Thematic Article

Religious Education in the European Context

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Abstract

The current government in Hungary decided to introduce religious education and ethics as compulsory subjects in state schools from 2013 on. This has started a contested debate in Hungarian society about the place of religion in school. Arguments opposing this decision refer to tendencies of secularisation and to decreasing influence of churches in society. It is stated that the government tries to re-invigorate the importance of religion (Christianity) in Hungary for political reasons. This article provides an introduction to the situation of religious education (RE) in Europe from a comparative perspective to support a more differentiated adjudication.

Introduction

The article has two parts. Firstly developments within the Council of Europe and the European Union are introduced. Both institutions are vehicles for implementing policies and disseminating norms and expectations in the field of education policy. Concerning religion they facilitate regular dialogue with churches and religious communities, appreciate their contribution to democracy, social cohesion and citizenship but also expect contributions for the political agenda. The Council of Europe's activities are based on the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law as basic values for European integration and as a background for education activities in which the relation of education and religion is explicitly mentioned. The European Union increasingly integrates education and training into the strategy for developing European integration and acknowledges the existing and different national state-church relationships. The aspect of religion in education is an implicit element of the discourse of the EU.

The second part includes some key characteristics of religious education in Europe, and presents findings of comparative research projects.

1. Religion in the context of the Europeanisation of Education

In a recent study the importance of religion in the context of the Europeanisation of education has been investigated by exploring key documents using mainly qualitative content analysis (Schreiner, 2012). The background of the project is given by a renewed interest in religion in the context of Europe and evidence that Europeanisation processes and dynamics are influencing national systems of education and training.

The interest in religion is nurtured by the fact that religion did not vanish in modernity as some religious sociologists assumed (see Davie, Heelas & Woodhead, 2003). Global attention is given to religion as a result of the tragic events of September 11, 2001 in the USA, their causes and associated incidents that have affected people in many parts of the world. The political dimension of religion has become a decisive dimension of European policy.

The second observation is that national systems of education and training are increasingly influenced by European and global processes. A key message came from the European Council in 2000 in Lisbon "to make Europe by 2010 the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world". This has brought forward a number of initiatives concerning quality and efficiency of the national systems of education and training and how to improve it (Pépin, 2006). Against this background the study investigates if religion is an issue in the context of the Europeanisation of education and explores aspects of religion and education that can be found in key documents of the European institutions.

Theoretical Considerations, Methods and Sample

The concept of Europeanisation is used as an underlying theoretical perspective (Featherstone & Radaelli, 2003; Graziano & Vink, 2007; Lawn & Grek, 2012). It reflects the complexity of processes, including direct effects of EU policy and the Council of Europe's recommendations on domestic change in education. It also includes changes on the level of member states and considers *vertical* and *horizontal* processes (cf. Beck & Grande, 2005). Europeanisation influences processes, policies and institutions (Börzel & Risse, 2003, p. 60). The concept is used to analyse a European Education Space and a European Education Policy (Dale & Robertson, 2009).

The particular combination of research methods used in the study included qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2007) based on elements of *Grounded Theory* and discourse analysis that allowed to describe the European institutions as *loci of discourse production* where positions and perspectives can be found in official and non-official documents.

The Sample consists of 47 documents including recommendations of the Council of Europe such as "religious tolerance in a democratic society" (1993), "education and religion" (2005) or "the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue (2011) (cf. Schreiner, 2012, pp. 88–184). From the European Union the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), the Charter of Basic Rights (2000), and the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) were analysed (cf. Schreiner, 2012, pp. 216–264).

Main Findings and Perspectives

An initial finding is a distinction between the ways in which Council of Europe documents and European Union documents handle the interrelatedness of religion and education. In Council of Europe documents the relationship is *explicit*, whereas European Union documents tend to deal with the interrelationship of religion and education *implicitly* or indirectly. Key issues raised within the texts are religious tolerance, democracy, education and human rights, intercultural dialogue and intercultural education, freedom of religion, lifelong learning and knowledge society, migration and mobility.

Concerning Religion: In the documents of the Council of Europe three different perspectives of religion can be analysed: *religion* as a *private matter*, religion as *collective and organised* and religion as a *cultural fact*. From a diachronic perspective private religion is an established concept in the documents while organised religion gains sympathy and recognition in more current documents (time frame between 1993 and 2011). The agreement that religion is, at least, a 'cultural fact', has received prominence in documents of the Council of Europe and is seen as lowest common denominator. In the context of the European Union no explicit concept of religion is expressed. The EU respects and does not prejudice the status of churches and religious

associations or communities under national law in the Member States and organises regular dialogue with churches and religious communities.

Concerning Education: In the documents of the Council of Europe a high value to education is expressed. Also education is seen as a problem solver of society. There is uncritical confidence in the transmission of knowledge as a key to combat intolerance and stereotypes. No further perspectives on the concept of education are included in the documents (Bergan, 2013; Huber, 2011 as references of a more nuanced debate). In the context of the EU, education has become a European issue with a special role and value for matters of economy and growth (cf. European Council, 2009; European Commission, 2012). Lifelong learning is the guiding principle towards the European Union as an advanced knowledge society and for creating a sense of European citizenship based on understanding and respect for human rights and democracy, and encouraging tolerance and respect for other peoples and cultures (European Parliament & European Council, 2006a, b).

Concerning Religious Education: A general relation between education and religion can be found in Council of Europe documents as well as criteria and expectations concerning teaching about religion and concepts of religious education. Preference of the Council is expressed for a knowledge-based concept of "teaching about religions". The existing range of models of religious education in Europe is not identified or discussed. The relation of education and religion is not an explicit policy issue of the EU, although it is from time to time a subject in the dialogue with churches and religious communities.

Summarising findings one can say that on the one hand religious communities are seen as valid partners of political institutions within civil society, if they follow existing political conditions and frameworks. The danger of a functionalised perception of religion and religious communities has to be carefully recognised in this context. On the other hand the relationship of religion, democracy and society is seen as complex. This can be documented in the following slightly antagonistic findings: (1) religion fades away, but receives increasing importance in society; (2) religion is a private matter, but becomes increasingly an issue in the public sphere; (3) religion is a cultural fact, but for many, religion is a way of life, an embodiment of revealed truth or linked to important ethical convictions.

Perspectives include a plea for a more differentiated perception of religion and space for churches and religions in the public sphere to engage in dialogue with other institutions within civil society, and to shape collaboration between state and religion. This can also prevent an instrumentalisation of religious communities for political interests.

From a pedagogical perspective it can also be argued that education should mean more than promoting employability, flexibility and mobility. Oriented on a human scale, a comprehensive, multi-dimensional concept of education (*Bildung*) is needed

complementing the part of education that is focused on skills and knowledge serving employability.

Finally, the relation between religion and education should go beyond the knowledge aspect of teaching about religion. The transmission of knowledge should be complemented by exploring other aspects of religion to promote a concept of religious competence that is not limited to knowledge but includes also skills, attitudes and the volition to deal with one's own religion as well as with the religion of the other.

2. The situation of religious education in Europe

The second part of the article provides an introduction to religious education in Europe while exploring five key characteristics with illustrations how they shape RE in a specific context.

It exists in nearly all European states. There are different traditions, different concepts and different approaches (Franken & Loobuyck 2011; Jäggle, Rothgangel & Schlag, 2013; Jackson, Miedema, Weisse & Willaime 2007; Kuyk, Jensen, Lankshear et al., 2007; Miedema, 2007). In many contexts, such as in Hungary, religious education is contested as a school subject. Debates happen within two contradictory perspectives: On the one hand, RE is seen as a relic of former times. Proponents of this view argue that in a neutral and impartial state RE should no longer have a place in public or state school. In a different perspective, religious education is seen as making a vital contribution to identity formation as well as to orientation and dialogue in an increasingly plural Europe with a manifold variety of religions and cultures. The quality of existing approaches to RE is a central topic in the political and academic discourse. The majority of European states acknowledge the need for RE in school, while the nature of the subject and the appropriateness of different approaches give rise to debate. Concepts differ, e.g. on how intense religious communities should be involved in organising RE in public schools or how 'religious' the subject should be.

Three basic types of RE can be introduced while taking account of the fourth "type" of no RE in school:

1. Teaching organised by religious communities with exclusive responsibility for religious education (denominational/confessional/catechetical; mainly a voluntary subject, e.g. in Poland, Ireland, Italy).
2. Teaching organised in collaboration between state authorities and religious communities (denominational/confessional/non-confessional; voluntary and/or obligatory subject; e.g. in Austria, Belgium, England, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Russia, Spain, some parts of Switzerland).
3. Teaching organised exclusively by state authorities (non-confessional, religious studies; obligatory subject, e.g. in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, some parts of Switzerland).

A different perspective on the situation of RE can be explored by main aims of RE or general directions of teaching: 'learning religion' refers to a narrow confessional approach, an introduction to a specific faith tradition, 'learning about religion' refers mainly to the transmission of knowledge about religions and its meaning for believers, and 'learning from religion' that should "enable pupils to widen and deepen their understanding of both what lies at the heart of religions and their interpretation of the human condition" (Teece, 2010, p. 101).

The approach to RE is influenced by the national and regional context.

Each approach to religious education has its own 'biography' and history is shaped by the interplay of different factors. The main are as follows:

Religious landscape. The south of Europe tends to be dominated by Catholicism (Austria, Italy, Spain, Portugal, to some extent France, as well as Belgium, Poland, Ireland and Lithuania), whereas the north is more Lutheran-Protestant (Scandinavian countries). Central Europe tends to have mixed religious landscapes (Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands), while Orthodoxy is dominant in most Eastern European countries as well as in Greece. Finally Islam is the major religion in Turkey, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina (cf. Kodelja & Bassler, 2004).

Image of religion in society. If, for any reason, religion has a negative image in society, it influences perceptions of RE as a compulsory subject in school. In countries that were under a socialist regime until 1989, attempts for new or renewed approaches to religious education have been started and faced an emotional debate in society for different reasons. This can be illustrated by the example of Macedonia where the High Court has disagreed to a proposal to implement RE in school because of the separation of state and religion or the situation in Estonia where the public debate became very emotional about RE in school (cf. Schihalejev, 2010; Valk 2007). A background of the current debate in Hungary may also relate to the different perception of religion in society.

Relationship between state and religion ranges from a clear separation between religion and state (France) to a relation of sympathy, state religion and state church (England, Poland, Ireland, Greece, Norway). Furthermore, in different countries the legal status of religion has influenced the education system especially when it comes to private schools. The strict separation in France includes the right for the Catholic Church to establish schools and today about 20% of all French pupils and students attend 8800 private Catholic schools.

Education system. The fact that in the Netherlands two third of all schools have a religious affiliation comes from the 'solution' of the controversial debate about RE in school at the beginning of the 19th century. Due to the parents' right in education it was agreed that the public school should be religiously 'neutral' and that the parents can establish their school according to their religious belief. The result has been what is

termed as 'pillarisation' of society and schools along denominational lines (cf. Avest, Bertram-Troost & Miedema, 2011). The current debate in the Netherlands includes a proposal to implement a subject called Religious Citizenship Education (Miedema, 2012).

Labels do not work to characterise the existing approaches to RE.

It may be no surprise that labels such as 'confessional', 'non-confessional' or 'religious studies' fail to distinguish adequately between different existing approaches. What is conceived as 'confessional' in one country can differ significantly from the understanding in another country, in conceptual and in practical perspectives. In the English context, the term 'confessional' is often close to 'indoctrination' (cf. Copley, 2005) whereas in Germany it means the collaborative responsibility of religious communities for RE together with the state (cf. Schweitzer, 2011).

Converging tendencies

A survey of different objectives and goals for RE in different European countries reveals that much more is shared in common than one can expect due to the different concepts. Converging tendencies include that the general rationale of RE in most European countries is based on educational principles. This is also valid when religious communities play a crucial role for RE. RE in school differs from religious nurture outside school. The following objectives are dominant in most syllabi of RE in Europe: (1) to encourage pupils to be sensitive to religion and the religious dimension of life; (2) to provide orientation among the variety of existing religious traditions and worldviews including non-religious convictions and (3) to provide knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and experiences.

Existing approaches are challenged by the need to explore concepts that can respond to and accommodate existing plurality in European societies. An academic discourse happens around the general aims of "identity and dialogue" and the possible contribution of RE (Jackson et al., 2007; Kodelja & Bassler, 2004; Schweitzer, 2013). The following issues are central in that discourse: Developing openness towards different religions and organising inter-religious learning, using a process oriented concept of religion and culture and raising the question on how to integrate students' experiences and attitudes in an adequate manner.

Common standards for RE?

It may be no surprise that in a situation of increasing Europeanisation of education and also religious education the issue of common standards comes up. Those standards could clarify what RE is about and how RE is embedded in a general educational debate. Friedrich Schweitzer put forward the following elements (Schweitzer, 2013, p. 24).

(1) Religion must and can be taught in line with the criteria of general education (*educational quality*).

(2) Religious education is of relevance to the public and must be taught accordingly (*contribution to general education*).

(3) Religious education must include some type of interdenominational and interreligious learning, in line with the increasingly pluralist situation of many countries (*dialogical quality, contribution to peace and tolerance*).

(4) Religious education must be based on the children's right to religion and religious education (*child centred approach based on children's rights*).

(5) Religious education teachers must be professionals in the sense that they have reached a level of self-reflexivity based on academic work which allows for a critical appropriation of their religious background and biographies (*professional teaching*).

Another example for an attempt of identifying standards for teaching religion is provided by the OSCE and called *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (TGP) (OSCE & ODIHR, 2007). Their rationale is based on two core principles: first, there is positive value in teaching that emphasises respect for everyone's right to freedom of religion and belief, and second, that teaching about religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes (cf. Jackson, 2009). The underlying argument of Schweitzer's proposal is rooted in a pedagogical perspective that takes account of children's rights and shaped by his German context. The OSCE proposal is based on a 'three dimensional security' concept where security is not only considered in politico-military terms but also through its human dimension and economic dimension.[7]

While those examples of guiding standards are no more than a first beginning for a professional consensus, it is evident that shared expectations become more and more important. A different contribution for that comes from increasing comparative research in RE that is presented in the next section.

Comparative Research in RE

A final aspect refers to the number of comparative research projects that have been launched during recent years into religious education, covering issues such as the relevance of the subject, models of religious education in schools and their impact on general education, issues of religious competence and religious diversity and education. The findings of these initiatives promote a more and more differentiated picture about RE in Europe. An epitome is the REDCo project (Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries) that had its focus on the value of religion and religious education for 14 to 16-year-olds. The study was conducted in eight European countries dealing with different perspectives of the general question on how far religion is a factor of stereotypes and conflicts or a source of dialogue and peaceful living together. Results of this European Union

sponsored project are published in the Waxmann book series 'Religious Diversity and Education in Europe' (cf. Jackson et al., 2007; Knauth et al., 2008). One of the key research findings of REDCo was that students are interested in learning about religions in school, irrespective of their religious position, and that they desire peaceful coexistence across religious differences.

The research network TRES (Teaching Religion in a multicultural European Society) including faculties of theology, religious education and religious science from 26 European countries focused on how to teach religion in the framework of academic theology and religious studies (Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009). Comparative studies among RE teachers in different countries show that there is a convergence in the use of methods in the teaching. Also the conceptual difference between "teaching religion", "teaching about religion" and "teaching from religion" has been approved less relevant for teachers and their teaching (cf. Schweitzer, Riegel & Ziebertz, 2009, p. 252).

Another research project is organised by the University of Vienna. A team of researchers proposed a catalogue of 12 questions as a frame for articles about national situations and the different ways in which religious education is organised and taught in European schools. The first volume of a planned series of six books includes articles about the situation of RE in Central Europe (Jäggle et al., 2013).

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