

## Encountering Religious Pluralism in School and Society

# Religious Diversity and Education in Europe

edited by

Cok Bakker, Hans-Günter Heimbrock,  
Robert Jackson, Geir Skeie, Wolfram Weisse

Volume 5

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Thorsten Knauth, Dan-Paul Jozsa,  
Gerdien Bertram-Troost, Julia Ipgrave (Eds.)

# Encountering Religious Pluralism in School and Society

A Qualitative Study  
of Teenage Perspectives in Europe



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*Wolfram Weisse*

## **Foreword**

The question of dialogue between religions and of a dialogical approach to Religious Education is gaining more and more prominence all over the world. There is a rising public awareness of the necessity to seek dialogue with everyone who can aid us in preventing conflict and supporting peaceful coexistence in a multireligious society. This also requires efforts in intercultural and interreligious education. To this end, the degree to which religion functions as a potential criterion of exclusion in schools and universities must be investigated as well as the degree to which interreligious dialogue in education can promote the peaceful coexistence of people in Europe. This is especially important when we face people of different cultural and religious backgrounds for whom we need to map out educational strategies to recognise and learn from each other rather than perpetuate divisions. These questions are the main focus of our international research project called REDCo: “**R**eligion in **E**ducation. A contribution to **D**ialogue or a factor of **C**onflict in transforming societies of European countries”.

This volume, edited by Thorsten Knauth, Dan-Paul Jozsa, Gerdien Bertram-Troost and Julia Igrave, is the second publication of the REDCo project. Our first REDCo book was dedicated to an analysis of the preconditions of our research, outlining the developments, contexts and debates in our 8 countries (Jackson, Miedema, Weisse & Willaime, 2007). This volume concentrates on empirical studies. Focusing on teenagers in the 14–16 year age group, this publication looks into their own perceptions of religion, interreligious dialogue or conflict within the different national contexts. What is REDCo and what relevance does this volume have in the context of our research project?

The REDCo project is funded by the research department of the European Commission with a total sum of EUR 1.188.000 over a period of three years from March 2006 to February 2009. Universities in 8 European countries are involved: Estonia, Russia, Norway, Germany, The Netherlands, France, England and Spain. The REDCo project aims to address the question how religions and religious values can contribute to either dialogue or heightened tension in Europe. Researchers in the humanities and social sciences cooperate in a thematic and methodological approach to gain better insight into how European citizens of different religious, cultural and political backgrounds can live together and enter into a dialogue of mutual respect and understanding. Their differences are studied with regard to their impact on modern Europe and the lives of its citizens. The REDCo consortium researches empirically how differences within European societies can be addressed without creating conflict or exclusion.

The focus of the REDCo project is on ways to develop an educational goal in the field of religions and value systems that can serve both as an orientation for personal development and as a means to develop an appreciation of the processes of democratic citizenship and social cohesion. We cannot hope to solve this task at the national level alone. A European perspective needs to be established through a comparative study. This is the stated aim of our project and is reflected in its research structure. Our findings can cast the differences between countries and their main emphases into sharper profile, thus improv-

ing our understanding of the path to developing a ‘European identity’ which must be understood as plural and dialogic rather than monolithic.

When we designed the structure of our research, we had something smaller in mind. According to the wording of our application, the aim was “to work out three or four questions in order to record pupils’ views on the societal function of religion, on their experience with religion in education, and their wishes to include or exclude religion from education”. All questions should “focus on the possibilities of dialogue and/or conflict ... and be answered in a written form (about 1 to 2 pages per pupil) by about 70 pupils in each country” (Weisse, 2007, p. 18 f.). As the editors of this volume outline in their “Introduction” and their “Methodological Reflections on the Comparative Approach”, the concrete research exceeded the plans by far, whether this is in the number of questions and the questionnaires in all REDCo countries or in the depth and scope of the analyses. The material of the qualitative data showed such great potential that additional levels of analysis with a higher degree of differentiation seemed appropriate. As an example, I would like to mention that on top of the analyses concerning individual countries, the decision has been made to include additional bi-national analyses directed towards comparisons of Russia with Estonia, Norway with Germany, the Netherlands with England, and France with Spain. Thus we have gained a deeper and broader basis for a European comparison than other existing materials offer, including a significant number of European countries and using a large store of qualitative data. The results of this study are extraordinary both in their academic foundation and in their fascinating national, bi-national and European findings. Learning about and from religion, especially the religion of ‘the Other’, is shown to be of remarkably great relevance for schools throughout Europe. It also appears extraordinarily important to address the tension caused by existing prejudice in the religious arena and the great interest expressed by pupils in learning more about other cultures and religions. The analyses in this volume form a corner-stone of our REDCo project and they constitute a highlight in our ongoing research process which continues with, among other things, a quantitative survey carried out with an identical questionnaire in all of our countries, with interaction studies, analyses of material, of the role of teachers, and of the impact for an appropriate restructuring of teacher training approaches at University level.

Thanks go to the highly motivated and productive REDCo team as a whole, especially to the editors of this volume and also to Francis Ipgrave from Glasgow University for his support with language editing. Finally I would like to thank colleagues worldwide, who are not members of REDCo, but who stimulated our research considerably. We can here only name two of them: Prof. Dr. Gerhard Kleining from Hamburg University, who made invaluable contributions to the design of our qualitative study with his advice; and Prof. Dr. Peter L. Berger from Boston University, who challenged us with his thesis that Europe is the only region in the world where secularisation is gaining more and more ground. The findings and questions of this book and our ongoing research may contribute to a productive discussion of this hypothesis.

Hamburg, 12 January 2007

Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse  
Coordinator of REDCo

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*Gerdien Bertram-Troost, Julia Ipgrave, Dan-Paul Jozsa & Thorsten Knauth<sup>1</sup>*

## **Encountering Religious Pluralism in School and Society: A Qualitative Study of Teenage Perspectives in Europe: Background and Contextualisation**

### **General background**

Religion has returned to the forefront of public debate in European societies. It can no longer be regarded as a phenomenon of earlier times destined to wither in the face of advancing secularisation. It must be taken seriously as a powerful influence on the actions and thoughts of individuals. Several recent political and demographic trends have contributed to this return, among them migration patterns bringing to Europe increasing numbers of people from ethnic and cultural groups for whom religion plays an important role in their lives; the ending of the state-imposed atheism of the Soviet era; the prominence of religion in international affairs and the perceived threat of religious fanaticism in western societies. Religion is thus of great social and political significance, both in ethnic or national conflicts and extremist movements, but also in individual and communal quests for meaning and orientation. As a result, today's young people are most likely to encounter religion in one form or another. This could be either at home, at school, in their neighbourhood or through media images. From a pedagogical and educational point of view it is important to gain insight into the role of religion in the lives of young people. It is also important to reflect upon the (possible) role of education with regard to a growing religious diversity in society and a growing influence of religion in general.

The picture is far from being straightforward: from various recent studies into the religiosity of adults and young people throughout Europe it could be concluded that institutionalised religion is on the retreat (European Social Survey, 2002 & 2004). Other surveys suggest that the picture is much more complex and present counter-examples of increased religious observance within traditional institutions. To take the example of church attendance in England, ORB polls<sup>2</sup> showed a steady increase in those attending Christmas services from 33% in 2001 to 43% in 2005, and Church of England figures released in 2007, report increases in regular attendance in several dioceses across the country, and a year by year increase in the number of children and young people experiencing parish worship.

On the other hand a survey of 17–18 year olds throughout Europe recently found that for most countries (with the sole exceptions of Turkey and Poland) “there is a gap between formal church (or mosque or synagogue) membership and the natural religiousness of a member” (Ziebertz & Kay, 2006, p. 248). Although the percentage of church membership is quite high religion in terms of experience and commitment to faith communities is (apart from exceptions) not an important factor in the lives of young people.

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<sup>1</sup> Authors in alphabetical order.

<sup>2</sup> Using random phone calls to over 1000 people.

However, what can be conceived as well is that these exceptions actually include minority ethnic groups within European societies: religion is of high importance for many children of migrant communities in several European countries, such as for example in England and Germany.<sup>3</sup>

The seeming incompatibility of these findings has given rise to the question whether or not the process of secularisation in Europe in fact continues unabated (Pollack & Müller, 2006) or whether, on the contrary, we can speak of a “desecularisation” (Berger, 1999) or a “return of religions” (*Rückkehr der Religionen*) (Riesebrodt, 2000). Whatever the answer might be, the rise of individual, non-organised religiosity in European society is an undeniable fact. It has been the focus of many studies that have clearly demonstrated that a diminution of the social importance of religious institutions is not automatically accompanied by a concomitant loss of significance of religion at the individual level. The British sociologist Grace Davie coined the phrase “believing without belonging” (Davie, 1994) to describe this extra-institutional, individualised religiosity. Mikhail Cherniysh’s empirical study of Russian young people (Cherniysh, 1998) provided one of many illustrations of this theme. Over 50% of them believed in God, yet only 2% regularly attended a church service. It was found that they were largely ignorant of the main doctrines of traditional religion and open to a variety of unconventional forms. A basic question to be answered in the discussion about secularisation and pluralisation is whether there is a transformation of religion into manifold forms rather than a decline of religion. Another question concerns the mechanisms governing the relation between institutionalised, traditional religion and these emergent individual forms, which, as yet, are far from being clearly understood.

Altogether we can clearly say that more and deeper research is needed to understand the changing shape of religion and religiosity in Europe. The particular focus of the international research project REDCo (“Religion in Education: A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European countries”) is the role of religious education in a multireligious society. One central task, in relation to education, is to understand the positions of young people; how do they view religion in general and its social role, and what are their expectations of the educational establishment with regard to these? As yet, we know far too little of their religious orientations and positions outside closely defined national contexts which have rarely, if at all, been studied comparatively. This is all the more true for empirical qualitative research which, to date, has never been carried out on a comparable scale in the field. The main aim of this qualitative study is to gain a clearer insight into the role of religion in the lives and schooling of young people in general. Against this background there are further questions to be discussed about suitable conceptual approaches for responding to religious diversity in school (Weisse, 2007).

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3 This was found to be the case among minority young people in England, for example, when they were asked to rate the level of importance of religion in their lives for a large scale education department survey (DfES 2006). Among the respondents 71% of Black Africans and 85% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi students classed religion as *very* important. This is also true for Germany as a recent large scale survey of Deutsche Shell (2006) has confirmed that 52% of the young people with migration background believe in a personal God whereas only 28% of the German students without migration background do. The authors conclude that real religiosity has only a strong backing in the group of students with migration background.

## **Aim and purpose of the study**

In the present volume we present an empirical research study of religion in the lives and schooling of young people in Europe. The participating countries are Russia, Estonia, Norway, Germany, England, The Netherlands, Spain and France. The study is based on a qualitative questionnaire that was distributed to 70 students per country.<sup>4</sup>

The study serves two purposes: For the first time, large-scale qualitative findings on the importance of religion, attitudes towards religious diversity and religious education among European youths are presented, analysed, and integrated into bi-national and Europe-wide comparative studies. The data reflect a wide range of perspectives on religion and religious education, show the plethora of opinions and priorities, and, in spite of all evident variety and difference, reveal a basis of shared fundamental positions among young people throughout Europe. Within the framework of the REDCo research programme the study is also used as an explorative survey in preparation for a quantitative survey. The quantitative survey is based on the domains and outcomes of the qualitative study; it partly takes up its findings and seeks to verify its main results on a broader, quantitative basis.

In order to draw a comprehensive outline of the significance of religion in the overall life of young people we addressed different domains of the individual, social, societal and scholastic significance of religion. The aspect of dialogue and conflict was accorded special attention in this context. We were particularly interested to see what the significance of religion was in communication between young people and whether it gave rise to conflicts of any kind. Through these questions the students were encouraged not only to describe their experiences and existing practices within their schools but to share their views of what might be possible and what should be aimed for in their educational context and wider society.

The questionnaire used incorporated eight main questions, consisting of up to three sub questions.<sup>5</sup> The questions focus on students' individual views and experiences with religion, try to find out about students' experiences of other religions and explore students' opinions on the role of religion in society and in school life in general.

Question 1 dealt with students' associations with the terms 'religion' and 'God' and tried to establish the importance of religion and God respectively in their personal lives. Question 2 aimed to establish the most important sources of information about religion, the ways students encounter religion and how they value these experiences. Question 3 dealt with the issue of whether religion is a topic of conversation with friends or not, what themes related to religion the young people are interested in, and on what occasions such discussions occur.

Question 4 aimed to establish what (if any) experiences students have with their own religion and the religions of others, what kind of experiences with religions are most important for students and what experiences they consider to be good or bad. Question 5 asked for students' own views on the coexistence of different religions. The question sought to ascertain whether students think that people of different religions can live

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4 In some countries there was a possibility to collect more data and/or have (additional) oral interviews next to the written questionnaires. In total almost 1,011 students participated in the qualitative research.

5 In Appendix 1 the English version of the qualitative questionnaire is added as an example.

together in peace or not, what they consider to be the prerequisites of a peaceful coexistence or whether they think such coexistence is possible at all. Question 6 was about the place students would give to religion in school, whether there should be any role for religion, what that role should be and why they consider that role to be appropriate. Question 7 tried to determine which topics related to religion the students consider important to learn about in school. Question 8 dealt with the issue of teachers' religiosity, whether students considered it to be important, and what model of religious education they prefer. Students were asked to express their thoughts about a confessional model where students are taught religious education in separate classes according to their religious affiliation and about a non-confessional model, where students are taught religious education together in the same class irrespective of their religious affiliation or conviction.

### **Methodological approaches and the challenges of a comparative qualitative study**

A study that attempts to establish what teenagers think of religion, its social role, religious plurality and the role of religion in school is in itself a challenge from a methodological point of view. This is even more the case when it extends to eight different European countries and aims to finish with a comparative analysis of the results. Such an endeavour faces difficulties of technical organisation of research, difficulties of developing a questionnaire that fits all contexts, problems in adjusting the pattern of analysis to allow for a subsequent comparison.

The fact that the researchers responsible for the study came from different scientific backgrounds and specialisations in several fields such as religious pedagogy, psychology, anthropology, Islamic studies, theology and sociology was of great benefit for the study. However, it also posed a challenge in that different views of religion and theological, sociological and pedagogical traditions were hard to reconcile when planning and coordinating a study in which more than 1,000 students from different religious, social, ethnic and national backgrounds were questioned on intimate and complex aspects of religion. Conflicting concepts of the nature of religion affected the discussion on suitable questions to explore our research topics. The role accorded to religion and religious education in different school systems needed to be taken into consideration. Diverse views on what the students conceive as belonging to the realm of religion themselves were at stake. Translation problems arose; sometimes, key terms were understood in different ways.

To begin with, though the word religion exists in the languages of all participant researchers in the study, we could not safely assume that it always describes the exact same idea, let alone that the young respondents themselves would share that definition. Ultimately, different, country and context-specific terms might have had to be used to express the same intent. At the stage of translating the questions into English (a foreign language to most participant researchers in the study) a debate on the appropriateness of the chosen terms for the respective projects, and the eventual retranslation of the consensus version into the respective native languages took place. This debate highlighted the complexities of an international research design. International comparative research is by its nature intercultural; this fact became tangible for all of us in the course of our cooperation. The discussions around the development of the questionnaire, the study design, and the comparative analysis could serve as an illustrative example of successful international religious education research.

The pioneering nature of this study also extends to the methodology of international comparison itself. A basic consensus on comparative approaches throughout the REDCo research team is that diverse national and regional contexts need to be accounted for. This *context-sensitive approach* operates on the assumption that different traditions, established practices and political frameworks at the societal macro-level influence the meaning and importance of religion (cf. the analysis of contextual frameworks in the participating countries: Jackson, Miedema, Weisse & Willaime 2007). These contextual conditions affect the meso-level of addressing religion in educational contexts. They also offer convenient anchoring points for individual perspectives on religion. Any comparative approach must thus, in its analysis, even take into account the context of individual interpretations. However, alongside the differences between contexts, their similarities, too, can be regarded as significant in the context of our study. In the case of similar contextual frameworks we have coined the term contextual setting. Following this concept we roughly differentiate between a *plurality-friendly, integrative dialogical setting, a plurality-conscious, but segregated and separating approach to religions*, and a *secularist setting with a tendency to be critical of religion* (cf. Knauth & Körs, in this volume). Nonetheless, our work is underpinned by the assumption that young people throughout the eight European countries included in our research share certain basic perceptions and perspectives. They not only live in separate national contexts, but also in a shared space of common cultural, social and political tradition, economic exchange, shared values and not least shared media. The context model utilised in this study fully takes this dialectic of difference and commonality into account.

The dialectic of different and shared traits found its concrete expression in the methodology of evaluating the data generated. We deliberately chose not to prescribe any single approach or method across all national participant institutions. In refraining from this, the research design team chose to privilege the different national and regional traditions and contexts and their approaches to evaluating qualitative data over a centrally imposed standardisation. Instead it was agreed, by way of a meta-principle, that every project should apply a tested and proven method to generate the data. Further, it was agreed that the data was to be studied with respect to shared and different traits, an approach familiar from Grounded Theory, qualitative-heuristic data analysis and qualitative content analysis. It was agreed this analysis in terms of commonality and difference would relate to the individual variables of gender, religious affiliation, migration background (where appropriate) or social status in order to identify possible shared patterns following religious affiliation, gender or other aspects across national borders.

Context orientation, including the consideration of all particular or shared tendencies, also found expression in the third pillar of our research design. Our comparative approach adopted a *bottom-up* perspective. Analysis started with the individual meaning ascriptions and patterns of young people in specific national contexts. This analysis took into account both individual and school-specific variables. At a second level the data of two countries were compared with each other. This comparison of salient results was carried out between those countries that seemed to be closest to each other with regard to for instance religious diversity and (religious) history. In the final analysis, which was on a European level, the common and divergent traits of individual perspectives, as well as those across countries, were taken into account in full awareness of contextual factors.

### **The process of carrying out the qualitative study**

A first version of the questionnaire consisting of four open questions was discussed at the methodological workshop at Granada in May 2006. This consultation generated several important results for the design of the overall study, extending the questionnaire from four to eight questions and expressly including the dimensions of the personal approach to religion, communication on religious topics inside the peer group, experiences with other religions, the contribution of religions to peaceful coexistence and the significance of religion in the school context. At the same time it was decided to try out the questionnaire design in a pre-test. This took place in the form of oral interviews to establish through on-the-spot reformulations and questions whether the phrasing was appropriate to the mental horizon of the young respondents and which formulations were most suited for inclusion in the final written form. The pre-test was carried out in four of the eight participant countries (Estonia, France, Norway and Germany) in August and September 2006 and was used to optimise the questionnaire design.

During a further meeting of the research group in Tartu, October 2006, the results of the pre-test were presented by *Olga Schihalejev* (Estonia), *Céline Béraud*, *Séverine Mathieu*, *Bérenghère Massignon* (France), *Marie von der Lippe* (Norway), *Dan-Paul Jozsa* and *Thorsten Knauth* (Germany). Based on these results, it was decided to carry out the main study with a standardised qualitative questionnaire of eight open questions. Written interviews were to take place in all eight participant countries. A minimum of respondents was set at 70 per country or region in order to ensure sufficient variation in individual variables such as gender, religion or social background.

A working group, consisting of *Gunther Dietz*, *Markus Friederici*, *Dan-Paul Jozsa*, *Séverine Mathieu*, *Thorsten Knauth*, *Anna Körs* and *Wolfram Weisse* was formed to develop the final version of the questionnaire and to set further coordinates for the study. The four individual items were simplified and clarified as the researchers who carried out the pre-test had the experience that the pre-test version often needed oral explanation or reformulation. The questions on religion in the school were reformulated entirely. Besides these reformulations a statistical survey was added to the questionnaire to ascertain age, gender, religious affiliation or confession, and data on nationality, country of origin of the parents and languages spoken in the family, which could indicate a migration background.

In order to minimise the possibility of mistakes during the interview process, a field guide was written to standardise the written survey-taking as much as possible. Thus, it was agreed that one person was to be present during the survey at all times in order to be able to explain items, provide information on the character of the study, ensure adherence to ethical norms and guarantee anonymity.

The written survey was then carried out in November and December 2006. Guidelines for analysing the data were agreed on in the working group and expanded by the expert social scientists *Markus Friederici* and *Anna Körs* into “*Guidelines for structural analysis*”. This was to provide both a coordinated approach to evaluation and a degree of unity in presenting the findings. As to the agreed guidelines for data analysis it was clear that each project should follow the pattern of a *question-by-question analysis* focusing on similarities and differences. Main patterns of meaning were to be illustrated by significant quotations. As a tool for analysis the working group suggested leading questions for each section of the questionnaire. It was agreed to relate the findings to personal characteristics

of the respondents such as gender, religion and migration background and to investigate the influence of such variables.

A preliminary evaluation by researchers of the national or regional projects was completed by early February. On the basis of these reports, *Anna Körs* and *Markus Friederici* prepared a first comparative analysis at the European level. The regional and preliminary European reports were presented and discussed during a meeting in Melilla on 22–24 February 2007.

“*Guidelines for the revision of the regional reports*” were developed by *Thorsten Knauth* and *Anna Körs*. Within half a year, the preliminary analyses were completed and brought into the form presented here. The regional reports also formed the basis for the so-called bi-contextual analyses. The goal here was to compare data from countries that show certain contextual similarities.

The findings presented in Melilla formed the basis from which to generate the first, as yet preliminary, hypotheses and indicators to be tested in the course of the large quantitative REDCo project study in all eight participant countries.

### **Structure of this volume**

This is the second joint publication of the REDCo research group. Following the first book that presented a historically based insight into the various conceptions of and debates on religion in the school system, this second one now presents empirical foundations. Like all other publications to follow, they are to contribute to the solution of REDCo’s main question: how can religion in education contribute to dialogue and conflict in the experiences and understandings of young people in a rapidly changing Europe?

Without pre-empting the detailed analyses to follow, one central finding can already be mentioned here:

Europe’s religious plurality has filtered into the consciousness of the young generation. They consider school an excellent venue to learn about the wide range of religious and cultural traditions and world-views.

The students surveyed in all eight countries take a balanced perspective. They understand the conflict potential inherent in religion as well as the difficulties that religions have in dealing with each other and that some societies have dealing with religious plurality. Next to the potential of religions for a peaceful cooperation, it also became clear that problems of stereotypes, prejudices and even racism and exclusion have not yet been resolved for young people in Europe. But students also recount positive experiences, often when recalling opportunities for interreligious dialogue both in and outside of school. This gives them hope and trust in the peacemaking potential of religion that can find its expression in harmonious, respectful relations, encounter and dialogue. They desire this peaceful coexistence and welcome everything that can further this goal. It is in this context that they consider the importance of religious education in school.

The present volume follows the methodological design of the survey in its structure. What we present in this volume can be regarded as an example for an intercultural contextual comparative research. Coming from regional context analyses, it proceeds to bi-national comparisons to arrive at a European level. This approach has proven itself fruitful with respect to the results it yields in several respects.

1. The **regional analyses** are conceptualised as contextual *case studies*. Depending on the sampling strategies used, it has been possible to draw conclusions that relate findings to typical features of the local, sometimes even regional or national context. But, in general the studies can be characterised more as close shots of a specific contextual setting than as national surveys. They allow for a sharp analytic view on the features of particular cases. They allow for an insight into the relation between religious socialisation and attitudes and stances towards religion. They also show what students think about other religions and how they evaluate other religions or assess the role of religions for a peaceful living together in society. With regard to the role of religion in school it became evident, that different contextual conditions as well as previous experiences of religion have a decisive impact on views of the students regarding the role of religion in education.
2. In the **second level analyses** a wider perspective has been taken. For this comparison we grouped regions and countries that seemed at first glance to have commonalities. Thus four contextual couples came into being: Estonia and Russia have been grouped together because they are countries of the post-socialist space; Norway and Germany became a couple due to the similar discussions about religious education taking place in both; The Netherlands and England were selected as a pair because of their long-standing self-understanding as multicultural societies; France and Spain were chosen for cross-cultural comparison because of their common history as societies where the predominant religious influence has been the Catholic Church. Against the background of this tentative structure it was left to the analytical competence of the researchers to flag up their foci of comparison and highlight commonalities and differences between the contexts. This procedure turned out to be very fruitful since, as the articles clearly show, unpredicted differences between apparently similar features have been analysed and vice versa: unexpected commonalities have emerged between seemingly different traits. In all cases the findings of the regional analyses have been interpreted against the background of the legal framework but also with regard to topical debates in the relevant pedagogical, sociological and theological discussions. As these bi-lateral analyses are based on findings of contextual case studies it would be misleading to call them bi-national comparisons. The term '*bi-contextual analyses*' is more accurate. However, the value of these comparisons is not diminished, by restricting their validity to the explanatory force of contextual case studies.
3. The same is true for the **European comparison**, which attempts to combine elements from the analyses of individual variables with the overall tendencies mapped out in the regional reports, and interpret them in the light of both context-sensitive factors and varieties established therein. In all fairness it must be conceded that what is being compared is ultimately not data on the student populations of European countries in the abstract, but data generated by students from different religious, cultural, family and individual backgrounds from settings that differ not only by country, but also by region and environment. Nonetheless, they show clear tendencies and afford us a glimpse of the diverse European perspectives on religion, religious pluralism and religion in education.

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*Gunther Dietz, Javier Rosón Lorente & Francisca Ruiz Garzón*

# **Religion and Education in the View of Spanish Youth: The Legacy of Mono-Confessionalism in Times of Religious Pluralisation**

## **1. Introduction: religion and education in contemporary Spain**

Religious education is a persistently ‘hot topic’ in contemporary Spain. Astonishingly, however, the ultimate target and supposed beneficiary of religious education, Spanish youth, has never been consulted about their views, opinions and perceptions on religion or on learning about religion at school. The following analysis of qualitative questionnaire data, designed and collected in the frame of the comparative REDCo project<sup>1</sup>, therefore presents a first and still rather exploratory approach to young people’s attitudes towards and experiences with religious education.

As will be shown in detail below, the views reported in different Spanish cities by both Christian Catholic and Muslim young people, who are from both native and immigrant background, often reflect the current debate. Different and opposing positions regarding religious education are the topic of lively discussion on a nearly daily basis in Spanish mass media and politics. In the course of post-dictatorship secularisation and democratisation, step by step the Catholic Church has been forced to give up its monopoly on education in general and religious instruction in particular. Although nominally Catholic, majority Spanish society tends to be sharply divided with regard to the issue of religion in education (Dietz, 2007): more conservative and church-attending parents approve the still overwhelming presence of Catholic teachers trained and chosen by the Catholic Church who teach (confessional Catholic) religion in both public and confessional primary and secondary schools, more liberal or progressive parents reject this ‘intrusion’ of the church as reminiscent of ‘national Catholicism’ and favour a strict state-church separation such as the French *laïcité* model.

This bipolar conflict has turned more complex only recently, when two long lasting traditions are being challenged by the increasing presence of Muslim (particularly Maghrebien) as well as Protestant (increasingly Latin American) immigrants: firstly, the self-perception of Spanish society as being homogeneous – Catholic, though scarcely practicing – in religious terms, and, secondly, the close interrelation and frequent overlapping between the Catholic Church as an institution and the Spanish nation state as another institution (Moreras, 2005). It is particularly the Muslim community which – legally backed by the Spanish Constitution and the Concordat-like agreements signed in the nineties between the Spanish state and the non-Catholic community representatives – has

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been claiming equal treatment and access to public schools (Tarrés Chamorro et al., 2007). This pluralisation of confessional religious education at school, which is currently being implemented in several pilot primary schools in districts with high percentages of Muslim students, meets a strong resistance not only from the Catholic Church, but also from those who struggle for a completely laic solution. Therefore, the current Socialist government has just introduced a new, non-confessional subject, 'citizenship education', aimed not at substituting, but at supplementing current confessional Catholic religious education with the teaching of "non-religious, universal values", which will be compulsory during one year in primary and two years in secondary education (Cortina, 2006).

Despite these ongoing political and media debates, certain educational features have persisted since the Franco regime. It is particularly the existence of a mixed, three-fold school system which reflects the deeply rooted tradition of transferring educational competences to the Catholic Church. From pre-primary to pre-university (*bachillerato*) levels, there are three school types: (1) public schools, which are originally owned and run by the central state, but which in ever more regions are now being transferred to the autonomous communities' governments, (2) so-called *escuelas concertadas*, private schools which are mostly owned and run by Church institutions, congregations or orders, but which are nearly completely subsidised by the state or the region, and (3) completely private schools owned by co-operatives or by private enterprises, which are not subsidised by any public resources. While these latter, completely private schools only reach a tiny minority of students, about 1.7 million students attend subsidised Catholic schools, representing approximately 25.5% of all Spanish students attending compulsory educational levels (Dietz, 2007).

The strong presence of the Catholic Church is, however, not limited to these confessional schools; even public schools show an overt presence of Catholic religious symbols, liturgical traditions, practices and feasts. Besides, in all public schools, Catholic religious education is plainly and autonomously designed, organised and offered by the Spanish Conference of Bishops' Commission for Education and Catechesis. Catholic religious education is still chosen by a huge majority of students, but the percentage of involvement has constantly diminishing over recent years: in primary education, it has decreased from 81% to 75% of all students, and in secondary education, Catholic religious education only reaches 53% of all students (Dietz, 2007).

The content and teaching methods of Catholic religious education have not been affected by the broader educational reforms. Since 1992, on the basis of a document elaborated by the Bishops' Commission for Education and accepted without any modification by the Spanish Ministry of Education, Catholic religious education is taught in the whole country according to the same curriculum and following very similar, officially approved text books. Emphasis is placed on the comprehensive knowledge of the Old and New Testament, but particularly of Church traditions, liturgy and rites. Inter-religious contents are not included in the official curriculum, but are often addressed by teachers on their own.

Islamic religious education, by contrast, has only been taught through pilot projects in selected public primary schools. The most far-reaching experience with Islamic religious education has been developed in the Spanish enclaves in northern Africa, Ceuta and Melilla. As in these cities nearly half of all students are Muslims, and a much higher

percentage of them face problems of school failure than in the case of Catholic students, the local school authorities had to concede equal treatment to the Muslim religious communities much earlier. Islamic instruction was accordingly introduced for the first time in the nineties and, in both cities more regular Islamic religious education classes started in 2002, when the Spanish state contracted 20 teachers (Morera, 2005). In mainland Spain, it was only after the March 11<sup>th</sup> bombings in Madrid that the newly elected Spanish government suddenly perceived the discrimination suffered by Muslim communities with regard to Catholic privileges: the central government quickly promised to contract 74 Islamic religious education teachers, who were supposed to start teaching in selected primary schools in Madrid, Catalonia and Andalusia in the 2005–2006 school year; in the end only 17 new teachers have been hired – together with the twenty teachers already serving in Ceuta and Melilla schools –, mostly in Andalusia (Dietz, 2007; Tarrés Chamorro et al., 2007). Since September 2005, Islamic religious education is thus being offered by teachers chosen by the Islamic Commission, who teach in certain public primary schools in Andalusia, Ceuta, Melilla, Madrid and Catalonia for those students whose parents are interested. The language of instruction is Spanish, while Arabic is used for those contents that are directly related to the Qur'an.

Reflecting the typology outlined above of public vs. confessional schools as well as the division of students into those attending Catholic religious education, those who have participated in pilot projects of Islamic religious education and those who have no experience at all with religious education at school, our qualitative study has been carried out in a variety of different school settings in order to be able to compare and to contrast the accordingly diverse experiences and attitudes of young people towards religion and education.

## **2. The setting: types of schools and classes studied**

When applying the questionnaire in Spain, for practical as well as empirical reasons we decided to focus on those sites where we are conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the framework of our local REDCo project. Therefore, the written questionnaire has been distributed in secondary education schools in three regions or 'Autonomous Communities' of Spain: in Andalusia, Murcia and Melilla (for details, cf. below). The choice of these regions is due to the fact that it allowed us to diversify the sample internally according to different criteria:

- urban (Granada and Melilla) vs. rural contexts (Murcia),
- emerging (Murcia) vs. established (Granada) region of immigration,
- strong tradition of mono-religious Catholic presence (Granada and Murcia) vs. long existing religious diversity (Melilla),
- different acquaintance with non-Catholic, i.e. Islamic religious education (still non-existent in primary education in Murcia, recently introduced for this level in Granada and already practiced since the nineties in Melilla).

In broad terms, the data collected in the rural and urban, public and private schools on the Iberian Peninsula reflect typical features and trends of contemporary Spanish society, both with regard to gender, social class and religious belief. The Melilla data, on the other hand, are exceptional in the sense that they do not reflect the overall Spanish situation,

basically because autochthonous Spanish Muslims are nearly nonexistent in mainland Spain. Nevertheless, for the central issues of this project the situation in Melilla constitutes – for good or for bad – a ‘social laboratory’ of future Spanish multi-faith society, which is why we included such a large ‘extreme group’ sample from this population.

**Table 1: Details of questionnaire coding and interviewee features**

City & School	Questionnaire running number	Gender & Religion
<b>a</b> = Granada Catholic confes. school	<b>01–21</b> = Murcia	<b>ch</b> = Christian
<b>b</b> = Granada public urban school	<b>22–81</b> = Granada	<b>mu</b> = Muslim
<b>c</b> = Granada public semi-urban school	<b>82–113</b> = Melilla	<b>nr</b> = no religion
<b>d</b> = Murcia public rural school	<b>01–21</b> = MU public rural school	<b>me</b> = <i>métis</i>
<b>e</b> = Melilla mixed public school	<b>22–45</b> = GR public semi-urban school	<b>f</b> = female
<b>f</b> = Melilla Muslim maj. public school	<b>46–77</b> = GR Catholic confes. school	<b>m</b> = male
	<b>78–81</b> = GR public urban school	
	<b>82, 83, 88</b> = ME mixed publ. urban school	
	<b>84–87</b> = ME Muslim maj. publ. urban school	
	<b>89–113</b> = ME Catholic maj. publ. urban school	

As to the interviewed students’ experience with religious education, in the case of Granada and Murcia, 95% of all interviewees are currently attending Catholic religious education classes, which are given during one or two hours per week. The remaining 5% are Muslim students, who do not attend any religious education classes, as they are not offered in secondary education. Currently, in the first grade of secondary education one weekly hour of *religious education* is given, in second grade two hours are given, in third grade one hour is given and in fourth grade one hour of religious education and one hour of *ethics* is offered. These classes are offered inside the normal classroom for all those students whose parents chose the *confessional Catholic religious education* option. Those whose parents chose another confessional religious education option or the ‘alternative to religion’ option, are taken out of their normal classroom, for other “guided study activities”, mainly homework. The percentage of students attending these activities instead of (Catholic) religious education varies from only 30% – in the case of the rural Murcia school – to more than 50% in the case of the public school in urban Granada. The confessional Catholic private school is officially obliged to offer alternatives to religious education, but the percentage of students enrolling in non-religious education classes is much lower.

In the case of Melilla, either Catholic or Islamic religious education is currently offered in the primary school level, but in secondary education only Catholic religious education remains, apart from the ‘non-religious alternative’. Nevertheless, a huge majority among

the Muslim students interviewed in this study have never attended Islamic religious education at all, as this variant has been only recently introduced in selected primary schools. Catholic students, on the other hand, have all attended religious education classes in both primary and secondary level education.

As to the setting of the data collection, the questionnaires have been distributed and filled in inside the students' respective classrooms. This has been done mostly during the religious education class, but also during the 'alternative to religious education class', in order to reach non-believers and non-Catholics, as well.

The answers provided by the students have been rather short, oral interviews would certainly have provided more information. Nevertheless, their written answers have been precise and nearly always to the point. Only in one instance, some respondents have misunderstood a phrasing of question: in question 7, asking "Should there be a place for religion at school?", some students (e.g. respondent "m-ch-7"<sup>2</sup>) understood a "built place", a building or chapel for religious education classes. However, in the large majority of answers this problem did not arise, so in all other questionnaires and questions, the quality of the data is very good.

For purposes of data analysis, and in order to take account of the rather different demographic and multi-religious composition of Melilla with regard to Murcia and Granada, we will here distinguish between the questionnaires from the Iberian Peninsula (mainland Spain, i.e. in our case Murcia and Granada) and those from the north African Spanish enclave city of Melilla. Therefore, we are here providing the statistical table of the respondents' profile separately for each of the two contexts.

### **The interviewed youngsters: the Spanish mainland sample**

Due to the diverse age composition of the classes interviewed, only 66.66% of all distributed questionnaires were filled in by students whose age ranges from 14 to 16 years, who were attending Catholic religious education classes (cf. Table 2). Reflecting broadly the general male/female divide in this age group in secondary education, 65.43% of all interviewees are women. A third of the students are from a "private" (but publicly recognised and subsidised) Catholic confessional school in Granada, while the other two thirds of students attend Catholic religious education in public schools, one in Murcia and one in Granada. Only four Muslim students of Moroccan origin have participated in the mainland Spanish questionnaires, so the large majority (88.88%) holds Spanish citizenship, is monolingual in Spanish and comes from a Christian-Catholic background.

In this sample, 8.64% of all respondents are immigrants, but 6.25% come from traditionally Catholic countries in Latin America or southern Europe. Thus, only 2.40% were born in a country whose official religion is not Catholicism.

Socio-demographically speaking, and in order to reflect the rapid changes occurring in Spanish demography and in urban-rural relations, we first chose a school from a quickly transforming and economically vibrant rural region.

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2 The codes used for each questionnaire and the corresponding features of the interviewee are detailed and explained in Table 1.