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18 Varieties of Islamic Religious Education and the Link with Citizenship Education

Siebren Miedema

Reconstructive Tools

Today there is a shared notion that Islamic religious education (IRE) combined with good citizenship education (CE) may help to prevent radicalisation and extremism and could lead to deeper knowledge and understanding of different religions and worldviews. It may also encourage pupils to reflect on their own identity with regard to religion or worldview.

In my review of the chapters in this volume, I found several conceptions of IRE in relation to the formulated conceptions of CE. The first conception is *exclusivity*: Islam embodies the one and only truth, and if other religions and worldviews are considered, it happens from within this exclusive Islamic perspective. The second conception is *inclusivity*: Attention is paid to other religions and worldviews, and they may contain elements of truth, but their representation is given from the perspective of Islam. The third conception is *plurality*, which can be organised in two ways: (1) in a pillarised or segregated way where pupils take their “own” confessional religious class, opt out, or take an alternative subject (e.g., ethics/philosophy/citizenship); or (2) in such a way that all religions and worldviews are held equal in terms of truth claims, and participants bring in their stances in substantial dialogues and encounters. Crucial here is reciprocal communication and exchange (Wardekker and Miedema, 2001).

Two other approaches of CE might be helpful as well: (1) *minimal citizenship education* and (2) *maximal citizenship education* (Miedema, 2012). In the former approach, the subject matter is presented in a purely knowledge-based way, with a civics-related content, and transmitted in a formal way. The pupil’s identity is merely seen in formal, institutional, and legal terms, and there is no integration of IRE and CE, which are separate curriculum areas. In the maximal approach, by contrast, the pupils’ development of critical reflection and understanding is stimulated and fostered, and active learning is emphasised. This approach is value-based and process-led and aims at the development of pupils’

opinions and at dialogical skills. The pupil's identity is seen as dynamic rather than static, i.e., as a matter of continuing debate and redefinition. Here, IRE and CE are strongly intertwined.

Conceptions of (I)RE and CE

In the following paragraphs, I present the different positions in IRE from a more closed form to a more open form, and I will point to the related CE position. However, sometimes CE is not explicitly dealt with.

Exclusive

If denominations have an exclusive status in both state and denominational schools, this means that the particular tradition, in this case Islam, claims an absolute truth position, and from this stance other religions and worldviews are treated. It appears that several Muslim schools in France can be considered an example of such exclusivity in respect to IRE. More precisely, IRE is in France provided in most Islamic schools, where it can range from *Qur'anic* memorisation to child-centered IRE inspired by alternative pedagogies. A 2018 IRE handbook makes a connection with topics from the secular state school curriculum, such as moral and citizenship education (in a minimal CE approach).

Inclusive

Some countries opt for an inclusive policy: Islamic denominations have a preferential status, but attention is also given to other religions and worldviews, and sometimes aspects of truth might also be detected there.

Swedish Muslim schools seem to belong to this type, with an IRE approach aiming at teaching *about* as well as *into* Islam. But attention is also paid to other religions and worldviews from an *about* perspective. Due to state regulations, these schools also need to take into account human rights, fundamental democratic values, and the intrinsic value of each person and the environment, and this all is surprisingly combined with maximal CE. In the Swedish state schools, however, the maximal approach to CE is combined with a preference for the Christian tradition and for Western humanism, although presented from a study of religions, i.e., a teaching *about* approach. Islam is also addressed from this “impartial” perspective.

In the Danish case, Lutheran Protestantism still has a preferential position, nowadays also as cultural and national identity marker (minimal approach for CE), while Islam is characterised as an “other religion”. Within the religious boundaries, a pedagogical “enlightenment of life” approach emphasises general formation (*Bildung*), citizenship, and secularity and diversity.

In state schools in Switzerland, Christian RE is traditionally prioritised, but this kind of RE is increasingly complemented or replaced by non-confessional RE. IRE could be added, but this is sparsely done due to fear of public and political opposition or just not knowing the possibilities. An explicit relationship with CE is not mentioned here.

In Bulgaria, there are three Islamic secondary schools. In state and municipal schools, the subject Religion - Islam is offered, either as a compulsory elective or as an elective subject next to Religion - Christianity/Orthodoxy. However, due to secularisation, few pupils are interested in both streams. Since 2018–2019, Religion - Islam has shown an inclusive openness to different spiritual traditions and intends to include moral and citizenship education. It is not clear whether this CE is provided in a minimal or maximal variant.

Greek state schools are impregnated with Greek Orthodox belief. Although there are no special IRE modules in these schools, attention is given to Islam in Greek Orthodox RE classes. In Western Thrace, IRE is an integral part of Muslim schools and state schools. There is no explicit link with CE conceptions here.

In the Netherlands, IRE is given in Islamic elementary and secondary schools. These schools are obliged to meet the same quality criteria as state schools. Accordingly, they are required to deal with other religions and worldviews and to contribute to CE, either in a minimal or in a maximal approach. Islam as a subject matter in a teaching *about* form is part of the primary school curriculum *Geestelijke Stromingen* (spiritual movements). This curriculum is mandatory in primary schools and should be integrated into the curricula of state and denominational schools. Denominational (Islamic or Christian) schools sometimes experience a tension between the “subjective” school subject religious education and the “objective” subject *Geestelijke Stromingen*.

In Norwegian state schools there is no special IRE, but since 1996 Islam is, next to the prioritised Christianity, given more space in a teaching *about* mode than any other religion or worldview. Recently, the focus changed from knowledge to general competencies. A danger is the stereotypical representation of Islam as a pre-modern religion in textbooks. There is no explicit link with CE conceptions.

Finland has two national, Christian churches and an all-encompassing state school system that should focus on the diversity of languages, cultures, and religions and worldviews in the country. Knowledge *about* Islam, but also of other religions and worldviews, should support pupils in becoming responsible members of the Islamic community and of the democratic society and becoming global citizens (a mix between minimal and maximal CE). However, Islam is, as in Denmark, quite often perceived as “other religion”, with all the dangers related to such a view.

IRE in state-funded Islamic schools in England shows resemblances with such schools in the Netherlands. They are obliged to follow the

national curriculum, to teach IRE according to their own guidelines, and to promote fundamental British values. Textbooks need to be educationally and pedagogically in line with the inspectorate. There is openness towards other religions and worldviews in an interfaith way, and CE is provided in a maximal approach. In addition, the non-confessional study of Islam is also addressed in state schools.

In the northern part of Cyprus, Islam has priority in state schools. However, attention is also paid to other religions and worldviews in a teaching *about* form, thus raising secular and democratic individuals (a minimal CE approach). In the southern part, on the contrary, Greek Orthodoxy has priority in a confessional and exclusive way.

Plural

I have not found cases of what I would characterise as *full plurality*, where religions and worldviews are dealt with on an equal truth claim basis and intertwined via dialogue and communication. We see *plurality in its pillarised form*, unfortunately still strongly segregated, for instance in state schools in Belgium (and in a quite similar way also in Dutch state schools), where all pupils of school age take their “own” religious classes, including IRE. In the French part of Belgium, pupils can opt out of RE and take the subject Philosophy and Citizenship. In addition, philosophical questioning, interreligious dialogue, and education for active citizenship should be taken into account in all RE curricula of the French Community (maximum CE). In the Flemish part, religious diversity, human rights, and the danger of religious fanaticism are addressed in all the RE courses. Unfortunately, Flemish IRE textbooks are based on Turkish books, and they are not adapted to the Belgian context. In the French part, there are no official textbooks. Very interesting and highly comparable with the alternative course for RE in the French part is a proposal launched in the Flemish part for an alternative course on worldviews, ethics, and philosophy (LEF), with a strong focus on teaching *about* religions/worldviews.

In Austrian state schools, pupils take RE in their “own” religion, and IRE is offered in two sub-denominational forms (Islam-RE and Alevi-RE). Both forms of IRE should, like any other RE subject, not contradict CE, and they should respect the constitutional pillars and basic European values. These requirements must also meet the standards of modern pedagogy. In theory this is fine, but in practice this is not evident because many IRE teachers lack the required pedagogical skills. Besides, the textbooks are not always in accordance with the values prevalent in the Austrian/European context. Recently, initiatives have been undertaken to train Catholic and Muslim teachers in interreligious learning.

The German system is similar to the Austrian one, with the exception that IRE is only organised as a *regular* school subject (i.e., in addition

to Catholicism, Protestantism, and ethics) in governmental schools of three states. Here, IRE is in line with the pedagogical requirements of the states. Some recent trends go in the direction of interconfessional and dialogical inter-faith teaching and learning, but there is no explicit link with CE conceptions.

Conclusion

Regarding the linkages between IRE and CE in the different countries, most could be categorised in terms of an inclusive position combined with a minimal or maximal CE approach. In some cases, however, the link with CE has not been addressed explicitly.

It will be interesting to see whether developments in the future will tend towards more plurality in IRE and to a maximal conception of CE. It is my guess that where the underlying pedagogical approaches will change from a transmission view (in which the subject matter receives priority) to a more transformative view (in which the priority is the development of the pupil), this trend will become stronger (Miedema, 2014). Due to a further pedagogisation of the religions and worldviews domain, the place of religions and worldviews at school will get full attention.

In line with the last remark, often there is a strong emphasis on the importance of IRE in *countering terrorism and radicalisation*, rather than on the *pedagogical aims* of IRE in combination with CE. From this perspective, edification (*Bildung*) should be emphasised, and the combination of religions/worldviews, CE, and human rights education could be strengthened with an eye on learning to live together in diversity via dialogue and encounter.

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