

The Perspectives of the European institutions concerning the place of religion in education

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Samenvatting

Dit artikel brengt de hedendaagse ontwikkelingen in beeld van Europese organisaties met een focus op hun visie op religie en onderwijs. Aandacht wordt met name geschonken aan de Raad van Europa en de Europese Unie, maar ook aan de OSCE. Deze organisaties faciliteren de geregelde dialoog met kerken en geloofsgemeenschappen ten aanzien van hun bijdrage aan democratische processen, sociale cohesie en burgerschap, waarbij ook de eigen agenda van deze religieuze gemeenschappen aandacht krijgt.

Het artikel richt zich in het bijzonder op de plaats en de rol van religie in het onderwijs zoals die expliciet tot uiting komt in de rapporten van de Raad van Europa wanneer de religieuze en levensbeschouwelijke dimensie van interculturele dialoog en intercultureel onderwijs, democratische burgerschapsvorming en onderwijs gericht op mensenrechten in het geding is. Ook de Europese Unie is duidelijk gecommitteerd aan de dialoog met geloofsgemeenschappen, daarbij rekening houdend met de verschillen die bestaan in de respectieve natiestaten met betrekking tot de relatie van kerk en staat. Het aspect van religie in het onderwijs is om die reden veel meer impliciet in vergelijking met de Raad van Europa.

Religion in education? A discussion of current European documents

The place of religion in education will be discussed within the framework of the discourse on education of the Council of Europe and the European Union. The focus of the argument is on an increasing Europeanisation of education that influences national concerns. Education has become an international issue and the conceptual debate can no longer be limited to national perspectives. Also

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religion has gained new relevance in the European public sphere. This contribution highlights some links between the two areas.

In the first section the article explores the dominating concept of education of the EU and of the Council of Europe. It creates ground for investigating the place and space of religion in the context of a Europeanisation of education. Finally two perspectives are critically discussed. The danger of a functionalized view of religion and the need of a critical religious perspective that expresses commitment for the European project in reflecting and, where necessary, criticizing developments and policies that are not sensitive towards social cohesion and inclusion.

A European view takes account of the policy of the European institutions concerning education and especially on religion in education. These are mainly the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CoE). Also agents such as the OSCE and the OECD play a role as well as other international organizations (e.g., UN Alliance of Civilisations UNAOC; see: www.unaoc.org).

For a long time education has not been a central issue for the EU. The legal responsibility for education rests with the member states. With the Maastricht Treaty (1992) a supporting competence was given to the EU for encouraging exchange and mobility and for supporting member states to improve their education system (Lawn & Grek, 2012; Pépin, 2006; Schreiner, 2012). A main change of perspectives was initiated by the decision of the European Council held in 2000 in Lisbon "to make Europe the most competitive knowledge economy in the world, capable of sustaining growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion." This ambitious aim has put education and training at the center of European integration policy with the intention to increase employability and entrepreneurial potential.

A Europeanisation of education takes place e.g. through the government of experts, common guidelines, indicators, benchmarks and data measuring the quality of the national education systems. Education has become a European issue, crucial for economic and political processes of European integration. In this political perspective there is a high need to foster the "human capital" concerning employability, mobility and flexibility as part of European integration. The established *Open Method of Cooperation* (OMC), increasingly implemented in the field of education after Lisbon 2000, includes common indicators and benchmarks, peer review and regular reports about the quality of education and training systems. Governing of education happens through "persuasion and attraction" of those who are more "successful", through the "hidden politics and standards" and in the meaning provided by the European project (cf. Dale & Robertson, 2009, p. 15). There is also a growth in data collection and its production by European agencies such as the OECD that play a significant role for education policy. A European Education Space (EES) is formed by these developments and a European Education Policy (EEP) influences national concerns but can also be seen as discrete domains (cf. Dale & Robertson, 2009). A

lot of pressure is put on the quality and structure of national education systems without interfering directly in their legal structure.

After 2000 a Working Programme was established to promote lifelong learning and a knowledge economy/society (European Council, 2002), a reference frame of key competences (European Parliament and European Council, 2006a), and an integrated action programme for lifelong learning (European Parliament and European Council, 2006b; see also Schreiner, 2012, pp. 33-38). European Education Policy promotes lifelong learning as a key principle for all education activities.

Developments in this area can be summarized as follows:

The field of education as a new policy area has moved over the years from a small vocational training area and wider actions on a cultural Europe into an integrated policy of benchmarked improvement in which education is a comparable area of public (European P.S.) policy. (Lawn & Grek, 2012, p. 11).

The document “Strategic Framework on Cooperation in Education and Training” (ET 2020) (European Council, 2009) renewed the Lisbon initiative. It includes the following aims of education:

- Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality
- Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training
- Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship
- Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

The list represents an holistic understanding of education. Aiming at issues such as social cohesion and active citizenship it can include also a religious/spiritual dimension. There are attempts to imply or at least to connect aims such as promoting equity, social cohesion and citizenship to religious education approaches in European countries (cf. Jackson, 2012; Miedema, 2012).

We now introduce a current document of the EU to see if the preliminary impression of a preference for a holistic concept of education can be confirmed. In November 2012 a document from the European Commission was published, with the ambitious title: *Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* (COM[2012] 669/3) (European Commission, 2012). The document has five accompanying Staff Working Documents such as the “Education and Training Monitor 2012”, providing an ‘empirical background’ for the line of arguments. The document includes a broad mission of education and training, maybe as an overall rhetoric, but then the crucial point for delivering this document is mentioned: “the most pressing challenges for Member States are to address the needs of the economy and focus on solutions to tackle fast-rising youth unemployment.” (Ibid., p. 2)

Against this background the task of education is seen in the following:

Investment in education and training for skills development is essential to boost growth and competitiveness: skills determine Europe's capacity to increase productivity. In the long-term, skills can trigger innovation and growth, move production up the value chain, stimulate the concentration of higher level skills in the EU and shape the future labour market. (Ibid, p. 2)

A critical view of this statement is not rooted in lamenting that employability is seen as a decisive aim of education and training, but in the observation that these aims (to boost growth and competitiveness) dominate in a way that other aims of education are no longer in the focus. In line with the general perspective the document mentions the following challenges in member states to be addressed:

- Building transversal and basic skills for the 21st century (mainly in STEM = science, technology, engineering and mathematics)
- Stimulating open and flexible learning (Using ICT and Open Educational Resources)
- Promoting a collaborative effort.

Again, these points are at first sight convincing because transversal and basic skills are needed but it might be questionable if STEM is sufficient to deal with the complex situation of a flexible working force. Also social and intercultural competencies are needed for "success" including the competence to deal with the existing plurality of religions and worldviews.

These challenges are then specified in a list of six priorities for member states (pp. 14-15)

1. Promote excellence in vocational education and training (VET).
2. Improve the performance of student groups with high risk of early school leaving and low basic skills.
3. Strengthen the provision of transversal skills that increase employability such as entrepreneurial initiative, digital skills and foreign languages.
4. Reduce the number of low-skilled adults.
5. Scale up the use of ICT-supported learning and access to high quality OER.
6. Revise and strengthen the professional profile of all teaching professions.

Quantitative oriented indicators are mentioned and a new impetus is given to Information *Communication & Technology* (ICT) and especially to *Open Educational Resources* (OER), that are teaching, learning or research materials in the public domain with an intellectual property license that allows free use, adaptation and distribution. This marks a development that is changing the nature of higher education in a revolutionary and rapid way. It should be noted that some of the long-term aims of education are no longer mentioned. The document also proposes key-actions for the European level including support to Member states, the creation of a European Area for Skills and Qualifications and entrepreneurship education actions.

The document is an example on how European governance in education is constructed. It entails an analysis of an urgent need, describes challenges and sets general priorities for member states guided by European activities. The European Education Policy is reducing the broad mission of education by addressing economic needs and neglecting aspects of personal development including the spiritual/religious dimension.

The Council of Europe is an inter-governmental organisation founded in 1949 and based in Strasbourg, France. At present it comprises 47 member states. 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. The three core principles of the Council of Europe are: *human rights* as the value basis for a more just and cohesive society; democracy as the chosen form of managing this society through democratic institutions and processes as well as an everyday democratic culture; and the *rule of law* as the safeguard for justice and equality. These three principles apply to all human beings irrespective of their cultural and religious affiliations. They also lay ground for activities in education. 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 (made up of party members of national parliaments from the member states), the Committee of Ministers (the Foreign Ministers of member states, each of whom has a diplomatic representative resident in Strasbourg) and various specialist conferences of Ministers, including one on Education. The powers of the Parliamentary Assembly extend only to investigation, recommendation and advice.

When we now look at education in the context of the Council of Europe we can refer to four main purposes of education, defined in Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)6 by the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the public responsibility for higher education and research, used in the Pestalozzi programme for teacher in-service training and currently confirmed in the report of the meeting of Ministers of Education in Helsinki in 2013 (Council of Europe, 2013).

They are:

- preparation for sustainable employment (and for the labour market);
- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- personal development;
- development and maintenance, through teaching, learning, and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base (Bergan, 2013; Council of Europe, 2007; Huber, 2011) .

These aims are not put in a hierarchy but:

the importance lies in the balance, a horizontal balance, of the different purposes, which need to be developed equally for everyone and not vertically in the sense that for some people it could be enough to just develop one or the other, or perhaps two out of the four (Huber, 2011).

When we compare the list with the EU document we find remarkable differences. The perspective of the Council of Europe on education is related to personal development, to enabling people to become active citizens and to a broad, advanced knowledge base while the EU is focusing mainly on employability and entrepreneurship. The Council of Europe's perspective is more oriented on the perspective of the learner and less on the needs of the knowledge economy. However, also "preparation for sustainable employment" is included. But this qualification of employability is closely linked to other educational aims that are put on an equal level.

A fairly new recommendation of the Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education adopted in April 2013 on "Governance and Quality education" (Council of Europe, 2013) confirms the dissimilar view of the Council of Europe on education compared with the EU. The scope of the concept of "quality education" in the document includes that education:

develops each pupil's and student's personality, talents, mental and physical abilities (...) promotes democracy, respect for human rights and social justice (...) enables pupils and students to develop appropriate competences, self-confidence and critical thinking to help them become responsible citizens and improve their employability; passes on universal and local cultural values to pupils and students while equipping them also to make their own decisions.

It is also stated in the document that education

must prepare children and young people for democratic citizenship as well as for economic activity; that it must further the personal development of pupils and students as well as their growths as active members of society.

It seems that the orientation towards democracy, human rights and the right of law is closely linked to a more comprehensive view of education than a policy that is mainly linked to economic needs.

The introduction of different understandings of the nature of education of the EU and the Council of Europe provides a perspective to deal with the question: How does (can) religion and religious education relate to the concepts of education?

Religion in the context of a Europeanisation of education

Is there a place and space for religion and religious education in the activities of the European institutions? Findings of a current study (Schreiner, 2012) underline that this happens not in a direct way because the EU sees itself as neutral or impartial concerning the existing situation of religion in the different national contexts and accepts the relationship between state and religion as it exists in the member states (Art. 17 Lisbon Treaty on the Functioning of the European

Union TFEU). Indirectly religion and religious education can be related to a “broad mission of education” that includes objectives such as active citizenship, personal development and well-being, as these were introduced in the first section of this article. A comprehensive concept of education is included in some EU documents but this emphasis is rather weak.

Also the Council of Europe sees itself as a secular institution, impartial concerning existing religious and non-religious worldviews but the Council deals more explicitly with aspects of education and religion compared to the EU.

The recognition of religion in the context of education can be investigated in documents of the Council of Europe (Schreiner, 2012). In different recommendations of the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly aspects of religion and education are discussed and promoted (Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, 2005, 2007, 2011). Examples are the recommendation Rec1720(2005) ‘on education and religion’ (Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, 2005) and the recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 on the ‘Dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education’ (Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, 2008) as well as the recommendation 1962 (2011) on ‘The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue’ (Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, 2011). In these documents the value and potential of religion is stated as well as possible negative aspects rooted in a religious conviction.

In ‘education and religion’ it is mentioned that “the values upheld by the Council of Europe stem from the values of the three monotheistic religions” although religion is also seen as “a strictly personal matter”. Furthermore it is stated that “a good general knowledge of religions and the resulting sense of tolerance” is important as an integral part of the knowledge of humankind and civilizations.

The recommendation ‘on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education’ has its focus on intercultural education and not on religious education. Religion is seen as a “diverse and complex” phenomenon and as a decisive element in personal identity. A common point is to see religions at least as “cultural facts”. Education should develop intercultural competences through a range of activities and the place of religions and non-religious convictions in the public sphere should be recognized and included in the curriculum as topics for discussion and reflection.

The recommendation ‘on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue’ promotes the collaboration between religious communities to foster the values that make up the common core of our European societies and recommends

that states and religious communities review together, on the basis of the guidelines provided by the Council of Europe, the questions regarding teaching on religions, denominational education, and training of teachers and of ministers of education or those with religious responsibilities, according to a holistic approach. (Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, 2011, p. 21)

Whereas elsewhere the recipients of the recommendations have been the member states, now a dialogue with religious communities is proposed concerning the teaching of religions and denominational teaching.

In 2008, the Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: Living Together as Equals in Dignity* (Council of Europe, 2009) identified several key areas where action is required to enhance intercultural dialogue to safeguard and develop human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Intercultural education was one of these areas. The *White Paper* viewed intercultural competence as a crucial capability that needs to be developed by every individual to enable him or her to participate in intercultural dialogue. The document names the 'religious dimension' as a condition of intercultural dialogue. This is based on

considerable overlaps between the Council of Europe's agenda and the concerns of religious communities: human rights, democratic citizenship, the promotion of values, peace, dialogue, education and solidarity. (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 21)

The *White paper* recalls that

An appreciation of our diverse cultural background should include knowledge and understanding of the major world religions and non-religious convictions and their role in society. (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 43)

In addition to these documents other developments can be mentioned. Since 2008 a regular dialogue and exchange with the religious communities has been organized. Whereas the first meetings dealt with issues of education and religion the following meetings (2010-2012) focussed on the role of the media in intercultural dialogue and the crucial role of the younger generation in promoting intercultural understanding and exchange.

These developments underline the view that more dialogue produces more common understanding and collaboration leading to a more differentiated perception of both the political institutions and their agendas and of the religious communities, their commonalities and differences.

Before summarizing the main findings concerning the Council of Europe and the EU we have to mention another major international institution concerned with human rights and also consider the place of the study of religions and beliefs in public education. This is the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), based in Vienna. The OSCE is the largest regional security organization in Europe. Its 57 participant states come from Europe, Central Asia and North America. It was set up in the 1970s to create a forum for dialogue during the Cold War. For the OSCE security is not only considered in politico-military terms but also through its human dimension and an environmental and economic dimension (*three dimensional security*).

Because of the human dimension to security, OSCE has an Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), which is based in Warsaw. ODIHR conducted a project to identify principles on which participant states could develop policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious beliefs in schools. The result were the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (TGPs), named after the city in which the drafting team first worked on the text, and in recognition of Toledo's historical role in communication between different religions (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007).

The rationale of the *Toledo Guiding Principles* (TGPs) 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 TGPs 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 TGPs focus solely on an 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/ODIHR, 2007, pp. 11-12). The TGPs offer guidance on preparing curricula for teaching about religions and beliefs, preferred procedures for assuring fairness in the development of curricula, and standards for how they could be implemented.

In the TGPs, the underlying argument for the inclusion of the study of religions and beliefs in public education has a human rights emphasis. The first premise is that freedom of religion or belief predicates plurality: if freedom of religion or belief is a given for society, then society inevitably will be plural. The next premise is that if society is to be cohesive, plurality requires tolerance of difference. The conclusion is that tolerance of difference requires *at least* knowledge and understanding of the beliefs and values of others. This would be so whatever the approach specifically taken to RE or intercultural education in particular countries. In other words, the document supports the inclusion of a just and fair approach to religious difference, whatever the system of RE or education about religion in particular states.

The TGPs include a substantial chapter on the human rights framework – including legal issues in relation to the state and the rights of parents, children, teachers and minorities, as well as chapters on preparing curricula and teacher education, plus conclusions and recommendations. The *Toledo Guiding Principles*, were approved by the Ministerial Council and launched at the 15th OSCE Ministerial Council held in Madrid in November 2007.

After presenting selected documents on education and on teaching about religions the next section summarizes findings of a study that deals extensively with the space and place given to religion in education in the framework of the European institutions. The qualitative approach employed here investigates key

documents which were analysed using a combination of qualitative content analysis, discourse analyses and Grounded Theory (Schreiner, 2012).

Space and place of religion in education: a preliminary summary concerning European institutions

Concerning Religion: In the documents of the Council of Europe three different perspectives of religion can be distinguished: religion as a private matter, religion as collective and organised and religion as a cultural fact. From a diachronic perspective private religion is an established image while organised religion gains more sympathy and recognition in the history of the analysed documents between 1993 and 2011. The agreement on the fact that religion is, at least, a 'cultural fact', has received prominence in current documents of the Council of Europe. In the context of the European Union no explicit concept of religion is expressed. The EU respects the legal national status of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States. The EU organizes regular dialogue with churches and religious communities.

Concerning Religious Education: A general relationship between education and religion can be distinguished in the Council of Europe's documents. The Council of Europe clearly expresses a preference for a knowledge-based concept of "teaching/education about religion" whereas other aspects of religious education such as learning from religion and learning religion are not dealt with extensively.

On the one hand religious communities are increasingly seen as valid partners in the politics of creating a democratic society, if they follow existing political conditions and frameworks. They should actively support the basic values of democracy, human rights and the right of law, support tolerance, and become active in interreligious dialogue. The danger of a functionalized perception of religion and religious communities and their perception of helpful 'political instruments' has to be carefully recognized in this context (safe the own space of religions).

On the other hand the relationship of religion, democracy and society is seen as increasingly manifold and complex. This can be documented in the following slightly antagonistic findings:

- Religion fades away, but receives increasing importance in society.
- Religion is a private matter, but becomes increasingly an issue in the public sphere.
- Religion is a cultural fact, but for many, religion is a way of life, an embodiment of revealed truth or linked to important ethical convictions.

A critical aspect is that the existing range of models of religious education in Europe is not recognized or discussed in the documents of the Council of Europe. The knowledge aspect of teaching about religion is stressed whereas the

existential, experience oriented dimension of religious education is neglected or covered by stereotypes and prejudices.

The relation of education and religion is not an explicit policy issue of the EU, although it is from time to time a subject in the dialogue with churches and religious communities. A reason for that could be that the EU accepts the (different) national situation in state-church relations and the independence of the churches and religious communities and does not interfere in any way in these dynamics.

The Council of Europe is encouraging teaching about religion and so does the OSCE through the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in public schools* (TGPs) (OSC/ODIHR 2007). Its motives are to promote intercultural understanding, to combat prejudices and to encourage living together in harmony appreciating existing diversity. In some documents there is mistrust expressed against confessional approaches and some religious communities. For the OSCE it is interesting that the overall framework of security has motivated to discuss the contribution of education and the teaching about religion. What the TGPs offer and promote are more or less established criteria of any good RE teaching. This may be a reason why the European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education (EFTRE) adopted the TGPs without intense debate and included a reference to the principles as part of their statutes (see www.eftre.org).

Another aspect is that religious communities are motivated – especially by the Council of Europe - to become more democratic, to enhance interreligious dialogue and to strongly support the aims of the Council.

Conclusions

The introduction of selected documents of the EU, the CoE and the OSCE on education and on religion and education has underlined that the field is complex. European Education Policy is focusing on the need of employability while the Council of Europe favors a broader concept of education and the OSCE is functionalizing the teaching about religions for security purposes. In all three organizations perspectives on the place of religion in education are not very elaborated, *implicitly* in the framework of the EU and *explicitly* with the Council of Europe and the OSCE. The preference for a knowledge-based concept of teaching about religion goes hand in hand with a functionalized view of religion for the purpose and aims of the Council and the OSCE.

For research and policy there is a need to connect to the agendas of the European institutions more actively and to use opportunities for dialogue. The agendas are different. The EU focus is on growth and political stability, the Council of Europe's concern is on democracy, human rights and rule of law, and the OSCE's main focus is on 'three dimensional security'. Education activities are related to these basic values and religion comes in with a specific function.

The role of education is limited to the teaching about religion; the existing scope of approaches to religious education that exist in Europe is not mentioned. Initiatives to increase dialogue with religious communities about the teaching of religion and also denominational education are welcome because increasing dialogue can provide increasing understanding and a more differentiated perception on both sides.

Abstract

This article presents current developments within the European institutions in relation to their perspectives on religion and education. This includes the Council of Europe and the European Union and also the OSCE. These organizations facilitate regular dialogue with churches and religious communities, appreciate their contribution to democracy, social cohesion and citizenship but also frame the dialogue with religious communities taking account of their own agenda. A special focus is on the place and impetus of religion in education, explicitly in documents of the Council of Europe when it comes to the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue/education, education for democratic citizenship and human rights education EDC/HRE. The context of the European Union is shaped by a clear commitment to dialogue with religious communities but also to the acknowledgement of the different national state-church relationships. In this respect the aspect of religion in education is an implicit element of the discourse.

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