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THE POLITICISATION AND SECURITISATION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION? A REJOINDER

Robert Jackson

Abstract

I consider Liam Gearon's critique of what he calls the politicisation and securitisation of religious education, focusing on his criticisms of a European research project, the REDCo project (Religion in Education: a Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries?) funded by the European Commission Framework 6 Programme, and a European policy discussion document, the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions in Public Schools, published by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. I criticise Gearon's representation of both projects, offering alternative accounts, and relating my comments to Gearon's essentialist view of religious education. I give a critique of Gearon's view that initiation into 'the religious life' is the only legitimate form of religious education. I conclude that, although educators should always be wary of being manipulated by politicians and others, support for research and/or development concerning studies of religions (or of religions and non-religious worldviews) is a legitimate concern for bodies such as the European Commission, and the OSCE/ODIHR, provided that participants are enabled to work freely and openly in the pursuit of scholarly enquiry and liberal educational goals.

Keywords: *religious education; politicisation; securitisation; European Commission; REDCo; OSCE; ODIHR*

Introduction

Liam Gearon points out that democratic states, in response to increased religious and cultural diversity, seek to encourage tolerance (through promoting human rights, for example), and therefore choose to develop policies concerning 'religious education' or 'teaching about religions and beliefs' to support it. Thus they 'politicise' religious education. Gearon identifies REDCo, a research project funded by the European Commission Framework 6 Programme, specifically with this view (Gearon, 2012a; 2013a and b; 2014). Furthermore, governments' interest in social cohesion goes further than promoting tolerance of diversity, extending into the murky field of security (Gearon, 2012a, b; 2013a, b; 2014). The religious education classroom, concerned with issues of citizenship and social cohesion, becomes, as Gearon puts it, highly emotively, 'The Counter Terrorist Classroom' (Gearon, 2013b; 2014). In moving along the path from supporting citizenship, or social cohesion, we arrive at the 'securitisation' of religious education (Gearon, 2012b). Thus, the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, published by

a security organisation – the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – is a particular target for Gearon’s criticism.

The main purpose of the present article is not to deny that there are issues about the nature or aims of religious education – in relation to social, political and security concerns, among others – but to point out Gearon’s misrepresentation of both REDCo and the *Toledo Guiding Principles*. This is done in the context of an exposition of Gearon’s own views on the nature and aims of religious education, which are not always made explicit in his writing. These include the view that the only genuine ‘religious education’ is initiation into ‘the religious life’, and that other approaches – including what he calls the ‘historical-political’ – are incompatible ‘paradigms’, each rooted in an inherently secularist ‘paradigmatic discipline’. The article points out the highly contestable nature of Gearon’s position, presenting an alternative perspective.ⁱ

The REDCo Project

Known by its acronym REDCo (in full, *Religion in Education: a Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries?*) this project attracts sustained criticism from Gearon. The REDCo project researched the views of samples of 14-16 year old students in publicly funded schools in eight European countries on teaching and learning about religious diversity in schools. Co-ordinated by Professor Wolfram Weisse of the University of Hamburg, the project included educational researchers from universities in Germany, England, Norway, Estonia, France, Spain, the Russian Federation and the Netherlands. These researchers had a range of research and academic specialisms, and a common interest in the relationship between religion and education.

The REDCo project team designed three substantial empirical research studies conducted across the eight participant nations. These formed the core of REDCo research findings. They included a qualitative study of the views of 14 to 16-year-olds (Knauth *et al.*, 2008), a quantitative study of teenagers’ perspectives on the role of religion in their lives, schools and societies (Valk *et al.*, 2009) and a study of student/teacher and student/student interaction during lessons concerned with religion (ter Avest *et al.*, 2009). All studies were carried out by each national group in its own setting, before analysis and subsequent comparison. In addition, there was a qualitative study of teachers from six of the countries, focusing on biographical information, teachers’ views on religious diversity and their strategies for responding to it (van der Want *et al.*, 2009). There were also several related studies carried out by particular groups. These included a series of action research studies produced by members of the English team (Ipgrave, Jackson, and O’Grady, 2009), a volume bringing together studies from REDCo research related specifically to Islam (Veinguer *et al.*, 2009), and books dedicated to reporting REDCo research in France (Béraud and Willaime, 2009) and Estonia (Schihalejev, 2010). In addition, an edited volume was published at the beginning of the project, setting the scene for the forthcoming research project, and discussing questions relating to religion and education in each national context (Jackson *et al.*, 2007). Towards the end of the project, a book was published in German giving an overview of the research (Jozsa, Knauth and Weisse, 2009). After the end of the project, in 2011, a special issue of the *British Journal of Religious Education* included a selection of

articles introducing different aspects of REDCo (later published as a book, Jackson, 2012a). Articles and book chapters related to the project, together with some follow-up studies (eg McKenna *et al.*, 2014), have continued to appear.ⁱⁱ

Gearon on REDCo

In various publications, Liam Gearon has criticised the REDCo project vigorously (Gearon, 2012a; 2013a and b; 2014). Interestingly, Gearon refers directly to the project's scene-setting book (Jackson *et al.*, 2007), and to the 2011 special issue of the *British Journal of Religious Education*, giving an overview of the project, and there are occasional references to material posted on the REDCo project website at the University of Hamburg. However, he does not refer to, engage with or show any familiarity with any of the books reporting the project's main empirical research studies. Nevertheless, he makes strong negative judgments about the research, its design and methodology and about the perspectives of the researchers. Furthermore, he misreports the views of members of the REDCo team. I will outline some of Gearon's claims about the REDCo project and then respond to each of them.

REDCo on 'Counter-secularisation' and 'Civil Religion'?

Gearon devotes most of an article (Gearon, 2012a) to criticizing what he sees as the REDCo project's assumptions about 'counter-secularisation' and 'civil religion'. REDCo researchers see religious education 'in terms of counter-secularisation (Weisse, 2011), even a new "civil religion" (Jackson and O'Grady, 2007)' (Gearon, 2013b, p. 130).

Gearon challenges what he calls 'a foundational conjecture' of the REDCo project, '...that increased interest in religion in public and political life as manifested particularly in education is evidence of counter-secularisation' (Gearon, 2012a, p. 151). Gearon quotes Wolfram Weisse:

...in most European countries, we have assumed for a long time that increasing secularisation would lead to a gradual retreat from religion from public space. This tendency has reversed itself in the course of the past decade as religion has returned to public attention. (Weisse, 2011, p. 112)

Gearon says, with regard to this quotation: '...the project leader could not be clearer'; yet Gearon clearly misinterprets what Weisse writes. Gearon takes Weisse's remarks as a conjecture about *counter*-secularisation. Weisse never uses this term. Occasionally he does use the term 'post-secularism' (eg in Valk *et al.*, 2009, p. 9), and here he is referring to the change in mood which allowed religious discourse, and much discourse about religion, to enter public interchange in the West. Weisse is observing that religion is a topic of discussion in public space – in the media for example – in ways that might have been avoided or played down pre-9/11. He describes a shift in attitude, as reflected in documents such as the Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (Council of Europe, 2008a). Weisse does not imply increased *support* for religion, or religious renewal or revival. He does provide,

however, a reason for giving more attention to religion in public education. If representations of religions, debates about religion, stories of religious conflict, accounts of the involvement of religious people in society etc figure more in public discourse than they did when religion was regarded primarily as a private matter, this is one reason why public education should be concerned with helping young people to understand and interpret it. In short, Gearon has associated Weisse and the REDCo project with a technical term that is not used by Weisse or members of the project team *at all*, and has projected a meaning on to Weisse's and REDCo's work that does not match its writing or intentions. To say the least, Gearon's claim that '... some statement is needed to moderate the more extravagant counter-secularisation claims of theorists and empirical researchers of European religious education' (Gearon, 2012a, p. 152) is somewhat misdirected.

Linked to this is Gearon's portrayal of the REDCo Project's view of the nature of 'civil religion'. 'REDCo researchers are enthralled', says Gearon, 'by the prominence given to the subject, seeing it in terms of ... even a new "civil religion"' (Gearon, 2013b, p. 130). In the title of his article he links what he calls 'European religious education' with 'European civil religion'. 'Civil religion' is not a term used by Weisse, or by contributors to *any* of the books reporting REDCo research. Of the scores of papers produced by the REDCo project, only one – from the project's first scene-setting book published in 2007 – uses the term 'civil religion'. In this *single* chapter, by me and Kevin O'Grady, the term 'civil religion' appears only twice, in the title and in the conclusion. This chapter is *not* about religious education in *Europe*, but about the history of religious education specifically in *England*. As is clear from the context, the term 'civil religion' is used descriptively, simply to refer to the place of religion in public life in England. On the flimsy basis of a mention of the term 'civil religion', in a single chapter about England, written before any empirical research was conducted, Gearon projects *Durkheim's* use of the term 'civil religion', not only on to the meaning of the writers of the chapter – 'the Durkheimian sense of representing the most treasured values within society', but on to the project as a whole (Gearon, 2012a, p. 160). The REDCo project, asserts Gearon, rather than providing evidence of counter-secularisation (something it does *not* claim), actually contributes to the process of secularisation – through the propagation of its supposedly Durkheimian view of civil religion. The REDCo project, according to Gearon, thus undermines religion (Gearon, 2012a, p. 161).

To highlight Gearon's use of projected meanings, different from those intended by REDCo writers, and to acknowledge his use of generalisation and hyperbole, it is worth quoting the following remarkable claim:

...in contemporary America, President Obama has been the only United States President formally to challenge the unstated common Christian heritage of America, even the notionally Christian nature of American civil religion, in his widely reported speech in which he described America as 'not a Christian nation'. In Europe such a proclamation about the continent's religiosity would not now be in the least problematic. Religious education of the kind advocated by REDCo and their political funders has helped facilitate this. (Gearon, 2012a, p. 159)

Collusion with ‘Political Funders’?

This introduction of the idea of collusion between researchers and their funders is not Gearon’s only use of suggestion. Gearon again asserts a collusive relationship between the political agenda of the European Commission and the REDCo project.

There are of course unexplored questions here about how sound the findings are of the research itself. This is not in any sense to question the academic integrity of the research, but the close congruence of funding by political institutions committed to diversity management and research findings, which provide ready-made pedagogical strategies to achieve these political goals, raises issues of independence between funding and findings. (Gearon, 2013a, p. 36)

Here Gearon, by the use of intimation, manages both to suggest a collusive relationship between the funding body and the researchers while, at the same time, placing a question mark by the soundness of the research findings (which he confuses with policy recommendations), and while rhetorically *denying* that he is doing this. This he does while never citing a REDCo research study, or showing any evidence that he has read any more than a summary of selected research findings and policy suggestions.

To claim a collusive relationship between the funding body and applicants questions the integrity of researchers and of procedures relating to submitting a research proposal and its review by independent academics. Regarding funding, it is interesting to point out that a contributory study to REDCo, a series of action research studies (Iprgrave, Jackson and O’Grady, 2009), received supplementary funding from a UK charity, the Westhill Endowment Trust. The origins of this body date back to the foundation of Westhill College in 1907, whose aim was ‘to train Sunday School leaders to spread Christian education to ordinary people through the Sunday School movement’ (<http://www.westhillendowment.org/history.php>). It seems doubtful that Gearon would accuse the REDCo researchers involved of collusion with this particular body in order to promote the goals of Christian nurture.

Furthermore, why should not the priorities of a body such as a national government or the European Commission reflect actual social need? Researchers, teachers and other citizens might share some current political concerns, such as social cohesion in complex democratic societies. Moreover, policy changes with regard to religion in schools may be in response to lobbying from citizens, and these include educators and researchers.

Gearon’s Representation of the ‘Historical-Political Paradigm’

Gearon presents the REDCo project as a key example of what he calls the historical-political paradigm of religious education (Gearon, 2013a, pp. 132-134) and the *Toledo Guiding Principles* as an extension of this. This ‘paradigm’ has a *single* ‘political’ aim according to Gearon. REDCo reports, says Gearon, are concerned *only* with the political goals of increasing tolerance (Gearon, 2013a, p. 133).

Gearon claims that the philosophical-theological counterpart of the political liberalism which underpins the historical-political paradigm is ‘a theological notion of religious pluralism in which all religions represent cultural variations of one ultimate reality’ (2013a, p. 134). The impression is given of a research team sharing the same theological outlook, and projecting that view into the research field. Actually, REDCo researchers were invited to participate because of their expertise in a range of relevant academic disciplines and for their familiarity with a variety of empirical research methods (including quantitative survey research, ethnographic research, action research and video analysis). Researchers came from a variety of religious (including Christian and Muslim) and non-religious backgrounds. They did not share a common theological viewpoint or set of assumptions, nor did they expect students to adopt any particular view.

According to Gearon (2013a, p.134), the historical-political paradigm, exemplified by REDCo, filters out conflict in relation to religion. However, an examination of actual REDCo research reports, related to students, teachers and classroom interaction studies, shows that, rather than avoiding issues of conflict in relation to religion, they have much to reveal about students’ experience, and about how conflict can be managed and used constructively in the classroom (Skeie, 2008). REDCo research reports numerous experiences of conflict by students, and also notes observations on pedagogy by researchers, resulting from their analyses of classroom interactions. The last thing that REDCo researchers do is to ‘filter out’ conflict. For example, Kevin O’Grady’s didactical approach, using drama and role play in an English school, included examples of constructive engagement with conflict issues (O’Grady, 2013). Fedor Kozyrev, working in St Petersburg, analysed videotaped examples of topics about religion and conflict issues in the classroom. He highlights the importance of the adaptability of the teacher in addressing issues of conflict through dialogue, emphasizing the importance of the relationship between teacher and students as established over time (Kozyrev, 2009, p. 215). Marie von der Lippe’s research, conducted in Norwegian schools, shows how conflict can be generated by some media representations of religious material, and suggests ways of dealing with this in the classroom (von der Lippe, 2009; 2010). Thorsten Knauth, researching in Hamburg schools, demonstrates the importance of the teacher’s awareness of the dynamics of classroom interaction. between conservative Muslim students and more liberal students influenced by values and attitudes from general youth culture, while maintaining their Islamic identity, and discusses how such conflicts can be addressed. He shows how well-managed classroom dialogue provided an opportunity for pupils to test and challenge their ideas (Knauth, 2009). These are not examples in which conflict is ‘filtered out’ or ‘profound differences are not taken seriously’. Rather, the goal was to provide ‘safe space’ for civil exchange in which issues could be discussed, and in which the expression and acceptance of difference was accommodated. As Olga Schihalejev observes, in reporting her classroom interaction research in Estonia: ‘If the student recognises that security is available and trust has been built up, he or she will risk entering into conflict or vulnerable areas rather than avoiding them or utilizing uncontrolled ways to deal with them’ (Schihalejev, 2010, p. 177).

Other distortions of the REDCo project are discussed in Jackson (2015), including Gearon's misreading and misunderstanding of the interpretive approach to religious education and its role in the REDCo project. For example, Gearon's presentation of the interpretive approach as a reductionist, secularist, socio-cultural paradigm based on Durkheim's sociology, solely using the testimony of children as its source material (Gearon, 2013a, p. 131), is a misrepresentation. Durkheim is most certainly not an influence on the interpretive approach (Jackson, 1997, p.31); also, as numerous sources indicate, the interpretive approach is interdisciplinary, adapting and combining particular ideas on theory and method from ethnography, philosophy, religious studies and cultural studies, to offer students (whether from religious or non-religious backgrounds) tools to understand and interpret religious language and experience of others, as well as facilitating their own personal reflections on that learning (eg Jackson 1997; 2004; 2006; 2008a, b, c; 2009a, b; 2011a, b; 2012b; 2014a). It does not see 'the object lesson of religious education as creating ethnographic, cultural explorers' (Gearon, 2014, p.65).

Gearon's Views on Religious Education

At this point, it would be helpful to clarify Gearon's own position on religious education. Gearon presents his own analysis of contemporary religious education (the examples he uses are mainly from literature produced in the United Kingdom) as a set of incompatible 'paradigms',ⁱⁱⁱ each having a single underpinning 'paradigmatic discipline'. Only one 'paradigm' is regarded by Gearon as acceptable. This presents religious education as concerned *intrinsically* with initiation into 'the religious life' (eg Gearon, 2013a, p. 48). For Gearon, 'Religious education needs to be grounded in the religious life in order to address the critical moral and existential questions at the heart of the religious domain in human experience' (Gearon, 2014, p. 65). All other paradigms – psychological, phenomenological, philosophical, socio-cultural and historical-political – are based on disciplines which emerged or gained currency during the European Enlightenment. All of these, claims Gearon, are rooted in 'paradigmatic disciplines' which themselves are *inherently* secularist (Gearon, 2013a, pp. 99-143). 'Each', says Gearon, 'in being the grounding for religious education, has tried to appropriate religious education for its own ends' (Gearon, 2014, p. 65).

For Gearon, the meaning of 'religious education' is determined by his understanding of 'religion', rather than by the various uses of the term. Religious education, according to Gearon, *by its very nature* involves some form of initiation into 'the religious life'; the various examples he gives relate to initiation into the *Christian* life (eg 2013a, pp. 47-76; p. 176; 2014). Thus, on Gearon's view, modes of education *about* religion or religions, however they are justified, and even if they involve a reflexive element in which young people relate what they study to their own personal worldview, are not religious education *at all*.

In a few pages, Gearon challenges the fact/value distinction as related to a whole set of academic disciplines employed in theory or empirical research focused on religion(s) or religious education. For Gearon, *no* researchers utilizing the social sciences or psychology or contemporary philosophy in theorizing, designing research, analyzing research findings or applying such findings to policy development, can validly distinguish between description

and evaluation; their work is *inherently* and normatively secularist. I have responded elsewhere to Gearon's misapplication of Thomas Kuhn's work on paradigms in the philosophy of science to his (Gearon's) analysis of religious education and its pedagogy, and I refer readers to that discussion (Jackson, 2015). Given Gearon's essentialist view of religious education as *only* meaning 'initiation into the religious life', it is small wonder that he rejects any conception of religious education as possibly having any instrumental aims related to the promotion of inter-religious or inter-worldview understanding.

A Different View of Religious Education

Most academic discourse in the field acknowledges how terms are actually *used* in different contexts. For example, with regard to the discussion in England and Wales, in the 1944 Education Act, the term 'religious education' referred to a combination of 'religious instruction' and 'collective worship'. As the appropriateness of traditional forms of 'religious instruction' were challenged, the term 'religious education' became used widely for various approaches to learning *about* religion or religions (or combining learning *about* and learning *from* religions), as distinct from religious *instruction*. The term religious education also continued to be used in some contexts to refer to a variety of forms of religious nurture, or initiation into religion (Gates and Jackson, 2014). However, the more inclusive use of the term 'religious education' was recognised in law in the 1988 Education Reform Act. Thus it is evident that the designation 'religious education' is used in a variety of different ways in general educational discourse. The various meanings can be very different from one another, and there is a need for clarity in specifying which particular usages are under consideration (Jackson, 2014a, pp.27-31).

Different Aims of Religious Education

With regard to aims, it does not follow from REDCo's focus on a 'social' issue – namely learning about and discussing religious diversity in classroom contexts – that the researchers subscribed to a *single* 'historical-political' aim for religious education. For example, social aims are closely inter-related with *personal* views and commitments. Addressing the 'personal development' of students was an explicit REDCo aim, as Wolfram Weisse makes clear (eg Weisse, 2008, p. 5). Furthermore, in my own introductory chapter to the REDCo project I wrote:

... there is no intention to imply that the study of religion in schools should be solely justified through attention to social and political events and issues. I agree with the Delors Report in considering that education should include learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be (UNESCO, 1996). It is arguable that religious education should be concerned with all of these, especially the fourth. The present discussion focuses on the third, but does not ignore the others. The discussion responds to recent and widespread international interest in the study of religions in schools, with particular attention to European institutions, prompted by various political events and social issues. This is why close attention is given to citizenship education. (Jackson, 2007, p. 28)

Here, as in publications from the 1970s (eg Jackson, 1978) to the present (eg Jackson, 2014b), I point to the intrinsic value of studying religions (liberal education should cover *all* dimensions of human experience), as well as its *personal* value, contributing to each student's individual development, and its *social* value, for example its relevance to citizenship education. Like many other writers in the field, I distinguish such forms of education (called 'religious education', 'education about religions', 'religion education', 'religion in education' and various other names) from 'religious nurture' (also called 'religious instruction' or 'initiation into religion'), which is *also* sometimes called 'religious education'. REDCo researchers would regard both types of process to be valid in different contexts. Gearon's view, however, is that religious education can *only* genuinely mean initiation into 'the religious life'. Any other approach to the study of religion actually *undermines* this form of religious education, partly through drawing on academic disciplines which are themselves (according to Gearon) inherently secularist. Moreover, his assumption of *incompatible* (even incommensurable) paradigms relates to his view that each paradigm has a single underlying aim. The view that different aims might be considered appropriate in different contexts, or the possibility that there could be various constructive relationships between religious education as 'learning about religions' and religious education as 'religious nurture' are not considered. Gearon's assumptions need to be recognised when evaluating his critique of both the politicisation, and what he calls the *securitisation* of religious education. I will now turn to Gearon's critique of the *Toledo Guiding Principles*.

The Toledo Guiding Principles and 'Securitisation'

Gearon gives various international examples of the entry of 'religion in education' into the 'contested arena' of security and terrorism (Gearon, 2012b; 2013a and b). The main example given from Europe is that of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), whose Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights published the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007). Gearon points out that the term 'security' had become part of defence terminology by the Second World War and became 'an integral aspect of 20th-century political thought', especially through the United Nations, with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) being formed during the Cold War (Gearon, 2013a, p.17).

Gearon admits that that OSCE's agenda changed significantly over time, but he does not explain fully the OSCE's current roles or its concern with what it calls the 'human dimension' of security. However, Gearon does draw attention to what he sees as the naïveté of educational researchers in getting involved with a security organisation like the OSCE. For example, Gearon writes:

The idea that a former Cold War security organisation should be interested in developing teaching and learning materials does not seem to have struck many as anything out of the ordinary. (Gearon, 2013b, p. 134)

Gearon notes that the OSCE was formed during the Cold War initially as the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), with a security brief. This is true only in the sense that its formation was premised on the need for what is now called 'human security'. The basic understanding underpinning the Helsinki Accords which

established the CSCE was *détente* in Europe and the recognition of the legitimate interest of the West in human rights concerns in the former Soviet bloc. Arguably, it was as much a human rights organisation as a security organisation. The ‘human dimension’ was in some ways at its heart at a time when it was peripheral in other international spheres. Gearon’s terse description of the OSCE as a ‘Cold War security organisation’ (Gearon, 2012a, p. 155; 2012b, p. 225; 2013b, p. 134) is misleading.

Linking REDCo to the OSCE, Gearon says:

Readers unfamiliar with developments in European religious education might be surprised to know that the highly influential *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE 2007) originate from a Cold War security organisation called the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). This sharpening further of the political focus of religion in education to security concerns seems to leave the REDCo team unperturbed, and the status of the OSCE has itself been lauded in the context of religion and religious education’s new roles in international security (Gearon, 2012a, p.155).

Gearon’s direct link between the REDCo research project and the *Toledo Guiding Principles* needs some clarification. ‘A key driver’ of the REDCo Project, says Gearon, ‘is to support the recommendations of the Council of Europe and the *Toledo Guiding Principles*’ (Gearon, 2012a, p. 155). He gives the impression that a *motivation* for REDCo’s research (Gearon, 2012a, p. 154) was to ‘support’ recommendations from these two bodies. This was not so. The Council of Europe *Recommendation on Teaching about Religions and Nonreligious Convictions in Public Schools* was published in 2008 (Council of Europe, 2008b), while the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* document was published in 2007. However, REDCo empirical research did not *begin* until 2006, with only one study completed and reported by 2008 (Knauth *et al.*, 2008); most of REDCo’s main research studies were not published until 2009 (ter Avest *et al.*, 2009; Valk *et al.*, 2009; van der Want *et al.*, 2009). There was communication between REDCo researchers and those involved in drafting Council of Europe recommendation and producing the *Toledo Guiding Principles* (for example, the present writer participated in all three activities), but REDCo was hardly in a position to support recommendations that did not yet exist.

Towards the Securitisation of Religious Education/Religion in Education

Gearon traces the historical development of what he terms the securitisation of religion in education. First, from the European Enlightenment, he notes what he calls a *separation* of religion and politics, on the basis that rationality rather than revelation should guide state politics. Then he identifies a period of *suppression*, when religion was suppressed in officially atheist states (the Soviet Union; Mao’s China) and in various dictatorships. This furthered the separation of religion and state. Next he points to a period of *synthesis*, with the formation of the United Nations and the publication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with the use of education to support a human rights framework, including freedom of religion or belief. The intention was liberal and tolerant, aiming to ensure fundamental freedoms. Finally, he identifies a period of *securitisation*, post-9/11. The politicisation of religious education (or religion in education as he sometimes calls it) becomes the securitisation of religious education (Gearon, 2012b, pp. 216-227). The *Toledo Guiding*

Principles exemplify this development, through the involvement of ‘the largest security organisation in the world’, formed during the Cold War. The intentions might be benign, says Gearon, but the securitisation of religious education represents a clear shift from negative to positive liberty (Berlin, 2002) and ‘risks undermining the very freedoms it is intended to protect and promote’ (Gearon, 2012b, p. 230); policies developed in the pursuit of liberty can result in the restriction of liberty.

Gearon concludes that this is what has happened through the work of the OSCE in producing the *Toledo Guiding Principles*. Gearon remarks:

It is the security *sources* of such guidance not the guidance itself which seem questionable. For the closer and more integrally political and security organisations are concerned with religion in education (its guiding principles, even its pedagogy), the more they risk replicating the very totalizing and extremist structures they oppose. (Gearon, 2012b, p. 231) (original emphasis)

‘A counter argument’, says Gearon, ‘might be that liberal democracies have always maintained the principle of tolerance up to the point of not accepting the intolerant; bringing *military and security concerns into the classroom* is not, I would retort, a demonstration of this principle’ (Gearon, 2012b, p. 231) (emphasis added).

The OSCE as the ‘Source’ of the *Toledo Guiding Principles*?

‘It is the security *sources*’ of the *Toledo Guiding Principles*, says Gearon, ‘not the guidance itself which seem questionable’ (Gearon, 2012b, p. 231). But what exactly are these sources? Does Gearon mean that because those *professionally involved* in a security organisation (those who are paid to work for it) *produced* the document, then it is suspect? Does he mean that because people working within a security organisation *had the idea* of producing such a document, then it is suspect? Or does he mean, as he seems to imply in one article (Gearon, 2013b, p. 134), that acting as *publisher* of the document is sufficient to arouse alarm?

For clarification, I will give a short account of the development of the *Toledo Guiding Principles*, drawing on the minutes of meetings, my own notes and consultations with others involved directly in the process. Gearon mentions briefly the OSCE’s concern with what it calls the human dimension of security, but he does not explain it in any detail, nor does he discuss the OSCE’s conflict prevention role, which is clearly linked to the OSCE decisions and declarations (Strohal, 2007). The *Toledo Guiding Principles* were actually produced under the auspices of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). This branch of the OSCE, based in Warsaw rather than in the OSCE headquarters in Vienna, exists ‘to provide support, assistance and expertise to participating States and civil society to promote democracy, rule of law, human rights and tolerance and non-discrimination’ (<http://www.osce.org/odihr>); it has no involvement with matters of military security, disarmament or border issues. ODIHR is concerned with what is, in OSCE terminology, the human dimension of security (OSCE/ODIHR, 2011), notably dealing with what the Helsinki Final Act (OSCE, 1975) acknowledged as one of its ten guiding principles: ‘respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief’. The main function of ODIHR has been to produce educational materials,

dealing with topics such as anti-Semitism (eg <http://www.osce.org/odihr/57591>), and to combat racial intolerance (eg <http://www.osce.org/odihr/83821?download=true>).

Experts may be invited to participate in the work of ODIHR, and there was at the time of the development of the *Toledo Guiding Principles*, an Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief, now an Advisory Panel ‘consisting of independent experts from throughout the OSCE region’.^{iv} This included specialists of various kinds, most of whom were academics working in fields such as law, politics or education. Some were active members of religion or belief organisations, but they were not selected on that basis, but because of their academic and professional expertise.

The OSCE is chaired by representatives of different participant states (for one year terms and in rotation). The initial idea for producing a document on teaching about religions and beliefs was mooted in 2006, not by the OSCE directly, but by members of the Advisory Council. This was acted upon by the Spanish chairmanship in 2007. Thus, ODIHR assembled a group of experts – including members of the Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief, together with invited scholars, some of whom were educators working in fields such as religion and intercultural education – to discuss the shape and content of such a document.

The group met for a preparatory meeting in Toledo in March 2007. All invitees were welcomed by the then Director of ODIHR, Ambassador Christian Strohal. As he says in his foreword to the *Toledo Guiding Principles*, ‘The OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has gathered the Advisory Council of its Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, together with other leading experts and scholars from across the OSCE region, to develop and present *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*’ (Strohal, 2007, p. 10). Two members of the drafting committee, who were also serving as members of the Advisory Council, outlined the key ideas associated with the project, and summarised the thinking of the group so far. Invited experts then gave presentations on particular topics relevant to the task in hand (I made the first presentation). All spoke independently from their own expertise and experience; none was representing prepackaged views of the OSCE or ODIHR. Although speakers came from different countries (eg UK, USA, the Russian Federation, the Netherlands), no one spoke from the point of view of a national government, and no speaker was an employee of OSCE or ODIHR. Moreover, it was made absolutely clear that any advice on teaching about religions and beliefs that might appear in any document produced was intended for consideration by policy makers dealing with education in publicly funded schools. There was never any intention to present teaching about religions or beliefs as an *alternative* to any activity of religious nurture promoted within families or religious communities. The published document is completely clear on this, in relation to the rights of parents, children and minorities (eg OSCE/ODIHR, 2007, pp. 34-38). The term ‘religious education’ was avoided, as ambiguous and likely to cause confusion, and the designation ‘teaching about religions and beliefs’, although cumbersome, was used, incorporating non-religious worldviews as well as religions.

Much progress was made during the Toledo meeting. First draft ideas relating to the introduction, definitional issues and overviews of legal and human rights standards, diversity education and strategies for promoting understanding and respect for the right to hold religious or other beliefs, together with other human rights issues, were discussed. Then there

was discussion of the shape of the document as a whole, a consideration of how the text might develop, and planning of communications and future meetings. The key point is that no one from the OSCE or ODIHR dictated the direction of discussion or the provisional content of the document. The ODIHR maintained a co-ordinating and facilitating role throughout the process and relied on the expertise of the Advisory Panel and experts to develop the content of the *Toledo Guiding Principles*.

Two further meetings were held, one in Bucharest in June and a final one in Vienna in July, and there was a considerable amount of activity related to drafting, and addition of illustrative examples, between meetings. Since the official support for a document came during the Spanish chairmanship, it was considered important to publish it before that period ended. Thus, the *Toledo Guiding Principles* were completed and published in time for an official launch prior to the meeting of the OSCE's Ministerial Council in Madrid, on the 27 November 2007. I spoke at this meeting, giving an account of the development of the document and its key ideas.^v

So, in what sense are the *Toledo Guiding Principles* produced by the OSCE? Having been involved in the development of parts of the document from a fairly early stage, it was clear that there was no clandestine agenda for its production, no direct involvement in shaping or writing the text from employees of the OSCE or ODIHR, no attempt by the OSCE or ODIHR to influence writers or advisers to omit certain ideas or to introduce others. Especially important in the present context, there was no attempt in the document to *replace* activities related to religious nurture, initiated by parents or older students, with teaching about religions and beliefs; the rights of parents or legal guardians, children, and minorities are emphasised (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007, pp. 34-38). In my view, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights was a facilitating agency, enabling an interdisciplinary group of experts to work together to produce a document aiming to guide policy makers and others in helping young people in publicly funded schools to understand something of the diversity of religion and belief that exists currently in the world. This had a primary aim of developing *understanding* of religions or beliefs, seen as a key element (but not a sufficient condition) for promoting tolerance of difference (Strohal, 2007, p. 9). There was never any intention – and this is completely clear from the document itself – to present such education about religions and beliefs as an *alternative* to religious nurture, nor was there any suggestion that a study of religions and beliefs could only have a single aim. Gearon's representation of the *Toledo Guiding Principles* and their development as 'bringing military and security concerns into the classroom' (Gearon, 2012b, p. 231) is *very* different from the reality.

Summing up Gearon's View

Through examining Gearon's critique of what he calls the politicisation and securitisation of religious education, it has been possible to reveal his own views on the nature of the subject. In Gearon's view, religious education can *only* be concerned with initiation into 'the religious life'. Any other studies of religion are not and *cannot* be religious education. Furthermore, for Gearon, any utilisation of theory or method from the social sciences, psychology or contemporary philosophy in the study of religion(s) has a secularising effect. These disciplines are *inherently* anti-religious, claims Gearon, since their originators attempted to explain religion away. For Gearon, alternatives to 'genuine' religious education are competing 'paradigms', each having a *single* overarching aim. The only people

with a legitimate interest in conducting religious education, according to Gearon, are religious believers, whose role is to initiate children into ‘the religious life’.

Gearon’s assumption that *all* work in fields such as sociology, social anthropology, psychology and post-Enlightenment philosophy is inherently secularist because of the *origins* of the disciplines it employs, ignores the wide range of perspectives and on-going theoretical and methodological debates *within* the subjects concerned, including continuing reflections by those working in these fields about their nature and assumptions (eg Evans-Pritchard, 1962; Jackson, 1997, pp. 30-32). Specifically with regard to Gearon’s so-called historical-political paradigm, it does not follow from researchers’ focus on the relevance of studies of religion to social cohesion, that they must adopt the view that the *only* aim for the study of religions is its promotion (Jackson, 2015).

‘Religious Understanding’ and ‘Understanding Religion(s)’

A different perspective (Jackson, 2014b; Jackson, forthcoming) acknowledges the term religious education being used in a variety of ways in educational discourse (see also Jackson, 2014a, pp. 27-31; Rothgangel, Jackson and Jäggle, 2014). There is a clear distinction between types of religious education which initiate individuals into some form of religious life – developing *religious understanding* – and those which promote an inclusive, general public understanding of religion – what can be termed *understanding religion(s)*. The former process results from the wishes of parents or young people themselves, and does not necessarily depend on state funding. It is simply different from the activity appropriate for inclusive schools in which young people from various religious and secular backgrounds study together in order to gain a better understanding of religions and beliefs, including one another’s worldviews.

However, these approaches can be complementary. An individual’s religious understanding can, in principle, contribute experience that facilitates understanding of another person’s religious position. Similarly, an understanding of religious diversity can inform a person’s religious understanding. Indeed, many who are involved in educating for religious understanding within faith communities regard it as important that learners have opportunities to develop an understanding of religious diversity (eg Byrne and Kieran, 2013).

The *primary* aim of inclusive ‘religious education’ is to promote an understanding of the language, experiences and values of religious people and to use appropriate and effective methods for this, from whatever discipline(s) or sources they come. This goal is both intrinsic to the nature of education and can be instrumental to the benefit of individuals and society.

Governments and their agencies have a legitimate interest in promoting an understanding of religion(s), whether by supporting relevant research or the preparation of teaching guidelines. To do this transparently, with the aim of helping young people to gain an understanding of religious diversity, and with the further goals of promoting tolerance, and respect for the right to hold a religious viewpoint is legitimate and laudable.

Gearon uses the highly emotive term ‘the counter terrorist classroom’ to capture the idea that political and security justifications for religion in education ‘will inevitably shift the

aims and purposes of religious education to the aims and purposes of political and security interest' (Gearon, 2013b, p. 129). Neither his arguments nor his use of various literary devices establish his case. The association of work in inclusive religious education with governments, wider political agencies such as the European Commission, or with agencies dealing with security and human rights, such as the OSCE and ODIHR, does not *inevitably* change the aims of the subject, as Gearon claims.

Political and Historical Context

Of course, the above remarks take a close account of context. They relate to education in the context of democratic societies, and to a particular period of time. Gearon, however, seems to favour an approach to religion (he almost invariably means Christianity) and religious education which transcends political and temporal context (eg Gearon, 2013a, p. 27; p.176). This is a view rather different from that taken by many religious people, who see their personal religious commitment as highly relevant to moral and political issues related to living together, both in particular societies and the wider world. They acknowledge that we live in space and time, and that we cannot escape from social and political context in any form of human interaction, including education. This does not *negate* religious believers' concerns with the transcendent or the eternal or, indeed, remove these from the range of concepts to be studied and grasped by those being educated to understand religion(s).

Religious Education and Liberty

Gearon's major worry is the slippage of what Isaiah Berlin called 'negative' liberty towards 'positive' liberty (Berlin, 2002). Essentially, Gearon is concerned that, in the name of politics or of national or international security, those with political power can move, using values derived from democracy, towards authoritarianism. There is no escaping some degree of tension between democratic or human rights principles and some religious (and related cultural) positions. And there are dangers of knee-jerk reactions on the part of governments or their agencies, that could result in inappropriate and potentially counter-productive policies. In my view, an appropriate way forward is to support a form of 'dialogical liberalism', akin to what Kok-Chor Tan calls 'weak comprehensive liberalism' (Tan, 2000, pp. 59-60). This seeks a greater degree of dialogue between values as expressed in the human rights codes, and values that are rooted in particular religious and cultural contexts than is to be found in the rhetoric and policies of some governments as they seek to counter religious extremism. Care needs to be taken not to stifle all disagreement, or to oppose all alternative perspectives, but to recognise that the limits of 'political liberalism' (Rawls, 1993) lie, not with dissent *per se*, but with those in society who reject the concept of political liberalism itself. As far as possible, the state's response should be to promote discussion and dialogue, except in extreme cases, including those involving the coercion of vulnerable individuals by others or causing harm to others. At the level of social and political interaction within a society, basic human rights – as expressed in the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – provide a set of provisional moral principles, derived from reflecting on the idea of democracy itself, relevant to dialogue between those with different religious or cultural perspectives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Gearon projects ideas of counter-secularisation and a particular view of the nature of ‘civil religion’ on to the REDCo project, enabling him to construct a false argument that such programmes contribute to the process of secularisation. No evidence is provided for his intimation of the project’s collusion with ‘political funders’, and there is no recognition that the priorities of political institutions may be in response to concerns from citizens, including educators and researchers. Gearon’s description of a so-called ‘historical-political paradigm’ of religious education – having a single political aim, inherently secularising, avoiding issues of conflict, assuming a common pluralist theology – and his description of the interpretive approach as a reductionist, secularist, socio-cultural paradigm based on Durkheim's sociology, and solely utilising the testimony of children, are misrepresentations, incorporating many errors of fact, and refutable by reference to the relevant literature.

With regard to his critique of the *Toledo Guiding Principles*, Gearon’s emotive use of the terms ‘security’ and ‘securitisation’, his lack of clear differentiation in the roles and functions of different kinds of organisations and their relation to the democratic process, his misleading description of the OSCE as a ‘Cold War security organisation’ ‘bringing military and security concerns into the classroom’ and his lack of awareness of the nature and workings of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, contribute to an inaccurate and distorted account of the genesis, production and nature of the document. Gearon’s own use of literary devices – hyperbole, emotive language, generalisation and suggestion – in his critiques of both the REDCo Project and the *Toledo Guiding Principles* has been noted.

Gearon’s claim that ‘religious education’ is concerned inherently with initiation into ‘the religious life’ ignores the multiple uses of the term in discourse within the field, and ignores the fact that both the REDCo Project and the *Toledo Guiding Principles* acknowledge the validity of a ‘nurturing’ view of religious education within the context of the family and religious community, in addition to the role of education about religions and beliefs within the publicly funded school, primarily aiming to increase understanding of religions and other worldviews. Gearon’s essentialist picture of religious education is challenged in the paper by a view distinguishing between ‘understanding religion(s)’ and ‘religious understanding’, but also pointing to their potential complementary nature.

Although educators should always be wary of being manipulated by politicians and others, my view is that support for research and/or development concerning studies of religions (or of religions and non-religious worldviews) is a legitimate concern for bodies such as the European Commission, and the OSCE/ODIHR, provided that participants are enabled to work freely and openly in the pursuit of scholarly enquiry and liberal educational goals.

Finally, in recognition that all education takes place within a historical and political context, I pose some questions for Gearon. If religious education can *only* mean initiation into ‘the religious life’, what policies would he advocate for religious education in inclusive schools in a society like Britain in the twenty first century? Which religions would he include and why? Would he *impose* initiation into ‘the religious life’ on to *all* students? Would he advocate separate religious education for children from different religious family

backgrounds? In which case, how would this be organised and funded? And, what would children whose parents are *not* from religious backgrounds be expected to do? Would he prefer to have *no* study of religion for such students, rather than their learning about religious diversity in society and the world? Finally, would children of different religious and secular backgrounds (and those ‘in between’) be *prevented* from learning together about one-another’s religions and worldviews?

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ⁱ I declare an interest, in that I led the group of researchers from England who were involved in the REDCo Project. I was one of the speakers at a meeting about the REDCo Project for members of civil society (including educators, researchers, politicians and members of religious bodies) at the European Parliament in Brussels in December 2008. I was also an invited expert, working with the drafters of the *Toledo Guiding Principles*; specifically, I took part in various collaborative meetings during the drafting period, and provided drafters with material; I was also one of the speakers at the launch of the document in Madrid in November 2007.

ⁱⁱ Incidentally, Gearon says that the REDCo project produced over 20 books; this is a misreading on his part. Most, but not all, volumes about the REDCo project appear in the series Waxmann series *Religious Diversity and Education in Europe* which began as an outlet for two European research groups, one of which was REDCo, but was extended to include research reports from other sources. Gearon confuses the series as a whole with REDCo.

(http://www.waxmann.com/index.php?id=reihen&no_cache=1&tx_p2waxmann_pi1%5Boberkategorie%5D=OKA100024&tx_p2waxmann_pi1%5Breihe%5D=REI100189)

ⁱⁱⁱ Even here, Gearon is inconsistent. The paradigms are presented initially as incompatible or even 'incommensurable', but later we find Gearon advancing the view that the historical-political and socio-cultural paradigms are *complementary* (see Jackson, 2015).

^{iv} The structure changed in 2013; now there is an Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, but no Advisory Council. (<http://www.osce.org/odihr/44455>).

^v It would be interesting at some point to discuss the implications of the very tight schedule for assembling material and writing the document. In my view, issues arising from the strict timescale are more pertinent than the document's connection with the OSCE.