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Teaching about Religions in the Public Sphere: European Policy Initiatives and the Interpretive Approach¹

Robert Jackson

Abstract

This paper charts a policy shift within international and European inter-governmental institutions towards advocating the study of religions (or the study of religions and beliefs) in European publicly funded schools. The events of September 11, 2001 in the USA acted as a ‘wake up call’ in relation to recognising the legitimacy and importance of the study of religions in public education. For example, policy recommendations from the Council of Europe and guiding principles for the study of religions and beliefs from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe have been developed and are under consideration by member or participating states of both bodies. In translating policy into practice, appropriate pedagogies need to be adopted or developed. The paper uses the example of the interpretive approach to indicate how issues of representation, interpretation and reflexivity might be addressed in studying religious diversity within contemporary societies in ways which both avoid stereotyping and engage students’ interest.

Keywords

Council of Europe, European Commission, European Union, interpretive approach, reflexivity, religious education, religious studies, representation OSCE, ODIHR, public sphere, teaching about religions and beliefs, UNESCO, United Nations

Introduction

The study of religions as part of public education has become a ‘hot topic’ in recent times across Europe and on the wider international scene. This is partly due to the global attention given to religion as a result of the events of September 11, 2001 in the USA, their causes, on-going consequences and associated incidents that have affected

¹ This article is based on the author’s keynote lecture at the European Association for the Study of Religions conference, held in Bremen, September, 2007.

people in many parts of the world. However, arguments for policy changes encouraging the study of religious diversity in public education were being advanced well before 9/11. In one international institution, the Council of Europe, the shift from argument to policy development was held back by a reluctance to address a complex and controversial area reflected in different histories of religion and state within member countries and by a reluctance to acknowledge issues concerning religion as a mode of discourse within the public sphere. As noted in a Council of Europe document, the attacks on the World Trade Centre and other targets in September 2001, acted as a 'wake up call', bringing the issues directly to the attention of influential international bodies and precipitating action at the level of public policy (Council of Europe 2002).

I will note the initiatives taken by key international bodies, namely the United Nations (including UNESCO), the European Union (and European Commission), the Council of Europe, and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in encouraging the development of studies about religions (and beliefs) in public education. The main impetus for these initiatives lies in a combination of expressing respect for human rights in the public sphere (through the development of tolerance and respect for freedom of religion or belief, for example) and in fostering social cohesion through combating ignorance and developing understanding and tolerance for difference. Next I will give a sketch of current provision in Europe in relation to 'religious education' (understood in some rather different ways in different national systems of education), noting some tensions between certain concepts of religious education and 'teaching about religions'. Then I will consider issues of pedagogy, using the interpretive approach as an example of a pedagogy for what has been variously called 'teaching about religions and beliefs' (OSCE 2007), 'the religious dimension of intercultural education' (Council of Europe 2004), 'open and impartial religious education' (Jackson 1997), 'religion education' (Chidester 2006) and 'integrative religious education' (Alberts 2006, 2007). In this overview of the interpretive approach, I will draw attention to some issues relating to the application of the reflexive element of the approach in some European societies.

The United Nations and UNESCO

The United Nations (UN) is a global association of governments whose stated aims are to facilitate co-operation in international law, international security, economic development, social progress and human rights issues.² In 2001, before the events of September 11, the International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation to Freedom of Religion or Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination was held under the auspices of the then United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Mr. Abdelfattah Amor. The Final Document of the Conference took the view that that education, especially school education, should contribute to promoting tolerance and respect for freedom of religion or belief. Its recommendations included the strengthening of a non-discriminatory perspective in education and of knowledge in relation to freedom of religion or belief.³ The document influenced a number of initiatives, including the work of the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief through its programme on Teaching for Tolerance (eg Jackson & McKenna 2005; Kaymakcan & Leirvik 2007; Larsen and Plesner 2002).⁴

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)⁵ has been involved in human rights and inter-cultural education over a long period. In 1974, UNESCO's General Conference adopted Recommendations Concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms that have shaped its work in this area.⁶ The Dakar Framework for Action 2000-2015 is the basis of UNESCO's priorities, and refers directly to the role of schools in promoting understanding among religious groups, emphasising the importance of governmental institutions in

² <http://www.un.org/> (accessed 4 September 2007).

³ Final Document of the International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation to Freedom of Religion or Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, Commission on Human Rights, Report by Mr. Abdelfattah Amor, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Executive summary, 14 March 2002, E/CN.4/2002/73. See also Larsen & Plesner (2002:12-13).

⁴ <http://www.oslocoalition.org/t4t.php> (accessed 22 November 2007).

⁵ UNESCO's remit is to encourage international peace and universal respect by promoting collaboration among nations (www.unesco.org) (accessed 4 September 2007).

⁶ Recommendations Concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education Relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, (1974), http://www.unesco.org/education/nfsunesco/pdf/Peace_e.pdf (accessed 2 September 2007).

developing partnerships with religious groups in educational contexts.⁷ Also, UNESCO's Inter-religious Dialogue Programme aims to promote understanding between religions or beliefs and supports education in the field of inter-religious dialogue through the publication of pedagogical material.

To return to the UN more broadly, in 2005 the UN Secretary-General launched an initiative, co-sponsored by the Prime Ministers of Spain and Turkey, for an 'Alliance of Civilizations' to respond to Huntington's idea of a clash of civilizations. He established a high level group of distinguished people with the task of producing practical recommendations to counter the 'clash of civilizations' view. The report, (presented in November 2006), includes the recommendation that 'Education systems, including religious schools, must provide students with a mutual respect and understanding for the diverse religious beliefs, practices and cultures in the world'.⁸ This takes the view that ignorance is often a cause of hostility towards religions, and that educational materials should be developed reflecting a consensus view. This recommendation influenced the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's decision to develop guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs for use in its participating states (see below).

European Union (EU) and European Commission (EC)

In 2005, the Council of the European Union (heads of state and the President of the European Commission) adopted a resolution on the response of educational systems to racism and xenophobia which emphasises the value of using teaching materials that reflect Europe's cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.⁹

The former European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, now the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), published a number of reports on racism and xenophobia in the EU, which included recommendations on

⁷ The Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments, adopted by the World Education Forum, Dakar, Senegal, 26-28 April 2000, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121147e.pdf> (accessed 2 September 2007).

⁸ Report of the High Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations, 13 November 2006, Chapter VI, para. 6.8, available at http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf (accessed 2 September 2007).

⁹ Response of Educational Systems to the Problem of Racism, Resolution of the Council [of the European Union], 23 October 1995, Official Journal C 312 of 23.11.1995, available at <http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/cha/c10413.htm> (accessed 4 September 2007).

promoting inter-religious dialogue, including through education.¹⁰

Perhaps the most important recent initiative offered by the EC is its support for research in the field of religions and education. Through the Framework 6 programme, the EC has sponsored research into varieties of teaching about religions or beliefs that promote dialogue and address conflict. The project is entitled ‘Religion in Education: A contribution to dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European Countries?’ (REDCo). The research proposal was submitted as part of the EU Framework 6: ‘Citizens and governance in a knowledge based society’ research field, under Research Priority Area 7: ‘New forms of citizenship and cultural identities’. The Project was designed to contribute to section 7.2.1., ‘Values and religions in Europe’.

The project’s main aim is to establish and compare the potentials and limitations of religion in the educational fields of selected European countries and regions. It brings together scholars from nine universities in Germany (2), England, Norway, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Estonia and the Russian Federation. The project aims to identify approaches and policies that can contribute to making religion in education a factor promoting dialogue in the context of European development. Its work includes a series of discrete national studies, European overviews (Jackson *et al.* 2007), cross-European studies (including qualitative and quantitative studies of adolescents’ attitudes towards the study of religions in schools) and comparative studies. The Project began its work in March 2006 and is scheduled to end in February 2009.¹¹ As well as being of value in its own right, the project is likely to provide a platform for future European research in the field of religions and education.

¹⁰ See, for instance, the report EUMC, Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia, (EUMC, Vienna, December 2006), http://eumc.europa.eu/eumc/material/pub/muslim/Manifestations_EN.pdf (accessed 4 September 2007).

¹¹ <http://www.redco.uni-hamburg.de/web/3480/3481/index.html> (accessed 4 September 2007).

*Council of Europe (CoE)*¹²

The values of freedom of religion or belief and education for tolerance are embedded in Council of Europe documents, such as article nine of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms¹³ and article twelve of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.¹⁴ However, it is only post 9/11 that the Council of Europe has become directly involved in developing ideas for handling religion in the context of public education. Two main initiatives have been taken, one within the Directorate IV (Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport) and its work on intercultural education, and the other through the auspices of the then Commissioner for Human Rights.

The religious dimension of intercultural education

Within the Council of Europe, a view of intercultural education has gradually emerged, concerned with developing competences and attitudes enabling individuals to respect the rights of others, developing skills of critical empathy and fostering dialogue with others from different backgrounds (Council of Europe 2002). This approach was developed in projects in subjects such as history and education for democratic citizenship but did not include attention to religion. Religion was avoided because of the different relationships between religion and state across Europe, because of the diversity of current arrangements in member states on the place of religion in schools (reflecting histories involving religious conflict) and especially because, as a public body, the Council has to maintain neutrality with regard to the expression of views on religions.

However, at the political level, the atrocities of September 11, 2001 triggered a shift

¹² The Council is an inter-governmental organisation founded in 1949 and based in Strasbourg, France. It comprises 47 member states currently and its aims include protecting human rights, pluralist democracy and the rule of law and seeking solutions to problems such as discrimination against minorities, xenophobia and intolerance (Council of Europe 2004b). The Council's work leads to European conventions and agreements in the light of which member states may amend their own legislation. The key political bodies of the Council are the Parliamentary Assembly, the Committee of Ministers and various specialist conferences of Ministers.

¹³ The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, available at <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/005.htm> (accessed 4 September 2007).

¹⁴ Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, available at [http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/minorities/2_framework_convention_monitoring/1_texts/PDF_H\(1995\)010%20E%20FCNM%20and%20Explanatory%20Report.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/minorities/2_framework_convention_monitoring/1_texts/PDF_H(1995)010%20E%20FCNM%20and%20Explanatory%20Report.pdf) (accessed 4 September 2007).

in policy. Through the Committee of Ministers, the Council of Europe formulated its response to include safeguarding fundamental values and investing in democracy. In relation to the latter, the then Secretary General, Walter Schwimmer, affirmed that intercultural and interfaith dialogue would become a key theme for the Council, proposing:

...action to promote a better understanding between cultural and/or religious communities through school education, on the basis of shared principles of ethics and democratic citizenship. (Council of Europe 2002)

9/11 is thus a symbol for the study of religion to emerge as a new priority for European public policy on education. This priority was, in effect, an extension of previous efforts to combat racism and promote democratic citizenship within the Council agreed at the Vienna Summit in 1993.¹⁵ However, the Council had ‘...no overall intercultural concept, strategy or recent normative text capable of easy extension specifically to cover religious diversity as well’, recognising that ‘existing activities do not deal with issues of religion in education’, and concluding that ‘a new activity is required; and the importance and complexity of the subject indicate making it a full-scale project’ (Council of Europe 2002).

In early 2002, the Council set up a working party to examine the issues, prior to the establishment of a project suggesting methods and approaches for integrating the study of religion into intercultural education in the public domain. The key condition for including religion as a cross-European topic in education was that, despite different views on religion at the personal and societal levels, all could agree that religion is a ‘cultural fact’ and that knowledge and understanding of religion at this level is highly relevant to good community and personal relations and is therefore a legitimate concern of public policy. This was not an attempt to *reduce* religion to culture, but a recognition that the presence of religions in society was the lowest common denominator with which all European states could work in an educational context.

¹⁵ http://www.coe.int/T/e/human_rights/ecri/5-Archives/2-Other_texts/2-Vienna_Summit/Declaration/Declaration_Vienna_Summit.asp (accessed 15 May 2006).

The Working Party's proposals, following discussion at a forum on intercultural education, religious diversity and dialogue in Strasbourg in September 2002, were adopted in modified form by the Committee of Ministers. European experts in religious and intercultural education met in Paris in June 2003 to identify the key issues in relation to religious diversity and intercultural education, to examine their implications for pedagogy and to make policy recommendations for the Education Ministers' conference on intercultural education to be held in Athens in November 2003. At this workshop there was an initial suspicion by some of the intercultural educators of the aims of specialists in religious education. It became clear that, as a result of their academic specialisation and national focus, many in each field were ignorant of the work of the others; there was especially an ignorance of work done on open and impartial approaches to the study of religions in schools. Once intercultural educators became aware of the range of ideas that had been developed in presenting religions impartially, a genuine dialogue was established, and fruitful collaborative work followed.

In relation to policy, the view was taken that, whatever any particular state's system of religious education, children should have education about religious and secular diversity as part of their intercultural education. The 2003 Athens Conference of the European Ministers of Education endorsed the project.¹⁶ Issues related to the project were discussed at a high profile conference for educational decision-makers, professionals and representatives of civil society, held in Oslo in June 2004 (Council of Europe 2004).

The Council then appointed a group of specialists in religious and intercultural education to collaborate in producing a reference book for educators, administrators and policy makers to deal with the issue of religious diversity – theoretical perspectives, key concepts, pedagogies and wider questions of religious diversity in schools, including school governance and management in Europe's schools (Keast 2007).

¹⁶ For more detailed information see the webpage entitled The Europe of Cultural Co-operation, available at http://www.coe.int/t/e/cultural_co-operation/education/intercultural_education/overview.asp (accessed 4 September 2007).

The Steering Committee for Education also submitted a recommendation to the Committee of Ministers on the management of religious diversity in schools, based on the project's approach. The draft Ministerial recommendation's aim¹⁷ is to ensure that governments take into account the religious dimension of intercultural education at the levels of *education policy*, in the form of clear education principles and objectives, *institutions*, especially through open learning settings and inclusive policies, and *professional development of teaching-staff*, through the provision of adequate training.

The recommendation provides a set of principles that can be used by all 47 member states. These include the following:

- agreement that religion is at least a “cultural fact” that contributes, along with other elements such as language and historical and cultural traditions, to social and individual life;
- information on and knowledge of religions and philosophies fall within the public sphere and should be taught in order to develop tolerance as well as mutual understanding and trust;
- religious or philosophical conceptions of the world and beliefs develop on the basis of individual learning and experience, and should not be entirely predefined by one's family or community;
- an integrated approach to religious, moral and civic values should be encouraged in education;
- intercultural dialogue and its religious dimension are an essential precondition for the development of tolerance and a culture of “living together”. (Council of Europe 2007)

The document recommends that the governments of member states should draw on the principles in their current or future educational reforms, in order to promote tolerance and the development of a culture of “living together”, and should bring these to the attention of relevant public and private bodies.¹⁸

¹⁷ At the time of writing (October 2007) the draft recommendation is awaiting approval by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

¹⁸ The draft policy recommendation and the project book were discussed at the first of 3 regional

Proposal for a European Centre

A second initiative made within the Council of Europe was prompted by the then Commissioner for human rights, Mr. Alvaro Gil-Robles, who set up a series of annual meetings, including representatives of religions in Europe, academics and politicians from member states to discuss the role of religious bodies in promoting human rights and addressing social issues. These seminars began in 2000, turning their attention to religious education at the meetings in Malta (2004) and Kazan in the Russian Federation (2006).

The Maltese consultation discussed the possibility of establishing a basic programme for teaching about religions in all member states, and considered the establishment of a European Centre for Religious Education focusing on human rights (McGrady 2006). The recommendations of the Maltese seminar were considered by the Parliamentary Assembly in 2005,¹⁹ which made recommendations to the Committee of Ministers, including the provision of generic, adaptable study modules for primary and secondary schools, of initial and in-service teacher training in religious studies, and the establishment of a European teacher training institute for the comparative study of religions. All of this was to be done with the objective of promoting understanding, not instilling faith (sections 13-14).²⁰ The 2006 seminar, held at Kazan in the Russian Federation (22-23 February), took the discussion further.²¹

The 2005 recommendations of the Parliamentary Assembly were discussed by the Committee of Ministers on May 24th 2006. The Ministers welcomed the recommendations in principle, but set them in the context of various policy statements

debates organised by the Council of Europe (held in Athens, 8-9 October, 2007) designed to consider the implications of the project recommendations for policy development in particular states.

¹⁹ <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta05/EREC1720.htm> (accessed 4 September 2007).

²⁰ Parliamentary Assembly, 4 October 2005 Recommendation 1720 (2005) <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta05/EREC1720.htm> (accessed 9 June 2006).

²¹ The conclusion to the seminar report states that:

‘In the majority of Council of Europe member states the new generations do not even receive an education in their own religious heritage, much less that of others. For this reason, it had previously been suggested to establish an Institute capable of contributing to the development of teaching programmes, methods and materials in the member states. At the same time this Institute would serve as a research centre on these matters. It should also be a training centre for instructors, a meeting place and a forum for dialogue and exchange. Course content should be defined in close collaboration with representatives of the different religions traditionally present in Europe’ (Anon 2006).

on developing intercultural dialogue (within and beyond Europe), including the religious dimension. Attention was drawn to the Council's project on the intercultural education and religious diversity (see above), especially to its reference book (Keast 2007), which encourages impartiality, open mindedness and a critical approach.

Although not stated explicitly, the Committee of Ministers considered that the recommendations from the Parliamentary Assembly, relating only to teaching about religions, were too narrow in relation to the establishment of a European Centre. The Chair of the Education Steering Committee reiterated the Committee's interest in setting up a network, centre or 'pôle' of excellence for the training of education staff in the Council of Europe's fields of competence, such as education for democratic citizenship and human rights and intercultural education, noting that training for teachers on education about religion could be featured as part of the Centre's programme.²²

A feasibility study was commissioned, which recommended the establishment of such an interdisciplinary Centre.²³ Subsequently, a major international conference on 'Dialogue of Cultures and Inter-Faith Co-operation' (the Volga Forum) included in its final declaration a statement expressing the participants' support for the project 'aiming at setting up, in the framework of the Council of Europe, a pôle of excellence on human rights and democratic citizenship education, taking into account the religious dimension'.²⁴ At the time of writing, discussions are proceeding on establishing an interdisciplinary centre, with support and funding from the Norwegian authorities. It is hoped that the Centre could begin its work some time in 2008, which is the Year for Intercultural Dialogue of the European Union. It is envisaged that the centre would deal with research, information sharing and with the training of

²² <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc06/EDOC10944.htm> (accessed 13 June 2006).

²³ The present author was commissioned to undertake the study, which was presented to the Council of Europe Steering Committee for Education on October 19, 2006.

²⁴ The conference was held in Nizhniy Novgorod in the Russian Federation, September 7-9, 2006, under the auspices of the Ministry of Regional Development of the Russian Federation, the Inter-Faith Council of Russia and the Council of Europe. The quotation is from the 'Volga Forum Declaration', Final Document of the International Conference 'Dialogue of Cultures and Inter-Faith Cooperation', paragraph 4.

http://www.strasbourg-reor.org/modules.php?name=News&new_topic=42&file=article&sid=352, http://www.coe.int/T/DC/Press/news/20060908_declaration_volga_en.asp (both accessed 12 October 2006).

educators.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (formerly the Helsinki process) has 56 participant states, including most European states plus the USA and Canada. It is engaged in setting standards in fields including military security, economic and environmental co-operation, conflict resolution and human rights issues. In relation to human rights, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) works in the areas of election observation, democratic development, human rights (including the right to freedom of religion or belief), tolerance and non-discrimination, and law. The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights is therefore well placed to play a role in facilitating dialogue and understanding between different religions and beliefs and in making educational policy recommendations.

The group brought together to produce the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE 2007) includes members of the ODIHR's Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief.²⁵ These include authorities on international law (with experience in dealing with legal questions related to the exercise of religious freedom), education and the social sciences. Additional experts in the fields of religion, education and pedagogy were brought in to assist in the preparation of the guidelines. The group as a whole reflects a range of different religious and non-religious positions, helping to ensure that the perspective of different religious and belief communities is taken into account and that the guiding principles are balanced and inclusive. The *Toledo Guiding Principles*, launched in Madrid on November 28, 2007, includes chapters on the human rights framework and teaching about religions and beliefs, preparing curricula, teacher education and respecting rights in the process of implementing courses in teaching about religions and beliefs.

The rationale for the Toledo Guiding Principles is as follows:

²⁵ The connection with Toledo comes from the fact that the first drafting meeting took place in May 2007 in Toledo and from that city's historic association with religious tolerance.

The Toledo Guiding Principles have been prepared in order to contribute to an improved understanding of the world's increasing religious diversity and the growing presence of religion in the public sphere. Their rationale is based on two core principles: first, that there is positive value in teaching that emphasizes 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.

The primary purpose of the Toledo Guiding Principles is to assist OSCE participating States whenever they choose to promote the study and knowledge about religions and beliefs in schools, particularly as a tool to enhance religious freedom. The Principles focus solely on the educational approach that seeks to provide teaching *about* different religions and beliefs as distinguished from instruction in a specific religion or belief. They also aim to offer criteria that should be considered when and wherever teaching about religions and beliefs takes place (OSCE 2007: 11-12)

Religious Education in Europe: the present picture

We have seen then that there is a very strong impetus, derived from inter-governmental bodies such as the UN, the Council of Europe, the EC and the OSCE, for European states to initiate policies introducing 'teaching about religions (and beliefs)' in European schools. In linking possible new policy initiatives to current practice and future developments, we need to review the range of policies to the study of religions to be found in different European states. Such a review shows that the role of religion in education has been seen rather differently in the various European states (Kodelja & Bassler 2004; Kuyk *et al.*; 2007 Schreiner 2002; Willaime & Mathieu 2005). On the basis of these sources one might make some points about the diversity of policy in Europe from different perspectives. One might, for example, distinguish between the different ways in which states accommodate religion within their educational systems and develop policy accordingly. There are 'confessional' systems in which religious bodies have responsibility for religious education. For example, in Germany, the churches have a supervisory responsibility for religious education, but within a constitutional framework of equal rights and non-discrimination. The 'confessional' system is different in the Netherlands, where schools can teach the religion of the sponsor, and different again from, say, Slovakia, where schools teach

what is recognised as the religion of the state. In some instances, as in Poland, religious education is an optional subject, taught by insiders, according to the tenets of particular denominations (mainly Roman Catholicism). Teachers' qualifications are defined by the church in question, in agreement with the Ministry of National Education and Sport (Eurydice 2006). Then, there are non-confessional systems where religious bodies have no role in public education. For example, in public education in France, there is no subject devoted specifically to the study of religion, and any teaching covering religion in subjects such as history, French or philosophy must be purely informational (Estivalèzes 2005, 2006). Sweden offers another example of non-confessional religious education, with no direct involvement from religious bodies, but where the subject is seen (in contrast to France) as closely related to the personal development of young people (Larsson 2000). There are also 'mixed' systems, as in England and Wales, where the majority fully publicly funded schools have an impartial form of religious education, while mainly state-funded voluntary aided schools may teach the religion of the sponsoring body (Jackson 2007; Jackson & O'Grady 2007).

A distinction is sometimes made between educating into, about and from religion (Hull 2002). Educating *into* religion occurs when a single religious tradition is taught by 'insiders', often with the objective of socialising pupils in the religion or strengthening their commitment to it. Educating *about* religion, in contrast, uses descriptive and historical methods, aiming neither to promote nor to erode religious belief. Educating *from* religion involves pupils in considering different responses to religious and moral issues, in order to develop their own point of view on matters relating to religion and values. On this classification, the Italian system would be an example of educating into religion (Gandolfo-Censi 2000), the Estonian system would exemplify educating about religion (Valk 2000), while the English community school system would combine educating about and educating from religion (QCA 2004).

Cutting across these approaches are different views of childhood and autonomy and different views of the role of the teacher that can be found in the educational traditions of particular states. Moreover, each approach is capable of manipulation for ideological purposes. Some approaches to 'educating into religion' might allow a considerable level of agency and autonomy to children. Others might be very

authoritarian. In the case of ‘educating about religion(s)’, there may be bias, in some education systems, towards or against particular viewpoints. For example, it has been argued that the ostensibly non-confessional ‘culture of religions’ subject in the Russian Federation actually promotes Orthodoxy and nationalism (Willems 2007).

What is crucial is that the general view of the UN, and the policies on teaching about religions developed by the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, should be brought into close dialogue with current national policies across the continent. The first regional debate on ‘the religious dimension of intercultural education’ (held in Athens, 8-9 October, 2007) did exactly this, disseminating the project findings and relating them to current policies in selected member states. The conference also brought together key members of the Council of Europe project writing team with drafters of the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* and key researchers from the EC REDCo Project. This is a model of collaboration that could be adopted by the proposed Council of Europe Centre.

Religious Discourse in the Public Sphere

As noted above, one of the reasons for the Council of Europe’s not dealing directly with religions within public education was a concern that issues of religion do not belong in the sphere of public institutions. This view is close to that of *laïcité* as expressed in French law and policy, where the State is required to be neutral in religious matters but guarantees the free exercise of religious worship and the organisation of religious institutions. Recently, the social theorist Jürgen Habermas has stated a view that cuts across the simple public/private distinction (Habermas 2006). Habermas distinguishes between the *formal* public/political sphere, consisting of parliaments, courts, ministries etc, and the *informal* or public/political sphere, which is held to be an appropriate setting for communication between religious and non-religious people. Thus, Habermas maintains that, while political institutions should remain neutral with regard to religion, at the level of discourse between secular and religious citizens (and between citizens of different religious persuasions), religious language and argument can and should be used. Fundamentally, understanding is developed through communication or dialogue. Habermas’s view is

that it is up to religious people to explain their language, and the values associated with it, to others through dialogue in appropriate settings within the informal public/informal political sphere. Through such communication, ‘secular’ people can learn something about values *from* religious people, while some religious people might learn to re-express their language more meaningfully in the context of late modernity. Habermas has his critics, but his general argument presents a theoretical case that is consistent with the policy shifts that have taken place in the inter-governmental institutions discussed above and it offers some pointers towards the types of procedure and pedagogy that would operationalise their policy initiatives.

In this respect I would argue that the publicly funded school is a microcosm of the informal public/political sphere and is an entirely appropriate setting for education about religions to take place, provided certain conditions and safeguards are met. The arguments of the inter-governmental organisations – based mainly on human rights and social cohesion – provide a set of reasons for teaching and learning about religions in public education, but they do not go much further than this. They convey a general view that the processes of policy making and curriculum development should be inclusive and dialogical, accepting that bodies formulating curricula should include different interest groups (for example, educators, representatives of religious groups and academic specialists), and that curricula and teaching should aim at impartiality and fairness in representing different positions. However, Habermas’s argument takes us further, in that it suggests that citizens from different kinds of background should interact with one another, listen to one another and engage with one another’s positions, in developing understanding and participating in the democratic process. If the public school is a microcosm of the informal public/political sphere, there is a need for arrangements within the school that promote this mode of communication. These would include its ethos and view of relationships within the school and with outsiders (especially its attitudes to social diversity) and its pedagogical approaches. Both procedures and pedagogies need to foster communication between those from different backgrounds.²⁶

As already noted, there is a good deal of work to be done at the interface between

²⁶ I have written about the school in this way in Jackson 2004, Chapter 10.

bodies such as the Council of Europe and individual states, and at the level of individual states in developing policies and pedagogies reflecting the level of integration encompassed in international declarations whilst also recognising individual cultural differences. Thus, not all states may be ready to employ fully dialogical pedagogies or pedagogies encouraging students to discuss their own positions and personal views. Elsewhere, I have reviewed a range of pedagogies that have been developed with the intention of helping students to handle religious and spiritual issues and information about religious diversity in the school (Jackson 2004; see also Grimmitt 2000). For the purposes of this article, I will concentrate on the interpretive approach, developed over some years at the University of Warwick. This is designed particularly to help students to engage with religious diversity in the contemporary world.

The interpretive approach

The interpretive approach was developed originally for use in religious education in publicly funded community schools in England and Wales, where the subject is primarily concerned with helping pupils to gain a critical and reflective understanding of religions. Subsequently, it has been developed further in the UK, and has also been used in Norway, Germany, Canada and Japan as well as in the Council of Europe project on religious diversity and intercultural education mentioned above (Council of Europe 2004; Keast 2007). The approach provides theoretical stimulus for research and pedagogy being conducted by the European Commission REDCo project on religious education in Europe (Weisse 2007). Thus the interpretive approach continues to be used and developed in a variety of contexts (Jackson forthcoming). It is complementary to some other approaches (Jackson 2004; 2006b), and is presented as a contribution to theoretical, methodological and pedagogical debates (eg Jackson 1997:6). It has been found to be particularly useful in helping students to develop an understanding of religious communities in contemporary society (eg O'Grady 2003; Whittall 2005).

The development of the interpretive approach shows the influence of a particular methodology within religious studies (an ethnographic one) on the development of an open and impartial pedagogy for studying religious diversity in schools. The

experience of engaging in ethnographic field studies of a way of life very different from my own (initially ‘Hinduism’ in an English city) changed my views about theory and method in qualitative research in religion, and in publicly funded religious education provided for a diverse population. The book *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (Jackson 1997) summarised ideas developed from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s during several research studies of children from different religious and ethnic backgrounds in Britain and applied them to teaching and learning about religions in schools.²⁷ Studies specifically of children from a Hindu background, together with some of the theory contributing to the interpretive approach, had already influenced the structure and contents of an introduction to Hinduism aimed primarily at teachers (Jackson & Killingley 1988) and two books for children which drew on the research material (Jackson 1989a; Jackson & Nesbitt 1990).²⁸ A detailed report on the research on Hindu children was published in 1993, including material discussing the concept of ‘Hinduism’ and various methodological issues (Jackson & Nesbitt 1993).

Participation in ethnographic fieldwork led to questioning the theoretical position of the phenomenology of religion (as articulated by its ‘classical’ exponents), its practical usefulness as a research tool, and its efficacy as a method and approach for religious education (Jackson 1997:7-29). The more philosophical versions of the phenomenology of religion had posited universal ideal types or ‘essences’, embedded in human consciousness and known subjectively through intuition (eg. van der Leeuw 1938). Although expressed in different cultural and historical contexts, the ‘essence’ of religion was regarded as universal, and its various ‘ideal types’ – seen almost as Platonic forms or ideas – were given expression through particular examples. Thus, although found in different cultural or historical situations, the meaning of these essences was held to be constant, and could be uncovered through suspending one’s own presuppositions and empathising with the ‘other’. There was no questioning of language used. Western (and primarily Christian) terminology tended to be projected

²⁷ Studies of children from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and Buddhist backgrounds were linked to the generation of religious education theory and the development of a series of texts for children and young people – the Warwick RE Project. The research, entitled ‘Ethnography and Religious Education’, was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (project reference number R000232489).

²⁸ The methodologies of these texts are discussed in Jackson 1989b.

on to a wide variety of material in some very different contexts (Jackson 1997:14-24).

The experience of fieldwork pointed up the limitations of the theory and methods of the phenomenology of religion. In brief, the practice of fieldwork showed that terminology and symbols used by adherents rarely had direct equivalents to the Western terminology used by phenomenologists of religion. The issue of interpretation was seen as *primarily linguistic and symbolic*, a matter of grasping how language and symbols were used, rather than intuitive. Both the persons being studied and the researcher were living within social and historical contexts. Rather than being a ‘disengaged consciousness’, the non-Hindu western researcher could only start with current language and understandings and take as much care as possible not to superimpose pre-conceived meanings on to new material. Grasping the meaning of terms and symbols depended on observing their *use in context*. Interpretation required, not the suspension of presuppositions (how can one be confident of knowing one’s own presuppositions?), but rather comparison and contrast of unfamiliar terms used by adherents with one’s own familiar concepts (Geertz 1983). Additionally, interpretation required placing particular examples of religious practice or belief within a wider context. At its broadest, this involved analysing the example in relation to one’s current understanding of the whole religious tradition.

Research was recognised as a reflexive and dialogical process. In other words, the process of trying to grasp someone else’s terminology was not simply about grasping their use of words or symbols, but included a questioning of *one’s own* understanding and use of terms, such as ‘religion’, ‘religions’ and ‘Hinduism’ and a critical interest in the historical development of this terminology, especially since the eighteenth century. This history encompasses the development of the fields of comparative religion and phenomenology of religion, including the emergence of the names of some of the religions – such as Hinduism (Jackson 1996; Jackson & Killingley 1988; Jackson & Nesbitt 1993) – in the nineteenth century, and the use in religious studies and religious education of expressions such as ‘religions of the world’ and ‘world religions’ in the twentieth century (Jackson 1997:49-60). The key point is that interaction with the West resulted in: religions being regarded by Westerners as systems of belief with similar structures; ‘insiders’ adopting western terminology (eg ‘Hindu religion’; ‘Hinduism’) and ‘insiders’ producing competing ideas of the nature

of the religion (for example, different versions of ‘Hinduism’) (Jackson 1996). The work of Edward Said, in particular, was important in highlighting the element of power as one factor in the formation and representation of religions – whether by ‘outsiders’ (including writers of travelogues, histories and research reports) or ‘insiders’ of different kinds (Said 1978).

The experience of ethnographic research on ‘Hinduism’ called for a more flexible way of representing religious material than found in comparative religion or the phenomenology of religion. Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s book *The Meaning and End of Religion* was an inspirational source, in which ‘religion’ was represented in terms of an interplay between individual faith and cumulative tradition (Smith 1978).

However, Smith’s views on faith, tradition and religious language were not adopted. Whereas Smith advocated the removal of words such as ‘religion’, ‘religions’ and ‘Hinduism’ from scholarly use, I accepted that these and many other English terms should be used, but flexibly and critically. I did not adopt Smith’s concept of ‘faith’ (preferring reference to the self-orientation of individuals – for example in relation to the transcendent – in the context of their own groups and tradition), and I introduced the notion of ‘membership groups’, an idea that transforms Smith’s idea of tradition. ‘Membership groups’ are not collections of isolated individuals, but are interactive networks of communication through which, for example, religious language and tradition are mediated to the young (Jackson 1997:96-104; Jackson & Nesbitt 1993). ‘Religions’ were not seen as belief systems, with necessary and sufficient conditions for inclusion, but as broad religious traditions, reference points for individuals and groups, whose shape and borders are often contested, but with descriptive content. The character of specific religious traditions as ‘wholes’ varies; the ‘structure’ of ‘Hinduism’ is different from that of ‘Christianity’, for example. Nevertheless, we can speak meaningfully of ‘religions’ or ‘religious traditions’ that are related by family resemblance and have in common some reference to the transcendence of ordinary human experience. Despite demarcation and boundary issues, religious traditions generally can be distinguished from related cultural or ideological forms.²⁹

²⁹ Thus, in its view of ‘religions’, the interpretive approach is closer, for example, to the broad position represented in religious studies by Gavin Flood (1999) than it is to Timothy Fitzgerald’s fully deconstructive position (2000). The view of ‘construction’ in relation to religions in the interpretive approach is similar to that advanced by James Beckford (2003).

Theory, Method and Pedagogy

The development of this work had theoretical, methodological and pedagogical dimensions. *Theoretically*, it raised questions about the representation and interpretation of religions, and about reflexivity, seeing religious studies and religious education as hermeneutical and dialogical activities. *Theoretically and methodologically*, it drew on social anthropology, especially the interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz (eg. Geertz 1983), itself influenced by literary criticism and the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (eg. Geertz 1973). There was also some influence from some of Geertz's critics working within anthropology (eg. Clifford 1988). The process of interpreting the ways of life of others was seen, not as 'hard science', but as a systematic, ethical, reflexive and self-critical process, akin to writing a biography, a history or a piece of literary criticism.

The pedagogical dimension developed from reflecting on the theory and method in a research context and applying the ideas to children's learning. Thus, a fundamental aim for religious education was 'to develop an understanding of the grammar – the language and wider symbolic patterns – of religions and the interpretive skills necessary to gain that understanding' (Jackson 1997:133). This 'necessitated the development of critical skills which would open up issues of representation and interpretation as well as questions of truth and meaning' and also involved a reflexive element, in which young people were given the opportunity to relate learning to their own views and understandings, to formulate critical comments and to review the methods of study they had been using (Jackson 1997:133-4, 2004:88-89). The following summary of the key concepts of representation, interpretation and reflexivity emphasises their pedagogical application.

Representation

As indicated above, the approach is critical of Western, post-Enlightenment models of representing 'world religions' as schematic and homogeneous belief systems, whose essence is expressed through set structures and whose membership is seen in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. However, the approach does not abandon the use of the language of 'religions' or claim that 'religions' as 'wholes' are incapable of description, but is critical of approaches which essentialize or stereotype them. A

model for representing religious material is developed which encourages an exploration of the relationship between individuals in the context of their religious and cultural groups and to the wider religious tradition. The **religion or religious tradition** is seen as a contested 'whole'. **Individuals** relate to various groups. **Groups** are of different, sometimes overlapping, types (sub-traditions, 'streams', denominations, ethnic groups, sects and movements, castes, families, peer groups etc. [Jackson 1997:64-5]), and they are socially interactive and communicative, providing the context for the processes of 'transmission' of tradition, 'nurture' and 'socialisation' we investigated in various Warwick research projects (Jackson & Nesbitt 1993; Nesbitt 2004).

It also should be noted that processes of 'transmission' take place within a matrix of both traditional and modern plurality (Jackson 2004). Young people interacting with parents, community leaders, peers from the same background, texts, spiritual teachers etc. also interact with other sources of value, and the types and degrees of interaction may vary over time.

Examining the interplay between individuals in the context of their groups and the wider tradition offers a view of religions which acknowledges their complexity and internal diversity, including their varying interactions with 'culture'. The personal and group-tied elements of religions are emphasized, with religion being presented as part of lived human experience. The approach is not relativistic in relation to truth, aiming for a procedural epistemological openness and acknowledging varying and often competing truth claims (e.g. Jackson 1997:122-6).

Interpretation

The interpretive methodology relates closely to work in recent interpretive anthropology/ethnography. Rather than asking learners to leave their presuppositions to one side, the method requires a comparison and contrast between the learner's concepts and those of people being studied. Sensitivity on the part of the student is regarded as a necessary condition, with empathy only being possible once the terms and symbols of the other's discourse have been grasped. This process is not necessarily complex. The Warwick RE Project books for children show many

examples of interpretation. For example, in introducing young children (aged 5-7) to a boy from a Buddhist family sitting quietly in a meditation hall at a rural English Thai Forest Hermitage monastery, the teacher explores 'noisy times' and 'quiet times' with children in the class. Children give a variety of reasons why they like to be noisy and quiet. They then listen to the story of the Buddhist boy's visit to the monastery and start to think about why he might be having a 'quiet time' in the meditation hall. The teacher feeds in information from the book, and the children compare their ideas about 'quiet times' with those of the Buddhist family. Interpretation also overlaps with issues of representation in also examining the relationship between individual cases in the context of groups in relation to a developing idea of the wider religious tradition.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is understood here as the relationship between the experience of students and the experience of those whose way of life they are attempting to interpret. Three aspects of reflexivity are identified in relation to the interpretive approach. Firstly, learners are encouraged to review their understanding of their *own* way of life (**edification**). Secondly, they are helped to make a constructive critique of the material studied at a distance; and thirdly, they are involved in reviewing their methods of study.

Edification

It is illuminating that anthropologists have written about how their studies of others have prompted some form of re-assessment of their understanding of their *own* ways of life (e.g. Leach 1982:127). In the interpretive approach, the term 'edification' was used to describe this form of learning.³⁰ This reflexive activity is not easy in practice to separate from the process of interpretation. Interpretation might start from the other's language and experience, then move to that of the student, and then move between the two. Thus the activity of learning about another's way of life is inseparable in practice from that of pondering on questions raised by it. Such reflexive activity is personal to the student and teachers cannot guarantee that it will happen.

³⁰ This concept has some features in common with Michael Grimmitt's idea of 'learning from' religion but is not identical to it (see Grimmitt 1987:225; Jackson 1997:131-2).

They can, however, ensure that it is not stifled by giving time and providing structured opportunities for reflection. Moreover, making this type of connection often helps to motivate students. As Kevin O’Grady has demonstrated in his action research with secondary pupils in the north of England (O’Grady 2003, 2005), a religious education disconnected from pupils’ own questions and concerns is very likely to fail to engage and to motivate them.

It should be made clear that ‘being edified’ by studying religious material does not imply *adopting* the beliefs of followers of that religion. It does, however, build upon a genuinely positive attitude towards diversity, seeing the meeting between people with different beliefs and practices as enriching for all, and seeing individual identity as being developed through meeting ‘the other’.

Edification may not only result from studying religions or cultures other than one’s own. As Wilna Meijer has noted in relation to religious education (Meijer 2004), and Barbara Myerhoff has demonstrated in her anthropological research (Myerhoff 1978), the study of *one’s own* ancestral tradition, in religious or cultural terms, can also give new insights in re-examining one’s sense of identity. In the case of religious education, young people might see religions, including the one of their own history, from a new perspective. Ethnographic source material, plus data from locally conducted studies, could provide a basis for this, as could historical material (whether from local or wider sources).

However, despite the fact that ‘edification’ does not imply *adopting* the beliefs of others, there would be some difficulties in applying this element of the interpretive approach to studies of religion within certain education systems, such as those of France and the USA. Activities in which students express their own views and opinions on religious matters might be regarded as deviating from the requirement that public schools should be entirely neutral in areas of religion. Bruce Grelle, an authority in the debate about religion in public education in the USA, suggests an adaptation to the reflexive aspect of the interpretive approach for the American context, providing an alternative way of making the connection between knowledge and understanding and pupils’ personal lives. He does this through linking religious education to citizenship education, with an emphasis on the rights and responsibilities

of citizenship in a pluralistic democracy, rather than on the sharing of personal views. ‘Teaching about diverse religious and secular worldviews and ways of life’, argues Grelle, ‘becomes a venue for helping students understand their rights to religious liberty or freedom of conscience as well as their responsibility to protect those same rights for their fellow citizens’ (Grelle, 2006). There are clearly possibilities for developing the approach in this direction within societies operating a strictly ‘teaching about’ methodology.

Constructive Criticism

Reflexivity also involves engaging critically with material studied. Managing such critical work is a sensitive pedagogical issue, especially in pluralistic classrooms. Criticism can also be applied fruitfully to method. Just as researchers should spend time reflecting on the effectiveness and the ethics of the methods they have used, so a critique of religious education methods should be part of its content. This methodological self-awareness can reveal issues of representation and can also stimulate creative ideas for improvement, in the presentation of findings to others, for example (Jackson & Killingley 1988: 50-55).

Developments

Initially the pedagogical ideas, and the data from ethnographic studies, were used in the development of curriculum texts (the Warwick RE Project) written for children of different ages (eg Barratt 1994a, b; Barratt & Price 1996a, b; Everington 1996a, b; Jackson, Barratt & Everington 1994; Mercier 1996; Wayne *et al.* 1996). The books aimed to help learners (and teachers) to use interpretive methods in engaging with ethnographic data on children from religious backgrounds, portrayed in the context of the communities in which they lived and the wider religious tradition to which they related.

Subsequently, the broad approach has been (and continues to be) developed in a number of directions. In relation to pedagogy, these include pupil-to-pupil dialogue (eg Ipgrave 2001; McKenna, Ipgrave & Jackson, forthcoming), using students’ concerns and questions as a starting point for the exploration of religious material as a means to foster student motivation (O’Grady 2003, 2005) and using concepts from a

religion as a starting point for exploring that tradition through examples of individuals and groups (Whittall 2005).

As indicated above, the interpretive approach also provides theoretical stimulus for research and pedagogical development within the EC REDCo project (Weisse 2007). Here, the interpretive approach is not used to impose any uniformity in theory, epistemology or method, but as a source for questions to be applied both to field research methods and to pedagogy. Each group of questions corresponds to one of the three key concepts of the approach (Jackson 2008).

The key concepts of the interpretive approach also provide stimulus for a group of studies being conducted by members of a ‘community of practice’ as a specific UK contribution to the wider REDCo Project.³¹ These studies combine insights from the interpretive approach with theory and method related to action research (O’Grady 2007a) in developing pedagogies that foster dialogue and address religious conflict. The work of the community of practice includes the articulation of the shared concepts of the interpretive approach consistently, clearly and critically in a variety of contexts, including primary and secondary classrooms, teacher education courses and the continuing professional development of teachers (O’Grady 2007b).³²

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a clear drive from international and European inter-governmental institutions for the adoption of studies of religions, or studies of religions and beliefs, in publicly funded schools. Policy recommendations and guiding principles from such organisations are being considered by governments and educators in relation to current provision for ‘religious education’ in its various forms. In converting new or adapted policies into practice, educators will need to consider the use of appropriate pedagogies. While mixed approaches, meeting the needs of specific national systems and local situations, are likely to be needed, the interpretive approach, in its various forms, is offered as a flexible methodology for addressing

³¹ The concept of a community of practice refers to the process of social learning that occurs when people who have a common interest in a subject or problem collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations (Wenger 1998).

³² Jackson (forthcoming) discusses developments to the interpretive approach in a European and wider international context.

religious diversity in contemporary societies – and issues related to it such as cultural racism and stereotyping. Finally, the importance of the study of religions as an academic field should be mentioned. Although non-specialist teachers can be provided with appropriate education and training as part of their continuing professional development, a supply of specialists in the science of religions will be needed within the teaching professions of all states which introduce teaching and learning about religions. Specialists are needed in order to contribute their expertise to teaching and curriculum development programmes.

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