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Religion in Education: Contribution to Dialogue

Policy recommendations of the REDCo-research project

From: REDCo (Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries)

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To: EU-Institutions (Parliament, Commission, Council of Ministers), Council of Europe, United Nations (UNESCO, General Assembly, Alliance of Civilizations), National Educational Bodies of EU-member states, Educational Research Associations, Non-Governmental Organizations, Religious Organisations, Universities and Schools within the European Union.

I. Introduction

Throughout the world, people are increasingly coming to recognise the implications of the renewed importance religion holds for both individuals and societies in national and international politics and public discourse. Increasing religious diversity has given the question new urgency, and accordingly 'social cohesion' is a frequently cited policy goal when addressing the role of religion in European societies. This is especially evident in the attention paid to the study of religions as a part of intercultural learning and human rights education and is clearly expressed in international documents such as the Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (Council of Europe 2008) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE 2007). Both documents stress the importance of dialogue between people of different faiths and convictions in the context of intercultural teaching and learning. This is also the focus of REDCo (Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries), a European comparative research project on young people's views of religion, religious diversity and possibilities for dialogue, as well as of classroom interaction and teacher-strategies. REDCo is the first substantial research project on religion and education to be financed by the European Commission, running from March 2006 until March 2009. It has carried out qualitative and quantitative research in eight countries (Germany, England, France, The Netherlands, Norway, Esto-

nia, Russia, Spain) mainly focusing on religion in the lives and schooling of students in the 14–16 age group. The students expressed their attitudes about personal experience with religion, the social dimension of religion, and religion in school. The REDCo findings can encourage further policy development in education at a European as well as at a national level.

II. Research findings of REDCo

- The majority of students appreciated the religious heterogeneity in their societies, although a range of prejudices was expressed.
- The most important source of information about religions and worldviews is generally the family, followed by the school.
- Students from families with migration backgrounds are more likely to consider religion important for their lives.
- Students are well aware of and experience religious diversity mostly in, but also outside school.
- Students tend to socialise with peers from the same background as themselves, even when they live in areas characterised by religious diversity.
- Students often express a tolerant attitude more at an abstract than a practical level. The tolerance expressed in classroom discussion is not always replicated in their daily life-world.
- Those who learn about religious diversity in school are more willing to enter into conversations about religions and worldviews with students from other backgrounds than those who do not have this opportunity for learning.
- Students desire peaceful coexistence across religious differences, and believe that this is possible.
- Students believe that the main preconditions for peaceful coexistence between people of different religions are knowledge about each other's religions and worldviews, shared interests, and joint activities.
- In most countries students support the right of adherents to a moderate expression of religious faith in school. For example, they do not oppose in school the wearing of *unobtrusive* religious symbols or object to *voluntary* acts of worship for students who are adherents of a particular religion.
- Students for whom religion is important in their lives are more likely to respect the religious background of others and value the role of religion in the world. Most students would like to see school more dedicated to learning about different religions than to encouraging a particular religious belief or worldview.
- Students express their desire that learning about religions takes place in a safe classroom environment governed by agreed procedures for expression and discussion.
- Students generally wish to avoid conflict on religious issues, and some of the religiously committed students feel especially vulnerable.
- Dialogue is a favoured strategy for teachers to cope with diversity in the classroom, but students are more ambivalent about its value since in practice, not all students are comfortable with the way diversity is managed in schools.

III. Policy Recommendations

The findings of REDCo broadly support the policy recommendations of the Council of Europe and the Toledo Guiding Principles. However, they suggest a need for a degree of differentiation at the national level regarding the implementation of policies in the educational system. This is due, for example, to different national traditions, norms, legal systems and pedagogical approaches in dealing with religion in education. Each national context needs to be taken into account when policies are applied. Proceeding from this general assumption, the following points must be taken into account both when addressing different national contexts and the European level.

1.) Encouragement for peaceful coexistence

Education policy development and implementation need to focus on the transformation of passive tolerance into active tolerance.

Necessary Action:

- Counter stereotypical images of religions, present more complex images that show positive contributions religion makes to society and to the individual.
- Develop and strengthen skills for interreligious dialogue among students.
- Provide opportunities for engagement with different worldviews and religions, (including cooperation with local communities in order to increase exchange between different religious and non-religious groups) and to offer opportunities for interreligious encounters between the students.

2.) Promotion of diversity management

Citizenship education tends to focus on homogeneity; but in turning from passive to active tolerance, it is necessary to value and foster religious diversity at school as well as at university level.

Necessary Action:

- Offer opportunities for students to learn about and give space for discussions on religions
- Develop innovative approaches to learn about religions not only in RE lessons, but also in other relevant subjects such as history, literature, but also science.
- Throughout their school lives, students should experience RE which stresses understanding and tolerance and is matched to their differing needs as they mature.
- Encourage students of different religious backgrounds to take up religious studies and religious education at university.
- Promote representation of different religions among professors and academic staff at Universities.

3.) Including religious as well as non-religious worldviews

School is a place where all students must be respected, regardless of their worldview or religious conviction. Religion is important to some of the students, and their beliefs must not be allowed to become an obstacle to their academic progress.

Necessary action:

- Inclusion of learning about different religious and secular worldviews in their complexity and inner diversity.
- Inclusion of the religious dimension into general intercultural education.

4.) Professional competence

No changes can be made without education professionals and the required competence on their part.

Necessary Action:

- Prepare educators in different subjects to treat religious topics relevant to their subject, ensuring the inclusion of students regardless of their religious or non-religious background.
- Train educators in methods to support and encourage students to be comfortable with difference, and to engage with the diversity of their personal experiences.
- Include the development of skills to organise and moderate in-class debates on contentious religious issues and to manage possible conflicting worldviews in the classroom in the curriculum for teacher training.

For further references see:

<http://www.redco.uni-hamburg.de>

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