

# Religious Education in a European Context: READY?

## – Briefing on a new Erasmus plus project –

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The future of religious education in public schools is being increasingly seen in the context of European developments. However, the issue of religious teacher education has been neglected so far. A new Erasmus+ project made up of seven partners from six countries is currently working on this problem in a variety of ways.

### The context

In the 16 German federal states (“Bundesländer”), educational policies are manifold and multifaceted. During the last decades, however, all federal education systems have become increasingly influenced by European developments. In 2003, an article described latent, but constantly increasing, European pressure to harmonize and adapt existing educational structures which in the long run may also affect structures and the place of Religious Education at schools.<sup>1</sup> At that time a negligent phasing out of religion and religious education in several education systems was identified; since then perceptions on the European level have, however, changed:

- After the tragic events of 9/11, religion was rediscovered by the European institutions, mainly the European Union and the Council of Europe. A clear and comprehensive overview on the current discussion is provided in a study by Peter Schreiner<sup>2</sup>, and a recent publication entitled “Signposts”<sup>3</sup> which is based on a recommendation by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, and worked out by an international group of experts.
- REDCo (Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of Euro-

pean Countries), a large-scale project funded by the European Union and led by Wolfgang Weisse (Hamburg), investigated the relevance of religion in the lives of 14–16 year old youths in eight European countries. The findings have been published in numerous publications.<sup>4</sup> One observation which I will highlight, apparently made in all countries involved, was that: *“Most students would like the state-funded school to be a place for learning about different religions / world views, rather than for instruction in a particular religion / world view.”*<sup>5</sup>

- Under the acronym of REL-EDU (Religious Education at Schools in Europe) Martin Jäggle, Martin Rothgangel, and Thomas Schlag have started to publish a series of six volumes on national concepts and organizational patterns of Religious Education in Europe.<sup>6</sup>
- Beginning with the school year 2011/12 the Canton of Zurich replaced the denominational and denominational-cooperative Religious Education with the compulsory subject “Religion and Culture”.<sup>7</sup>
- In Luxembourg the new government of Liberals, Social Democrats, and the Green Party engaged Jürgen Oelkers, who had already substantially contributed to the development of the Swiss

model “Religion and Culture”, to elaborate on a new subject called “Life and Society” (“vie et société”). This subject is to merge the former subjects of “Catholic Religious Education” (“instruction religieuse et morale”) and the alternative subject “Morals” (“formation morale et sociale”) into a compulsory educational program for all children and adolescents.<sup>8</sup>

- A recent memorandum of the Council of Protestant Churches in Germany (EKD) states very clearly that in the context of increasing heterogeneity and diversity, the framework for denominational Religious Education in schools is changing completely. The document prioritises the necessity of a new educational goal named “competence to deal with plurality”.<sup>9</sup>

All this indicates that the discussion about the future of Religious Education in European schools has developed since 2003. This, however, can not be said for the European dimension in teacher education, in particular for colleagues teaching Religious Education. German students and teacher trainees often very quickly label the Religious Education programs in Great Britain or Scandinavia as mere “Religionsskunde” (information *about* religions), whereas from the perspective of other Europeans, the German model of denomi-

national RE is often linked with mission or indoctrination by institutional interests of the churches.

A more advanced dialogue between the German and the English discourse<sup>10</sup> on the didactics of Religious Education would offer a patch remedy; it fails, however, very often due to language barriers. It is therefore very helpful that the most important documents of the Council of Protestant Churches in Germany (EKD) have now been published in English.<sup>11</sup> Also the translation of the "Religionspädagogisches Kompendium", edited by Martin Rothgangel, Gottfried Adam, and Rainer Lachmann, makes the professional discussion on Religious Education published in German English accessible to English speaking colleagues.<sup>12</sup>

### The Project: READY – Religious Education And Diversity

In the above mentioned context, a new three year ERASMUS PLUS project funded by the European Union (runtime 9/2015 – 8/2018) is introduced:<sup>13</sup>

**Erasmus plus** is the European Union's program of education, training, and youth for the period 2014 to 2020.

**READY** is a "strategic partnership for school education" funded within the budget of "key action 2" promoting "Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices". <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/>

The Project is entitled "READY – Religious Education and Diversity. Sharing experiences of and approaches to teacher education in the context of Education and Training 2020".<sup>14</sup> The acronym READY alludes to the question as to whether future Religious Education teachers are adequately prepared for a common European future, especially concerning matters of diversity. The question could be: "Are we ready?" The same question would, by the way, also be relevant for teachers of the German alternative subject "Ethics". In countries where the content of Religious Education and its equivalents is strictly organized by state

authorities, and not by churches and other faith communities, the problem quickly arises: how does one fill and structure the subject? Does one structure it as a multi-faith-subject (as in England); as a subject with significant aspects of philosophy and ethics (e.g., as in Scotland<sup>15</sup>) or as a subject focussing on issues of life competencies (as in most Scandinavian countries, but also in the German State of Brandenburg)?

The READY project is coordinated by the "Staatliches Seminar für Didaktik und Lehrerbildung (Gymnasien)" in Tübingen / Germany ([www.seminar-tuebingen.de](http://www.seminar-tuebingen.de)) and its department for "Religion, Ethics & Philosophy". The partner institutions are

- The School of Education of the University College London / England
- The School of Education of the University of Aberdeen / Scotland
- Karlstad University / Sweden
- The Kirchliche Pädagogische Hochschule Wien / Krems / Austria
- The Dipartimento di Studi Storici of the University of Turin / Italy
- The Comenius-Institut Münster / Germany which will contribute, in particular, to quality management, academic monitoring, and to the dissemination of the results of the project

All partners involved in READY are interested in dealing with issues of "Religion and Diversity" in two respects: firstly, through an exchange of ideas, information, and experience regarding different forms of Religious Education and the ways in which Religious Education teachers are prepared for their profession; secondly, through an exchange of teaching experiences and teaching modules dealing with the increasing diversity of children and young people.

READY begins – using eTwinning, an internet platform up to now reserved only for schools – with a structured dialogue between Religious Education teacher trainees in different European countries.



*eTwinning has been developed by the European Commission in 2005 in order to build a network between European schools. Teachers and school classes can register and use the etwinning platform available in all 23 languages of the EU to find partners in other European countries, to generate international projects and to share experiences and results. By now more than 300.000 teachers, 150.000 schools and 40.000 projects are involved in eTwinning.*  
[www.etwinning.net](http://www.etwinning.net)

This eTwinning process is intended to lead to the development of teaching sequences and teaching modules dealing with issues of "Religion and Diversity". In parallel, participants will work on case studies of different profiles of Religious Education teacher education in the partner countries. There will be an interactive READY website, and guidelines for a one week study visit abroad.

During year 2 of the project, groups of five ("staff and learners") will spend one week in a European partner country observing Religious Education lessons and



having discussions with Religious Education teacher trainees, teachers, teacher educators, pupils and stakeholders. In this way the digital communication of year 1 will be built upon and deepened. The observations and insights gained by the study visits will be documented and analysed. In parallel, there will be piloting of teaching sequences on “Religion and Diversity” that will be evaluated and in some cases also recorded. The Religious Education pupils involved will also be encouraged to make use of eTwinning themselves.

From the very beginning READY has had ambitious aims to support large-scale knowledge exchange and dissemination – identifying sustainable findings which will be facilitated by the experiences, contacts, and structural involvement of the Comenius-Institut Münster ([www.comenius.de](http://www.comenius.de)): a Protestant Centre for Research and Development in Education sponsored mainly by the Protestant churches in Germany through the EKD. There will also be: READY newsletters; the READY website; two national multiplier events in Tübingen and London and one international multiplier event in Vienna – together with a READY print publication.

#### Notes

- 1 Eckart Marggraf, Unter Anpassungszwang? Religiöse Bildung im zusammenwachsenden Europa, in: HERDER KORRESPONDENZ 5/2003, 242–246.
- 2 Peter Schreiner, Religion im Kontext einer Europäisierung von Bildung. Eine Rekonstruktion europäischer Diskurse und Entwicklungen aus protestantischer Perspektive, Münster 2012.
- 3 Council of Europe (ed.), Signposts – Policy and practice of teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education, Strasbourg 2014.
- 4 Note particularly: Robert Jackson / Siebren Miedema / Wolfram Weisse / Jean-Paul Willaime (eds.), Religion and Education in Europe. Developments, Contexts and Debates, Münster 2007.
- 5 Robert Jackson, Context Document: Council of Europe recommendation on the dimension of religious and non-religious convictions within intercultural education – Towards a Roadmap. Unpublished paper presented to the 5th Meeting of the Joint Expert Group of the Council of Europe / European Wergeland Centre on the Implementation of Recommendation CM/Rec (2008)12, St. Petersburg, 4–5. (Quotation following Council of Europe (ed.), Signposts, l.c., 50.
- 6 Martin Jäggle / Martin Rothgangel / Thomas Schlag (eds.): Religiöse Bildung an Schulen in Europa, Wien 2013 ff. (volume 1 on Central Europe in German and English, volumes 2–3 on Western and Northern Europe in English, volumes 4–6 on Southern Europe, South-Eastern Europe and Eastern Europe to be published).

- 7 Cf. Johannes Rudolf Kilchsperger, „Neugier auf das, was sie nicht glauben“. Das neue Schulfach Religion und Kultur im Kanton Zürich, in: Bernd Schröder (ed.), Religionsunterricht – wohin? Neukirchen 2014, 89–103.
- 8 Cf. [www.gouvernement.lu](http://www.gouvernement.lu): document cadre „vie et société“, dated March 11th, 2015. – Jürgen Oelkers, Kann man in der Schule das Zusammenleben in der Gesellschaft lernen? Public lecture, Luxembourg, March 23rd, 2015. <http://www.ife.uzh.ch/research/emeriti/oelkersjuergen/vortraegeprofoelkers/vortraege2015.html>
- 9 Kirchenamt der EKD (ed.), Religiöse Orientierung gewinnen. Evangelischer Religionsunterricht als Beitrag zu einer pluralitätsfähigen Schule. Eine Denkschrift der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, Gütersloh 2014.
- 10 Cf. James C. Conroy et al. (eds), Does Religious Education Work? A Multi-dimensional Investigation, London 2013. – Philip Barnes / Andrew Davis / Mark Halstead, Religious Education. Educating for Diversity, London 2015.
- 11 Kirchenamt der EKD (ed.), Education from a Protestant Perspective. A Collection of Documents from the Evangelical Church in Germany, Gütersloh 2013.
- 12 Martin Rothgangel / Thomas Schlag / Friedrich Schweitzer in cooperation with Gottfried Adam and Rainer Lachmann (eds.), Basics of Religious Education, Göttingen 2014.
- 13 This article reflects the view only of the author, and the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.
- 14 For official EU document “Education and Training 2020” in different languages cf. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:ef0016>.
- 15 Cf. Graeme Nixon, The emergence of philosophy in Scottish secondary school Religious Education, in: Koers – Bulletin for Christian Scholarship 1/2012. – Graeme Nixon, Postmodernity, Secularism and Democratic approaches to Education: the impact on Religious Education in Scotland. An Analysis of the “philosophication” of Scottish Religious Education in Light of Social and Educational Change, in: Journal of Empirical Theology 22 (2009), 162–194.

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