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Education for Peace and Tolerance: New Tasks for Religious Education

The question of what religious education can contribute to peace and tolerance is broad enough for a major book. Consequently, my presentation will not really cover the topic in any comprehensive manner. Instead I will offer a number of thoughts that may be helpful for future discussions.

I will start out by asking about the place of our topic within religious education. Second, I want to take up two different understandings or models of education for peace and tolerance. Third, I will try to connect these models to the European discussion on religious education. Finally, I want to take the liberty to set forth a number of ideas concerning CoGREE – the Coordinating Group for Religious Education in Europe – as a player in European religious education.

1 Education for Peace and Tolerance – A New Task for Religious Education?

The title of my presentation – Education for Peace and Tolerance: New Tasks for Religious Education – can mean that religious education should take up a new task by becoming aware of the need for peace and tolerance. This would imply that peace and tolerance have not played a role for religious education in the past.

In the year 2005, it is easy to see that this would be a mistaken assumption. On September 25, the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Religious Peace was celebrated here in Germany. This peace still stands as a powerful symbol for peaceful religious coexistence, even if it took almost another hundred years before the famous Westfalian Peace of 1648 established a more permanent system of religious pluralism.

Such peace treaties certainly were not a matter of religious education but of power and politics. Yet it should not be forgotten that some religious education theorists of the time did in fact address peace and tolerance in their writings. One famous example within my own Protestant tradition comes from Philipp Melanchthon. In 1528, he devised a model of religious education that explicitly should not focus on „matters of conflict" (at that time, on conflicts especially with Rome). And he adds as an example that children should not be taught to „insult monks" what some teachers obviously liked to do.[1] Moreover, one of the first philosophers of education to set forth a comprehensive vision of education for peace and tolerance was Jan Amos Comenius, again a Christian educator and a 17th century classic of religious education of European scope.[2] We should not forget that there is a deep connection between the Christian tradition and the plea for peace and tolerance.

Yet while Comenius clearly invoked a global perspective (he called it „catholic" in its original sense – consultatio catholica de rerum humanarum emendatione) and while he himself belonged to a Christian minority that was left out even by the Westfalian Peace, it is quite obvious that the understanding of peace and tolerance within the tradition of religious education tended to be limited. Quite often, later catechisms, for example, in 17th century did include lengthy lists on „matters of conflict", warning children and youth of the dangers of other faiths. Most importantly, the understanding of peace and tolerance focussed on peace and tolerance within Christianity while Jews and Muslims were not considered worthy candidates to be included within the parameters of peace and toleration.[3]

In this respect, we should really speak of new tasks for religious education, most notably of the task to expand the parameters of tolerance in order to include other cultures as well as non-Christian religions. In many countries in Europe and beyond, we are now faced with so-called multicultural societies that require peace and tolerance to explicitly go beyond one's own culture and also beyond one's own religious tradition. Pluralism has become the hallmark of our time. No model of religious education that does not live up to the challenges of this pluralism can claim to be well-founded educationally or politically, at least not from the perspective of democracy. Yet how can we achieve peace and tolerance in a situation of multiculturalism?

2 Different Models of Education for Peace and Tolerance

First, we should note that the understanding of education for peace and tolerance marks an important point of agreement within the European discussion. At the

same time, there are tensions and controversies concerning the shape this education should take. Some of these controversies concern the role of religion in education. Others refer to the relationship between the state and civil society.

Some philosophers have argued that religion can never be the basis for tolerance. According to them, religious convictions always have a tendency towards fundamentalism because they are based on the assumption that one's own creed is of ultimate truth and value. These analysts therefore plea for a purely formal or philosophical basis for tolerance which they hope to find in universalist norms in the sense of the Kantian or neo-Kantian tradition. In Germany, Jürgen Habermas is probably the most well-known representative of this kind of thinking.[4] Yet as convincing as his plea for universal norms may sound, it is easy to see that the well known weaknesses of a Kantian universalist approach to ethics also go along with this kind of abstract basis for tolerance. The biggest weakness results from the lack of motive or motivation to adopt and to follow abstract norms. It remains quite unclear why people should subscribe to such norms which they do not perceive as part of their lives and not as part of their own culture, tradition or faith.

This is why the alternative option for identifying the sources of tolerance not *above* all faith traditions but exactly *within* the different religions has become so attractive. To the degree that these sources can be tapped and can be used, among others, in religious education, we may expect a powerful contribution to peace and tolerance. A good example is the so-called tolerance project on „religious roots of tolerance".[5] The tolerance project comes out of a joint effort of theologians, philosophers and psychologists. It aims at bringing together representatives of different religions – so far Christianity, Islam and Judaism – in order to discover roots of tolerance *within* each tradition. It is the guiding hypothesis of this project that tolerant attitudes can never by imposed upon people from outside – which, from an educational perspective, would indeed amount to the self-contradictory strategy of teaching for tolerance through intolerant procedures. In his introductory article „Tolerance from Faith", Christoph Schwöbel argues that pluralistic societies are dependent on the praxis of tolerance and that this praxis can only be achieved if there are institutions within society that support the development of tolerant identities.[6] From his point of view, religious institutions should be considered prime candidates for this task. A second point in Schwöbel's analysis is of immediate interest in our present context as well. In connection to globalization and fundamentalism he analyses the difficulty of „making" people tolerant by trying to force them into tolerant and enlightened attitudes. Based on all experiences with this attempt, this simply cannot work because people will only feel threatened and will just become so insecure about their identities that the result is more fundamentalism rather than less. Consequently the educational aim is not to „relativize religious identities" but to appropriate the religious traditions in such a way that they can become resources for tolerance. This point is especially interesting for religious education because some educational approaches are explicitly aiming at relativizing the religious identities that students have acquired, for example, in their families. If the intention must be to tap the roots of tolerance within the different religious traditions, this is an ill-chosen strategy for education.

The second controversy concerns the relationship between the state and civil society as agents of education for peace and tolerance. Again it is the situation of multiculturalism that is under debate. In the past, the relationship between civil society and religion was often described in terms of values. Civil society was seen as a sphere in which values of the common good could take root. Civil society was considered the soil from which values can grow. Religion was understood as part and parcel of this soil because the ethics of civil society was deeply religious. In the countries of central and western Europe where such ideas first took shape, this meant that it was a Christian ethics. Christianity was the value basis of civil society, and Christian values were expected to support the common good.[7]

It is important not to confuse the moral importance of *civil society* with the parallel yet different notion of *civil religion*. The term civil religion goes back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and refers to a religiously grounded ethics that is required for the maintenance of the government and for the order of society.[8] Civil religion comes from above as a state requirement imposed on the people – just like in the case of the United States when the president calls upon the citizens to live up to the true destiny of the country and when he requires them to carry burdens for the sake of God's chosen nation of freedom.[9]

Contrary to this, the ethics of civil society stands for a different model. While also helpful for the community and for the common good, this ethics does not come from above or as a requirement of a central government. It grows out of the shared convictions held by the inhabitants of society. Only this second model is in line with the idea of democracy and of a democratic form of government that does not attempt to determine the religious values of the citizens.

The traditional relationship between civil society and

religion that resulted in a religious ethics of civil society, also reminds us of the important changes that we have to take account of. European countries have turned into more or less multicultural and also multireligious societies. Faith in Europe no longer is identical with Christian faith or with Christian and Jewish faith but has come to mean many different kinds of religious as well as non-religious faiths. Consequently, the ethics of civil society can hardly rely on just one religion anymore.

This is why some observers assume that the pluralization of society, culture and religion actually excludes the possibility of a democracy based on civil society. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas can again serve as an example. He suggests that democracy can no longer be based on the different traditions and goals embodied in the groups, communities and associations that make up civil society.[10] For him, democracy means that, quite independent of civil society, there must be a constitutional framework with binding universal norms that all members of society must accept. All groups within society have to comply to the rules set by this universalist framework. Different communities and groups enjoy the freedom to do whatever they like within this framework but they are not allowed to determine or to influence the framework itself. From this point of view, civil society comprises different particularist communities and orientations that ultimately have to be subordinated to the universalist norms and values of a discourse ethics.

In my understanding, democracy must be based on a strong civil society, and this is especially important when we refer to large political units like the European Union. In this case, the physical or geographical distance between the individual citizens and the political institutions makes it very difficult for the traditional parliamentary structures and procedures to guarantee participation and to support democracy in everyday life. The institutions of civil society can contribute to making democracy a living experience.

Yet while large political units become more dependent upon civil society, they also make it more difficult for civil society to fulfil its task of working for the common good. The more diverse the population becomes, the less civil society can be based on shared traditions because such traditions will only be shared by some members of civil society but not by all of them.

This is why civil society will only have a future if it strives for mutual respect and understanding explicitly and intentionally across different traditions, different cultures and different religions. In other words, civil society must become a dialogical enterprise that does not rely exclusively on traditional groups and communities within their respective limitations. People from different national, cultural and religious backgrounds have to work together in new ways if they want to achieve a strong civil society in a multicultural Europe.

If we think of the expectation mentioned earlier that this cooperation should also be a soil for shared values, it becomes obvious that the idea of a dialogical civil society holds many challenges. It certainly cannot be realized without an education that prepares young people for working towards peace and tolerance which are at the heart of democracy in multicultural societies.

3 Models for Religious Education

Concerning the role of civil society, it is important to remember that the traditional state school had no connections to civil society. A Prussian state school, for example, was considered something like the property of the state, not the property of society. Until the 1950s, the legal situation of the German state school was comparable to that of the army because in either case the principle of special state power („besonderes Gewaltverhältnis") applied. Since then, however, there has been a clear movement towards more democracy in education. In a first step, public schools became subject to parliamentary debate and decision making. Parents' rights and eventually also children's rights gained more legal influence. New laws have allowed for more local participation and for more democracy, including cooperation between the schools and local communities. At least in a certain sense we could say then that the German state school is moving into the direction of civil society, even if it still has a long way to go before the marriage between civil society and the state school will be fully accomplished.

Where does this place religious education? What does the democratisation of schooling mean for religious education? In Germany and also in some other European countries, we can observe developments that point into two very different directions:

- On the one hand, the *religious studies approach* based on religious neutrality and combined with some values education is clearly becoming more and more prominent. In this case, religious education is considered as *teaching about* religion. From this point of view, students should *learn about* different religions in the sense of acquiring knowledge about different convictions, traditions and orientations, and in the sense of considering them critically from the perspective of the scientific study of religion or the philosophy of religion (but never from the perspective of theology).[11] The aim is tolerance through distance and objectivity. The

state takes full responsibility for this subject. There is no influence from civil society, neither from the religious communities nor from other non-government organizations. – In Germany, this model is often confused with the interfaith model developed in England and Wales. Yet the British model clearly includes a strong influence from the religious communities and from other members of civil society, for example, through the so-called SACREs – the local standing committees on religious education – which are responsible for the syllabi of religious education. These committees represent civil society but they have no equivalent in the (German) religious studies approach.

On the other hand, we can observe that the traditional model of denominational religious education in Germany is giving way to *cooperative models of religious education* that try to combine *denominational* and *dialogical* elements.[12] In any case, the German situation is becoming more plural because, in addition to the traditional forms of Protestant and Roman Catholic religious education, additional forms of Orthodox, Jewish and Muslim religious education have been established or are in the process of being established. Some religious educators have greeted this development because it is in line with the idea of strengthening the influence of civil society and of giving it more influence within the state school rather than having the state take over the field of religious education and values (like in the federal state of Berlin where the Social Democratic Party is planning to introduce some kind of value studies as a mandatory subject for all while religious education remains a voluntary subject that requires students to stay at school for extra hours if they should opt for this subject). Others are more sceptical because they work from the assumption that the combination of the characteristics of 'denominational' and 'educational' can only lead to contradictions. In addition, there is a language problem. In the UK, 'confessional' in the context of religious education is often understood as 'indoctrination'.[13] In Germany, designations like 'denominational' or 'confessional' refer to a *sponsorship* for religious education that is shared between the state and religious communities. It does not refer to the *expected outcome*. Even from the point of view of the churches, German denominational religious education does not have the task of turning children or adolescents into followers of a certain religious community or church. Religious education should give them a chance to encounter a clear religious outlook but not in order for them to be indoctrinated. The aim is considered choice – a choice in the sense of what I like to call principled pluralism. This implies that denominational religious education must go beyond the limits of the respective denomination. Any kind of responsible religious education must include other denominations and religions as part of the curriculum as well as personal encounters with other denominations and religions. Cooperation between different denominational groups in religious education aims at learning from the other and together with others – Protestants and Roman Catholics but also Christians and Muslims or Jews.

Let me point out three consequences from these observations:

First, the idea of limiting religious education to *teaching about* religion clearly is not helpful for the future. A number of countries including England and Wales have moved away from this approach, simply because it does not achieve its educational purposes. The assumption that there are only two choices – either to *teach religion* or to *teach about religion* – has turned out to be much too simple. We need more complex and sophisticated models – models that include *learning from religion* like in the UK or that are based on *dialogical learning and cooperation* like in Germany. The respective experiences indicate that we should leave behind the traditional oppositions between a religious studies camp and a church or theology camp in order to work towards more flexible and open models that will include both, the perspective of the academic observer as well as the perspective of the faithful believer. The aim of a principled pluralism will not be achieved unless religious education comes to balance different views – religious views and convictions, self-interpretations of individuals and of religious groups, but also views from a non-religious perspective and from the scientific study of religion.

Second, concerning the relationship between religious education and civil society or democracy, we must also include, as one of the basic criteria, the need for future models of religious education to contribute to a strong civil society. Civil society is dependent on education for peace and tolerance, for justice and solidarity. In multireligious societies, education must also include dialogical aims in the sense of a principled pluralism. No future model for religious education should be allowed to exclusively aim at intra-school purposes and to neglect its necessary relationship to the civil society surrounding the schools.

Third, the organizational model for religious education should be explicitly open for its relationship to civil society. As can be seen from different countries in Europe, there are many different ways of supporting the relationship between religious education and civil society. The local SACRE

committees in England and Wales are one example, the German model of shared responsibility or sponsorship between the state and the religious bodies is another. I do not think that we will ever find the one model that fits all. We should not even strive for such a unitary model because it would contradict the necessary pluralism in religious education in different countries. Yet it is important that the different models will be in line with the overarching criteria of a democracy based on a strong civil society, and this includes criteria like peace, tolerance, and solidarity.

4 The Need for a European Player in Religious Education

As has become clear from what I have said so far, I am advocating a model of education for peace and tolerance that includes a clear place for religion and religious education. From my point of view, there can be no doubt that such a model must apply within different nation states but also within the European Union. This is the reason why I want to conclude my presentation by adding my appreciation for CoGree and by formulating a few expectations for CoGREE's future work as a European player in religious education.

It has often been observed that religious education is at the disadvantage of not having a European voice. There have been a number of smaller initiatives for religious education in Europe but none of them can claim any representative status. All of the existing groups are important grass root movements but they do not speak for a reasonably large constituency. This is the first reason for being very happy with CoGREE and with the attempt of forming an association across different countries. From my perspective, CoGREE is the most important attempt of developing a unitary voice for religious education in Europe. Yet the process of including others in this association is not complete. As I have learned from many conversations in the context of European politics, we must find ways of bringing all of the Christian denominations together. Protestant groups are not enough, even if they represent different countries. We also need to find ways to include Roman Catholics and the Orthodox, difficult as that may be. And in the longer run, even all of Christianity cannot be the limit. If there is a need for a clear voice for religious education in Europe, this voice must come from Jews and Muslims as well and also from Hindus and Buddhists. Consequently, expanding CoGREE – step by step – is the first challenge for the future of CoGREE as a European body from my point of view.

Another reason for appreciating CoGREE has to do with its roots in civil society. This association does not come from above – from Brussels or from the state governments. It comes from civil society. Moreover, the institutionalisation of this association follows the principle of dialogical agreement. With this, it proves the ability of different religious bodies to work together and to share many understandings without denying lasting differences. In this respect, the existence of CoGREE is in full harmony with its aims – peace and tolerance not through the privatisation of religion but through religious dialogue and through education for mutual respect and understanding.

It will be a very important task for CoGREE and others who are interested in the future of religious education in Europe to come up with what I like to call common standards for religious education.[14] By this, I do not mean standards that can be used to evaluate students or schools in the manner of the new agencies for evaluation. Instead, I am thinking of standards that define, from a professional point of view, what kind of religious education should be available to children and youth in European countries. This is not the place to go into the details of such standards. It should be clear that such standards must be open and flexible enough in order to apply to the different traditions and models in different countries. Yet at the same time, the standards must define minimum requirements that guarantee the future of religious education in Europe. In my understanding, it could be a prime task for CoGREE, as a European player in religious education, to set forth and to advocate such standards – something like a declaration on religious education based on the rights of children.[15]

Anmerkungen

[1] P. Melanchthon, *Unterricht der Visitatoren an die Pfarrherrn im Kurfürstentum zu Sachsen* (1528). Quoted from K.E. Nipkow/F. Schweitzer, *Religionspädagogik. Texte zur evangelischen Erziehungs- und Bildungsverantwortung seit der Reformation.* Vol. 1, München 1991, 88.

[2] Cf., for example, the sections documented by Nipkow/Schweitzer, op. cit., 106ff.

[3] For a historical overview see R. Forst, *Toleranz im Konflikt. Geschichte, Gehalt und Gegenwart eines umstrittenen Begriffs*, Frankfurt/M. 2003.

[4] Cf. R. Forst, op. cit.

[5] See C. Schwöbel/D. von Tippelskirch (ed.), *Die religiösen Wurzeln der Toleranz*, Freiburg et al. 2002.

[6] C. Schwöbel, Toleranz aus Glauben. Identität und Toleranz im Horizont religiöser Wahrheitsgewissheiten. In: Schwöbel/von Tippelskirch, op. cit., 11-37.

[7] There is an extensive literature on civil society. In the present context, the foundational study J.L. Cohen/A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge/London 1992 is of special interest. Important insights can also be gained from A.B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, Princeton 1995 and M. Walzer (ed.), *Toward A Global Civil Society*, Providence/Oxford 1995. For earlier and more detailed statements of my own respective views see F. Schweitzer, Zivilgesellschafthaft – Schule – Religion: Welchen Religionsunterricht braucht eine zivilgesellschaftliche Demokratie? In: C.T. Scheilke/F. Schweitzer (eds.), *Religion, Ethik, Schule. Bildungspolitische Perspektiven in der pluralen Gesellschaft*, Münster 1999, 295-307, R.R. Osmer/F. Schweitzer *Religious Education between Modernization and Globalization: New Perspectives on the United States and Germany*,Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2003, F. Schweitzer, *The Postmodern Life Cycle: Challenges for Church and Theology*, St. Louis 2004.

[8] J.-J. Rousseau (1762), *Du Contrat Social*, Amsterdam 1762, book IV.

[9] In the second half of the twentieth century, the concept of civil religion has been applied first of all to American politics, cf. R.N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*, New York et al. 1970.

[10] This understanding runs like a thread through many of his works, cf. J. Habermas, *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus*, Frankfurt/M. 1976, 92-126, J. Habermas, *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung*, Frankfurt/M. 1987, 159-179.

[11] The clearest example for this approach in Germany comes from Brandenburg; cf. W. Edelstein et al., *Lebensgestaltung – Ethik – Religionskunde. Zur Grundlegung eines neuen Schulfachs. Analysen und Empfehlungen*, Weinheim/Basel 2001.

[12] For an official church statement on this cf. Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, *Identität und Verständigung. Standort und Perspektiven des Religionsunterrichts in der Pluralität. Eine Denkschrift*, Gütersloh 1994; for empirical results see F. Schweitzer/A. Biesinger et al., *Gemeinsamkeiten stärken – Unterschieden gerecht werden. Erfahrungen und Perspektiven zum konfessionell-kooperativen Religionsunterricht*, Freiburg/Gütersloh 2002.

[13] T. Copley, *Teaching Religion: Fifty years of religious education in England and Wales* (Exeter, University of Exeter Press), 101.

[14] See F. Schweitzer, International Standards for Religious Education *Panorama* 14, 2002, Nr. 1, 49-56.

[15] In my article (note 15), I present the following examples: 1) Religion must and can be taught in line with the criteria of general education; 2) RE is of relevance to the public and must be taught in line with this relevance; 3) RE must include some type of interdenominational and interreligious learning; 4) RE must be based on the children's right to religion and religious education; 5) RE teachers must have reached a level of self-reflexivity which allows for a critical appropriation of their religious biographies.

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