

Transatlantic Encounters – what research on religious education in public schools in Europe can contribute to the issue of religion in the public sphere in the USA

Bert Roebben, Dortmund University (Germany)

hubertus.roebben@tu-dortmund.de

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Introduction

In a modern society social cohesion cannot flourish without a fundamental discussion about what concerns the human person in that society ultimately: his/her life expectations, fundamental values, senses of direction and religious/non-religious convictions. The place *par excellence* to acquire the communicative competence to deal peacefully with norms, values and meaning is the school, this ‘microcosm’ in our complex and pluralized societies. In most of the European countries this vision is implemented in the provision of religious education (RE) in school. In this chapter I develop the idea that children and young people not only have to be taught in RE how they can live and learn together, but that they also have the alienable right to acquire spiritual competence in/through reflecting the foundations of their own personal religious or non-religious position in the midst of the encounter with others. Without this affirmation of the personal dignity there cannot be any appropriate discussion on social cohesion and solidarity in society. Community presupposes the presence of differences. The modern school with its RE provision can offer a safe space to learn to know one’s own and the other one’s religion and life stance – with its generic experiences and its mother tongue – within diverse relationships, and to live it reasonably, this means in a peaceful and constructive way.

This issue will be developed in four steps: RE within the school’s educational mission, the question of religious mother tongues and religious experiences in the public realm of the school, dealing with religious diversity and ideas for

implementing RE in a concrete classroom. I conclude with recommending ‘RE for all’ as an important pathway of human flourishing for future generations. This chapter originates from a European context, based among others on the research data of two large EU funded projects, namely REDCO (Jackson, Miedema, Weisse, et. al. 2007) and REMC (Smyth, Lyons and Dermody 2013) and should be considered in that respect. Other continents definitely have other issues to face, although one can argue that globalization is bridging many educational gaps these days.

RE and the educational mission of the school

A good school teaches children and youngsters different language games to perceive the fascinating and, at the same time, complex reality that they are surrounded by, from a linguistic, mathematic, geographic, literary, scientific, etc. point of view. In the RE class the religious dimension of reality is explored. Therefore, children and youngsters learn, by virtue of the religious and non-religious means of communication in past and present, to perceive existential questions, to evaluate them and to answer them. These ‘slow questions’ about the origins, the fundamental reasons and the orientations of the sense of life always reemerge anew and in different ways. According to the Dutch systematic theologian Erik Borgman (2008, 51), “in the places where this happens, culture appears in a way that is theologically relevant”. The German researcher in education Jürgen Baumert describes four approaches to reality, including the theological one, as “modi of encountering the world” (*Modi der Weltbegegnung*) (Dressler 2011, 155). The Dutch RE scholar Thom Geurts talks about the ‘lenses’ used by the one who observes life in the world (1997). Each type of perception of reality understands the world differently, has its own constituent rationality or ‘lens’. For example, literature, natural science and theology agree in what is reasonable and scientifically founded when reality is beheld, evaluated or understood from that specific approach. Education in school is grounded in this matrix of rationality.

However, education is also more than this. It is also about the human ‘valuing’ person, who has to deal morally and reasonably with the acquired knowledge. In complex societies, the question is often raised: “What can and should I do with my knowledge?” General education cannot be disconnected from personal

education. I perceive in the current educational context a great deal of interest in the issue of the human person who learns (Biesta 2011). The challenge seems double to me: firstly as a question of children and youngsters about their personal life orientations and secondly as a question about the ‘with’ of ‘with others’ in society, about social cohesion in the midst of the plurality of religious and non-religious life projects. Education is currently perceived, above all, in its double-facet of identity development and diversity management. The question about commitment takes a central place in this (Mette 1994): “What binds us unconditionally together? And, how can each individual’s and each group’s uniqueness contribute to the ‘common good’?” With this broad concept of education as self-clarification [in German: *Bildung*] in mind, new and exciting questions can arise in the life of the young person at school: “What do I do with my knowledge and what does my knowledge do with me? How is my ‘self’ formed at home, at school, or at any other place? In which way do I want afterwards to make my own contribution to social cohesion? How do ‘science and con-science’, knowledge and ethics relate to my development as a human person? How do I deal responsibly with the others? How do I give responses to meaningful others around me? How do I obtain information about other points of view and to what extent do I allow them to become part of my own life project?”

In one way or another these issues – approaching the religious reality at school through the lens of theology and the personal appropriation of this approach in one’s own life project – are dealt with in European RE classes. In some countries the objective element of ‘learning *about* world views’ is more central. In other countries the personal ‘learning *from* world views’ is more at stake. But in most cases teachers and scholars are aware of the dialectic of the two – how the “adolescent life-world curriculum” interferes with and shapes the “religious life-world curriculum” and *vice versa*, to put it in the words of the English RE scholars John Hull and Michael Grimmitt (cfr. Bates 2006, 20-22). Portraying this dialectic for each country in Europe is the aim of the research and book project Rel-EDU at the University of Vienna (Jäggle, Rothgangel and Schlag 2013; cfr. Kuyk et. al. 2007).

It is reasonable that this dialectic is dealt with publically in the framework of the school as learning environment. The RE class is a suitable place for this discourse (Mette 2010). It offers a *sui generis* understanding of reality that should not be

replaced by other language game. At this point in my argumentation it is not relevant whether or not this RE class is organized according to a specific confession or from a secular point of view. And again, at this point the variety of RE provisions in Europe is large. The central concern should be – as far as I am concerned – to legitimate (again) the RE class as a place in which existential questions can be perceived and taken seriously and in which reasonable interpretation models to understand and also to answer these questions can be found in a peaceful and constructive way.

Religious experiences and mother tongues in the classroom?

The German RE scholar Bernard Dressler establishes the goal of RE, in line with Jürgen Baumert's general concept of education, as follows: "to be able to behave critically in one's own life style towards religious praxis (active, passive or abstinent)" (Dressler 2011, 163). The fundamental question is however, what happens when religious praxis vanishes into thin air, when it cannot be perceived and cannot be either evaluated or understood? What happens when the religious point of view, that is *the lens*, does not work anymore because the religious perception and action, that is, *the sight*, are falling apart? One of the fundamental issues in current RE research is the question of what happens when the knowledge of the religious traditions is not factually available anymore. Or, in other words, what happens when each time we find fewer and fewer representatives who seize this knowledge and who can present it and transmit it to others reasonably? Intercultural and interreligious learning will make little sense when there is not a critical amount of different representative voices. Would RE become meaningless if fewer and fewer people have learnt the religious mother tongue or have been socialized religiously? Can we still talk about 'interreligious learning' (learning *about* and *from* religion) when the religious traditions who shape the 'inter' disappear – and this because of the fact that fewer and fewer people remember the core of tradition at the one hand or because there are only a few who maintain it and cannot or do not want to deal with their own hermeneutic position at the other hand? At school this might specifically mean that in class time a clash between religious illiterates and religious fanatics can take place. Can we then still talk about a healthy learning environment?

In the recent past, in the RE class, there have been attempts to overcome this situation by taking good care of the students' own world construction and by providing them a wide knowledge perspective; this way, students themselves can choose and taste and can become involved again. Others claim that, instead of a widening of the offer, a deepening of knowledge should be attained, for example, regarding the contents that are specifically Christian. Some others have decided on an approach towards aesthetic and moral training processes. There are still others who maintain that school has to be newly re-catechized and that schools themselves must expressively acquire the label of a community of believers. Finally, some believe that it is better not to talk about religion at school at all: the topic is old-fashioned and belongs to the private sphere of the individual.

This is my position: religious and non-religious worldviews are present in society in a blurred and fragmented way. A clear and systematic approach to this phenomenon in the RE class may reasonably be expected from school, due to its educational mission. Every child has the right to this learning process. RE for all should be the standard. With that aim in mind, information has to be placed at its disposal and has to be *represented* through teaching materials properly chosen. Information about religious practices, people and spaces should be present in the classroom, either virtually or physically. This information offers concrete accesses to a particular point of view, religious or not. Through the testimony of their lived faith the people who represent these points of view (virtually or physically) *present* at the same time their own affinity to faith. Children and young people have thus the opportunity of wondering and tracking how these concrete models can give them guidance about their own life project. This way, they get to know the variety of approaches to certain vital questions that each person considers. Facing these approaches the disposition to pose questions on one's own life perspective is renewed: "What is it that religious people (physically present here or represented by texts or images) are thrilled about? What have they seen that I have not seen up to today?" And all this happens in the midst of the creative space, in which the questions of human existence arise.

When such a variety of points of view, either religious or not, is mentioned and discussed, young people will feel provoked to explore themselves and their origins, and to take themselves and their own future seriously. Little by little, a *presence*, a personal point of view in a broad environment of lived convictions is

expected from them. Like was argued before: “Through the intercultural and inter-religious encounter I am challenged to re-define myself, to know myself better, and respect myself more, as a human person with dignity, who makes a difference through encounter with others. Another person’s view on a given (religious) question can only inspire me when I myself am committed to that question and begin to answer it” (Roebben 2013, 163). Only then, when the individual can find, “re-define and re-dignify” him/herself again, and as such, take part in the discussion, when he/she acquires the personal competence of a moral and intelligent human being, only then social cohesion can emerge out of the encounter of individuals. This comprehensive approach to interreligious learning – learning in the presence of the religious other (Boys 2008) – encompasses three elements: learning about, from and in/through religion (Roebben 2013, 164).

Learning <i>about</i> religion	Learning <i>from</i> religion	Learning <i>in/through</i> religion
<i>Multi</i> -religious learning	<i>Inter</i> -religious learning	<i>Intra</i> -religious learning
Knowing the other	Respecting the other	<i>Re-defining</i> and <i>re-dignifying</i> myself
Information through documentation	Interpretation through communication	Confrontation through encounter
Heuristic competence	Social competence	Existential competence
Teacher provides information as <i>expert</i>	Teacher manages the communication as <i>moderator</i>	Teacher confronts with lived religion as <i>witness</i>

Towards a productive relationship with one’s own singularity

In order to increase knowledge (*about*), communication (*from*) and appropriation (*in/through*) of religious diversity, the educational space has to be well structured and full of stimuli. When this is not the case, or, in other words, when the representations and presentations in the class do not take place or are confusing, the original intuition of the religious and non-religious positions – experience and mother tongue – have to be presented and inserted in a performative way. Regarding this point, as early as 1994, the German RE researcher Hans Zwergel stated the following: “When the RE class can hardly rely on previous religious

experiences, it would not have any other choice but to venture into new ways of cognitive and emotional connection which combine faith and life in the same class and, from there, to give new ways of consolidation aimed towards the subject” (Zwergel 1994, 44). And in 2004 the well-known expert on education Dietrich Benner argued: “In order to extend the experience of the world and human relationships in the class and in the school, at first, basic experiences about the world and relationships are required. If this premise is not fulfilled through pre-school education and socialization, firstly, they have to be created and guaranteed artificially with the help of explorations, visits, trips and practical activities, with the purpose of having subsequent instruction in class” (Benner, 2004, 14).

It is clear that the effect, motivation and interest for experiential learning in the presence of the religious other are different in each class, school and region. The German RE scholar Hans Mendl offers a clearly differentiated framework for a methodology of teaching an *Alteritätsdidaktik*, a didactics of otherness, a framework in which one can interact with religious positions that are different and opposite from one’s own beliefs in class. In the first place, he describes the aspect of “perceiving the experience of what is strange from a distance”, in which young people are taught, as an essential method, a draft of a personal map with religious similarities and differences (Mendl 2009, 33-34). Secondly, he defends that young people “should be made familiar through experiences with segments of other religions, which are different from their own” (34) and “should be given the opportunity to experience moments of specific participation in their own *strange* religion” (34-37). The last step, the “procedural comprehension of one’s own religion” (37-38) does not belong to the working package of the school. This step is of a catechetical nature and corresponds to the believers’ community. Even if children and young people reach a revelation of faith in the framework of the educational process, it cannot be a deliberate objective in class. In this situation the teacher can forward the question explicitly to the church or the faith community.

The second step is particularly interesting for our reflections: here young people receive the chance of knowing something about other people’s religious life and about the life of their own religion, as well as the possibility of participating in well-chosen encounters with the otherness of the other and the strangeness in others and ... oneself. The Dutch philosopher of education Siebren Miedema

holds the view that this way of proceeding, learning by doing through participation in ‘culturally structured activities’ (Miedema 2008, 39; cf. Hermans 2003) leads to transformational learning from a religious world view, and therefore, young people will be more challenged to take a stand by themselves than through the traditional strategies of transmission. Thus, they learn to understand better their position through the ‘with’ of ‘with others’, to value and to stand for it.

The Dutch RE scholar Ina ter Avest (2009, 26) states, thanks to the REDCo research, that many possibilities of education through social cohesion in the cultural and religious sphere are overlooked, because, although pupils are able to perceive cultural and religious differences on the playground, they are not invited in the classroom to present these differences personally, to perceive them more deeply and to take them into consideration. In Dutch, the RE class is referred to as *levensbeschouwing*. *Leven beschouwen* means to contemplate or to consider life in its complexity and plurality and to try to understand it as such. Life is literally left out ‘of consideration’ in too many RE classes today. The goal of *levensbeschouwing* is then simply not reached in RE! Even in schools that lack a great cultural and religious variety this topic cannot be omitted (Richardson 2010, 277). Religious variety takes always place (for instance on the Internet, in the media, on the playground, etc.) – even in so-called homogeneous religious contexts!

Concrete pathways to RE as human flourishing

‘RE for all’ can open a hermeneutical space for personal storytelling, for an intensified awareness of the (non-)religious stories of others and for the communicative ways to deal with the dialectic of these two in a peaceful way. It can make children and young people more resilient to cope with the accelerated complexity of modern society and to honor them in their personal contribution to that society. The title of this essay confirms this vision: ‘RE for all’ is as such a valid pathway for human flourishing of children and young people. In what follows I present five recent developments in RE research in Europe that concretize this approach.

The first and most basic development relates to *community building*. Young people need interaction chances to learn together. In the German religious didactics this idea is reflected in the so called ‘Compassion’ projects (Kuld 2002), in which young people engage with open hands in community work and discuss their experiences afterwards. In the USA a similar project is very successful: the Interfaith Youth Core (Patel 2007). Through service learning young people talk about their inspiration, in order “to identify what is common between religions”, but also to get the chance to discover “where each can articulate its distinct path to that place [of communality, BR]” (Patel 2007, 167).

A second path to create opportunities for human flourishing in the RE classroom is the *cultural path* – imaginative explorations in other people’s religions and belief systems. Sometimes young people need more distance to understand their own intentions – ‘mental detours’ in the words of Paul Ricoeur. Literature, music, film, theater, etc. can be helpful in that respect. A mere introspective approach to existential questions is often too intrusive. A story told by another person in a novel offers breathing space and the possibility of role taking, in order to understand oneself as another better (Ricoeur 1992).

The third dimension of RE development, both in praxis and theory, is the so called pedagogy of *sacred space* (*Sakralraumpädagogik*) (Rupp 2005). Presumption is that young people themselves deal with ways to ‘liquefy’ the spiritual capital of sacred spaces around them to interpret the transformations that are taking place in their neighborhoods. One of the central research questions is: What happens when young people conceive of spiritual questions in the presence of others and in the context of traditional sacred spaces (such as a church, a temple, a mosque), although lacking religious mother tongues, and/or using conflicting languages, and/or inventing other languages through e.g. new media?

The fourth track to stir up human flourishing through RE is the exploration of religious *rituals in schools*, related to experiences of passage, death, new life, hopes and expectations of young people in every day school life. Such “ritual-like practices have important functions and characteristics that potentially can enhance life. Perhaps not only enhance it, but are even essential to life.” (De Wildt 2012, 243).

And finally, related to the previous topic, there is a huge need for silence and focused reflection in RE. These relate to concentration and asceticism: to stand the restlessness, to wait till inner rumors disappear, to receive a new vision and a new heart to see the world differently. In silence the human person can become very wide and full of mercy for him/herself and others. Reconciliation with oneself is a necessary prerequisite for the encounter with the other (Hochheimer 2011). Young people have the right to learn this *habitus* or virtue.

This whole process ‘uses’ existing theology but also in a way ‘produces’ new theology: children and youth theology (Schlag and Schweitzer 2011). Young people are respected in their dignity as creators of a new theological discourse for the future. The UK researcher Julia Ipgrave is deeply convinced that we should not lose any time in this kind of support of human flourishing of children in religiously diverse classrooms: “I propose that religious education in schools should include (alongside its concern to increase children’s knowledge of different religious traditions) the active promotion of a theological method that takes the concept of God seriously, takes faith seriously, takes truth seriously, takes the religious perspectives of others seriously; one that forms children as theologians who are not afraid or embarrassed to express or reflect upon their own beliefs, to criticize and revise their own religious language” (Ipgrave 2009, 69). It is my contention that this comprehensive learning *about, from and in/through* approach can enrich appropriately the many educational tracks being developed all over the world to start with information *about* religions (see e.g. for the USA: Moore 2007, AAR 2010 and Moran 2010).

Conclusion

Is society prepared and able to stimulate these processes of vital importance in primary and secondary school and in higher education? The school alone or what is even worse RE alone cannot deal with this task. Knowing the peculiarity of the religious language game, addressing the slow questions and researching with young people the existential experiences in everyday life, cannot and must not be only a task for the RE class. I think that leaving all the burden of the secularization and modernization of religion on the children’s shoulders would not be justifiable. We are all responsible for dialogue among cultures, for learning *about, from and in/through* the cultural or religious other and, therefore, also for

the development of the self-awareness of the future generations in their contribution to a better world.

Good education helps children to start learning together, helps them to understand their own specific contributions and brings them at the end of the day together again – in reflecting and re-collecting their newly gained insights (Roebben 2012). Children do not need ‘more’ identity, they need a ‘better’ identity (quoted in Könemann and Mette 2013, 77), one that is fitting into their personal narration and into the larger context of a culture of recognition, of persons recognizing each other in their otherness.

This whole educational process costs energy, courage and, last but not least, money. I finish this chapter with an extensive quote from Elaine Champagne, a Canadian researcher in children’s spirituality. She points to the necessity of an educational community which shows the courage of its convictions: “It seems that the population and the governments count on the school to build a community of the future, capable of respect and dialogue in the context of plurality. But children cannot do that alone. Identity cannot be ‘taught’; it is rather experienced, supported and developed like a language, within a community. And dialogue in a pluralistic society is seriously challenged if social and personal identities are in crisis. To establish an authentic dialogue, there is a need to clarify our identities. And to clarify our identities, we need a collectivity. It would be a shame if we put the burden of social tolerance, respect and dialogue in a context of plurality on the shoulders of our children without addressing the questions for ourselves. The risk of exploiting the children for the sake of a better future is not only foolish, but absolutely unjustifiable. It is undermining of the very fundamental belief in the value of each individual” (Champagne 2009, 2).

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