Religious Education in Europe – Situation and Developments

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Introduction
Thank you for inviting me to this presentation. It is good to see graduates and undergraduates in RE and Religious Studies who have decided to look into other contexts. I hope that our meeting today can provide some inspiration for exchange and for reflection about the purpose and the outcome of RE.
I have decided to deal with my theme not in the classical way in presenting an overview about RE in Europe. Two reasons for that: We will have workshops during the day and you will have the chance of a more colourful picture about RE in Norway, Belgium, Denmark and Northern Ireland. Also there are a number of current publications that can serve this need. Among them:

- Elza Kuyk et al. (2007) (Eds.): Religious Education in Europe. Situation and current trends in schools, Oslo: iko & ICCS
- Johannes Lähnemann & Peter Schreiner (2008) (Eds.): Interreligious and Values Education in Europe, Münster: Comenius
With my presentation I try to uncover main concepts and current developments that underlie and shape Religious Education in contemporary Europe. This is one of the tasks as a professional educational researcher, at the Comenius-Institut in Muenster, Germany.¹

Two basic perspectives are guiding my work:

(1) The need of greater understanding of, and dialogue about the concepts underpinning Religious Education and the objectives of Religious Education in Europe. I am convinced that the national perspective is no longer sufficient and satisfying when it comes to education and religious education. We should develop a transnational perspective.

(2) It is vital to promote children’s right to religion and religious education in Europe and to encourage knowledge and understanding of their own and other religious traditions. This has a lot to do with the issue, for whom we organise religious education. Current collaborative approaches to Religious Education at a European level tend to promote approaches to RE that link the students’ personal concerns to broader social and political issues at local, national and global level.

My presentation has two main parts. Part I provides an introduction to Religious Education in Europe while exploring six key characteristics.² Part II profiles the situation of Religious Education in selected European countries (Norway, Switzerland, Germany) and some remarks to European developments.

I. Key Characteristics of Religious Education in Europe

(1) Religious Education is a complex, varied European phenomenon. There are different concepts of, traditions about, and approaches to Religious Education, in nearly all of the states of Europe.

In many schools in Europe Religious Education is a contested issue. Current debates on Religious Education in Europe can be framed in terms of two overarching perspectives. According to the first perspective Religious Education is seen as a relic of former times and proponents of this view argue that in a neutral and impartial state it should no longer have any place in public or state schools. A second perspective sees Religious Education as making a vital contribution to identity formation, orientation and dialogue in Europe. It argues that this is especially relevant at a time where there is an increasing plurality of worldviews in Europe. From this perspective Religious Education is an indispensable part of a general education. In both perspectives the quality of existing approaches to Religious Education is a central theme. In general, when surveying the European situation, one can say that the necessity of Religious Education in schools is not contested in the majority of European countries, yet the nature of Religious

¹ I am also involved in existing religious and educational European networks and organisations as well as issues such as intercultural and inter-religious learning and alternative approaches to education which integrate a spiritual and/or religious dimension.

² While this chapter cannot provide a comprehensive picture of the European situation reference should be made to Kuyk, Elza et al. Religious Education in Europe. Situation and current trends in schools, Oslo: IKO & ICCS which reports on the situation of Religious Education in the school situation of 31 different European countries.
Education and the appropriateness of different approaches to it gives rise to serious debate.

It is helpful to begin with a general overview of Religious Education in Europe. One discovers a range of approaches to Religious Education that are linked to one of the three main basic models of organization:

1. Teaching organized by religious communities that have exclusive responsibility for RE (confessional/catechetical)
2. Teaching organized in collaboration between state and religious communities (confessional/non-confessional; voluntary and/or obligatory subject)
3. Teaching organized exclusively by state authorities (non-confessional, religious studies).

One can further refine one’s classification of Religious Education in Europe by exploring the different emphases in the three terms: ‘learning religion’, ‘learning about religion’ and ‘learning from religion’. The first term ‘learning religion’, refers to a confessional approach to religion or an introduction to a specific faith tradition. The second term ‘learning about religion’ encompasses religious studies, in other words knowledge about religion and its meaning for its adherents. The final term ‘learning from religion’ explores religious experience and religious life as well as the meaning of religion for identity formation, orientation and dialogue. However it must be noted that some religious educators view the separation of these three terms as somewhat artificial when it comes to classroom practice where aspects of all three overlap.

(2) Existing approaches to RE in Europe are shaped by national and regional contexts.

When we survey Religious Education in Europe by moving from specific local situations to the general regional, national or European context, it becomes evident that these specific contexts are highly influential in shaping particular approaches taken at local level. This may, at first, appear to be an obvious insight yet its significance means that each approach to Religious Education is contextual and is shaped by a specific history, a ‘biography’ or life-story created by the interplay of multiple factors. Furthermore there is a distinct rationale underpinning the existing diversity of Religious Education in Europe. Therefore it is necessary to outline some key pointers that facilitate an understanding of Religious Education in European countries. In general one can state that:

1. There are differences in the religious landscape of the countries of Europe. The south tends to be dominated by Catholicism (Austria, Italy, Spain, Portugal and to some extent France, as well as Poland, Ireland and Lithuania) whereas the north is more Lutheran-Protestant (Scandinavia). Central European countries tend to have mixed religious landscapes (Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, etc.) while Orthodoxy dominates most countries in Eastern Europe including Greece. Finally Islam is the major religion in countries like Turkey, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina.
2. There are differences in the relationship between the state and religion in European countries, ranging from a more distant encounter (France) to a relationship of sympathy (Poland, Ireland). Furthermore different countries present different understandings of the nature of religion in society as well as having different educational systems e.g. in the number of private or state public schools in a country. For instance in countries where there is a majority religion as is the case in Italy, Ireland, Norway, Poland or Austria, the issue of the relationship between the majority religion and the religion of the minorities is discussed differently than in mixed confessional countries with a more equal distribution of religious affiliation. There is an observable contrast between a country where a state-church system exists or has been in existence for a long time, and the situation of a country with a strict separation between state and religion or where (fractional) collaboration exists.\(^3\) Where religion and state are strictly separated one finds that religion has no place in public school. While one might be inclined to suggest that France illustrates this situation, the issue is complex and in France there is a current debate about a so-called intelligent ‘laïcité’ and initiatives focusing on implementing more religious knowledge in the existing curriculum and subjects have begun.\(^4\) France also has a high proportion of Catholic schools, attended by about 20% of all pupils. Where state and religion are closely related as in Poland, the teaching of Religious Education in schools is not very different to parish-based catechesis. In countries that have been under a socialist regime up until 1989, new or renewed approaches to Religious Education have been developed and implemented in schools. It is interesting to note that many of these approaches have faced difficulties and experienced tensions.\(^5\)

3. Existing approaches to Religious Education depend on the structure of the school system within a country. For example in the Netherlands two thirds of schools are religiously affiliated while one third is religiously ‘neutral’. History has an important part to play in interpreting this data. The emphasis on the parent’s right to select appropriate education for the child led to a debate about the place of Religious Education in schools at the beginning of the 19\(^\text{th}\) century. The result has been what is termed the ‘pillarization’ of schools along denominational lines. Pillarization refers to the denominational segregation of society into small vertical pillars where all the main social institutions (newspapers, schools, hospitals, banks, universities etc.) are organized according to people’s religious convictions. Thus ‘pillarization’

still shapes the contemporary Dutch school system where almost thirty Islamic schools exist.

(3) It is helpful to use a comparative perspective to take account of differences and commonalities in Europe and to provide ground for dialogue on further perspectives. Every comparison of different approaches to Religious Education should be highly sensitive to the complexity of existing approaches, as well as national and regional contextual issues. Dialogue and assessment should take careful cognisance of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the approaches.

At an international level exchange and dialogue in Religious Education is developing in existing networks like EFTRE, conferences and projects. Exchange about methods and experiences in the classroom can encourage teachers to look beyond their own territory. Researchers perceive an increasing need to engage in comparative research into international Religious Education. International studies like the OECD International PISA survey, which investigated learning ‘outcomes’ in the form of the skills and knowledge of fifteen year olds in fifty-seven countries, highlighted issues around the ‘success’ of Religious Education. Whereas obstacles like the problem of language or how theory and practice fit together should not be underestimated, the value of a comparative perspective has to be promoted to take account of the increasing Europeanization and internationalization of the field of education. The Open Society Instituts in Ljublana / Slovenia has engaged with south eastern European countries in a comparative project on experiences and developments in Religious Education throughout Europe. The project aims to explore the possible role of religious education in state-based community schools as well as the role of Religious Education in promoting an open, democratic society. A ‘Framework for Informed Dialogue’ has been published under the title ‘Religion and Schooling in an Open Society’6 particularly intended for policymakers who have little prior experience or comparative information on religion and schooling. Among its findings it presents the right to establish private sponsored schools and a preference for the model of ‘teaching about religions’. The paper also underlines the need of more comparative research on the learning and social impact of various approaches and methodologies to teaching about religions. However comparative research does not have the goal of a future-oriented perspective aimed at creating one model of Religious Education for the whole of Europe. Such a model would ignore the range of diverse conditions for RE in different countries, each with their own unique historical context.

(4) Labels like a confessional, a non-confessional or a religious studies approach to Religious Education fail to distinguish adequately between different approaches.

Simple binary distinctions between confessional/non-confessional Religious Education only represent one dimension of Religious Education. What is perceived as confessional in one country can differ significantly from the mainstream understanding of the same

term in another country. For example in England the term confessional is often seen as involving indoctrination. This in itself highlights the need to develop a more subtle and differentiated view about the involvement and participation of religious communities in the education system in a country. Also in some contexts religious studies has a negative image, whereas knowledge about religious issues and religious traditions is of high importance for every approach to Religious Education. More significantly, labels seem to disclose underlying hermeneutical approaches that show how students are made aware of their own religious tradition as well as the manner in which they are given knowledge and understanding of traditions other than their own.

(5) There are convergent tendencies in Religious Education in Europe.
A survey of different objectives and goals for Religious Education in different European countries reveals that they share much in common and so one can speak of a tendency towards coming together or convergence. The general rationale for Religious Education in most countries is based on educational principles and Religious Education is no longer viewed as having exclusively theological roots. This means that religion is seen as a significant part of education in general and faith has a subordinated value in this respect. However the pupil’s perspective on religion and belief is highly significant in the teaching of Religious Education. The following objectives can be found in most syllabi governing the teaching of Religious Education in Europe:

- To encourage pupils to be sensitive to religion and the religious dimension of life
- To provide orientation on the variety of existing religious opportunities (including ethically-oriented guidelines for life that are based on religious convictions)
- To provide knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and experiences.

All approaches are challenged by the need for concepts that can respond to and accommodate an increasingly plural European society. All existing models must address how they can facilitate and respond to existing diversity while enabling deeper understanding to occur. In many cases the situation of plurality gives impetus to the further development of existing approaches. The following issues are central to such discussion:

- Developing an openness toward other religions and inter-religious learning
- Presenting a dynamic understanding of religion and culture (taking into consideration the intra-plural situation of religious communities)
- Raising the question of how to integrate students’ experiences and attitudes.

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(6) A Europe-wide debate about standards of Religious Education?

If we are serious about working towards high quality Religious Education as well as the convergence of objectives for Religious Education in Europe we must raise the question of whether it is appropriate and desirable to speak of establishing common standards for Religious Education that extend beyond national boundaries. These common standards could clarify what Religious Education professionals might expect children and young people to achieve in the area of Religious Education in different European contexts. Friedrich Schweitzer, a German scholar involved in international comparative research, has suggested five examples of such professional criteria:

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 which are 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 backgrounds and biographies (professional teaching)9.

Schweitzer’s five important criteria focus on the educational quality of Religious Education, its contribution to general education, its dialogue-oriented, child-centred nature and its delivery by professional teachers. Effectively these criteria form a preliminary type of benchmarking for Religious Education in Europe that can help to provide guidance and orientation on issues that have already proved to be significant in different approaches. This approach, which outlines common standards in Religious Education, has much to offer the European context and merits serious discussion.

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9 Schweitzer 2004, p. 196.
II. Developments

Norway:
Religious Education in Norway has changed from a confessional subject based on Christianity (85.7% of Norwegians belong to the Lutheran Church) with the right to opt out to a non-confessional, multi-religious, ethical oriented subject with a limited right to opt out. The title of the subject has been up to end of 2008: Knowledge of Christianity, Religions and Worldviews or Christian Knowledge and Religious and Ethical education. The subject KRL was implemented in 1997 and has been revised twice, in 2002 and in 2005. The opting out act is not a specific right for RE but a general right to opt out for religious reasons for all school activities. KRL is regulated by a national curriculum but provides space for local adaptation. Dialogue is a key term in the debate on RE. There has been a legal dispute of the Humanist Union that has led to a decision of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The background for that has been the fact that Christianity has been understood in the new subject no longer as a confession or faith tradition but more as a tradition of culture, that is common to all Norwegians. This has been no problem for the Norwegian Lutheran Church. But religious minorities and humanists have been of the opinion that this understanding is against their right of religious education. So through several levels of jurisdiction the case was brought to Strasbourg. Now the Norwegian government was obliged to change the curriculum and the education law. The changes refer to more space for non Christian religions and convictions and a teaching that should be organized in an impartial and neutral way. The limited right to opt out was not changed so far. Some observers of this process fear, that teachers now are not too enthusiastic for an active and dialogue oriented participation of students, because they fear to be not neutral enough or not impartial enough in their teaching. Can RE contribute to identity formation then?

Switzerland: New subject in the canton of Zurich: Religion and Culture
In Switzerland the responsibility for education lies with the government of the twenty-six cantons. On the basis of different Church traditions and the religious landscapes within those cantons the following approaches governing Religious Education can be found:

1. Denominational Religious Education provided by religious communities
2. Teaching organised in collaboration with state (canton) and religious communities
3. Teaching organised exclusively by the canton.10

The profile of the subject
In August 2004, the Education Council of the canton of Zurich decided that the existing confessional-cooperative Religious Education approach in secondary level should be replaced a new subject entitled ‘Religion and Culture’. Since 2007 the obligatory subject of ‘Religion and Culture’ has been dealt with the content, forms, ceremonies and

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festivals of different religions in an impartial perspective. Teaching in religion is excluded from state maintained schools where the main religious traditions are presented from the Religious Studies perspective (non-confessional) while simultaneously being related to the lived experiences of the students. The syllabus contains three perspectives:

- The historical-descriptive perspective: Religions and their main characters
- The societal-political perspective: Religion and the community
- The life-world oriented perspective: Religion and the individual.

The subject ‘Religion and Culture’ is designed in such a manner that students ‘who come from different cultural, religious and ideological backgrounds will be able to participate.’ It combines two didactical concepts: ‘Religion and Culture’ is based on the concept of religious studies, in which young people can learn about the origin of the religions, their main elements, their impact on culture (literature, music, architecture, aesthetics) and their relevance for society today (‘teaching about religion’).

The starting point of the subject ‘Religion and Culture’ can also be young people’s questions of life. They should learn about their life-world and the values that shape life-world issues as well as arrange ways of living differently to their own. They should deal with questions that are important to their own experiences of life and also at the same time with religious traditions. The subject addresses topics of values in society which are also important for people who don’t belong to a religion. The students should learn a critical and a respectful attitude towards the different religions. (‘learning from religion’).

Religious experiences and the students’ personal perspectives are also intended to play a role in teaching and learning and this poses the question as to whether a ‘neutral’ and objective view - not to mention learning about religion - is possible at all.

**Didactical conception of Planning and instruction – exploration courses**

In the canton of Zürich/Switzerland the syllabus for Religious Education favours an exploratory method. According to this rationale students learn by exploring phenomena or connections about cultures and religions in a holistic sense. This method promotes exploring and learning about religious traditions in order to gain a better understanding of one’s own world-view. This can be done by:

- Dealing with a specific religious tradition (e.g. Judaism)
- Comparing a common issue in different religions
- Theme oriented exploration e.g. war and peace
- Life history oriented exploration
- Religious life in a specific context.

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11 Bildungsdirektion, Zürich, 2006, p.3.
12 Bildungsrat, 2006, p. 4.
13 Pestalozzi: learning by head, heart and hand.
Germany: A model for competences through religious education

A group of experts in religious education, theology, and teacher education has been invited by the Comenius-Institut to work out a model of religious competencies. Three guiding questions were identified:

- What should be the outcome after 9 years of religious education?
- How can outcomes of religious education be performed, shown, or demonstrated?
- How can religious competencies be evaluated and measured?

The group identified three issues as important:

(1) Religion as a *phenomenon* (in different modes)
(2) *Different dimensions* to encounter with religion
(3) What *problems* can be solved with religious competencies?

(1) Religious education in schools contributes to understanding and to participate in religious rituals. Religion is a *phenomenon* that can be expressed in four different modes:

- as individual faith or belief,
- as *content* of a school subject based on theology and Christianity in a Protestant perspective,
- as *content and practice* of other religions and beliefs within a plural society,
- as a *cultural fact* in society expressed in music, art, literature, advertisement, sport.

(2) For the development of religious knowledge, skills, and attitudes different dimensions of access are relevant:

2.1 *Perception*: recognize and describe
2.2 *Cognition*: understand and interpret
2.3 *Performance*: create and act
2.4 *Interaction*: communicate and make judgements
2.5 *Participation*: participate and decide (to participate in religious communities or not)

(3) What kind of problems can be solved by referring to religious competencies? The group identified some *examples of life situations*, which account for problems of constitutional rationality.
The model introduces the following aspects:

1. Areas / fields of religion
   1.1 Individual religion
   1.2 Main religion of RE: Protestant Christianity (in Germany)
   1.3 Other religions and world views
   1.4 Religion as a cultural fact in society

2. Dimensions to explore religion (methods, ways of acting)

12 competences
Within this threefold context of (1) Religious phenomena, (2) dimensions of access, and (3) exemplary problems of life a set of 12 basic religious competencies are proposed. In a short version they are as follows14:

1. Express one’s own faith or understanding of the world also in dialogue with others
2. Reflect on religious interpretations of contingencies in life and their plausibility
3. Reflecting ethical decisions in life and their religious dimension
4. Knowing and understanding basic forms of religious language
5. Presenting knowledge of Protestant Christianity
6. Performing basic religious practice on a tentative basis and reflect on it
7. Learn the difference between supportive and hostile forms of religion
8. Dealing with other religious views and dialogue with people of other religions
9. Examine critical views on religions
10. Decoding religious background of societal traditions
11. Explaining basic ideas and values of religions
12. Identify and reflect on religious motifs in culture.

European Perspectives
In sum one can state that there is an increasing recognition of religion in public as a significant cultural fact and a major issue in Europe. Moreover there are current developments that indicate religion in education as a positive and important value. For example one can say that the Council of Europe, the oldest political institution in Europe (founded in 1949) and a watchdog concerning democracy, human rights and the right of law, is now more open to the phenomenon of religion than it has ever been before. It is widely recognised that the tragic events of 9/11 in New York and Washington along with other subsequent brutal attacks afterwards (Madrid, London etc.) have placed religion at the centre of the European stage in an unprecedented manner. In recent years there has been a general interest in religion in the discipline of education. In 2007 the Council of Europe gave prominence to religion by publishing a reference book for schools on Religious diversity and intercultural education.15 Earlier in 2005 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation entitled Education and

Religion, which supported the religious studies approach to Religious Education and recognised the involvement of religious communities in the teaching of religion. A positive relationship between religion and democracy underlay its recommendation that emphasised the common roots and sources of the world religions.¹⁶

The Assembly observes moreover that the three monotheistic religions of the Book have common origins (Abraham) and share many values with other religions and that the values upheld by the Council of Europe stem from these values.¹⁷

On 7 May 2008 the Committee of Ministers adopted a White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: “Living together as equals in dignity” that includes a section on “religious dimension” and under Recommendations “Learning and teaching intercultural competences”.

These three examples document a remarkable enhancement of the Council’s policy that had previously tended to deal with religion mainly as a problem or a source of conflict. However other initiatives served to further reinforce the position of Religious Education at a European level. At a conference of the Coordinating Group for Religion in Education in Europe (CoGREE) in November 2005, Jan Figel’, EU-Commissioner for Education, Culture and Multilingualism, expressed the ‘close relationship between education and religious and moral values’ as decisive for the future of Europe. He further stated: ‘Above all, our Union must live up to its aspiration to be a community of values: peace, solidarity, democracy, respect for human rights, including religious rights. And all these values are centred on the human being .... The shared values of different religious traditions can provide a collective sense of good conduct in private and public life. Getting to know about each other’s beliefs and values can also raise our mutual respect for the principles of cultural and spiritual diversity.’

And at a Conference in September 2008 in Berlin he mentioned the need that dialogue should not be seen as a means in itself but should lead to commitment and day to day practice.

The fact that a high ranking European politician presents a positive argument for Religious Education at a European level indicates how religion has become central to public debate in recent years. Moreover in a historic move the European Commission has supported a research project about religion in education.¹⁸ The project which organises research on religion in education and Religious Education from universities in Estonia, Russia, Norway, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Germany, is entitled REDCo – Religion in Education: A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European countries. First results of this remarkable project are published.

¹⁸ EU’s Sixth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development, Priority 7: Citizens and governance in a knowledge based society. For more information see www.redco.uni-hamburg.de.
This European funding marks an important development and witnesses to the fact that the role of religion in education is seen as highly relevant in Europe. Furthermore it recognises that it is vital to research the contribution that Religious Education can make to peaceful social co-existence in an intercultural and interreligious Europe.

These developments signal that religion and Religious Education are not marginal to educational, social and legislative endeavours at a European level. The increased research activity, the renewed emphasis on Religious Education as a force for social harmony and for developing respect and tolerance in society are welcome departures. It remains for religious educators in local, regional and national contexts to respond positively to the challenges posed by an intercultural and interreligious European society by working imaginatively and collaboratively for a better future.