The relevance of interreligious dialogue for intercultural understanding.

The White Paper “Living together as Equals in Dignity” of the Council of Europe and the principal findings of the European research project REDCo. Documentation of a public event in the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, March 2009

The REDCo-team in front of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg
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Our EC-funded REDCo project was given the extraordinary opportunity to present its findings at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg on 19 March 2009. This event titled “The Relevance of Interreligious Dialogue for Intercultural Understanding” allowed us to juxtapose the Council of Europe’s white paper “Living together as Equals in Dignity” and the principal findings of our European research project REDCo: “Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European countries”. After having had a similar privilege already at the European Parliament in December 2008, where we presented and discussed major themes from our REDCo research (see …), the event at the Council of Europe offered us a very special opportunity: We could present our findings in the very last month of our three-year research project, and we felt encouraged by the presentation of Mrs Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, the Director General of the Council of Europe for Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport. She made clear how the specific and concrete results of the REDCo project support the general direction of the white paper of the Council of Europe. The presentations given by various REDCo project members underscored this impression, making reference to major findings of their research.

We are happy to be able to document the presentations, given on 19 March 2009 at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. About 70 people from a wide variety of different institutions attended the meeting. In addition, dozens of members of the education committee of the Council of Europe, who held a meeting in an adjoining room, approached us before our meeting and expressed interest in our research.

A meeting like the one we held at the Council of Europe can only take place if two conditions are met. First, the subject must be felt to be a genuine concern. We feel challenged by the increasing prominence of religion in education, both in the academic and the public sphere. Secondly, it is a question of good mutual cooperation. This cooperation between stakeholders of the Council of Europe and REDCo developed gratifyingly dynamically and productively over the past few years. My thanks go especially to the Director General of the Council, Mrs. Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, and to Ulrich Bunjes, Stefano Dominioni and Villano Qiriazi from the Council of Europe. Among my REDCo-colleagues, special thanks go to Julia Ipgrave, Ina ter Avest and Jean-Paul Willaime for their contributions and – last but not least – to Christian Rudelt for his splendid organisation and management.

Hamburg, April 11 2009  Wolfram Weisse
Coordinator of REDCo
Wolfram Weisse

Introduction

Madam Director, honourable guests, dear colleagues and friends,

I am delighted to welcome you here. We are really happy to have the opportunity to present the findings of our European REDCo project here in the Council of Europe.

There are many parallels between our findings and the priorities expressed in the “White paper” of the council from May 2008 with the title “Living together as Equals in Dignity! We will come back to this.

Madam Director, you are one of the members of the advisory-board of REDCo, and I would like to publicly thank you for comments and your support over the last three years. May I give you two of our publications which just came out last week.

Now we are looking forward to your introduction.
Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni

The Council of Europe and the REDCo project

I welcome the opportunity of this meeting aimed at presenting findings of your research work and to be with high-level experts like you, who have been involved for a long time, since the very beginning (may be even before) in our projects on intercultural dialogue, and in the preparation of the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue – “Living together as equals in dignity”.

I hope that this long-standing and faithful co-operation has been fruitful for you and I hope that the White Paper has been an asset in your research work.

I have no doubt that this co-operation will also be fruitful for the Council of Europe because on the basis of the findings of your research work, the Council of Europe could further develop its Education Policies focusing on the teaching about religions.

If we look at developments in Europe and beyond since the time of the preparation and adoption of the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, there is no indication that intercultural dialogue is a less urgent concern now that it was a year ago. The call for action is urgent and through the White Paper we are now equipped with better tools to move from ideas to action.

Our societies are in the middle of a financial crisis – or maybe that is too optimistic, maybe we are only in the first part of the crisis and not in the middle of it. The economy is important but we should not forget that it is precisely in difficult times that we are in particular need of values, civic competences, attitudes and action.

Let us not forget that it is precisely in times of economic distress that those who are different from the majority are in most danger of being identified as scapegoats. Let us not forget that it is our responsibility as citizens to act in accordance with our key values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and let us not forget that it is education – at all levels, from pre-primary to higher education – that carries a large part of the responsibility to develop the democratic culture that makes democracy as well as intercultural dialogue possible.

During the past year, I have been gratified by the ways in which the White Paper has been received and also by the enthusiasm for our ongoing campaign “Speak out against discrimination”.

Preparation process of the White Paper

The drafting of the White Paper was preceded by a wide-scale consultation of all major stakeholders - an extremely important form of dialogue in itself- within and outside the Council of Europe, involving member states, members of national parliaments, local and regional authorities, religious communities, migrant communities, cultural and other non-governmental organisations, journalists and media organisations as well as international institutions. Religious communities played a very important role in this consultation since more than 100 religious communities replied.
Consultation and dialogue processes
Consultation and dialogue is a long-standing and usual Council of Europe’s behaviour when preparing new instruments. The Council of Europe has been involved in dialogue with representatives of different faiths for some time.

The process started a few years ago and has since gained momentum. The 2007 San Marino Conference on “the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue” was the culmination of a series of Council of Europe events, including the international conferences on “Dialogue, tolerance and education: the concerted action of the Council of Europe and the religious communities” (Kazan, 22-23 February 2006) and “Dialogue of Cultures and Inter-Faith Cooperation”, (Nizhniy Novgorod, 7-8 September 2006).

These events, including the conferences organised since 2005 by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights brought together representatives of religious communities with the aim of associating them with the work of the Council of Europe in the human rights field, underlining the important role of religions in enhancing dialogue.

Initiatives taken by the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe over the past few years have also greatly enriched the debate with religious organizations.

Nature of the consultation and dialogue processes
Consultation and dialogue with religious or non-religious organisations has lead to a real partnership between all these stakeholders and the Council of Europe. Links have been established, resulting in a climate of mutual trust and understanding.

Ladies and gentlemen, as Professor Willaime so clearly puts it in his recent work “Le retour du religieux dans la sphère publique”, the contemporary European approach to the religious dimension of cultural diversity can be characterised by the three pillars of European “laicism” or laïcité:
- Freedom of thought, conscience and religion as a human right (Art. 9 ECHR, Art. 18 Universal Declaration)
- The principle of equal rights and duties for everyone, regardless of their religious or other convictions, or the principle of non-discrimination;
- And the principle of the mutual autonomy of religion and politics.

Based on this wide European consensus - which leaves room for very different interpretations, however -, public authorities have to take a very cautious position with regard to interfaith dialogue. Interfaith dialogue is not at all part of the mandate of public authorities. It is rather the responsibility of religious communities themselves, through interreligious dialogue, to contribute to an increased understanding between different religions. This being said, there is a considerable degree of overlap between the agenda of public authorities and the agenda of religious communities, with regard to cultural diversity: human rights, democratic citizenship, the promotion of values, peace, dialogue, education and solidarity. This gives rise to considerations as to how public authorities can act as a facilitator for the activities of faith communities promoting intercultural dialogue, and how they can encourage interfaith dialogue without compromising their role. It is for faith communities to answer the question what is needed to ensure good interfaith co-operation. However, the “White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue”, defines the possible supportive roles of public authorities in this regard over and above a general encouragement (as expressed by the Committee of Ministers and the Third Summit). Some examples: The State, through its judicial system, can manifest its non-partisan role, thus encouraging a dialogue of faith communities on an equal basis, without fear of domination (one of the principles of intercultural dialogue, which in this case has to be guaranteed by the State). The State, through the educational system, can lay the foundations for a minimum of knowledge about religious and non-religious convictions (“teaching of religious and convictional facts”, “Exchanges on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue”, European Wergeland Centre), without interfering with the freedom of religion and the principles of laicism. Public authorities, through their infrastructure, can provide if necessary the physical spaces necessary for interfaith dialogue.

What are the lessons learned and best practices from intercultural and interfaith dialogue which can help build relations between communities, foster integration and address issues of cultural social exclusion? The international community in Europe has recently formulated its consensus on the issue of cultural diversity, integration and dialogue (the “White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue”). In our view, key building blocks of a cohesive society are:

- Intercultural dialogue will only thrive if we develop the democratic governance of cultural diversity, e.g. by building a political culture of diversity that recognises the rights of
minorities and migrants; and by promoting policies and—if necessary—by taking positive
action to secure the equal enjoyment of rights of all citizens.

- Secondly, we must strengthen the democratic citizenship and participation for all.
- Another task is to support the learning and teaching of intercultural competences in all
parts of the education sector; the knowledge of other cultures and religions, of history and
heritage, languages and life-styles, compromise and conflict-resolution is essential here.
- Efforts must be made to create more—and more accessible—spaces for intercultural
dialogue, be it physical spaces or virtual spaces like in the media or the arts.
- And finally, the principles of intercultural dialogue must also inspire international
relations.

All this is a key responsibility of public authorities at all levels — but also centrally involves
civil society and other non-state actors, including religious communities, private enterprise,
media professionals and every individual, including migrants. Promoting intercultural
dialogue is not only a transversal policy; it is also a common responsibility that needs to be
shared by all.

What is new since the adoption of the White Paper last year?
A very important step has been the organisation in 2008 of a “Council of Europe Exchange on
the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue”, putting together representatives of religious
and non-religious communities/institutions, with a view to exploring the teaching of religious
and convicitional facts as a tool for acquiring knowledge about religion and beliefs in
education, keeping in mind the core values of the Council of Europe, in particular democratic
citizenship, and human rights.

The adoption of a Recommandation in December 2008 of the Committe of Ministers to
Member States on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within
intercultural education. Such a recommendation is a strong political tool, in which the Council
of Europe has expressed its vision by inviting the Member States to ensure that they take into
account the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions at three different levels:

- education policies, in the form of clear-cut education principles and objectives;
- institutions, especially through open learning settings and inclusive policies;
- professional development of teaching staff, through adequate training.

Conclusions – future challenges: 2009 Exchange and REDCo findings
Equipped with this new Recommendation Rec(2008)12, and based on the results of the 2008
Exchange, the Committee of Ministers has decided to organise a 2009 Exchange on the
religious dimension of intercultural dialogue.

The event will take place in Strasbourg on 29-30 June 2009. The objective is to challenge
religious and non-religious institutions and to ask them how and to what extent they can
contribute to putting into practice the Recommendation Rec(2008)12. With this in mind, it is
clear that there is a strong link between the challenges that the Council of Europe is currently
facing and the results of the REDCo project. In conclusion, I am extremely happy that you
decided to have this meeting here in the premises of the Council of Europe, as a symbol of the
partnership that has been growing between us over the years, and also very interested in
discovering the findings you have reached through the REDCo project. I wish you all a
pleasant and fruitful meeting.
Wolfram Weisse

Introduction to the REDCo project and policy recommendations

Academic research in fields with societal implications must find two expressions: Publications in books and public dissemination. As the role of religion in education is more and more a theme of high relevance, both in research as in the public discourse, we are very happy to have the opportunity of a public presentation in the Council of Europe. In the following presentation, I would like to give a short overview of the REDCo-project, and continue with our policy recommendations, based on our research findings.

Introduction to the REDCo project
Religion in Education is the thematic background of our REDCo-project. REDCo is the acronym for “Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European countries.” It is located in the section “Values and Religions in Europe” of the EU-programme „Citizens and Governance in a knowledge based society”. This project is funded by the research department of the European Commission over a period of three years from March 2006 until March 2009. Nine projects from eight different European countries are participating: Estonia, Russia, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, England, France and Spain.

The project’s main aim was to establish and compare the potentials and limitations of religion in the educational systems of selected European countries and regions. Approaches and constellations that can contribute to making religion in education a factor promoting dialogue in the context of European development have been addressed. Looking at religion in the context of education, we analysed the position and importance of religions and religious values in various European countries with their very different traditions. Our main aim was to look at the challenges facing religious education in the context of current changes in European societies and their importance for dialogue and mutual understanding without disregarding potential problems. We believe it is vital in this context not only to further develop theoretical approaches, but also to look for possibilities for successful dialogue in actual, daily situations of encounter occurring at schools throughout the Union. Taking account of potentials for confrontation as well as dialogue, this will allow us to develop impulses for the future peaceful coexistence of people of different religions and beliefs.
In the context of historical development, we concentrated on questions of religions and religious values. Differences were not studied in the abstract or through history (there are numerous studies of this kind from both theological and religious studies perspectives), but in their impact on modern Europe and the lives of its citizens. We did research empirically on the question how differences within European societies can be addressed and thematised without creating conflict or exclusion. Empirical studies, targeting students in the 14-16-year age group, looked into their own perceptions of dialogue or conflict within the different national contexts. These included a dual perspective of, on the one hand, the subjects' own perspectives and, on the other hand, analyses of observed teaching in both dialogue and conflict situations. Our subject selection also allowed for gender-specific results. It is particularly from those studies we gained further insight into whether and how religious and value-based identity development can coexist or must clash with openness for other positions.

Our project analysed conceptual and practical approaches to mutual understanding in the field of religious education. The correlation between low levels of religious education and a willingness to use religion as a criterion of exclusion and confrontation has been pointed out before. We, conversely, looked into how, in the context of religious education in schools and universities, theoretical and practical approaches that further openness towards others and mutual respect across religious and cultural differences can be strengthened. Looking towards the future, we cannot hope to complete this task at the national level alone. A European perspective needed to be established through comparative study. This was the stated aim from the beginning and is reflected in the outcome structure of our project.

Theoretical, conceptual and empirical analyses helped to lay the foundation for our understanding of the contribution religion in education can make towards the transformation processes at work in various European countries. By comparing different approaches we gained the necessary perception of historical depth and analytical clarity to address the core questions of dialogue and conflict in Europe and to find ways to stimulate a process of growing European identity/ies.

In spite of a wide range of societal and pedagogical backgrounds, the research group holds a common conviction: religion must be included in schools, as religion is too important a factor in the social life and the coexistence of people with different cultural and religious backgrounds throughout Europe.

In addition to many articles in journals we published our research findings in 6 books with research results of REDCo. One refers to the different historical, educational and religious contexts in Europe (Jackson, Miedema, Weisse & Willaime 2007). Another one presents analyses of our qualitative findings on Encountering religious Pluralism in School and Society. A qualitative study on Teenage perspectives in Europe (Knauth, Jozsa, Bertram-Troost, & Ipgrave 2008). A third one is a quantitative study on “Teenager’s perspectives on the Role of Religion in their Lives, Schools and Societies (Valk, Bertram-Troost, Friederici & Béraud2009). The fourth one focuses on “Teachers responding to Religious Diversity in Europe (van der Want, Bakker, ter Avest, Everington 2009), the fiths is directed to analyses of “Dialogue and conflict on Religion. Studies of classroom interaction in European Countries” (ter Avest, Jozsa, Knauth, Rosón, & Skeie 2009). And the last one is on “Islam in Education in European countries - Pedagogical Concepts and Empirical Findings” (Alvarez Veinguer, Dietz, Jozsa & Knauth, 2009).

On the basis of our research findings we have worked out the following policy recommendations of our REDCo project, dated March 19 2009:
Religion in Education: Contribution to Dialogue

Policy recommendations of the REDCo research project

From: REDCo (Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries)

Funded by the European Commission

Coordinator Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse, University of Hamburg, Germany

National project leaders: Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse, Prof. Dr. Thorsten Knauth, University of Hamburg, Germany; Prof. Dr. Robert Jackson, University of Warwick, England; Prof. Dr. Jean-Paul Willaime, EPHE Sorbonne, Paris, France; Prof. Dr. Siebren Miedema, Dr. Ina ter Avest, VU University Amsterdam in cooperation with Prof. Dr. Cok Bakker, Utrecht University, the Netherlands; Prof. Dr. Geir Skeie, University of Stavanger, Norway; Dr. Pille Valk, University of Tartu, Estonia; Prof. Dr. Muhammed Kalisch, Dr. Dan-Paul Jozsa, University of Muenster, Germany; Prof. Dr. Vladimir Fedorov, Prof. Dr. Fedor Kozyrev, Russian Christian Academy for Humanities, St. Petersburg, Russia; Prof. Dr. Gunther Dietz, Dr. Aurora Alvarez-Veinguer, University of Granada, Spain.

To: EU Institutions (Parliament, Commission, Council of Ministers), Council of Europe, United Nations (UNESCO, General Assembly, Alliance of Civilizations), National Educational Bodies of EU-member states, Educational Research Associations, Non-Governmental Organizations, Religious Organisations, Universities and Schools within the European Union.

Policy recommendations of REDCo

Introduction

Throughout the world, people are increasingly coming to recognise the implications of the renewed importance religion holds for both individuals and societies in national and international politics and public discourse. Growing religious diversity has given the question new urgency, and accordingly ‘social cohesion’ is a frequently cited policy goal when addressing the role of religion in European societies. This is especially evident in the attention paid to the study of religions as a part of intercultural learning and human rights education and is clearly expressed in international documents such as the Council of Europe’s White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (Council of Europe 2008) and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (OSCE 2007). Both documents stress the importance of dialogue between people of different faiths and convictions in the context of intercultural teaching and learning. This is also the focus of REDCo (Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries), a European comparative research project on young people’s views of religion, religious diversity and possibilities for dialogue, as well as of classroom interaction and teacher-strategies. REDCo is the first substantial research project on religion and education financed by the European
Commission, running from March 1st 2006 until March 31st 2009. It has carried out qualitative and quantitative research in eight countries (Germany, England, France, The Netherlands, Norway, Estonia, Russia, Spain) mainly focusing on religion in the lives and schooling of students in the 14–16 age group. The students expressed their attitudes about personal experience with religion, the social dimension of religion, and religion in school. The REDCo findings can encourage further policy development in education at a European as well as at a national level.

Key research findings of REDCo

- The majority of students appreciated the religious heterogeneity in their societies, although a range of prejudices were expressed.

- The most important source of information about religions and worldviews is generally the family, followed by the school.

- The school population includes a sizeable group of students for whom religion is important in their lives, a sizeable group for whom religion is not important and a sizeable group who hold a variety of occasionally fluctuating positions between these two poles.

- Irrespective of their religious positions a majority of students are interested in learning about religions in school.

- Students are well aware of and experience religious diversity mostly in, but also outside school.

- Students are generally open towards peers of different religious backgrounds. At the same time they tend to socialise with peers from the same background as themselves, even when they live in areas characterised by religious diversity.

- Students often express a tolerant attitude more at an abstract than a practical level. The tolerance expressed in classroom discussion is not always replicated in their daily life-world.

- Those who learn about religious diversity in school are more willing to enter into conversations about religions and worldviews with students from other backgrounds than those who do not have this opportunity for learning.

- Students desire peaceful coexistence across religious differences, and believe that this is possible.

- Students believe that the main preconditions for peaceful coexistence between people of different religions are knowledge about each other’s religions and worldviews, shared interests, and joint activities.

- In most countries students support the right of adherents to a moderate expression of religious faith in school. For example, they do not oppose in school the wearing of unobtrusive religious symbols or object to voluntary acts of worship for students who are adherents of a particular religion.
• Students for whom religion is important in their lives are more likely to respect the religious background of others and value the role of religion in the world.

• Most students would like to see school dedicated more to teaching about different religions than to guiding them towards a particular religious belief or worldview.

• Students express their desire that learning about religions should take place in a safe class-room environment governed by agreed procedures for expression and discussion.

• Students generally wish to avoid conflict on religious issues, and some of the religiously committed students feel especially vulnerable.

• Dialogue is a favoured strategy for teachers to cope with diversity in the classroom, but students are more ambivalent about its value since in practice, not all students are comfortable with the way diversity is managed in schools.

• Students generally favour the model of education about religion with which they are familiar.

**Policy Recommendations**

On the basis of the findings of REDCo we support the policy recommendations of the Council of Europe and the Toledo Guiding Principles. However, we suggest a need for a degree of differentiation at the national level regarding the implementation of policies in the educational system. This is due, for example, to different national traditions, norms, legal systems and pedagogical approaches in dealing with religion in education. Each national context needs to be taken into account when policies are applied. At a European level we suggest making room in the classroom for dialogue and discussion about and between different religious (and non-religious) worldviews. Against the background of our research on the views of students we underline the importance of dialogue at classroom level which emphasizes the exchange of different perspectives of students concerning religions and worldviews. Proceeding from this general assumption, the following points should be taken into account both when addressing different national contexts and the European level.

**Encouragement for peaceful coexistence**

Education policy development and implementation need to focus on the transformation of abstract (passive) tolerance into practical (active) tolerance.

**Actions:**

• Counter stereotypical images of religions, present more complex images that show the impact of religion on society and the individual.

• Develop and strengthen skills for dialogue between pupils concerning different religions and worldviews

• Provide opportunities for engagement with different worldviews and religions, (including cooperation with local communities in order to increase exchange between different religious and non-religious groups) and to offer opportunities for encounters between students of diverse positions vis à vis religion.
Promotion of diversity management

Citizenship education tends to focus on homogeneity; but in turning from passive to active tolerance, it is necessary to value religious diversity at school as well as at university level.

Actions:
- Offer opportunities for students to learn about and give space for discussions on religions.
- Develop innovative approaches to learning about religions and worldviews in different subjects including RE, history, literature and science.
- RE and learning about religion must incorporate education for understanding and tolerance and take account of children’s differing needs as they develop.
- Encourage universities to give fuller consideration to religious diversity in research and teaching.

Including religious as well as non-religious worldviews

School is a place where all students must be respected, regardless of their worldview or religious conviction. Religion is important to some of the students, and their beliefs must not be allowed to become an obstacle to their academic progress.

Actions:
- Inclusion of learning about different religious and secular worldviews in their complexity and inner diversity.
- Inclusion of the religious dimension into general intercultural education, education for democratic citizenship and human rights education.

Professional competence

No changes can be made without education professionals and the required competence on their part. Such education would be needed both at initial training level and in the continuing professional development of teachers.

Actions:
- Prepare educators in different subjects to treat religious topics relevant to their subject, ensuring the inclusion of students regardless of their religious or non-religious background.
- Train educators in methods that support and encourage students to be comfortable with difference and to engage with the diversity of their personal experiences.
- The curriculum for teacher training should include the development of skills to organise and moderate in-class debates on controversial religious issues and conflicting worldviews.
References


Dr. Julia Ipgrave and Dr. Ina ter Avest
Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse and Prof. Dr. Vladimir Fedorov in front of a REDCo roll-up display
Julia Ipgrave

**REDCo and the Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: ‘Living together as Equals with Dignity’**

**CONTEXT and QUESTION**

In this paper I propose to link the work of the REDCo project to the Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (7th May 2008) noting where there are commonalities in origins, focus and approaches and what the empirical research, findings, implications and recommendations might add to that which is already in that document. I begin with the forward to the white paper, placed under the heading ‘Dialogue – a key to Europe’s future’ at the beginning of the document. The context is ‘Europe’s increasing cultural diversity’ and the question, ‘what is our vision of the society of the future?’ (Council of Europe 2008, 4).

Within this context of diversity, REDCo’s interest has been with religious diversity in particular, a reflection of the increasing profile of religion in public consciousness in Europe. And for the question of vision for the future, it is the future of young people we have been addressing with students from the 14 to 16 year old age bracket, in a number of schools in eight countries. It is their vision we have been exploring and their answer to this question of the future in the light of their present experiences of religion and religious diversity.

We sought the young people’s views through questionnaires supported in some cases by interviews. In each of our nine regions (the German contribution came from two states treated separately), around 70 young people filled in a qualitative questionnaire giving their views on the role of religion in their lives, in school and in society present and future. The open-ended questions gave them a chance to expand on their experiences and understandings and what they had to say formed the basis of questions for a larger scale quantitative survey of more than 8000 students on the same themes.

**CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY**

To return to the context, that of religion and of diversity- in the White Paper we find the observation that ‘religious practice is part of contemporary life’ (Council of Europe 2008, 22). The students in the REDCo project were asked directly about the role of religion in their own lives and the variety of the responses was notable. The students held several different positions on a spectrum between very important and of no relevance at all, yet whatever their own position the vast majority recognised the significance of religion in contemporary
society, as the report of our quantitative findings expresses it, most of the teenagers, the data tells us, see religion as a normal part of societal life (Valk, Bertram-Troost, Frederici, Béraud 2009). Though many were aware of religion’s conflict potential, and those for whom religion was important in their own lives were more likely to value the role of religion in the world, students with or without a personal religion of their own were generally accepting of the place of religion and religious heterogeneity in society.

So we have religion as part of the context, and within religion we have diversity which parallels and is to some degree (though not entirely) part of that cultural diversity that the white paper addresses. The ever-growing diversity of European societies is the impetus and a continuing theme of the white paper and the sampling has aimed to capture some results of that diversification by incorporating different groups originating in the historical pluralisation of European Christianity, including schools where we expected to find students from the broad categories of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, and selecting a charismatic Christian school as part of the Norwegian sample, for example. It also sought to capture the increasing pluralisation of religion, religious culture and religious discourse that has happened within each of the regions through the movement of peoples between European countries, as with the Russian heritage families of Orthodox background in the traditionally Lutheran Estonia, and into Europe from outside, as with the West African heritage Christians in the English sample, or Turkish Muslims in the North Rhine Westphalia sample, to take just two of several examples. It was also correctly anticipated that there would be young people in the sample whose non-religious identity reflected historical secularising trends in European society. In the questionnaires the students were given an opportunity to select a descriptor for their religious identity.

Like the white paper, the REDCo project recognised the importance of ensuring that the individual should not be lost within a group identity, it too was conscious of the need ‘to avoid the pitfalls of identity politics’ (Council of Europe 2008, 18) and applied to religious identity the white paper’s understanding of identity as being dynamic rather than static, ‘responding to new openings and experiences and adding new layers to identity without relinquishing one’s roots’ (p18). For this reason the project gave the opportunity to reflect on the role of religion in their personal history and present experience and to provide, a more nuanced description of their personal religious position than a group identity category might provide. Their responses to these questions highlighted still further the wide heterogeneity of
the students’ religious convictions and worldviews. It was evident that in the schools we worked with there were sizeable groups of students for whom religion and God were personally important or very important, (‘God is everything to me, my life’, ‘God and Jesus is my life. If I didn’t have them, life wouldn’t be worth living’), for whom religion was of no personal importance, (‘I don’t think about God at all’, ‘Religion has my absolute lowest priority!’), and many who take various (often fluctuating) positions between the two. They may be doubting and wondering, ‘I believe there may be something out there …I’m slowly thinking that there is nothing though’ (Ipgrave and McKenna 2008, 122) or thinking about God only now and then as the occasion demands, for example when they are worried about exams (Knauth 2008, 226) or the possibility of an accident on their motorbike (Dietz, Lorente and Garzón 2008, 32).

Another point of diversity was the young people’s experience of encounter with other religions. Some mixed with peers from a variety of backgrounds on a day-to-day basis in school and so were familiar with religious differences even in the minor practical details such as what food students from other religious traditions could or could not choose as they lined up in the school canteen. Others living in more heterogeneous environments did not have this opportunity for first hand encounter. If, as the white paper suggests, there is need to prepare young people for a role as citizens in an increasingly diverse Europe, then this imbalance of experience of religious plurality is something that needs to be addressed. While the white paper speaks of the importance of giving ‘young people opportunities to meet and engage with their peers from diverse backgrounds’ the REDCo recommended actions include,

Provide opportunities for engagement with different worldviews and religions, (including cooperation with local communities in order to increase exchange between different religious and non-religious groups) and to offer opportunities for encounters between students of diverse positions vis-à-vis religion. (REDCo Policy Recommendations)

An important message that the REDCo findings reinforce is that the young people of Europe are not only growing up in an increasingly religiously diverse society for which they need preparation, but that they too reflect that diversity of belief, commitment, practice and experience. Their different starting points, the variety of languages and references the pupils use when talking, or thinking about religion, constitute a significant challenge for teachers and have important pedagogical implications for the teaching approaches and forms of discussion and dialogue that might take place in the classroom. Another of the actions in the REDCo policy recommendations is to
Train educators in methods that support and encourage students to be comfortable with difference and to engage with the diversity of their personal experiences (REDCo Policy Recommendations)

THE VISION
Having reviewed the context of religious diversity evident in the REDCo research, I now move to the young people’s response to that diversity. The white paper sets out two stark alternatives for the future of society,

Is it a society of segregated communities, marked at best by the coexistence of majorities and minorities with differentiated rights and responsibilities, loosely bound together by mutual ignorance and stereotypes? Or is it a vibrant and open society without discrimination, benefiting us all, marked by the inclusion of all residents in full respect of their human rights? (Council of Europe 2008, 4)

It was the latter of these two, the positive vision of an open society marked by inclusion and respect, that was shared by the majority of the students, not only because they desired a peaceful co-existence across religious differences, but because most of them believed that it was possible. In their consideration of the possibility of peaceful co-existence encouraged by the qualitative survey, the students tackled the question at different levels, the macro level of wider society, the meso level of the community and the micro level of personal relations between individuals. Though it does not entirely match the white paper’s formulation of local, national and international levels, nevertheless the variety in the responses does reflect this recognition of the multi-layered nature of intercultural relations.

At the macro level the students’ responses were sometimes couched in the elevated language of religion, ‘love all people since they have all been created by the same God’, ‘every religion tells us to create peace and love people’, or of a humanist vision of a shared humanity ‘at the end of the day we’re all people’, ‘we are all humans in this world together’. Both speak of that sense of human equality and dignity enshrined in the white paper, of that common humanity that is presented there as ‘the “glue” that can bind together people who share the continent’ (p 13). Indeed in the paper it is viewed as a precondition for the kind of democratic society the Council of Europe is working to support;

‘diversity without any overarching common humanity and solidarity would make mutual recognition and social inclusion impossible’ (Council of Europe 2008, 14)

What the students are expressing is what the white paper recognises as the principle behind the whole corpus of human rights (Council of Europe 2008,14).
When discussing relations between people of different religions at the level of community or individuals, the students’ responses took a more experiential and practical turn. They knew that people of different religions, or people with religious and non-religious positions, could get on well together because, ‘My school is multicultural and we are proud of it because it is a community of so many people working together’, because a Muslim aunty shared accommodation with a Christian friend, because a Christian girl had a Muslim boyfriend, because someone’s religious granny lived together very happily with her non-religious grandchildren. They not only wrote about the positive but also recognised the practical issues entailed in people of different religions sharing their lives together, practical issues that might be the source of tension; the difficulties in a mixed faith marriage of deciding in which religion to bring up the children, different understandings of gender issues, Muslim prayer mats and prayer times ‘getting in the way’ of family life, Muslims with Hindu partners not being able to accept ‘idols’ in the house (Ipgrave and McKenna 2008, 131-133).

The students were encouraged to think about such day-to-day practicalities in the context of their own schools when asked direct questions about whether there should be a role of religion in school and what it might be, about the religion of the teacher, about whether education about religion should take place in classes separated according to the religion of the students, or in classes where children of different religions and worldviews learnt about religion together. Here again, in answer to open-ended qualitative questions, it was noticeable how several of the students had assimilated the language and concepts of human rights, when they wrote, for example, of the right to freedom of worship, the freedom of students not to have the beliefs of the teacher (or of each other) imposed upon them, the freedom of the teacher to hold his or her own belief;

Why should you be discriminated against in employment because of your religious beliefs? (English student) (Ipgrave and McKenna 2008, 139)

The principles of ‘freedom of thought, conscience and religion’ are there in their answers. The readiness of young people of this age to engage in dialogue around religious issues within a discourse of human rights and the potential for the development of these skills is something to carry forward from the research. REDCo recognises this in its policy recommendation for the ‘inclusion of the religious dimension into general intercultural education, education for democratic citizenship and human rights education’ (REDCo Policy Recommendations).
THE PUBLIC SPHERE

One of the ways to relate REDCo findings to the white paper is to consider the application of some of its statements and approaches addressing wider society to the specific contexts of the young people’s lives, taking the student’s school context for example, and relating it to the statement in the white paper,

Religious practice is part of contemporary human life, and it therefore cannot and should not be outside the sphere of interest of public authorities, although the state must preserve its role as the neutral and impartial organiser of the exercise of various religions, faiths and beliefs. (Council of Europe 2008, 22)

In this statement the white paper considers the relationship of religion and the sphere of interest of public authorities. A number of the questions in the REDCo questionnaires invited the students to consider the position of religion in the sphere of interest of the authority of the school, that public authority that oversees a significant part of their lives. In the questionnaires they were even invited to take on the role of this public authority. In the qualitative survey they were asked to ‘imagine you are a person who can decide on school matters’ and outline and explain policy decisions they would make about the role of religion in their institution, and in the quantitative to ‘imagine you are a person in authority who can decide on school matter’ and indicate how far they would agree or disagree on various policy decisions about for example the wearing of religious symbols in school, the taking into account of religious dietary requirements in the school canteen, the provision of facilities for prayer, the permission for students to absent themselves from school during their religious festivals.

A key finding of the REDCo research was that the majority of students did think that there was a place for religion within the public sphere of the school, particularly as a subject or a cross-curricular theme, within the academic curriculum. In most countries, too, the majority of students supported the rights to manifest religion to some degree within that public sphere, by wearing unobtrusive symbols of their religion or by allowing voluntary acts of worship.

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

To return to the students’ vision of peaceful coexistence between religions (and non-religious positions) – in the qualitative survey, although the students were generally positive about the possibility of such harmonious living, the realisation of that vision was often seen by them as being contingent on several conditions that the school authorities and teachers might be in a position to effect or support. The prime condition was knowledge of the other’s religion. This held a prominent position in many of the returns to both questionnaires. In the quantitative
survey ‘if they know about each other’s religions’ was the most highly evaluated prerequisite for peaceful coexistence. It was noticeable that in France, where the inclusion of information about religions in public school subjects is a recent initiative, the majority of students in the REDCo research subscribe to this pluralist approach and readily link it to learning to live together in a community. The white paper’s position 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’ (p44) is mirrored in the young people’s views.

I think everybody should learn about the different religions ...things that make it possible to live together in daily life with all the different people and world views. (Norwegian student) (von der Lippe 2008, 164)

Attitudes of tolerance, respect and open-mindedness were also cited as being of great importance in achieving this positive vision of the future in line with the white paper’s acknowledgement that ‘pluralism, tolerance and broadmindedness are more important than ever’ (Council of Europe May 2008, 13). Many students proposed as activities to further the development of this harmonious society, interacting directly, listening to each other, getting to know a variety of views, learning to look at things from different perspectives, learning from each other, which are essentially dialogue skills. Responses to the qualitative survey showed that the young people viewed dialogue on religious issues as an important means of understanding others. Students who were accustomed to religious education in classes where students of different religious and non-religious identities and positions are taught together, often expressed their opinion that a religiously mixed religious education class provided a valuable forum for such dialogue. The following statements come from two of the regions (England and Norway) that have such educational models.

I think pupils should be taught together as this will help them to understand each other’s beliefs better. It will help them to solve arguments by discussing it among themselves. This could reduce religious racism. (English student) (Ipgrave and McKenna 2008, 140)

My opinion is that all students should be taught together independent of their religion if we want peace in the world. It does not help to have Christians for themselves, we must talk together to be able to understand each other and to be able to live together in peace. (Norwegian student) (von der Lippe 2008, 166)
Such views expressed by young people fit with the white paper’s statement on intercultural dialogue,

Successful intercultural dialogue requires ... open-mindedness, willingness to engage in dialogue and allow others to express their point, a capacity to resolve conflicts by peaceful means and a recognition of the well-founded arguments of others. (Council of Europe 2008, 17)

SPACES FOR DIALOGUE

The high minded aspirations and expressions of tolerance in the young people’s responses are not the whole story however. The tolerance expressed in classroom discussion was not always replicated in their daily lives. One of our key research findings was that though the students were generally open towards peers of different religious backgrounds, at the same time they tend to socialise with peers from the same background as themselves, even when they lived in areas characterised by religious diversity. In spite of the openness towards religious pluralism expressed by most of the young people in the qualitative survey, and the view of many that dialogue was a valuable tool for understanding others better, they spoke about religion very little outside the classroom and if they did they mainly talked about it with peers who held the same religious views as themselves. The reasons they gave for this discrepancy were various. There may be lack of opportunity to mix with people of other religious backgrounds socially for a number of reasons, the nature of after school activities or family patterns of socialisation. There are many other interests and preoccupations for this age group that more readily formed topics of conversations than religion.

It is not appealing to us to be talking about different faiths. It’s more the typical music-clothes-boy/girl thing. (German student) (Knauth, 2008, 223)

In the qualitative study some volunteered that religion, particularly one’s own religion and questions of belief, was an embarrassing or ‘uncool’ subject to talk about in their peer culture, or expressed the view that though they would be interested to discuss religious subjects they would not bring them into the conversation with their friends for fear of being teased. There were a variety of contextual factors that made this more the case for some young people than others. Other reasons for avoiding religion as a topic of conversation related to its perceived conflict potential often connected with inter-group tensions or with conflicting truth claims. Such views are reinforced by media images of religions in conflict.
Religion is not spoken about in school [out of class] a lot as a lot of fights in this world happen over the differences of religion. ...Religion is basically one of the big causes of fighting and chaos and nobody wants it to happen so we try to refrain from talking about it a lot. (English student) (Ipgrave and McKenna 2008, 145)

Sometimes this fear of the conflict potential is stronger than the students’ confidence in the ability of teachers to manage tensions that might occur in class, and it is given as one of the reasons by those students who advocate religious education in separate classes according to pupil religion.

If religion were taught for all independently of their creed, that would be absolute conflict, because, as we are from different creeds, not everybody thinks the same. (Spanish student) (Dietz, Lorente and Garzón 2008, 46)

There should be separation in order to avoid disagreements: everybody keeps his own beliefs. (Russian student) (Kozyrev 2008, 304)

But a contrary argument, still based on the premise of conflict, is that it is particularly important that students should learn about religion together in mixed groups if they are to learn those important relational and dialogical skills needed to get on well together, to learn how to associate, talk and co-operate.

No, then when you put together different groups and that will result in conflicts, because they don’t get used to each other and don’t understand each other. (Dutch student) (ter Avest et al. 2008, 104)

This last statement is in tune with the white paper’s warning that ‘shutting the door on a diverse environment can offer only an illusory security’ (Council of Europe May 2008, 16), and its cautions against ‘segregated and mutually exclusive communities’ (p16). It also leads into the concept that meeting and dialogue between differences would benefit from a degree of pro-active, structured support and management which is the line taken by the white paper (p13).

In that paper there is a discussion of the importance and the nature of public spaces for dialogue and examples of physical spaces (with implications for town planning) and virtual spaces (for example, those created by the media) are given. The imperative to ‘engender spaces for dialogue that are open to all’ (p46), is supported by the REDCo research that shows that on one hand students see learning about and listening to each other as important for good relations and on the other that students generally do not dialogue much with different religious perspectives outside the classroom, and that also indicated that fear of conflict or in
some cases of ridicule, were among the reasons for not engaging. Given that fear and embarrassment figure among the obstacles to dialogue it might be helpful to view the classroom not just as a physical space, but as an emotional space which, through the skills of the teacher, can become a safe and secure environment for discussion and dialogue, governed by what one student described as ‘teaching conditions’, where there could be exchanges of opinions and disagreements without the arguments spiralling out of control.

If you keep it civilised then it’s OK to express your views and compare things and see where there’s differences ...they’re not drawing out guns and knives and shouting at each other, they’re just talking like this, like we are. (English student) (Ipgrave and McKenna 2008, 145)

Creating such an environment is a challenging task, and though some teachers may have a natural gift, for most guidance and training in such dialogue skills would be very beneficial. The white paper places emphasis on the need for ‘teacher training, educational strategies and working methods to prepare teachers to manage new situations arising out of diversity’ and the REDCo policy recommendations include among the action points

The curriculum for teacher training should include the development of skills to organise and moderate in-class debates on controversial religious issues and conflicting worldviews. (REDCo Policy Recommendations)

**DIALOGUE ABOUT RELIGIOUS ISSUES AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE**

The content of the discussions and dialogue that can take place in such spaces will vary according to the school context and educational culture involved. In our REDCo team we have members from a variety of states. The study of teachers and of classroom interactions has been part of our work. These, the responses of the students to questions about their experiences and understanding of schools and learning, as well as the discussions we have held over the three years of our project have revealed (sometimes unexpected) commonalities in focus, purpose and approach but have not obscured the very real differences in pedagogies and educational philosophies that remain. One of these differences lies in our understandings of the role of the teacher, and where it fits in relation to transmission or facilitation models. Another is the degree to which young people are expected to express and consider their personal beliefs within the class.

The white paper expresses its appreciation of the value of interreligious dialogue as part of intercultural dialogue and recognises the important contribution it makes to ‘an increased understanding between different cultures’ (Council of Europe 2008, 22) and ‘a stronger
consensus within society regarding the solutions to social problems’ (p24). It sees interreligious, and indeed intra-religious and intra-convictional dialogue as something that should be encouraged though it is outside its own remit. In some national contexts the understanding of the role of the school and of the teacher is such that the dialogue that takes place within class will not involve the students’ personal beliefs or theologies but will instead focus on religious issues. Nevertheless the experience of discussion around these will enable a refinement of skills, and the knowledge they gain from learning about religions will give them the content, for fruitful interreligious or inter-convictional dialogue in the future. In other states involved in the project, the educational context is different. Recognition of the various religious and non-religious positions of the young people, and an understanding of teachers as having a facilitating role in these contexts, means that interreligious and inter-convictional dialogue is something that could be (and in several cases already is) encouraged within class. The rationale for such dialogue would be the increased understanding it can generate between cultures and the opportunities it gives to students to develop ‘the ability to express themselves’ and ‘capacity to listen to the views of others’, rehearsing the ‘open and respectful exchange of views’ between differences ‘on the basis of mutual understanding and respect’ that is the spirit of the Council of Europe white paper (p17).

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Ina ter Avest

Teachers responding to religious diversity. Impression of everyday practice and recommendations for teacher training

Introduction
The REDCo project focuses on the role of religion in the life of youngsters, boys and girls, in an important field in society where religion is at stake, namely in education. While in days gone by it was easy for students to identify with each other’s story, since they all were socialized in more or less the same way, in our days in the multicultural society, being different is normal in European classrooms (ter Avest 2009).

Being the initiator as well as the facilitator of the learning process and a safe environment for students, the teacher is of pivotal importance in education. This was the very reason to focus on the role of the teacher in one of the subprojects of REDCo.

The basic research question is: How does the role of the teacher and the personal and professional biography relate to the teacher’s perception of diversity in the classroom and the development of ideas and strategies of inter-religious learning? (Van der Want, A., C. Bakker, I. ter Avest & J. Everington 2009)

We had conversations in in-depth interviews with six teachers in six European countries. In this presentation I inform you about remarkable findings of the interviews of in sum thirty-six European teachers, responding to the research question regarding an interreligious approach, focusing on the professional and personal biographical background for the teacher’s perception of diversity in the classroom. Is diversity seen as a threat or as an opportunity? In the research the relation is explored between the valuation of diversity as this developed in her or his biography, and the growth of ideas and development of strategies to respond to diversity, probably in a way of interreligious learning.

Findings
We are aware of the fact that it is not possible to draw any general conclusions from our research, the ‘situatedness’ of our research as well as the personal touch in this type of qualititative research being a hindrance for generalisation. At the same time does the personal relationship that is established during the interviews, guarantee for in-depth knowledge about the topic at state. We present some remarkable findings
Perception of diversity
What becomes clear from the thirty-six interviews is that religion is just one aspect of diversity. Gender being an other, but far more often the teacher talk about difference in participation in classroom discussions, difference in knowledge or awareness of the subject at stake and difference in learning attitudes and skills.

Although in some of the participating countries a great deal of effort is devoted to the development of curricula (in England the Agreed Syllabuses, in Norway the new curriculum for ‘Religion, Philosophy of Live and Ethics’ and in Hamburg/Germany ‘Religionsunterricht für Alle’), the teachers themselves word their aims and strategies in a very personal way. ‘In my view…’, ‘As I see it …’, ‘Following from my experience …’.

Aims & strategies
For a majority of the teachers of the six participating countries their aim includes promoting knowledge, understanding and respect for religion(s). Religious identity formation as the ‘Bildung’ aspect of teaching religion(s) is mentioned explicitly as an aim of RE in Germany and the Netherlands. This was also the case with the former national curriculum of RE in Norway till August 2008, but it was changed in the last amendment. Promoting the development of spirituality or evangelizing is not done, according to the majority of the teachers. As one of the possible strategies to teach religion(s) teachers mention presenting their own religious worldview, or inviting the pupils to do so. Some teachers make use of the diversity in their classroom, others emphasize the equality and commonalities of students of different ethnicities, boys and girls.

Preconditions
To arrive at understanding and respect, a classroom atmosphere of trust and confidence is a necessary (but not sufficient!) precondition, according to the teachers. Some teachers create such an environment in their classroom conversations, by being very open themselves about their religious stance, others make up a contract with rules and regulations with regard to classroom behaviour. Openness and the willingness to share personal faith and beliefs with the pupils is for example favoured in the Netherlands and Germany; reluctance and an attitude of cautiousness with regard to openness, and a more willing attitude to create rules is noticed for different reasons in England, Estonia and France.
The strategy to arrive at understanding and respect is to provide the pupils with knowledge, and – through classroom discussions - facilitate their exploration and elaboration on this knowledge. Norwegian and French teachers mention explicitly the development of skills like discussion techniques and knowledge-based inquiring techniques. Sometimes characters from a religious tradition are presented as examples of good practice, and as such are a start for a classroom conversation; a strategy used by some of the interviewed teachers in The Netherlands.

**Importance of religion, and migration background**

Whereas teachers not always explicitly refer to the ethnic background of their students, from the quantitative research amongst students we learn that the influence of migration on the responses and response patterns of students, shows clearly. In our view the ‘importance of religion’ and the ‘migrant background’ are ‘nested variables’. Building on the cultural and religious traditions and implicitly encouraged by the negative media coverage in the ‘host’ countries with regard to ‘them’ being ‘the other’, some groups of migrant families tend to form social support organizations – among which religious communities are not the least influential. For some of the migrant students, cultural organizations and religious communities might be ‘spaces of dependence’ i.e., “those more-or-less localized social relations upon which we depend for the realization of essential interests … for which there are no substitutes elsewhere [and which] define place-specific conditions for our material well-being and our sense of significance” (Harod 2007, 243). Spaces of dependence and of belongingness.

**Gender**

Yet another difference that shows from the data of the quantitative research and that is hardly mentioned by the teachers explicitly, is the gender difference. We learn from the quantitative research that in general girls are more likely than boys to exhibit an open attitude to ‘the other’ and the other’s religion. They are aware of their friends’ religious commitment. Girls seem more willing to talk to ‘the other’ and to listen to their point of view, whereas boys show a tendency to withdraw. Boys are more likely than girls to shy away from differences. Boys tend to try to convince ‘the other’ or opt out. Boys seem more able than girls to demarcate their own (and hence, the other’s) territory within the encounter. Or, as the English report says: ‘Boys tend to be more militant in their attitudes and girls stress understanding and conformity’.

Gender appears to be a distinctive factor for the importance of religion in the life of youngsters. There seems to be a shared underlying motive in the significantly different positions taken by girls, as it is for Muslim students. ‘Differences between girls and boys in the degree to which
they associate with people of different religions or speak with friends about religion might reflect their different patterns of socialization – whether, for example, they spend their break times playing football in larger groups or chatting with a few friends’ (O’Dell, Gemma (2009, forthcoming).

_We recommend research on the gendered communication patterns, and the construction of the student’s position towards religion._

**Biography**

Most of the teachers have a religious background themselves. In their childhood they have gone through positive experiences with religious diversity, either within the family (parents as examples of good practice) or in the neighbourhood (having playmates with different family background) as a context of tolerance, sometimes interpreted retrospectively as under-communication of religious differences (as in the Norwegian case). Teachers grant their pupils the pleasure of such positive experiences and tend to reproduce their own positive (religious classes) experiences for their pupils.

Not only biographical experiences within the family, but also experiences at school, at university and abroad have influenced the teachers’ strategies. The personal experience of living abroad, or engaging in the encounter with different religious characters and philosophies, is explicitly mentioned in the German and English samples, as source of knowledge in responding to (religious) diversity in RE classes. In the same way the personal experience of hope, comfort, protection and security is related to the teachers classroom behaviour (‘I like them to believe in love’) (Van der Want, Bakker, ter Avest and Everington 2009, p. 152).

Next to the above mentioned experiences with religious diversity in childhood and adolescent doubts, in the interviews with teachers attention is given to personality traits and personal teaching style. The personality of the teacher, related to her or his personal teaching style, is decisive in classroom interaction on the perception of religion(s) and religious diversity. The main question seems to be: how do I balance between my personal faith, beliefs and interests, and a teaching practice that is interesting and inspiring for the pupils? Or to put it in other words: How do we – my students and I – practice interreligious communication?

_We recommend to create space not only for the training of professional skills, but also for the personal development of the student-teacher._
As an example of the possible outcome of such an exploration in personal and professional faith commitment, I show you a characteristic example in the Dutch situation: a Dutch Roman Catholic teacher of an Islamic school, reciting the first *sura* of the Qur’an with her Muslim students, at the start of the day.

**Intercultural dialogue**

How do we practice intercultural communication with students from different religious and non-religious backgrounds?

From the White paper (Council of Europe 2008, 17) I quote:

*intercultural dialogue is understood as a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect.*

Dialogue seems to be a magic word referring to the classroom as a *meeting place* where differences can be resolved. Conflict is seen as something to be avoided or, if it is present, as something that needs to be got rid of. From the teacher’s point of view, a conflict in the classroom is a kind of negative ‘critical incident’ to be solved in order to restore a peaceful classroom situation, a safe learning environment which they all accept as a precondition for learning. Dialogue may then serve as a teaching strategy: a way to resolve conflicts. Dialogue understood in this way includes the debate about conflicts, but aims at establishing a harmonious situation where people exchange and explore their differing views in a dialogical conversation. Dialogue is seen as a particular kind of conversation in the sense that it functions as a way towards achieving better understanding between people, to be better citizens.

**Citizenship**

From the White paper (Council of Europe 2008, 28) I quote

*Citizenship, in the widest sense, is a right and indeed a responsibility to participate in the cultural, social and economic life and in public affairs if the community together with others.*
The educational task of living together amidst growing cultural diversity while respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms has become one of the major demands of our times and will remain relevant for many years to come.

The public domain in our view is a meeting place, a place of encounter. Multiculturalism favours interaction between people from different backgrounds, the encounter in the midst of diversity, abandoning indifference and opening up to – through commitment of both sides (either positive or negative) – mutual understanding, tolerance and respect.

**Competency: methodology of listening**

We notice in the teachers’ narratives a raising awareness of the continuum in their pedagogical strategy from teaching about the differences to learning from the diversity of commitments to religions and worldviews. It is unclear from our analysis whether teachers use the diversity to learn about the other or to learn from the other about oneself, for the pupils’ own edification.

Let me give you an example.

In the classroom by one of the students the topic of ‘hacking’ is introduced. In a classroom conversation different positions on ‘hacking’ and downloading are explored. The teacher makes use of these different opinions to make students aware of their own stance. Different and contrasting opinions for the edification of this child (ter Avest 2008).

**The teacher**

The teacher’s own perception on the public domain as a meeting place, might lead to an emphasis on the multicultural classroom as an example of future participation in the public domain. Participation in the classroom then will lead to participation in society. Inside-out.

Other teachers perceive the public domain as a place that differs from their own worldview and the school’s identity. They tend to explore their own stance towards the religious or non-religious tradition, in order to adjust to the demands of society. Interpretation of worldviews in their opinion will lead to a proper adjustment to society. Outside-in (Rietveld-van Wingerden, Westerman, Ter Avest 2009).
At the end of the day

At the end of the day the interaction of the teacher’s position towards citizenship and the public domain, the flexibility in pedagogical strategies, and last but not least the personality of the teacher will create a learning environment for students to learn to live together amidst diversity. Inside out and outside in, day after day.

References

The presentations take place in the Council of Europe

The panellists are discussing REDCo results
Jean-Paul Willaime

Towards an “intelligent and dialogical laïcité”:
Trends in developments in Europe on the basis of the REDCo findings

Mrs. Director General, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have had the privilege to participate not only in our REDCo project, but also in the deliberations and research that led to the Council of Europe's White Paper entitled “Living together as Equals in Dignity”. I would incidentally like to express my gratitude to you, Mrs. Director General, for inviting me to participate in this work. And so I am especially pleased to speak in the Council of Europe today.

I am happy indeed to observe that the results of the surveys that we carried out in the REDCo project can only strengthen the Council of Europe's determination to promote classroom education that covers religions and beliefs, considering it an important element of a school education in democratic societies. Starting from the fact that “The learning and teaching of intercultural competence is essential for democratic culture and social cohesion”, the White Paper explicitly recognised that “An appreciation of our diverse cultural background should include knowledge and understanding of the major world religions and nonreligious convictions, and their role in society”. How gratifying it was, then, to see that a majority of students themselves agreed with this statement: in our Policy Recommendations, we notice that “Irrespective of their religious positions a majority of students are interested in learning about religions in school”. As has already been said, our survey involved students from ages 14 to 16. And one of the ways in which the REDCO project was unprecedented was that it revealed many aspects of the attitudes and points of view that students had in this area, information that gave us a lot to go on. In order not to repeat what my colleagues have already said, allow me to focus on these two points on the basis of the REDCO findings: 1) The importance of including education dealing with religions and beliefs in the overall objectives of school education; 2) The need for intelligent and dialogical laïcité.

The importance of including education dealing with religions and beliefs in the overall objectives of school education

Religions cannot be brought up at school in an arbitrary fashion, neither by the teachers during their lessons and in discussions with their students, nor by the students among themselves. In other words, schools are special places where religions and beliefs are to be discussed in a special way. Let me clarify this point by referring to an example: the results of a comparative study made between answers that students in Norway and France gave in our surveys.

Despite major differences in the socio-religious and educational environments of Norway and France, it is very interesting to see in the REDCo findings how similar Norwegian and French students' personal views on religion are, and how much they agree on the role religion should have in school education. This relatively unexpected observation was one of the important results of the REDCo surveys. Basically, it reveals two things: one, the consequences of secularisation; two, the fact that young people can develop attitudes and reactions toward religion and its handling in schools which are fairly similar, even though they live in differing social contexts and react differently to several questions (especially on the visibility of
religious symbols at school). The findings of the Norwegian report can be applied to cases outside of their own country – I quote: "There is a general trend among the youngsters to prefer religious education in joint classes and to get objective knowledge. School is obviously not seen as a place for personal belief or religious practice, but a place to learn about different religions and also to discuss religious and ethical issues". Both in Norway and in France we find large numbers of young people who do not identify with a particular religion. We also see in both countries the students’ overall willingness to understand the specific status of schools, the specific role they play, and their substantial respect for that status and that role. Despite living in different socio-religious and educational environments, Norwegian and French students are nevertheless capable of grasping the main ideas of education dealing with religions and beliefs, education that is adapted to the secular and pluralist nature of the societies in which they live: knowledge-oriented education that scrupulously respects their personal choices in this matter. This is one of the more general results of the REDCo research. As we say in our Policy Recommendations:

- “Most students would like to see school more dedicated to teaching about different religions than to guiding them towards a particular religious belief or worldview”;
- “Students express their desire that learning about religions should take place in a safe classroom environment governed by agreed procedures for expression and discussion”;
- “Students believe that the main preconditions for peaceful coexistence between people of different religions are knowledge about each other’s religions and worldviews, shared interests, and joint activities” (see full text above as second part of Weisse).

The students understood, as the American political scientist Amy Gutmann points out in her thought-provoking book Democratic Education (Gutmann 1999), how important it is in pluralist democracies for students to have an opportunity in the course of their schooling to discover more about conceptions of humankind and the world that differ from their own. School education in societies that are increasingly diverse on cultural and religious levels must involve openness to pluralism.

The REDCo surveys confirm the interest that students show in education dealing with religions and beliefs. This education is to be offered to all students, irrespective of their religious or philosophical beliefs and those of their families and, furthermore, is to be taught to students of different beliefs together in one class. In other words, the aim is to teach to a pluralist audience composed of students belonging to different religions as well as students with no religion. The idea is not, therefore, to present issues regarding religions and beliefs in different classes into which students are separated according to their religious and philosophical affiliations. These specifications have an important implication: what we are talking about here is a form of teaching that is fully in keeping with the objectives and ethics of state schooling and teachers in state schools, in other words a form of teaching which contributes to the school's overall objectives, as with the other subjects that are taught. This instruction should clearly be seen as a contribution to civic education in pluralist democracies. The mere fact of approaching religions and beliefs in a documented and critical fashion (in other words, while respecting the code of ethics by which teachers must abide) has numerous implications for the way in which they can be studied at school, in a context of teacher-student relations that are again defined by law and by teachers' professional ethics, while taking into account the general aims of schooling as defined in a democracy. The approaches pursued must not conflict with, or be fundamentally different from, those used in the school context. This is something that has already been analysed, particularly at the Council of Europe (Keast 2007), but it is worth exploring further.
Towards intelligent and dialogical laïcité
This way of thinking about education dealing with religions and beliefs is an attempt to put intelligent and dialogical laïcité into practice. By bringing the term "secularity" back into use, I do not mean to refer specifically to the French approach to relations between church and state or between schools and religions. I am referring to one of the moral values of Europe upheld by the European Convention on Human Rights, a value which is consistently manifest in the three following principles that all European countries try to respect in their own ways: 1) Freedom of conscience and of thought, which includes the freedom to have a religion or not to have one and the freedom to worship if one is religious; 2) equal rights, equal duties and the equal respect of all citizens regardless of their religious or philosophical affiliations, in other words the absence of discrimination by the State and public authorities toward people on the basis of those affiliations; 3) the respective autonomy of political and religious systems, which means both the independence of the State from religions and the independence of religions from the State (while respecting the laws of democracy). The principles of laïcité in general are of course equally applicable to the particular case of laïcité in schools. Whatever the national approach to education dealing with religions may be, this means the implementation of an overall conception of education whose goals are: the full development of the students' skills; teaching them how to engage in dialogue; dissemination of knowledge from a critical and dialogical perspective; letting teachers and students judge the material independently; and civic education on democratic societies in schools open to all, in other words not segregated on the basis of the religious or philosophical beliefs of each student. This overall conception is secular because it informs students of their liberties and teaches them about critical thinking, and because it bases education on secular knowledge and dialogue that does not depend upon a particular religious or philosophical point of view.

On 8 April 2008, the Council of Europe organised, on an experimental basis, an exchange regarding the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue on the theme “Teaching religious and convicational facts. A tool for acquiring knowledge about religions and beliefs in education; a contribution to education for democratic citizenship, human rights and intercultural dialogue”. “Religious and convicational facts”: this expression does not imply that spirituality should be excluded. Religious forms of expression constitute facts that need to be both described and understood: it is not sufficient to provide an accurate description of the perceptions and conceptions of believers and their practices and rites: it is also necessary to reveal what these conceptions and practices mean to those who adhere to them and take account of the fact that they are things that are deeply experienced, individually and collectively. A mere historical and sociological approach would not provide much insight into religious facts if believers' experiences were overlooked. It is necessary to use empathetic intelligence, in other words develop an approach that combines objective knowledge with empathetic understanding. Presenting religious issues in a secular school setting also entails respecting these issues for what they are, in other words things that have been experienced by, and are meaningful to, large numbers of people. This does not in any way mean embarking on a theological debate or engaging in inter-faith dialogue. The idea is to remain in tune with the school's aims and the ethics of the teaching profession. The second part of the theme, the reference to convicational facts, indicates that account is being taken of non-religious conceptions of humankind and the world – what is commonly described as "secular humanism". I believe this is an essential aspect of such education, as a large number of Europeans identify with non-religious conceptions of humankind and the world. In our Policy Recommendation, we stress the fact that “school is a place where all students must be respected, regardless of their worldview or religious convictions".
As Régis Debray put it so well, we must move "from an incompetent laïcité (religious belief, by its nature, doesn't concern us), to an intelligent laïcité (it is our duty to understand it)" (Debray 2002, 43). This laïcité is neither anti-religion nor pro-religion. It is this laïcité, an asset shared by everyone in pluralist democracies, that allows individuals and groups with different religious and philosophical beliefs to contribute freely to public life and public education. In my view, there is a move today in Europe towards a European laïcité based on intelligence (knowledge and understanding of religious and philosophical diversity) and dialogue (taking account of and confronting this diversity) (Willaime 2008). It is this kind of laïcité, characterised by intelligence and dialogue, that students would like to see more often in the classroom. A kind of laïcité that makes it necessary, as we have recommended on the basis of the results from our surveys, to develop education at school involving “different religious and secular worldviews in their complexity and inner diversity”. In this way, students will learn throughout their years at school how to discover the cultural and religious diversity of our societies and understand it better. Through understanding and dialogue, this will also help them to find their own directions in life, giving them greater resolve.

References


Prof. Dr. Jean-Paul Willaime

Impressions of the REDCo-conference in the Council of Europe
Annex

Programme of the Event

Invitation to the conference

The relevance of interreligious dialogue for intercultural understanding. The White Paper “Living together as Equals in Dignity” of the Council of Europe and the principal findings of the European research project REDCo

Venue: Council of Europe, Strasbourg, Palais de l’Europe, room 8
Time: 15.00–17.00 h Thursday, March 19th, 2009

Programme:

- Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni / Council of Europe, Director General of Education: Introduction
- Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse / University of Hamburg: Introduction to the REDCo-project and policy recommendations
- Dr. Julia Ipgrave / University of Warwick: The White Paper “Living together as Equals in Dignity” of the Council of Europe and the results of the REDCo-project
- Dr. Ina ter Avest / VU University Amsterdam: Teacher training in European societies shaped by religious plurality – Research findings of the REDCo-project and future priorities
- Prof. Dr. Jean-Paul Willaime / Hautes Etudes Sorbonne, Paris: Towards a “laïcité d’intelligence et de dialogue” – Impulses for the future developments in Europe on the basis of REDCo findings
- Plenary discussion
**List of Authors**

Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni is Director General of Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport and Coordinator for Intercultural Dialogue of the Council of Europe.

Dr. Ina ter Avest is Researcher at the VU Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

Dr. Julia Ipgrave is Researcher at the University of Warwick, England.

Christian Rudelt, M.A., MPP, is Research Management Director of the REDCo project at the University of Hamburg, Germany.

Dr. Wolfram Weisse is Professor of Religious Education at the University of Hamburg, Germany, Director of the interdisciplinary centre „World Religions in Dialogue“ and co-ordinator of REDCo.

Dr. Jean-Paul Willaime is Professor and Research Director at l’Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Department of Religious Studies, Sorbonne, Paris, France; member of the Groupe Sociétés, Religions, Laïcités and Director of the European Institute of Religious Studies.