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Abbiamo il piacere di ospitare un contributo di Robert Jackson, professore di Religioni e Educazione all'Institute of Education presso l'Università di Warwick, UK, e Professore di Diversità Religiosa e Educazione allo European Wergeland Centre di Oslo. Robert Jackson è stato anche Direttore della Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/WRERU>). Il contributo presenta le principali attività e ricerche condotte da Istituzioni Europee e dal Consiglio d'Europa in merito allo studio delle religioni e al ruolo che questo può ricoprire in ambito educativo per favorire il dialogo interculturale. Il tema trattato è di grande attualità e pertanto può costituire uno spunto di riflessione per i professionisti dell'educazione.

Parole chiave: educazione religiosa – insegnamento delle religioni – politiche di sviluppo in Europa – educazione interculturale

It is with great pleasure that we host a contribution by Robert Jackson, Professor of Religions and Education in the Institute of Education at the University of Warwick, UK, and Professor of Religious Diversity and Education at the European Wergeland Centre in Oslo. Robert Jackson has also been Director of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/WRERU>). The contribution presents the main activities and researches carried out by European Institutions and the Council of Europe on the study of religions and the role it can have in education in order to support intercultural dialogue. The theme is of topical interest and for this reason it can be food for thought for education professionals.

Keywords: religious education – the teaching of religions – policy development in Europe – intercultural education

**Learning about Religions and Non-religious Worldviews:
European Research Findings and Ongoing Policy Development in the Council of Europe**
di Robert Jackson

Introduction

One shift in the publicly funded education systems of many Western countries in recent years is the increased acceptance of studies of religious diversity, whether through forms of religious education, wider fields such as citizenship or intercultural education, or as a cross curricular theme. This development relates closely to the debate about religion in the public sphere. The events of 9/11 in the USA were a catalyst for bringing discussion of religion into public space (Jackson 2007). Even in France, with its firm separation of religion and state, traditional understandings of laïcité are being challenged by scholars and politicians (Willaime 2007) and, as recent research shows, by young people in schools who express a new understanding of laïcité including advocating the study of religions and beliefs in schools as an aid to «living together» (Massignon 2011, 2012).

Bringing religious discourse into «the informal public sphere» (Habermas 2006) should be seen as a positive development, not least to educational debate. There has been a welcome growth of literature on facilitating dialogue between people of different religious backgrounds and also with those of non-religious viewpoint (e.g. Ipgrave 2001, 2002, 2003;

2013 forthcoming; McKenna, Ipgrave & Jackson 2008; see also the Face to Faith project¹). In parallel, various non-religious organisations, such as Humanist Associations, have sought to include some study of their ideas and values in schools, sometimes collaborating with religious groups. Countries and regions such as Norway, Scotland and the Canadian province of Québec have made interesting attempts at combining studies of religions and non-religious convictions within the same general subject area.

The increased attention to religion and non-religion as topics for public discussion has stimulated both research and policy development at the European level. During the decade following 9/11 there have been both European research and policy development projects relating to school education concerning religion and belief. The present article focuses on the dissemination of a Council of Europe policy development project, showing the relevance of research to the interpretation and implementation of policy. It charts the progress to date (May 2012) of the joint Council of Europe/European Wergeland Centre expert committee concerned with disseminating the Council of Europe Ministerial Recommendation on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education (Council of Europe 2008a), including drawing insights from recent research such as the REDCo project and Religion and Society research in the UK.

The REDCo project

Consistent with the change in mood since 9/11, the European Commission funded a major project on religion and education in schools between 2006 and 2009. Known by its acronym REDCo (full title: *Religion in Education: a Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries?*) the project collected the views of adolescents from eight European countries² on teaching and learning about religious diversity in schools. Meeting together in each other's countries, the REDCo team designed various studies, including qualitative (Knauth et al. 2008) and quantitative (Valk et al. 2009) studies of the views of young people, plus a classroom interaction study (Avest et al. 2009), all conducted by each national group in its own setting. Massignon's research in France, mentioned above, is an example of REDCo research reported in a recent overview of the project (Jackson 2012).

The presentations by members of the Project team at the European Parliament in 2009, while acknowledging contextual differences, attempt a generic summary of findings. These include:

- students wish for peaceful coexistence across differences, and believe this to be possible;
- for students peaceful coexistence depends on knowledge about each other's religions and worldviews and sharing common interests as well as doing things together;
- students who learn about religious diversity in school are more willing to have conversations about religions/beliefs with students of other backgrounds than those who do not;
- students wish to avoid conflict: some of the religiously committed students feel vulnerable;
- students want learning to take place in a safe classroom environment where there are agreed procedures for expression and discussion;
- most students would like the state-funded school to be a place for learning *about* different religions/worldviews, rather than for instruction *into* a particular religion/worldview; students tended to prefer the system with which they were already

¹ <http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/pages/education/> (retrieved 10/09/2012).

² England, Estonia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, the Russian Federation and Spain.

familiar (Jackson 2011 and <http://www.redco.uni-hamburg.de/web/3480/4176/index.html>, retrieved 10/09/2012).

Religion and Society

A subsequent mixed methods project based at the University of Warwick (due for completion in September 2012), as part of a UK Research Council (AHRC/ESRC) Religion and Society programme, has looked in more detail at young people's attitudes towards religious diversity in one particular country. Many findings mirror those of the REDCo project. However, the data collected across the UK, plus London as a special case, accentuate the importance of local context as a factor to be taken into account in designing and organising studies of religious diversity (e.g. Ippgrave 2012 forthcoming). The project also highlights the feelings of vulnerability experienced by minority groups in classes, raising issues about the context of «safe space» desired by the majority of young people as a condition for open and confident dialogue.

The Emergence of the Council of Europe Recommendation

Since 2002 the Council of Europe has given close attention to dealing with education about religions and non-religious convictions in public schools across Europe. The old view of avoiding the study of religions in public education – because religion was felt to belong only to the private sphere – was abandoned. Change was in the air, but it was the events of 9/11 2001 in the USA that provided a wake-up call for those habitually excluding religion from public – including educational – discussion (Jackson 2007, 2010).

Thus, the Council of Europe launched a substantial project on the study of religions as part of intercultural education entitled 'Intercultural Education and the Challenge of Religious Diversity and Dialogue in Europe' (Jackson 2007, 2010). The rationale for this was concerned with the relationship of religion to culture. More will be said about this rationale below. For the moment it is sufficient to say that there was no intention to *reduce* religion to culture. There were several outcomes from the project, including a widely circulated reference book, made available in several translations (Keast 2007).

However, most importantly, the Committee of Ministers – the Foreign Ministers of all 47 member states – agreed (December 2008) on a policy recommendation on the dimension of religions and non religious convictions within intercultural education. The Recommendation (Council of Europe 2008a) was circulated to all member states.

Council of Europe Perspective on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs

Rather than being a new area of discourse and research unrelated to the Council's earlier work, the new work on religion is seen as being closely related to key educational themes explored within the Council of Europe. These related themes include education for democratic citizenship, human rights education and intercultural education.

The document also relates to various Recommendations from the Parliamentary Assembly, and connections are also made to the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "Living together as equals in dignity" (Council of Europe 2008b), which argues that an understanding of cultural diversity should include knowledge and understanding of the main religions and non-religious convictions of the world and of their role in society. The Recommendation is also linked to the establishment of a European centre – what became the European Wergeland Centre – which would cooperate with and support the work of the Council of Europe in its work.

Whilst having clear goals, sensitivity is expressed to the educational systems and practices already in operation in member states, and attention is drawn specifically to the relevance of «the already existing best practices of the respective member states». Clearly, the

Recommendation is intended as an adaptable reference text and not as an inflexible framework. Sensitivity is also shown to the fact that different approaches would be needed with young people of different ages, taking «into account the age and maturity of pupils to whom it is addressed».

The Recommendation

The Recommendation itself (Council of Europe 2008a) is addressed to three principal stakeholders – policy makers, schools and teacher trainers. The ethos of the document is inclusive and democratic. It is concerned to provide an education about religions and non-religious convictions in the context of intercultural education. This form of education is logically distinct from forms of religious education which aim *specifically* to nurture children and young people in a particular faith tradition. However, if the Recommendation is followed through, the form of intercultural education suggested should be complementary to many forms of faith-based education. The Recommendation acknowledges diversity and complexity at local, regional and international levels, and encourages connections to be made between «local» and «global», the exploration of issues concerning religion and identity, and the cultivation of positive relations with parents and religious communities, as well as organisations who relate to non-religious philosophies. The intention is to introduce young people to a plurality of positions and debates in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance.

There is no suggestion that every religious or non-religious position should be covered. Knowledge content needs to relate, at least in part, to context, for example³. The emphasis is on competence, which includes well selected knowledge together with appropriate skills, attitudes and behaviours which facilitate intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. The aim is to provide knowledge but also to cultivate reciprocity, sensitivity and empathy and to combat prejudice, intolerance, bigotry and racism. The ideal learning context is through the provision of a safe forum or learning space in which people can engage in dialogue and discussion managed by teachers with appropriate specialist knowledge and facilitation skills. Didactical methods are recommended which are «open», «inclusive» and «impartial» and which acknowledge and respect the varied backgrounds of participants⁴. The Recommendation acknowledges that such provision needs to be supported by high-quality teacher training, rich and varied resources, and ongoing research and evaluation.

The New Project on Disseminating the Recommendation

The Recommendation was published in December 2008 and circulated to member states. To explore the extent to which the Recommendation had been discussed by stakeholders, the Director of Education at the Council of Europe and the Director of the European Wergeland Centre set up a joint committee of experts in 2011 to encourage utilisation of the Recommendation across the 47 member states. There was no intention to impose the Recommendation, but rather to produce a “road map” enabling users to engage with the Recommendation in their own particular national or regional contexts, and to provide feedback. One of the committee’s early tasks was to develop an online questionnaire to be distributed to the Council of Europe’s Education Committee, which includes representatives from all member states.

The Questionnaire

³ A point confirmed by research in the UK by Ipgrave (2012 forthcoming), in Estonia by Schihalejev (2010), and in Norway by Leganger-Krogstad (2011).

⁴ Examples include interpretive (Jackson 1997, 2004; Ipgrave, Jackson, O’Grady 2009) and dialogical approaches (Ipgrave 2001, 2003, forthcoming 2013; Leganger-Krogstad 2011).

There were two main aims. The first was to ascertain the level of intercultural awareness within each country's education system. The second was to explore the level of implementation of the Recommendation. The questionnaire was distributed in October 2011 and data collection ended in December 2011.

A total of thirty-six questionnaires and one written response were returned to the Council of Europe. Others indicated some difficulty in writing from the national point of view, since education policy was devolved to regional authorities. Nevertheless, some important general points emerged from the responses which have been taken on board by the committee of experts. First, there was general support for more discussion of the Recommendation.

Second, it was clear from responses that there was some confusion and misunderstanding due to different shades of meaning given to terminology such as «religious education» and «non-religious convictions» across different countries, and sometimes even within the same country. This issue includes discussion of the relationship between religious education seen as a means of deepening young people's understanding of religion(s), whatever their background, and religious education understood as initiating young people into a particular religious way of life.

Third, quality of teaching was an issue referred to frequently, a point having implications for the development of pedagogy and didactics as well as teacher training.

Fourth, there was a general concern about how to integrate or address non-religious worldviews alongside religions, or even whether it was appropriate to address this area alongside religion.

Fifth, there was a concern with media representations of religions (through television and the internet, for example) and how to deal with these critically in the classroom (see Jackson et al. 2010 and von der Lippe 2012 for some relevant research).

Sixth, the point was made that the Recommendation should be seen not only as having relevance to the classroom, but also to whole school policies on diversity and contact with the community and with schools more widely; the view was presented that the Recommendation was relevant to the ethos of schools, and not just to curriculum subjects.

Seventh, some respondents referred to human rights issues such as freedom of expression and the rights of minority pupils (including wearing religious symbols).

Other Feedback from Stakeholders

Further feedback has been provided from various stakeholders during conferences and meetings in different countries and international institutional settings. Many of the queries raised echo responses to the questionnaire and points made in the Recommendation itself. For example, the point has been made that the Recommendation needs to be worked with in some rather different contexts, for example in countries having some very different histories of religion and state. Similarly, the issue of knowledge selection, and finding appropriate principles for this, as well as the balance between knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours has been raised in some different national and religious contexts. Other issues include how to introduce more effective student-to-student dialogue and to create a «safe space» for exchange and the inclusion of non-religious worldviews or convictions.

Religion, Intercultural Education and Culture

In categorising religion as a cultural phenomenon, the Council of Europe is linking «understanding religions and beliefs» to its work on understanding other aspects of culture. Discussions by those who drafted the Recommendation and within the Council of Europe show that this does not mean reducing religion to culture, but rather finding the means to enable students, whatever their background, to understand, as far as possible, the language, beliefs and claims of those holding religious positions or non-religious stances within society.

The Council of Europe's view is consistent with Habermas's (2006) interpretation of understanding religion in the public sphere. In relation to religions, it is not sufficient to teach about the history of religions, or about the outward phenomena of religions. Religion is not restricted to practices, artefacts, and buildings. It is also necessary to attempt to understand the *meaning* of religious language as used by religious believers, including expressions of their beliefs and values. Such understanding requires knowledge, but it also includes certain attitudes, skills and behaviours that raise self-awareness as well as awareness and understanding of the beliefs and values of others. The Council of Europe's work on intercultural competence is very relevant to the development of such understanding and awareness (e.g. Barrett 2012). However, there are complementary sources in the fields of religious education and interfaith dialogue which might also be drawn on in developing competence for understanding the beliefs and values of others in an intercultural context.

Towards a “Road Map”/Consultation Document

Since May 2011 and over the next 18 months (up to late 2013), the committee of experts are developing a “road map” to help stakeholders to work with the Recommendation in ways that are relevant to their own particular context. Initially, the key stakeholders will be policymakers, school leaders and teacher trainers (initial and in service). We hope that initial uses of the road map will draw further stakeholders into the discussion, such as school students and parents. The committee has already identified some key areas for exploration, based on the Recommendation, the questionnaire sent to the Council of Europe Education Committee, and feedback from stakeholders through conferences and meetings. The provisional contents are likely to include the following, but the precise contents are likely to change and develop during discussion over the next year.

There will be a commentary on the Recommendation itself, explaining its links to other work done in the Council of Europe. The positioning of the study of religions and non-religious convictions in the context of intercultural education will be explained. There will be some comments on the diversity of histories of religion and state in European countries, and the relevance of these to the use of generic European policy documents. Reassurances will be given to those working in the context of «religious nurture»; the Recommendation is seen as, in principle, complementary to forms of religious nurture chosen by parents for their children. On the basis of the Recommendation, the questionnaire, feedback from stakeholders, the results of recent research and case studies of developments in policy and practice, a series of key issues will be identified and discussed in a way that should be helpful to stakeholders in resolving debates at a national or regional level. So far, the following *provisional* issues have been identified for discussion and development:

- Terminology: a guide to different terms and their different meanings in particular contexts will be provided in order to reduce misunderstanding and to establish a clear vocabulary for dealing with the general area of education about religions and non-religious convictions.
- Competence: what are the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours required to be able to understand at depth and engage with a plurality of religions and non-religious convictions? The discussion will consider competence in relation to self-awareness as well as awareness of others' beliefs, values and ways of life. This section will deal with both teacher training and student competence. Some examples of ways in which competence might be achieved through the use of particular didactical approaches will be given.
- The representation of religions: different ways in which religions are represented or portrayed in textbooks, and other sources. Attention will be given to the «internal diversity» of religions, and to helping teachers to develop their sensitivity towards

young people in their classes from different backgrounds. Attention will also be given to ways in which teachers and students might analyse media representations of religions.

- The provision of «safe space» for student-to-student dialogue within the school. Recent international research on this topic will be reviewed, and the relevant issues will be highlighted.
- Issues concerning the classification and incorporation of «non religious convictions» or «non-religious worldviews» into this field will be identified, discussed and illustrated by examples from different parts of Europe and Canada.
- Issues and debates concerning human rights in relation to this field will be considered.
- Guidance on developing policies on linking schools to local communities and organisations, and developing contacts with other schools, including international contacts will be provided.

Finally, mechanisms for promoting discussion at national and regional levels will be suggested as well as mechanisms for providing feedback to the Council of Europe and the European Wergeland Centre. It is hoped that the road map will stimulate and contribute to constructive discussion, policy-making, teacher training, classroom practice and community links in different parts of Europe, and perhaps beyond.

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