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Baseline Study  
Synopsis and conclusion

IERS Project. *Intercultural Education through Religious Studies*

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## **1. Introduction**

The IESR baseline study of religion education maps and analyses teaching (about) religion in the official curricula for public upper-secondary schools. Be it in the shape of a time-tabled religion education (RE) (confessional or non-confessional) or as a dimension in other school subjects. Apart from looking at the five participating countries: Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, it also highlights the most important trans-national European recommendations for teaching about religion in schools.

## **2. European projects and recommendations**

Supra-national processes such as globalization, pluralization and migration are a challenge to Europe and its nation-states. Some challenges are met, on the European supra-national political level, with educational projects and recommendations, be it from e.g. the Council of Europe, OSCE or the European Commission, and be it with a focus on e.g. 'citizenship education', 'intercultural education', 'inter-religious dialogue', - or religion education. Common to these recommendations about religion education is a perceived need to ensure that educational institutions provide teaching *about* different religions (and non-religious world-views) in a balanced, impartial and pluralistic way. The main common aims are to contribute to the learner's capability for active citizenship and tolerance as well as intercultural and inter-religious dialogue in order to strengthen and secure social cohesion, democracy and human rights. However, differences and nuances can also be detected, not least when it comes to the question if this kind of teaching should primarily or solely aim at learning *about* religion from the neutral point of view of the study of religions or whether it should include learning *from* religions with regard to the existential and/or spiritual-religious formation of the pupils.

## **3. RE and religion-related topics in upper-secondary schools in European countries**

As pointed out by many scholars, diversity is great when it comes to religion education in the public school systems of Europe. Inside the national systems, a great variety can also be detected, e.g. between the various German 'Länder' and between primary and upper-secondary school. With certain reservations, though, four main models or categories may be used to map the field: 1) No state-guaranteed time-tabled RE, confessional or not, 2) state-guaranteed, optional, time-tabled confessional (or 'separative') RE, with or without an alternative subject like e.g. 'Ethics' or 'Values', 3) state-guaranteed time-tabled non-confessional (or

'integrative') RE with or without a possibility for opting out, and 4) dimensional religion education, i.e. teaching about religion only as a part of other school subjects like history, art, literature etc. (Alberts 2007, Jensen 2005, Schreiner 2002, Willaime 2007). Numbers 2-4 of these models are played out in the official curricula for upper-secondary public schools in Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain.

### 3.1 Denmark

The Danish Constitution, § 4, makes the Evangelical-Lutheran Church the Established Church of Denmark, to be supported by the state. However, this does not have legal consequences for RE in public schools, and the Constitution does not hold any information as regards RE. Christianity is allotted more time in the various RE subjects than any other religion, and this but also other things give it a special and privileged status, especially in primary and lower-secondary school. RE in Denmark, nevertheless, is an example of state-guaranteed non-confessional, integrative RE.

In two types of the school-programs offered at the level of upper-secondary school, namely *Gymnasium* (STX) and *Higher Preparatory Examination* (HF), RE is a compulsory subject closely connected to the academic study of religions. All RE teachers at this level are educated to a MA level at one of the three Danish university departments for the Study of Religions. In *STX* RE is called *Religion* and it is timetabled with three lessons per week for one year, ending with an oral exam. At HF *Religion* is a part of a package of subjects called 'Cultural and Social Sciences' with one exam. Here *Religion*, together with *History* and *Social Science* is supposed to contribute with knowledge and skills built around cross-disciplinary themes. In HF and at STX it is also possible to choose a B-level elective in *Religion*. Despite differences, RE in both STX and HF aims at providing methods and theories pertaining to the academic study of religions and scientifically based knowledge about religion, religious and non-religious discourses about religion and religions, and about the diversity of and within religions as well as about issues related to religions in society. The subjects aim at contributing to the students *Allgemeinbildung* and social formation by providing them with knowledge and analytical-critical skills. The major religions of the world play a key role in the curriculum as does the theories and methods of the academic study of religions, e.g. history, phenomenology and sociology of religion theories and methods.

### 3.2 Italy

The Italian Constitution Article 7 clearly distinguishes between state and religion (in casu the Catholic Church), making each of the two independent and sovereign in its own right and domain. Italy can thus be classified as 'secular' (*laicità*) with regard to Article 7. However, with regard to RE in public schools, the relation between the secular state and the Catholic church is one of cooperation and RE in Italy can be classified as a kind of state-guaranteed confessional and separative RE. A special agreement between the Catholic Church and the Ministry of Education ensures that *Insegnamento della religione cattolica* (IRC) is provided in the normal curricula in pre-, primary-, secondary- and upper-secondary school as an optional subject. As an alternative, pupils can choose between having specific didactical activities, individual study activities or they may choose not to attend school during the teaching of IRC. Some schools, however, have organized non-confessional courses on history of religions. State upper-secondary education is offered by the *Licei* (the general path), divided in six school-types. IRC teachers in *Licei* are authorized by the ecclesiastical authorities and needs qualifications, for example a degree in theology or a diploma issued by a study of religions institute recognized by the Church.

The profile, overall aims and core contents in the curricula for the different *Licei* centres on transmitting the teachings of the Catholic Church with a focus on its dogmatic and ethical doctrines, Church history, as well as on the impact and contribution of the Catholic Church and Christianity on individual identity formation, social relations and the culture and history of Europe and the world. IRC shall thus contribute to the student's personal religious-spiritual identity formation as well as to social-ethical-civic formation, including inter-religious and intercultural dialogue. Knowledge of 'other religions' and 'system of meanings' is thus also to be included in the teaching. Religion-related topics and themes can be found in some of the other subjects primarily aiming at providing the students with historical-cultural knowledge about different religions and religious aspects in a perspective of a European culture and history.

### 3.3 Germany

The German Constitution separates state and religion (church), yet at the same time guarantees that confessional religious education ('Religionsunterricht') shall be offered as a regular though optional school subject in state schools. Several alternative subjects are offered, depending on the 'Bundesland' in question, e.g. 'Ethik' and 'Werte und Normen'. Responsibility for the subject is divided between the Bundesrepublik and the Länder, and there are thus significant differences from one 'Bundesland' to the other. In some Ländern the confessional *Religionsunterricht*

includes more than one religion and aims at a combination of religious instruction with learning *about* religions, and in quite a few Ländern there is a system of 'multi-confessional' RE.

This is the case in Bavaria, where Catholic, Evangelical-Lutheran, (Christian) Orthodox, Jewish, Old-Catholic and Islamic confessional RE and the alternative 'Ethik' are offered in the upper-secondary gymnasium. At the same time, in the law on education law and constitution of Bavaria, the Christian Churches and Christian tradition are mentioned as important foundations of education and 'Bildung' in general. A look at the curriculum for the different confessional RE types in Bavaria shows several common features. RE is meant to familiarize the pupils with the dogmatics, rituals and history of the church/religion in question and show its relevance for modern life and society and for the life and identity of the pupils. RE also aims at the student's personal religious-spiritual identity formation and realization of a so-called 'religious dimension' as a fundamental dimension of all human life and foundation of true values and morals. Other religions are also to be taught in order to develop the student's ability to make the right personal choices in a world with many possible worldviews. The alternative 'Ethik' includes learning about different religions but also aims at contributing to the student's personal and societal moral formation and ethical competences. Religions and religions-related topics are included in the curriculum for some of the other subjects in the Gymnasium, particularly History, with a focus on historical-cultural knowledge including religious-related conflicts.

### 3.4 Spain

The Catholic Church has played a highly important role in Spanish history, in relation to the state, in relation to society at large, *and* in relation to education in public and private state or state funded schools. During the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, the privileged position of the Catholic Church was crowned with a 1953 Agreement (Concordat) between the Spanish state and the Holy See. Education was "developed on the basis of Catholic dogma and religious teaching was imparted in all schools, public, or private, and at all levels, even at the university". After the death of Franco in 1975 things changed but as regards RE, they did not change that much. Moral education continued to be a battleground, and so did RE, and the Catholic Church is still exercising its strong influence.

The 1978 Spanish Constitution, with the additional 1980 law on freedom of religion, and the 1979 Agreements between the Spanish State and the Vatican (Holy See), constitute the two basic pillars also in regard to RE. The state in principle is secular,

and the state guarantees freedom of religion (§ 16)<sup>1</sup> and the right to education, and education (§ 27) "shall aim at the full development of the human personality with due respect for democratic principles of coexistence and the fundamental rights and freedoms". At the same time though, this right to education also secures the right of all parents to "obtain for their children a religious and moral instruction which is coherent with their own convictions" (§ 27.3), and with the 1979 Agreements between the state and the Holy See this in fact gives the Catholic Church a privileged position (the privileges of the Church being written into the 1979 Agreement) in regard to education: Every school in every Spanish school in every more or less otherwise autonomous region must offer *confessional* RE as a school subject. Due to its confessional character it must be *optional* but it *must* be there, and it is the Catholic Church (Spanish Episcopal Conference), like in Germany, that decides and provides the contents (curriculum) and the teachers and their education. But the state pays for it all.

The ideological and political struggles about education, including moral and religious education, also show in the fact that almost every government since Franco has introduced its own new educational system and law. At the moment Spain is again in between two laws, the L.O.E. and the L.O.M.C.E. The confessional RE however is to be offered in both the old and the new one, but contents and conditions as regards the alternatives are not finalized in regard to the new system, L.O.M.C.E. In the old one, L.O.E. the alternative was 'History and Culture of Religions' - the only subject in the Spanish public school reflecting some of the ingredients and approaches in non-confessional integrative RE in other countries. In the new system it seems that an alternative called Civil and Social Values or Ethical Values is to be taught.

### 3.5 France

The French Constitution declares France a secular (*laïque*), democratic and social Republic. A consequence of *laïcité* so far has been the omission of a time-tabled religion education (RE) as a subject in its own in the public school system. In the last twenty years, however, there has been a growing political, professional and public focus on the necessity to give teaching about 'religious matters' ('faits religieux') a higher profile in the school, and the teaching about religious matters have been introduced into the curriculum of various school subjects, especially History. In upper-secondary school it is mainly when dealing with Antiquity or the medieval period, that the curriculum and guidelines for the various subjects include or make

room for a study of religious traditions and matters. When dealing with the centuries after the Middle Ages, religious issues are mostly connected to cultural-political discussions, conflicts or war. But how and to what extent religious matters are included in History or other disciplines also depends on the choices made by the teacher. In some of the curricula or guidelines it is possible to choose religious matters, for example in the subject 'Civil, juridical and social education' where discussions about laïcité and religion can be included, or in Philosophy, where religious philosophical thinkers or philosophical discussions related to the concept of religion may be taught. In general, the approach to religious traditions and matters can be characterized as analytical-critical, stressing the need of historical-cultural contextualization and the distinction between an insider and outsider perspective on religion(s). A state supported program for in-service training of teachers in regard to teaching about religion in a professional scientifically based way has been located with the IESR - Institut européen en sciences des religions.

## **Concluding remarks**

As is evident from the base line study on the situation as regards religion education (RE) in the countries participating in the IESR, it is but Denmark that has developed a study-of-religions based timetabled RE. And, even in Denmark this is so primarily in upper-secondary school.

As for the other countries, the dominating trend is still to have confessional/religious RE based upon the teachings of the religion/church in charge of the teaching, the contents and most often also the training of the teachers. However, in all countries, this has long ago become an option, in the name of freedom of religion. Moreover, the need to teach about other religions than the one of the pupils and their parents is evident, and it does color the curricula in various ways. But, the teachers are not very well trained for teaching about religions other than their own. In all countries with confessional religion education, the state now has to also find ways to offer confessional RE linked to other religions than the majority Christian religion. RE has thus to a certain degree become multi-confessional. In addition to this, the rule is that an alternative to the confessional RE is offered (Ethics, Values, or the like) but this subject does not entail much about religion.

In France, teaching about religion(s) is as is the case in Denmark for upper-secondary school, strictly study-of-religions based (and thus 'secular' rather than religious RE) but in France teaching about religion takes place as a dimension within other school subjects, not least History.

Consequently, the IERS project is an important way for the EU to help promote the implementation of various recommendations for a secular, objective, study-of-religions based religion education to help foster mutual understanding and tolerance.

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