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FOREWORD

The place of the study of religion within public education, especially in publicly funded schools, has become a hot topic across Europe and on the wider international scene. This book, an engaging research report by Olga Schihalejev, represents a particularly interesting and valuable European case study. Of course, the book is extremely important for those considering the development of religious education specifically in Estonia, including teachers, academics, policy makers, politicians and religious bodies. Its contents should – must – be widely read and discussed in Estonia. However, the book is also highly valuable and relevant for those outside Estonia, whether in other parts of Europe or in other countries where the place of studies of religion in education is being discussed. The history of Estonia is unique, and that history will and should influence any Estonian discussion about the role of religion in schools. However, the questions faced by Estonia in considering this issue are essentially the same as those faced by other countries: Why are such studies important in today's world? What are the barriers to including studies of religion in the curricula of publicly funded schools? How might studies of religion be conducted so that their aim is to inform and stimulate discussion and reflection rather than either to propagate or to disparage religion? How might studies of religion be related to the questions and concerns of the young? What are the views of young people on whether or how religious diversity should be covered in schools? How do such studies relate to other areas of education concerned with values, such as education for democratic citizenship or human rights education? Such questions show why the Estonian case – one in which currently the study of religions is marginalised – is so interesting and important for non-Estonians. It provides a unique point of comparison with regard to questions like these. But Estonia also needs to be seen in the wider European context. It is, for example, a member of the European Union and of the Council of Europe, so any Estonian discussion of the place of religion in schools needs to be seen against wider European and international debates. No country today can be seen in isolation. From the outset, Dr Schihalejev's book sets the distinctively Estonian discussion firmly in the context of the wider European debate.

Why has the study of religion in public schools become such an important topic in Europe and internationally? In many countries, but especially in those where there has been a sharp distinction between religion and state – and Estonia is one of them – religion essentially has been regarded as a private matter. Estonia is one of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe. It is telling that before 2002 no Council of Europe educational project dealt with the study of religions in public education, precisely because religion was felt to belong to the private sphere. As acknowledged within the Council of Europe, it was the

events of September the 11th, 2001 in New York and Washington that provided a wake up call for those habitually excluding religion from public – including educational – discussion (Jackson, 2010). 9/11 propelled religion into public debate. Thus, in 2002 the Council of Europe launched its first project on teaching about religions in schools. The rationale for this was concerned with the relationship of religion to culture. Everyone, regardless of whether they held religious beliefs or not, must surely appreciate that religion is simply *there* in the world. It was argued that, regardless of the truth or falsity of religious claims, religion is a part of life and culture and therefore should be understood by all citizens as part of their education. It was on this basis that the Council of Europe launched a project on the study of religions as part of intercultural education. There were several outcomes from the project. One was the publication of a reference book for schools, aimed especially at those countries with little or no study of religions in public education (Keast, 2007). But most importantly, the Committee of Ministers – the Foreign Ministers of all 47 member states, including Estonia – agreed to a policy recommendation that *all* member states should include the impartial study of religions within the curricula of their schools. The recommendation (Council of Europe, 2008) should be studied closely by educators, policy makers and politicians across Europe.

Independently from the Council of Europe, another major European institution concerned with human rights also considered the place of the study of religions and beliefs in public education. This is the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE was founded in the 1970s, and includes as participant states most European countries (including Estonia), plus the USA and Canada. The security brief of the OSCE includes the human dimension as well as the military/political and economic dimensions; hence it has an Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). As with the Council of Europe, the ODIHR conducted a project to identify principles on which participant states could develop policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious beliefs in schools across its huge geographical region. The result was the publication of a standard setting document, the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, named after the city in which the drafting team first worked on the text, and in recognition of Toledo's historical role in communication between those of different religions (OSCE, 2007). Again, this important document should be studied and used as a tool by educators, policy makers and politicians across Europe and North America and beyond.

However, the development of policy requires much more than the implementation of generic recommendations. Policy makers need detailed knowledge of what is actually happening 'on the ground', so to speak. In this respect, it is important to understand particular societies – their history, social composition, public attitudes, current educational practices and the views of students and

teachers. This is where REDCo (Religion, Education, Dialogue, Conflict), a large scale inter-European research project involving eight countries,¹ is able to provide large amounts of relevant data at the national level to complement and inform European policy recommendations.

In the present case, Olga Schihalejev's extensive, mixed methods research, conducted as part of the REDCo Project, provides exactly the kind of data needed to inform public discussion and policy development in Estonia. It is written less than 20 years after Estonia regained independence, following nearly 50 years in which the country was part of the Soviet Union, and against the background of an educational system in which religion has a very minor role. Currently, according to Estonian law, schools only have to organise religious education classes if a minimum of 15 students or their parents make a request. Thus it is not taught in the majority of schools, and in those where it is, classes are often held out of normal school hours. Although the subject is non-confessional, it is widely perceived as promoting religion, and public awareness of the kinds of approach advocated by the Council of Europe and the OSCE is low. As Dr Schihalejev remarks, 'Insufficient legal status for the subject, the shadow of the former Soviet ideology in people's attitudes, the lack of qualified teachers and the overloaded curriculum make the organisation of religious education at a school level very difficult' (p. 55). Thus, the majority of students in Estonia acquire their knowledge, attitudes and views about religion by studying it in subjects such as history, civic education, and literature, although a few schools offer teaching about religion in subjects with titles such as 'history of culture' or 'worldview studies', rather than 'religious education', thus getting round the strictures of the current legislation.

Through a series of research studies, using both a quantitative approach and a variety of qualitative methods (including ethnographic interviewing and using video to study classroom interaction), Olga Schihalejev explores Estonian young people's attitudes to religion and religious diversity. Her research involved the investigation of their views on the role of schools in promoting dialogue and tolerance for different worldviews, and identified how religious education, as currently practised, affects these views. Her central research question was: 'What are the hindrances and potentials for developing tolerance towards religious diversity among 14 to 16 year-old Estonian students in the context of school, and of religious education in particular?'

Her detailed findings will be read in the book, but a few can be highlighted here. Religion was not a central issue for many Estonian young people, and the

1 England, Estonia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, the Russian Federation and Spain. The project took place between 2006 and 2009 and was funded by the European Commission as part of its Framework 6 programme. See Jackson et al. (2007) for accounts of the place of the study of religions in the education systems of the REDCo countries.

few involved with religion tended to keep their views private. For many, a secular worldview was seen as the norm. Students avoided conflicts about religious issues and were wary of entering into dialogue about religion with their limited skills and knowledge. In comparison to young people from other REDCo countries, Estonian students valued respect for religion less and viewed religious people more negatively. Religious students were found to be vulnerable in this climate. However, religiously attached students and those who studied religious education were more tolerant of others' views. Avoidance of religious topics, combined with little knowledge of religion, sometimes led to the unchallenged expression of bigoted attitudes. Students who did encounter religious diversity at school – even if they had negative experiences with members of different religions – tended to be more open to dialogue on religious issues than other students.

Students who did study religion appreciated this as much as their peers in the other REDCo countries. Interestingly, especially in relation to the recommendations of the Council of Europe and the OSCE, both students with and without a religious attachment believed that schools should provide them with objective knowledge about religions to prepare them for life in a pluralistic society. Those students who experienced religious education considered that it increased their tolerance towards others, and prepared them for dialogue with those having worldviews different from their own. Studying religious education did not make them more religious.

Dr Schihalejev's classroom interaction studies show that teacher centred instruction and content oriented aims were the main obstacles to dialogue. Lessons in which the teacher took the leading role did not encourage students to explore a topic, but led them to become dependent on the teachers' arguments. The current knowledge-centred approach was seen to discourage students from discussing their own views. Dr Schihalejev's findings should be of considerable interest to teachers and policy makers, as should her argument that a more dialogical approach could be fostered, concentrating on student interaction and with more agency given to students.

On an international level, the Estonian case is particularly interesting in terms of seeing possibilities for developing religious education against the background of a high degree of secularism in society. Moreover, the opportunity to get responses from young people with a range of possibilities for experiencing or not experiencing religious education at different points of schooling makes Estonia a valuable source for researchers in other kinds of setting.

While some of the REDCo countries had four or five researchers covering the fieldwork and research writing, most of the Estonian work was done by Olga Schihalejev, working under the supervision of Dr Pille Valk. This was a truly remarkable achievement on Olga Schihalejev's part, especially given the wide range of research methods used – something unusual even in a doctoral

thesis. Pille Valk also led the whole REDCo project's quantitative research culminating with the publication of a very substantial, cross-European research report (Valk et al., 2009). It was a delight to see both Pille and Olga in their own Estonian environment when the whole REDCo team met at the University of Tartu in 2006.

At a personal level, I was honoured to be invited to co-supervise Olga Schihalejev's doctoral research at the University of Tartu. This was a very rewarding and inspiring experience for me, and included a period in which Olga came to the University of Warwick as a Visiting Fellow in Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit. Pille Valk became seriously ill and consequently, at the stage of thesis writing, my involvement as supervisor became more intensive than had originally been planned. Very sadly, Pille died in September 2009 and she is remembered very fondly by all the REDCo team. Olga Schihalejev's PhD thesis was examined in November 2009. This book is based closely on the text of the thesis, making Dr Schihalejev's excellent research on Estonia available to policy makers, teachers, students, scholars and researchers internationally. The book provides some fascinating insights into the Estonian story, raises important questions of international interest and, not least, offers a wonderful tribute to the work and memory of Pille Valk.

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