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Religious Pluralism and Religious Education in Europe and Greece. Comparative Tendencies and Perspectives

Emmanuel Perselis stellt den Religionsunterricht in Griechenland in den weiten Kontext europäischer Entwicklungen im Bereich religiöser Pluralisierung. Er zeigt, wie diese Entwicklungen besonders in Großbritannien und den nordeuropäischen Ländern berücksichtigt und Konzepte religiöser Erziehung entfaltet wurden, die sich konsequent von konfessioneller Bevormundung in Richtung interreligiöser Lernens gelöst haben. Während in mitteleuropäischen Ländern wie in den meisten deutschen Bundesländern ein Mittelweg konfessionellen Religionsunterrichts mit interreligiöser Öffnung begangen wird, herrscht in den südeuropäischen Ländern noch ein z.T. streng konfessionell ausgerichteter Religionsunterricht vor. Hier ordnet er auch Griechenland mit seinem griechisch-orthodoxen Religionsunterricht ein, der noch sehr stark von der griechischen Orthodoxie als weithin anerkanntem Garanten nationaler Identität dominiert wird. Er zeigt, wie wenig das reiche religiös-kulturelle Erbe der Weltreligionen bisher Eingang in das Erziehungssystem gefunden hat und wie hier Zukunftsaufgaben besonders in Lehrerbildung, Richtlinienarbeit und Schulbuchentwicklung liegen, für die in Kirche, Öffentlichkeit und besonders auch der Lehrerschaft erst noch das nötige Verständnis gewonnen werden muss.

There is no doubt that pluralism as a social phenomenon predominates our modern and in fact postmodern European societies. But what pluralism is seems to be difficult or even impossible to be defined. This is because pluralism as a concept, like the concept “secularization”, has itself a plurality of meanings. Different meanings of pluralism reflect different ideological perspectives, no matter whether they are philosophical, sociological, religious or what ever else. Therefore any attempt to clarify what pluralism is depends on the kind of ideology historians, sociologists, philosophers, politicians, educators, religious leaders, etc. hold on matters concerning diversity in general and in particular cultural diversity. My scope is not to analyze philosophically or sociologically what pluralism is. This goes beyond the limits of this paper, although it would have been a worthwhile task. I take for granted that pluralism exists with us and within the societies we live. Martin Palmer, director of the International Consultancy on Religion, Education and Culture based in Manchester, UK, puts it clearly when he writes: *“The fact of the matter is that pluralism, religious, ideological, social and economic, is always going to be with us. It has always existed and seems to be an inherent part of our human nature. More than that, it seems to be an inherent and essential part of nature per se – of creation”*.¹

¹ M. Palmer (1991), p. 29.

Although pluralism in general and religious pluralism in particular is always present, it only very recently did attract the attention of academics; for example philosophers, sociologists and educationists and became a major topic for discussion². The discussion was caused by the fact that in the most advanced economically and technologically European societies, which are mostly located in the centre and the northern part of Europe, exist minority and immigrant groups of various ethnic and religious origins, which demand more freedom of expression and equal share of the civic and religious rights guaranteed to European citizens. These ethnic and religious groups of immigrants, coming primarily from African, Asian and countries from the periphery of Europe, entered the labour market of the advanced European societies in the late 60's and early 70's. There is no doubt that these immigrant labour forces contributed positively and successfully in building the economy of the host countries. It was in these countries where the wealthy and welfare post-war modern European market-orientated societies emerged.

The demand of preserving a distinct religious identity and the need to observe the customs and religious traditions of their native culture were some of the most burning issues, alongside with the learning of their ethnic tongue, which the immigrants faced in their new settlements. On the other hand a growing number of successive generations of immigrants inevitably have been socially integrated and adapted to the new circumstances. During this formative stage of the second generation of immigrants education has played a very important role for those who chose to participate actively in the economic and cultural life of their second homeland. The interaction of European citizens with co-citizens who initially come from different and distinct cultural and religious background compelled all those responsible for social and civil order to find constructive ways of coexistence and mutually acceptable respectability. A knowledge therefore of beliefs and practices of other great world religions apart from or beyond the dominant European religion, namely Christianity, was regarded urgent and legitimate³. To the social demand and challenge for sustaining cultural and religious pluralism and diversity educationists of most central and northern European countries responded by reconsidering and re-examining the criteria by which educational process should function within pluralist societies. This implied that the concept and aims of education as well as other related concepts such as teaching, training, indoctrination, etc. had to be scrutinised and redefined in the light of the new social conditions. The analysis pro-

² In this respect see, among others, the work of P. Wagner (1994), where a scholarly reassessment of the concepts of modernity, pluralism and postmodernity is given from an historical-empirical point of view. Also see Z. Bauman (1991). About pluralism from the perspective of some religious education theorists see: J. M. Hull (1985), esp. chapter 1, N. H. Thompson (ed.) (1988), E. Hulmes (1989), esp. chapter 1, M. Grimmitt (1994), C. Melchert (1995), M. E. Moore Mullino (1995), G. Skeie (1995). See also Board of Education (1996).

³ Cf. about the British experience: E. Cox (1966), Schools Council Working Paper 36 (1971), E. Cox and J. M. Cairns (1989), esp. pp. 18-21, J. M. Hull (1991). For the German experience cf.: K. E. Nipkow (1978), (1979) and (1993), J. Lähnemann (Hrsg.) (1992).

duced a fresh educational theory which did justice to democratic values and cultural and religious diversity.⁴

Nevertheless, even in European countries with long and successful experience in dealing with issues concerning pluralism, multiculturalism, multi-racism etc. there is no firm agreement on the underlying assumptions which should penetrate education in general and Religious Education (RE) theory and practice in particular. However two distinctive tendencies seem to prevail among educationists about the way education should function in a pluralistic society. These tendencies are well described by a British religious educationist Michael Grimmitt of the University of Birmingham, when he writes that:

“There are those – we call them ‘cultural absolutists’ – who hold that one culture (for example, ‘British culture’ which is often labelled as ‘indigenous’, ‘dominant’ or ‘our’ culture) should not only determine the values which inform education but that education itself should be primarily responsible for the transmission of those values to all members of society, irrespective of their own cultural roots and affiliations. The implication of this view is that a pluralist society, by definition, is one which is always in transition towards another type of society in which those with different cultural values and outlooks are assimilated into those values and outlooks of the ‘host’ culture. Education is thus seen as a form of enculturation of those who are in need of cultural and religious assimilation ...

*The other view of pluralism, ... is based on the assumption that cultures, like religions, need to be recognised as having equal value in a democratic society and that cultural diversity in such a society is desirable in itself. Those who adopt this position can only maintain it on the basis of being ‘cultural relativists’. In educational terms this means advocating that aspects of the cultures of various ethnic groups should be taught in schools to all pupils in an essentially descriptive, non-evaluative manner. Such teaching is seen as affirming ethnic groups in their own culture and, at the same time, promoting sympathetic understanding amongst those who are, in numerical terms, members of a majority culture. Thus the outcome of a successful educational process is seen as the promotion of tolerance and respect for the beliefs, values, outlooks and identities of all, be they distinctive of ethnic minorities or of the majority”.*⁵

Although Grimmitt’s description of the above tendencies mostly reflects the current concerns of the British educationists it may well be said that the same issues preoccupy the agenda of a number of educationists in other European countries as well.⁶

Despite the dilemmas put forward by “cultural absolutists” and “cultural relativists” most RE theorists also attempted to respond positively to the challenges of modern educational theory and practice. The first priority of RE theorists was to establish a theory for RE which ought to be based on educational ground. In other words, the first

⁴ Cf. R. S. Peters (1966), R. S. Peters (ed.) (1967), J. F. Soltis (1968), J. Gribble (1969), P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters (1970), P. H. Hirst (1974).

⁵ M. Grimmitt (1994), p. 134.

⁶ Cf. e.g. the German situation: W. Haußmann (1993), J. Lähnemann (1993), K. E. Nipkow (1993).

priority of RE theorists was to free RE from “ideological enclosure”, that is to shift from a structured and restrictive Christian confessionalism to a more open and accommodating environment.⁷ This was necessary because for a long time and in all European countries RE had been under strict ecclesiastical and denominational Christian control. The task of freeing RE from the control of the Christian Churches was not easy at all and is still doubtful whether RE theorists have to a desirable degree achieved their goals.

In analysing the development of religious education in European countries Herbert Schultze, Chair of the European Association for World Religions in Education, based in Hamburg, Germany, came to the conclusion that:

*“Present provision for the teaching of Christianity in all European countries offers some common features. These are, in short, the following: Christianity is part of the national heritage of the country in question and of Europe. It is still effective, even in a secular society. Values shared by all citizens are often rooted in Christian tradition. Nevertheless, national culture is specific for both Christian and other citizens. Respecting the dignity of the human person, striving for tolerance and dialogue determine the teaching of religions other than Christianity or cultures other than the national one. All this teaching benefits from improved academic standards maintained in all school levels and forms. This includes constructive criticism and fair comparison with other points of view. No doubt these statements of principle are not clearly realised in practice as often as they should be.”*⁸

More specifically what in fact seems to be achieved so far is that in some European countries like for example Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland, RE has been liberated from the strict control of Christian Churches. In these countries RE theorists formulated aims and set up criteria which enable teachers through proper teaching material to promote understanding, respect, sympathy, tolerance and a critical perspective for the religious beliefs and practices of the adherents of the great world religions.⁹

In other European countries like Germany, Belgium and Austria where the major Christian Churches still cooperate with the school in order to convey the teaching of a specific Christian tradition (e.g. Catholic, Protestant-Lutheran, Orthodox, etc.) to pupils

⁷ The term «ideological enclosure» is taken from the penetrating article of J. M. Hull (1990). In this article J. Hull states right from the beginning that he uses «this expression to refer to the situation which arises when an individual or a group sees everything from the perspective dictated by the ideology. Any individual or group of individuals adhering to an ideology is bound to be enclosed within it to some extent, because an ideology is a way of interpreting one’s business in the world. An ideology shapes the world within which one lives. This enclosure within the ideology, which is a necessary part of commitment to an ideology, may be partial or it may be total» (p. 335). Cf. also J. M. Hull (1985), chapter 2.

⁸ H. Schultze (1992), p. 38.

⁹ Cf. S. Rodhe (1977), E. Cox and J. M. Cairns (1989), J. M. Hull (1989) and (1992), F. Pajer (ed.) (1991), A. Brown (1992), F. Jacobi and H. Josephsen (1992), H. Schultze (1992).

who belong to these Churches, RE has included material which adequately covers at least the beliefs and practices of the main world religions.¹⁰

In Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Italy and Greece RE has almost a confessional content. More specifically this means that in Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Italy RE is confessional Roman Catholic.¹¹ In Italy this occurs “in spite of the fact that the constitution of the Republic of Italy has declared itself neutral. This, however, is because an introduction to Italian culture is part of the global educational aim ... Christianity is taught as a major ingredient of national heritage...Christianity is (more or less) identified with the institutions of the Roman Catholic Church. This also affects the focus of teaching religions other than Christianity. Their image in Italian religious education was formerly a biased one. Now the declarations of the second Vatican Council are the common measure for presenting those religions. The religions’ self-understanding or academic standards are secondary”.¹²

As far as Greece is concerned, the cardinal aim of RE is to impart the Christian Orthodox faith and style of life to all school boys and girls. In the classroom this aim is achieved by the transmission of what the Greek Orthodox Church has experienced and taught through the centuries of Christendom. Textbooks and teaching materials are so designed as to be in accordance with the teaching of Jesus Christ and his redemptive work in the world as well as with the teachings of Christian Fathers.¹³ “Other churches and denominations appear within the framework as groups which split off and left the one and true church”.¹⁴ Beliefs and practices of other world religions are taught in one senior class of secondary education and for only a half year. Current changes in the RE curriculum of primary school have entirely excluded any mention of beliefs and practices of the great world religions. Moreover Orthodox Christianity is taught in the primary school in a such a way as to promote attitudes for living a good Christian life instead of enabling pupils to grasp the meaning of Christian Orthodox beliefs and practices and their significance for daily life.

Herbert Schultze rightly remarks about RE in Greece that:

“In the last ten years or so, new topics have been added to traditional Greek religious education. But these, life themes and religions other than Christianity, are mostly isolated in syllabuses. One could call this approach a kind of Christian nurture although it takes place in state schools, regulated and supervised by the state ministry of education, but Orthodox theology has a strong influence. Student teachers at state teacher training colleges are trained for religious education by Orthodox theologians. Teachers of secondary education are trained at Orthodox university faculties. Greek Orthodoxy and national identity are and were for centuries interrelated. The Orthodox Church of Christ was for a long time the guarantor of Greek identity, particularly during more

¹⁰ C. D. Wyckoff (1979), G. Schmitt (1982), H. Schultze (1992), W. Haußmann (1993).

¹¹ Cf. F. Pajer (ed.) (1991), A. Brown (1992), J. Brooke (1994).

¹² H. Schultze (1992), p. 39.

¹³ See E. Perselis (1984), pp. 28-29 and (1987), pp. 21-22.

¹⁴ H. Schultze (1992), p. 38.

than 400 years of Turkish occupation. Therefore, we can conclude that the position of Christianity in this confessional teaching is that of national heritage."¹⁵

There is no doubt, then, that RE in Greece has not yet successfully reconsidered and renewed its educational philosophy according to the demands of an open-ended educational process which does fair justice to religious pluralism. Greece is one of those European countries in which RE has not yet achieved to overcome difficulties which derive from the long existing tradition of unprecedented cultural and religious ties.¹⁶ This closed connection between culture and a particular religious tradition in Greece, that is Christian Orthodoxy, has a far reaching impact even on the way national discussions and innovations of the Greek educational system as whole are addressed. RE administrators in Greece seem to be reluctant to accept that in order to set up criteria for a modern RE theory and practice should abandon any ideological enclosure which prevent from considering the rich potential embedded in all great world religions and not only in the predominant religious tradition of Greece.

Most Greek RE educationists and administrators could be characterised as being what M. Grimmitt calls "religious absolutists". They believe that the values which inform education must be entirely the values of Orthodox Christianity. This however seems to be highly problematic because in the last two decades or so Greece has established an educational system which tries to be faithful to the transmission of democratic values and critical openness.¹⁷ On the other hand, Greece's participation as a full member in the European Union has created new possibilities and opened up the way for accepting diversity and cultural pluralism as way of living in the global world of information society.

What has not yet been recognised by most Greek RE educationists and administrators is "the extent to which pluralism shapes the contemporary religious landscape". As Chris Arthur, Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Wales, Lampeter, U.K., points out:

*"Living in that landscape can be likened to being in a hall of mirrors, an image. The image stresses that we no longer stand before the single mirror of Christianity and see reflected before us, albeit in many different facets, an exclusively Christian vision of the world. Instead, we are faced with a confusing variety of images. The mirrors of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism, and so on (together with various pseudo- and nonreligious ideologies) all suggest many seemingly different pictures of ourselves and the world we live in. Such a situation has profound implications for the way in which education in this area is conducted."*¹⁸

¹⁵ Op. cit., p. 38. Cf. also G. Tsakalidis (1993).

¹⁶ Cf. G. Soterelis (1993).

¹⁷ See e.g. OECD (1980), (1982) and (1996).

¹⁸ C. Arthur (1995), p. 455.

I think that Greek RE educationists and administrators need to have constantly in mind, when they set up aims and objectives for RE and design curricula, that education is a process which should primarily satisfy the criteria of knowledge, understanding and cognitive perspective, as well as the promotion of personal growth, autonomy and socialisation. Moreover the school is a social institution which should fulfil these criteria. As the recent European Commission's White Paper on teaching and learning: towards the learning society, puts it:

*"It is possible to understand the world if the way it interacts and functions can be grasped and a sense of personal direction found. This is the main function of school. This is particularly appropriate to the building of Europe. By imparting a broad knowledge base to young people enabling them both to pick their way through its complexity and to discuss its purpose, education lays the foundations of awareness and of European citizenship. By the same token, the development of a broad knowledge base, namely the ability to grasp the meaning of things, to comprehend and to make judgments, is the first factor in adapting to economic and labour market change ... The radical changes taking place in the scientific and technological landscape, require individuals (even if they do not aspire to a career in research) increasingly to be able to grasp the meaning of things. Individuals must also learn to think more in terms of systems and to position themselves both as a user and as a citizen, as an individual and as a member of a group ... A broad knowledge base enables people to find their way in the information society, that is to say to be able to interpret in a critical way the images and information they receive from a variety of sources."*¹⁹

This means that the school should encourage children so that they may understand and interpret for themselves the phenomenon of religion. It is imperative for Greek school boys and girls to be introduced to the rich religious traditions of humankind in a manner which promotes understanding and critical openness. Boys and girls must learn to appreciate other religious traditions than their own. They should discuss in the classroom the commonalities and the differences religions have between them. In such a process, in the words of M. Grimmitt, "religious education far from being neutral, deliberately sets out to provide pupils with the skills of ideological criticism, taking as its basis an intention to promote in pupils: (a) increased critical consciousness of their own cultural/religious perspective and that of others; (b) awareness of the processes by which ideologies influence attitudes, values and beliefs, and in so doing, shape the human person; and (c) an openness to, and encouragement of, dialogue between those who are ideologically divided so that mutuality, commonality and co-operation based on the acceptance of certain core values challenges, and ultimately replaces, cultural tribalism. Such an intention is entirely consistent with the sort of issues which a 'multi-cultural and antiracist education' seeks to address, and contributes directly to the positive view of a pluralist society."²⁰

If this becomes a point of reference for the Greek RE educationists and administrators then RE in Greece could cease to be parochial and provincial as it is at the present.

¹⁹ European Commission (1996), pp. 26-28.

²⁰ M. Grimmitt(1994), p.138.

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