

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 REDCo European research project

Council of Europe
Strasbourg, Palais de l'Europe
Room 8

Thursday, March 19th, 2009
15.00-17.00 h

Professor Jean-Paul Willaime
Director of the European Institute for the Study of Religion
Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Sorbonne, Paris

***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 instruction; 2) The need for intelligent and dialogical *laïcité*.

1) 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".

The students understood, as the American political scientist Amy Gutmann points out in her thought-provoking

book *Democratic Education*¹, 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

¹ Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education. With a New Preface and Epilogue*, Princeton (New Jersey), Princeton University Press, 1999.

something that has already been analysed, particularly at the Council of Europe², but it is worth exploring further.

2) 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

² *Religious diversity and intercultural education: a reference book for schools* (edited by John Keast), Council of Europe Publishing, 2007.

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 convictional 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 convictional 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 *convictional 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)³". 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)⁴. 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.

³ Régis Debray, *L'enseignement du fait religieux à l'école laïque*, Rapport au ministre de l'Éducation Nationale, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2002, p. 43.

⁴ Jean-Paul Willaime, *Le retour du religieux dans la sphère publique. Vers une laïcité de reconnaissance et de dialogue*, Lyon, Editions Olivétan, 2008.