

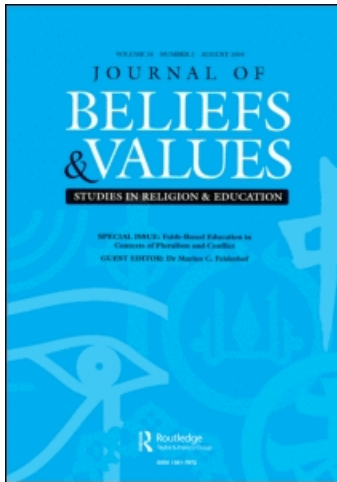
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### Fellowship of fate and fellowships of faith: religious education and citizenship education in Europe

Bert Roebben <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute for Catholic Theology, Technische Universität Dortmund, Germany

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## RESEARCH REPORT

# Fellowship of *fate* and fellowships of *faith*: religious education and citizenship education in Europe<sup>1</sup>

Bert Roebben\*

*Institute for Catholic Theology, Technische Universität Dortmund, Germany*

In this paper the relationship between religious identity and engagement in citizenship is examined from an educational point of view. The Dutch systematic theologian Erik Borgman refers to the development of European citizenship as a project of ‘fellowship of fate’: we will need to rediscover a common vision on humanity for Europe as fellow human beings, living in similar urban and multicultural contexts. This issue is both of a (religious) educational and a theological nature. The main research question is: How can we coexist as *fellows of fate* and at the same time consider ourselves as participants to particular *fellowships of faith*? This question is addressed by reference to the latest developments in the field of religious education theory and practice, generally acknowledged as a field with a longstanding tradition of vision and discernment.

**Keywords:** religious education; citizenship education; inter-religious learning

### Active citizenship in the modern city and school

Modern citizenship means being an active member of the modern city. This is a contemporary translation of the ancient Greek virtue of *phronesis* (critical discernment or practical reason), which refers to being critically but cooperatively ‘response-able’ to the *polis* in which one lives together with others. This virtue has an individual and a collective dimension: it implies being morally and existentially self-reliant on the one hand and contributing to the ‘common good’ and to social cohesion on the other hand. In the educational setting of the school citizenship education (CE) aims at stimulating children and adolescents to become gradually involved in this ‘response-ability’ to their daily living environment. In the Netherlands for instance, teachers are focusing explicitly on democracy, political participation and personal identity of children. In Belgium CE is part of a wider set of educational goals that extend beyond the normal boundaries of school subjects. Five topics are addressed: learning to learn, social skills training, citizenship education, health education and environmental education. The main interest of CE is here: how can we help young people to learn to live democratically, inside and outside the classroom? In the United Kingdom the inter-cultural dimension is stressed: the aim is to help children in ‘relating [their] personal concerns to selected cultural material, extending their horizons beyond family and locality to the region and nation and, in turn, to wider European and global issues’ (Jackson 2006, 57).

Recently the religious dimension of this issue has also been articulated. In the framework of the Council of Europe two important documents were launched: *The religious dimension of intercultural education* (2004, this is the text of the Oslo Declaration) and the

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\*Email: [roebben@fb14.uni-dortmund.de](mailto:roebben@fb14.uni-dortmund.de)

Volga Declaration in 2006 (for both documents, see Jackson 2007). The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has promulgated the *Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools* (2007). These documents argue that every form of inter-cultural education is undeniably rooted in the moral and philosophical presuppositions and worldviews of the participants. This 'dimension of conviction' needs to be elucidated in education and implies appropriate concepts of knowledge, learning attitudes and skills. Curricula, textbooks and teacher training comprise the direct access to this work of 'cultural literacy' (Keast 2007).

### Critical voices interrupting CE: a theological vision of Europe

So far, so good: nothing can apparently go wrong with this kind of learning process in and for Europe. But critical questions are raised. CE is exclusively based on the 'no harm' principle: I offer the other the full opportunity to flourish, I am politically correct, as long as he/she is not standing in 'my way' of individualised self-expression; you can worship within your own religion or life style as long as you are not offensive or coercive to mine. Our CE is much too soft, argues the English social scientist and human rights researcher Liam Gearon: 'Curricula based on high-minded principles of tolerance, understanding and empathy, also need something of a more hard-edged engagement for times when there are clashes between supposedly universal values such as human rights and culturally particular religious beliefs and/or moral values' (2006, 75). Difficult and contentious historical and political contexts are often sidestepped. The clash in the classroom can sometimes be very harsh. And at the end the question remains: why should we focus on solidarity and the common good at all? Why should we be moral or response-able at all?

Creating a learning space for citizenship and CE in Europe must go deeper, argues the Dutch systematic theologian Erik Borgman (2004, 2006). We will have to find new ways to discuss who we are and what we want as European citizens in an atmosphere of respectful fellowship. This respect is not only *about religions vis-à-vis* each other, but is *religious in itself*. Major mission statements are no longer needed, what we need is the act of respectful waiting for (or receiving and welcoming) one another as brothers and sisters (in theological terms: as children of God), in permanent dialogue. In actually enacting this dialogue, we shape a Europe-in-dialogue. We carry the same fate. We cannot but live 'maximum diversity in minimum space' (according to the Czech novelist Milan Kundera). This is the real definition and vision of Europe, not its problem, so argues Jan Figel, the European Minister of Culture and Education.

### The relationship between CE and RE

Pre-modern Europe was the age of religious wars, modern Europe was the age of ideological conflicts, postmodern Europe should be 'the age of the free meeting of minds, prepared to contribute to a *common historical project, on the basis of a cosmopolitan ethos*' (Ernesto Balducci, quoted by Pajer 2001, 193). The 'polis' has become the 'cosmopolis'. CE is dynamised by a global challenge. Can the school be helpful in creating space for such an ambitious project? Will the school be able to carry this burden at all? In my opinion, the global and the local should radically go together, if education wants to be effective at all. My contention is that we should listen carefully here to what we have learned from our research and reflections on inter-religious learning.

The argumentation goes as follows: religious education (RE) in Western Europe is mostly considered as training in hermeneutic awareness and critical communication about

the cultural phenomena of religion and worldview. What do people do with religion/worldview and what does religion/worldview do with people? RE enables young people to learn to perceive this phenomenon, to communicate about what they have perceived with others and to clarify their own point of view. This inter-religious learning model is quite a challenge for the contemporary classroom, given the difficult social, political and religious circumstances in which the school has to operate (Roebben 2000, 2009b; Roebben and Van der Tuin 2004), precisely because in this religious communication radical differences will come to the fore and will challenge the harmonious side of education. ‘What do I have to learn from you, if we do not differ? Why should I learn anything at all, if it doesn’t make a difference where you come from, who you are and what you believe in?’ Such ‘teachable moments’ in education occur when differences in interpretation come to the surface: ‘You are different from me, you appeal to my imagination, your thoughts trigger mine, your ways are unknown to me, but yet I want to know you, you intrigue me. This is me, how about you?’

This very local experience of the ‘otherness of the other’ and of the necessity of holding one’s own position in that encounter is the concrete and difficult pathway to the more global highway of living together in diversity. The global fellowship of fate implies concrete actions of learning faith in the presence of the other’s faith – of ‘learning in difference’. Difference refers to particularity, learning ‘in difference’ (which is radically opposite to the situation of indifference in which one cannot learn anything at all) refers to the teachable moment of ‘transparticularity’ (Jans 2007). Encounter and difference are two sides of the same coin. In this respect I argue that *intra-religious learning* is the complementary side of an intensified *inter-religious learning*. This way of proceeding constitutively deepens the hermeneutic dynamic of learning ‘about’ religion through a communicative exchange between students in the classroom (learning ‘from’ religion), into the ‘ultimate question’: who am I – what is my origin, what is my future? (learning ‘in’ religion).

The ‘other’ is not the generalised other (the master narrative, the classical text or the great tradition), but the actual other, sitting next to me in the classroom (the small narrative, the ‘text’ of my fellow student, the tradition in her/his own mind). This approach to RE makes us aware of the need to look deeper into one’s own meaning-giving system and to explore further the existential resilience it offers and the internal contradictions it raises. Through the inter-cultural and inter-faith encounter I am challenged to *redefine and redignify myself*. This means: to know myself better and to respect myself more, as a human person with dignity, who makes a difference in the encounter with others (Halsall and Roebben 2006, 448). For the ongoing discussion on the goals of religious education in Western Europe, this underlying dimension cannot be disregarded. When we confront ‘the adolescent life-world curriculum’ with the actually lived narratives, symbols and practices of the ‘religious life-world curriculum’ of the great religions (Grimmitt 1997), actually represented by other adolescents in the classroom, *multi-faith* education will become an *inter-faith* and, through this, an *intra-faith* encounter. If I am right, the answer to this spiritual ‘Who am I?’ question of young people, was/is the original hypothesis behind the work of Michael Grimmitt and John Hull (Bates 2006) in the UK. And, let us be honest, adolescents will remind us definitely of this hypothesis and of the task of bringing them to be ‘at home on the road’, when they provoke the teacher to respond to the question: ‘What is your spiritual home?’ (Roebben 2009a). It is their right to raise these sort of questions and to receive valuable answers, especially at school where this intrinsic intelligibility of religious and non-religious positions should appear eminently before the footlights (Mette 2007; Schweitzer 2007, 81–96).

## Conclusion

The encounter with the otherness of the other, the effort to understand the other in his/her otherness, the act of welcoming and receiving the other honestly, is an act of 'opening hands' and becoming vulnerable. As Erik Borgman argued, we cannot do otherwise in order to rediscover our European fellowship of fate. But we can make a difference in that encounter only when we celebrate our differences and honour our fellowships of faith. That is the real paradox, both of inter-religious RE and inter-cultural CE.

## Note

1. This paper is the abbreviated version of the keynote lecture which was held during the tri-annual conference of the European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education ([www.efre.net](http://www.efre.net)) in Budapest (23–6 August 2007).

## Notes on contributor

Prof. Dr. Bert Roebben is Professor of Religious Education in the Institute for Catholic Theology in the Faculty of Humanities and Theology at the Technische Universität Dortmund.

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