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## **Political issues in inter religious education: a European perspective**

### **Perspective**

The Council of Europe exists to promote European unity, human rights and democracy. It is therefore neutral between states and religions, according to the Enlightenment principle of separation of the state from church, mosque, synagogue and temple. This does not mean that it is neutral between all possible values; human rights are a system of values. The progressive specialisation of international organisations has ensured that our position in the orchestra is to defend the right point of view, knowing that others will defend more pragmatic considerations. Do not expect too much impartiality from me.

The other oddity of my perspective is distance: the Council of Europe brings together 45 states and 800 million citizens, 110 million school and university students. We are perched on a sort of mountain top, a long way from the daily reality of education. We are all aware of the risks of this position and try hard to stay concrete and work with professionals such as the participants in this Forum. Other projects started or accelerated following 9/11 include one on cultural policy for conflict prevention, and study sessions with youth organisations. My limited knowledge comes however from my former role in launching a new project of our Steering Committee for Education on intercultural education including the religious dimension in schools.

Note that by speaking of the religious dimension, the general issue is defined in a way that necessarily affects all schools and member states. They all accept religious freedom and respect for parental convictions in education under the European Convention on Human Rights, which implies the possibility of faith based private education. In public education, the treatment of religion is modulated through inherited solutions to the church and state problem. At one extreme lies French laïcité in which religion has, as the Debray report recommended, to be dealt with properly as a cultural and social fact in other disciplines. At the other we have established churches, where the starting point is typically a formal religious education curriculum based on the established confession. In between are countries with plural religious traditions, which may lead either to multi confessional or interconfessional curricula. Our project is trying to develop guidelines and approaches that are useful in all these scenarios.

However, the theme the organisers have asked me to speak is not the specifics of religious education, on which you plainly a lot more than I do, but on the political context. I shall divide this into the general expectations of politicians, and the politics of education.

### Political expectations

For the Council of Europe, the most important political references are Article 9 of the ECHR and Article 2 of its protocol<sup>1</sup>, to which I have already referred. The Parliamentary Assembly has over the years made several recommendations on religion and culture and Euro Arab dialogue'. The governmental side under the Committee of Ministers was less prescient and did not really take up these issues until the shock of 9/11. The CM now fully recognizes the need to include interfaith dialogue in community relations and education<sup>2</sup>. It has approved a number of proposals by the Secretary General in this sense including new projects in education and culture. A ministerial conference will be held in Athens in November on intercultural education, including its religious dimension.

The traditional expectations of rulers from religion have been if possible active support, and at least recognition of legitimacy and encouragement of obedience, virtue and a quiet life. Marx's famous jibe that "religion is the opium of the people" has more than a grain of truth. The first choice for a ruler is a compliant and uniform state religion. This is not always possible, and multicultural states from the Persian empire onwards have accepted religious diversity and also expected peaceful coexistence not always forthcoming. Non democratic and democratic multicultural states alike can have a simple common agenda for religious education: it should ensure that all young people acquire a minimum knowledge of, empathy for, and a capacity for dialogue with other religions.

The democratic rights based state makes these demands with greater legitimacy. Its perpetuation supposes some project of education for citizenship, reproducing democratic values. Since these values include critical thinking, the project is not simply the inculcation of another ideology. At all events, religious education has to coexist and at best cohere with education for citizenship. This coexistence is not an easy one. The participants at this meeting surely support a concept of RE that is fully compatible, but you may not represent the full range of religious opinion. The democratic state may be formally neutral for or against and between religions, but in fact some religious traditions are more congenial than others, and some are at points incompatible with it.

Schizophrenically, the democratic state also accepts religious freedom and parental choice of values, creating dilemmas where these conflict with education for citizenship. There are large areas of potential conflict: the status of women, the scientific study of religion, attitudes to religious authority, evolution, and of course theocracy.

The problems do not only lie on the side of fundamentalist religion. Human rights began as an attempt to define a minimum core set of principles to govern societies whose members held different views on religion and other important matters. Its key modern

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<sup>1</sup> For instance Recommendations 1396 (1999) on religion and democracy and 1556 (2002) on religion and change in central and eastern Europe. The preamble to the latter includes a list of other adopted texts. All are available on <http://assembly.coe.int>

<sup>2</sup> Communiqué of the 109th session of the Committee of Ministers [http://www.coe.int/T/E/Committee\\_of\\_Ministers/Home/General Information/Sessions/109th\\_session/e\\_CP827.asp](http://www.coe.int/T/E/Committee_of_Ministers/Home/General%20Information/Sessions/109th_session/e_CP827.asp)

promoters, like Eleanor Roosevelt and René Cassin, were practical people not theorists, and their work is like duct tape, very strong but a bit messy. There is however a tendency to develop human rights from an incomplete set of constitutional principles into a comprehensive as well as global ethic, in effect a syncretic non theistic religion. This result would be dangerous, and would throw into question the tolerance for seriously divergent religious conceptions within the rule of law. I personally hold the traditional view: the democratic state should allow competing visions of a good life and a good society.

### **Educational expectations**

In practice we have found the greatest difficulty not with general political issues but with specifically educational Politics. This is the ongoing debate over the direction of the education system, primarily involving ministries, teachers, parents, and educational theorists. It is in some ways rather different from general politics as it goes much deeper into the question: what precisely is a good education? The bone of contention has been how far to include religious education or religion in school in a general theory and praxis of intercultural education.

The debate draws on two opposing concepts on interculturalism and indeed of what a culture is. In the radical theory, a culture is a self contained causal and cognitive system that determines its various components, from stratification to language to sexual rules to religion. Religion is part of culture, therefore the explanation of religion lies in a sphere called Culture. Consequently communication and empathy with the Other across cultural Paradigms is a heroic, near impossible feat. To refer to the well known essay by Thomas Nagel, it's similar to the feat of imagining what it is like to be a bat<sup>3</sup>. In my view, the theory is quite wrong: it omits the causal input to culture from economics and technology (Marx), from human biology (Darwin) and psychology (Chomsky and Freud); it denies the historical facts of human interchange in war, trade, sex and religion, and the common reality they create of multiple cross cutting affiliations. The evidence is that human cultures are quite similar. Donald Brown has identified over 140 common features, including religion, poetry, inequality, and rules against murder and rape<sup>4</sup>.

As an alternative to the bat theory, let me propose the Marmite theory. Marmite is a spread for bread and toast made out of yeast. It looks like old axle grease. It is popular in Britain and Australia, indeed a comfort food recalling childhood, but no one else will touch the stuff. Cultures are full of Marmites; particular features that others find bizarre or repellent, standing out from the shared or similar background. Let me try to put this view in a more general way. First, the dimensions of culture language, religion,

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Nagel, "What is it like to be a bat?", *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1974. For an interesting literary response, see David Lodge, *Think*. Ch. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Brown, *Human Universals*, 1991. The latest list is included in Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, 2002.

economy, food, sexual customs, etc. are linked but partly autonomous. Marmite eaters and Marmite haters may both be Catholics or Muslims. There are enough differences between groups to create problems, up to genocidal conflict, but enough common ground to understand them if we try. The list of commonalities and differences may be long but it is finite and subject to rational analysis.

It is therefore open to debate generally how far intercultural issues should be tackled as wholes and how much as sets of specific issues in different domains, including religion. Analytically, it makes sense to start with a comprehensive approach to cultural differences, particularly as the labels that get attached in conflicts are often misleading: "Catholics" and "Protestants" in Northern Ireland, "Muslims" in Bosnia, and the invention of language differences as ethnic markers in the latter.

#### **Pedagogy**

For intercultural education, we can distinguish the levels of pedagogy and policy. The major common elements of Pedagogy are ones of method and style: recognition for the identity and views of children and parents, a school and classroom ethos of tolerance and respect, the search for multiple perspectives of understanding. The focus on praxis and skills and not just retention of data is a general educational value that translates to religion in the curriculum.

However, the curriculum must also respect the specific contents of culture reflected in the disciplines history, language, arts, sciences of religion and transmit a knowledge base in them. There is no interculturalism without cultural skills, and these are acquired in different ways. This is a powerful argument for the identity of religious education. Professional RE teachers may find it difficult to get across the position of other religions, but for generalists it's near impossible. This necessary specialisation however bears the seeds of further tensions; as those who teach a subject normally like it, prefer its characteristic methods or enquiry and think it deserves a greater share of the curriculum.

However, individual schools and teachers do not have much room for manoeuvre over curriculum. The question of the confessional base of religion in school (or its absence) is largely determined by history and constitutional law. In the abstract, educators may have a preference for laic neutrality, the secure roots of an established religion, or an interfaith, comparative perspective, but the choice is not theirs. In the Council's project, we are developing resources to support teachers in developing tolerance and dialogue between faiths and convictions from whatever institutional starting point they inherit.

#### **Policy**

At the policy level, leaders have a clear responsibility to meet the demands of unity in diversity, ensuring "learning to live together" in the memorable phrase of the Delors Commission. The balance in policy tilts toward the comprehensive educational

approach to cultural differences, the theme of our Ministerial conference in Athens, for a number of reasons.

First, curriculum time is a zero sum game, and a view has to be taken on priorities. An unintended consequence of 9/11 is to raise the priority of religion on school, provided it can deliver mutual understanding. In England and Wales, religious education has just become one of the top ten subject choices in the GCSE examination, which is to be welcomed. Less cheering is the fact that the subject it has displaced is German.

Second, governments are responsible for assuring quality in education, both private and public. Comprehensive quality assurance should try to include hard to measure outputs like tolerance and a democratic school ethos. Religious education, if it is a formal subject, should be held to the same quality standards as other subjects.

Governments are essentially responsible for the quality of teacher training. This training has to equip all teachers to deal honestly and fairly with cultural differences on sensitive issues, including religious ones, without denying their own standpoints and identities.

However, a consensus on means is hard to reach. The tensions we noted over curriculum balance have to be resolved politically. The greatest challenge to policymakers is in meeting both of two legitimate demands: on the one hand for respect for specific identities and differences, including religious ones; on the other, for integration within a common democratic house, with its different levels of political communities, held together by a modicum of shared democratic values.

The task is difficult, but there is no reason to think it impossible. The large and authoritative comparative PISA study of the OECD showed that there is no absolute trade off between cognitive attainment and social equity, and it includes suggestive if not conclusive evidence that there is no necessary conflict with social skills either witness the high attainment rankings of Japan, Korea and Finland.

## Conclusion

The quality of life in Europe over the coming century will depend very largely on the success or failure of our schools and policymakers in meeting the goals of intercultural education in general and in particular in fostering dialogue between religions.

A final remark. Religious educators are here faced with a legitimate external demand to nurture mutual understanding. But they should not see it as a constraint, as it is also an internal demand of faith. Conversation by believers with other believers should be seen as a necessary act of love, however painful. I recall the old joke: How do porcupines make love? Answer: they do, very carefully.