérisées par une grande diversité de religions et de conceptions du monde.

L'enquête REDCo auprès des élèves de France révèle que si la moitié d'entre eux déclarent ne pas avoir de religion, la majorité pense que l'école doit réserver une place à l'étude des faits religieux. Mais les élèves français sont très soucieux que cela se fasse dans le respect de la neutralité laïque et des objectifs éducatifs de l'école publique. Si l'école leur apparaît un lieu sûr pour aborder les faits religieux, c'est justement parce que les faits religieux y sont abordés avec distanciation et un souci d'objectivité. Ce qui ne signifie pas réduire l'approche des religions à l'école aux aspects culturels et sociaux des religions. Au-delà des particularités de chaque pays, s'élabore peu à peu une laïcité européenne de *d'intelligence* et de dialogue qui est compatible avec différents systèmes nationaux de relations Eglises-Etat.

Zusammenfassung

Wenn es auch an staatlichen Schulen in Frankreich weder ein reguläres Lehrfach Religion, noch speziell dafür ausgebildete Religionslehrkräfte gibt, so bedeutet dies doch nicht, dass die Schuelerinnen und Schueler dort nichts ueber Religion und religiöse Fragen lernen wuerden. Im Gegenteil, die aktuell stattfindende verstärkte Einbeziehung religiöser Themen in den französischen Schulunterricht ist besonders dem Debray-Bericht zur religiösen Bildung in der laizistischen Schule (2002) zu verdanken. In diesem Zusammenhang sehen wir den Uebergang von einem Laizismus, der sich von der Religion prinzipiell distanziert (*laïcité d'abstention*), zu einem Laizismus, der sie als Phänomen zu verstehen und sich ihr – unter Beachtung des Neutralitätsgebotes und Bildungsauftrages der staatlichen Schule – lernend zu nähern sucht (*laïcité d'intelligence*). So wird es Schuele-

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rinnen und Schuelern nicht nur möglich, unsere Geschichte und Gegenwart besser zu verstehen, sondern sie erhalten auch eine wertvolle Gelegenheit, die friedliche Koexistenz in einer von großer religiöser und weltanschaulicher Pluralität gekennzeichneten Gesellschaft einzueben.

Die REDCo-Studie unter Schuelerinnen und Schuelern in Frankreich hat gezeigt, dass – obschon sich die Hälfte der Befragten keiner Religion zugehörig sieht – die große Mehrheit religiöse Fragen im Schulunterricht behandelt sehen will. Zugleich ist es ihnen jedoch auch wichtig, dass dies mit der gebotenen Neutralität und im Bewußtsein des Bildungsauftrages der staatlichen Schule geschieht. Gerade weil sie diese Fragen distanziert und im Bemuehen um Objektivität behandelt, erscheint ihnen die Schule als der geeignete Ort zu ihrer Thematisierung. Keineswegs bedeutet dies aber, die Religion im Schulunterricht auf ihre gesellschaftlichen und kulturellen Aspekte zu reduzieren. Vielmehr beobachten wir schon heute die Entwicklung eines europäischen Laizismus ueber Ländergrenzen hinweg, der sich der Religion im Geiste von Verständnis und Dialog nähern kann und sich unter den Bedingungen der Beziehung zwischen Staat und Religion in verschiedenen europäischen Ländern bewährt.



Prof. Dr. Jean-Paul Willaime in the European Parliament

Jean-Paul Willaime

Religion in the Classroom – the Challenge of a «*laïcité d'intelligence*» in Europe and Findings of the REDCo-Project

It is very interesting for my colleagues and me to participate in the REDCo project about Religion in Education. In Europe, as you know, France is the country often seen as the champion of the separation between church and state on the one hand, and between school and state on the other. It is why, among the participants in the REDCo project, France may seem to be an exception when it comes to addressing religion in the curriculum as there is no specific subject that does so. The *départements* in the Alsace region (*Haut-Rhin* and *Bas-Rhin*) and the Moselle *département*, for historical reasons, are exceptions in this regard. However, this does not imply that young French people learn nothing about religion in school. Rather, it was decided to present course material on religion within pre-existing subjects, mainly History, French and Civics. As a result, this material focuses on knowledge and is presented impartially. For about twenty years, there has been growing awareness of the need to reinforce the understanding French students have of this topic; this has led to reforms in the school curriculum and also to greater attention being paid to teacher training in this area, following Régis Debray's 2002 report and the creation of the *European Institute for Religious Studies* (IESR) which I have the privilege to lead.

The Debray report

By entrusting Régis Debray with a survey of "the teaching of religious facts in the secular school system" on December 3 2001, the Minister for National Education realised that "a school system that is authentically and dispassionately secular" must allow every student to be able "to understand the world," which required teachers take into account "religions as essential and, to a large extent, constitutive elements of human history, sometimes as factors of peace and modernity, sometimes as instigators of discord, murderous conflict and regression"⁶. Hence the need, as Régis Debray put it so well, to move "from a *laïcité of incompetence* (religious belief, by its nature, doesn't concern us), to a *laïcité of intelligence* (it is our duty to understand it)"⁷. To this end, the Debray report calls for a number of measures that address both the school syllabus and the training, introductory and ongoing, of secondary school teachers, in particular the inclusion of a course on religious facts and *laïcité* at the University Institutes of Teacher Training⁸. Efforts to train teachers in the field of the history and sociology of religions are on the increase in different schools, following the creation of the *European Institute of Religious Studies*⁹, under the aegis of the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*. At first, the main focus of teaching about religion was to present religion from the perspective of cultural heritage. The idea was to enable students to understand monuments and works of art that would be incomprehensible to them without knowledge of religious traditions. Since the year 2000, a period

⁶ Jack Lang, Préface to Régis Debray, *L'enseignement du fait religieux dans l'école laïque*, Rapport au ministre de l'Education Nationale, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2002, p. 9-10.

⁷ Régis Debray, *L'enseignement du fait religieux à l'école*, *op.cit.*, p. 43.

⁸ Les Instituts Universitaires de Formation des Maîtres (I.U.F.M.).

⁹ *L'Institut Européen en Sciences des Religions*.

marked by the beginning of the Second Intifada in the Middle East and the September 11 attacks, more emphasis has been placed on the civic dimension of this instruction. Approaching the question in the classroom is viewed as an opportunity to improve intercultural relations and promote mutual respect. In addition, from the point of view of school life, the law of March 14, 2004 prohibiting "the wearing of signs or clothes by which the students ostensibly demonstrate a religious affiliation"¹⁰ is often seen as having eased some tensions in schools where there is a great deal of religious diversity.

The REDCo-project

The REDCo project, which focuses on the problems of dialogue and conflict, has given us access to the opinions of several hundred adolescents on these questions. This is an innovative research approach in France, as other surveys have typically only dealt with teachers and their difficulties. Above all, the adolescents we surveyed confirm the phenomenon of young people's indifference to religious institutions: half of them say they have no religious affiliation. Religion is of secondary importance to them. Only a minority of students, comprised principally of two religions (Catholics and Muslims), distinguish themselves from the others by the intensity of their religious beliefs. But, in our view, one of the most significant results of the survey is that it suggests French adolescents embrace the school system's specific nature as a social sphere and as an institution.

We find that nearly all of the middle- and high-school students we surveyed have completely internalised the French model regarding the role of religion in school. As to the climate within public schools, students seem to be generally supportive of the 2004 law on religious symbols in schools and with school regulations in other areas (which accommodate certain special needs, including the food that is served in the cafeterias or leave of absence from school on some non-Christian holidays). Regarding curriculum design, nearly all students agree with the idea that religion should be discussed impartially within existing subjects. Contrary to some stereotypes associated with the situation in France, we should also point out that French adolescents readily agree that religion has a role to play in school, both in the curriculum and in school life, provided that the school's secular structure is respected.

Concerning the question of tolerance and the ability to enter into dialogue, we must once again stress that there does not seem to be any overt hostility between young people disinterested in religion and people for whom it plays a major role. Religion is of no concern to a large number of the adolescents surveyed. Despite this fact, only a small minority of them has adopted categorically anticlerical or antireligious attitudes. On the contrary, these adolescents emphasise that respecting other people's beliefs is important. They don't believe that any of the various religious traditions has a monopoly on absolute truth. This indifference and this tendency to see the situation in relative terms are as important as, if not more important than, the ability to exchange opinions and the knowledge acquired of other people's religions in accounting for the generally relaxed approach students take towards religion. We can thus speak of a type of passive tolerance.

¹⁰ An official notice from May 18 2005 specifies what is meant by "ostensible religious signs". These are signs "which immediately identify those who wear them as belonging to a religious group, such as the Muslim headscarf, whatever name it may have, the yarmulke, or a clearly oversized cross".

What about religious facts?

In France, the expression “faits religieux”, “religious facts” or “religious phenomena” in English, is frequently used. The very expression “religious facts”, which tends to provoke numerous questions, can be interpreted in different ways. It can, in particular, be understood in a positivist sense, restricting the idea of teaching about religions to their social and cultural functions and their relations with other institutions and activities. As I have had occasion to explain before⁵, the expression “religious facts” does not imply an exclusion of the spiritual dimension. Religious forms of expression constitute facts that need to be both *described* and *understood*: it is not sufficient to provide an accurate description of the perceptions and conceptions of believers and their practices and rites: it is also necessary to reveal what these conceptions and practices mean to those who adhere to them and take account of the fact that they are individually and collectively profoundly meaningful experiences. A mere historical and sociological approach would not provide much insight into religious facts if believers' experiences were overlooked. It is necessary to use *empathetic intelligence*, in other words, to develop an approach that combines objective knowledge with empathetic understanding. Religious facts are not confined to *collective* features (religious assemblies, pilgrimages) and *physical* forms of expression (religious architecture and art): they include *symbolic* features (doctrine, moral precepts and liturgy) and things that are *experienced* (religious sensibilities and religious experiences in daily life). It is quite possible for schools to pursue documented, pedagogical approaches to these facts while taking account of these different dimensions. Teaching religious facts at school in a secular setting also requires respecting these facts for what they are: things that have been experienced by, and make sense to, large numbers of people. This does not in any way require embarking on a theological debate or engaging in inter-faith dialogue. The idea is to remain in tune with the school's aims and the ethics of the teaching profession. The second part of the pair referenced above, *facts about beliefs*, indicates that non-religious conceptions of humanity and the world – what is commonly described as “secular humanism” – are granted equal status with religious ones. I believe this is an essential aspect of instruction on religion as a large number of Europeans identify with non-religious world-views.

Knowledge-oriented teaching for all pupils in the same class

In the REDCo project, we are especially interested in the aspect of teaching facts about religions and beliefs to all pupils, irrespective of their religious or philosophical beliefs and those of their families, and, moreover, in the same classroom. In other words, the aim is to teach a pluralist audience composed of pupils from different religions along with those of no religion. The idea is not, therefore, to teach facts on religion and belief in different classes according to the pupils' religious and philosophical affiliations. Finally, we are looking at teaching these religions and beliefs in schools. These specifications have an important implication: we are talking about a form of instruction that must fully conform to the objectives and ethics of schools and teaching, in other words a form of instruction which, like all other subjects taught, furthers the school's general aims: a contribution to civic education in pluralist democracies. The requirement of approaching religions and beliefs in a documented and critical fashion (in other words, with due respect for the ethics of transmitting of knowledge in education), in the context of teacher-pupil relations as defined by law and by teachers' professional ethics, and in keeping with the aims of public schools as defined in a democracy, has numerous implications for the way in which they can be studied at school. The approaches pursued must not conflict with, or be fundamentally different from, those used in school contexts generally.

Towards a European secularism/laïcité

Regardless of the genuine diversity of national systems in Europe in terms of relations between church and the state, and between religion, the government and public education in particular, which have their roots in history and in the religious and political features of each country, it is possible today to speak of **European laïcité or, if you prefer, of European secularism**, on the basis of three principles:

1) *the principle of freedom*: freedom of conscience and of thought includes the freedom to have a religion or not to have one, and the freedom to practise one's religion and to change it if one so wishes;

2) *the principle of non-discrimination*: equal rights, duties and respect for all citizens, regardless of their religious or philosophical beliefs, in other words the absence of discrimination against people on grounds of their religious or philosophical affiliation;

3) *the principle that politics and religion are independent of each other*: this independence means that politics can operate unhindered by religion, while religions can operate unhindered by politics (within the limits of the law in a democratic society, of course). This mutual independence can exist in various systems of structuring relations between religion and state or between religion and schools (not only systems which enforce strict separation, but also those where there is separation but cooperation, including concordats and other forms of agreement between the political, educational and religious authorities).

This secularism is neither anti-religious nor pro-religious. It is this attitude that, as an asset shared by all in pluralist democracies, allows individuals and groups with different religious and philosophical beliefs to contribute unhindered to public life and public schooling. I believe that in Europe today, we are seeing a move towards a European **laïcité/secularism** based on **intelligence** (knowledge and understanding of religious and philosophical diversity) and on **dialogue** (accounting for and encountering this diversity).

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