

## **Religion, Education, Dialogue and Conflict: Editorial Introduction**

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Especially in the years following the events of 9/11, 2001 in the USA, religion has become a major topic of public debate globally. In academic literature, there has been a growth in writing about the place of religion in the public sphere (eg Habermas 2006) and in policy development, at European and wider international levels, there has been close attention to education about religions and beliefs in schools. The Council of Europe completed its first ever project on the religious dimension of intercultural education, which includes a Recommendation by the Committee of Ministers – the Foreign Ministers of the 47 member states – that all young Europeans should learn about religious diversity (Council of Europe 2008). The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the largest security organisation in the world, published the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, again arguing that education about the diversity of religions and beliefs in society should be a part of everyone's general education (OSCE 2007). The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations programme makes a similar recommendation through its education about religions and beliefs website ([www.aocerb.org](http://www.aocerb.org)).

Consistent with this change in mood and policy, the European Commission funded a major project on religion and education in schools between 2006 and 2009 through its Framework Six programme. The full title of the project is 'Religion in Education: a Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries?' Known by its acronym REDCo, the project collected the views of adolescents from eight European countries on teaching and learning about religious diversity in schools. The REDCo project brought together educational researchers from universities in Germany, England, Norway, Estonia, France, Spain, the Russian Federation and the Netherlands. Meeting together regularly in each other's countries, the REDCo project team designed both qualitative (Knauth *et al.* 2008) and quantitative (Valk *et al.* 2009) studies and a classroom interaction study (ter Avest *et al.* 2009), all conducted by each national group in its own setting. In addition, there was a study of teachers from six of the countries (van der Want *et al.* 2009), plus a number of related studies conducted by particular groups (Ipgrave, Jackson and O'Grady 2009; Alvarez Veinguer *et al.* 2009).

Co-ordinated by Professor Wolfram Weisse of the University of Hamburg, the REDCo project team worked to a tight timetable of research design, fieldwork, data analysis and

report writing. The project spawned a new European book series entitled *Religious Diversity and Education in Europe*, published in Germany by Waxmann (<http://www.waxmann.com/?id=21&cHash=1&reihe=1862-9547>). At the time of writing, 19 books have been published in the series, nine of them specifically reporting research related to the REDCo project, the first an overview of the place of religious education within the educational systems of the participating countries (Jackson *et al.* 2007), the last an account of the Estonian research findings (Schihalejev 2010). The present publication offers a cross-section of the project's work, with new, specially written, contributions from authors in all eight of the REDCo countries. It thus provides an introduction to the wide-ranging work of the REDCo project as a whole.

The contributions are as follows. Wolfram Weisse provides an overview of the project, including his own personal retrospective reflections. The next four contributions provide examples of national studies. Marie von der Lippe from the Norwegian team, based at the University of Stavanger, focuses on Norwegian teenagers' discourse about Islam and Muslims, showing that young people need help from teachers in formulating their criticisms of dominant media discourses and in marshalling their own more independent ideas. The Spanish team from the University of Granada give a picture of the attitudes and experiences of young Spaniards in relation to religious diversity at school. Bérengère Massignon, from the French group at the Sorbonne in Paris, reports French teenagers' understanding of the concept of *laïcité*. Massignon illustrates how French secondary pupils share a *laïcité* of proximity – of being neighbours, of living together in community – which is different from the state interpretation and also from how the term is used in ideological debates in France. Pupils' view of *laïcité* is consistent with the idea of living together tolerantly and respectfully in a pluralist society, expecting equal treatment of different religions, and being open to dialogue with those who hold different views. Joyce Miller and Ursula McKenna, from the English team based at the University of Warwick, draw on two studies in order to compare and contrast the views of pupils and teachers in a school with a high population of Muslim students and a high number of non-Muslim staff.

The following four studies illustrate various methodological approaches and issues relating to the REDCo project. In the initial design of the project, Wolfram Weisse employed the interpretive approach (Jackson 1997) as a theoretical and methodological stimulus. My own contribution charts the use of the interpretive approach in the REDCo project, selecting some examples for discussion and illustrating some adaptations and developments to the approach.

Thorsten Knauth and Anna Körs, from the Hamburg section of the German team, undertake a meta-analysis of the data collected by project partners for the qualitative study (Knauth *et al.* 2008). They take care to point out that national comparisons are not being made. Rather, particular contextual settings for religious education in the different countries, each shaped by national and regional traditions and structures, are being compared. The authors concentrate on four main issues, namely, the role of religion in school, the content of learning, the teacher's religiosity and learning models. Sean Neill from the Warwick group and Olga Schihalejev, from Estonia, illustrate the use of structural modelling techniques in exemplifying influences on English and Estonian students' views on religions and education. Judith Everington from the Warwick team and Ina ter Avest, Cok Bakker and Anna van der Want, from the Dutch group based at the VU University in Amsterdam and Utrecht University, summarise and outline the methodology of their study of religious education teachers' biographies conducted in six of the eight REDCo countries.

The final two contributions look back in a reflexive way at different aspects of the REDCO project. Fedor Kozyrev, from the Russian team, based in St Petersburg, reflects on the complex mixed methods methodology of the REDCo project. Recognizing the limitations of all research methods, and the inter-influence of research reports, he argues for the use of hermeneutical methods in interpreting mixed methods results, seeing this process as more like history or literary criticism than hard science. Revisiting data, in his view, should be seen as re-reading the story for a better interpretation. His re-reading of his own research studies in St Petersburg leads to his view that teaching which provides students with encounters with a plurality of interpretations of subjective knowledge, in dialogue with reflections on their own presuppositions, is likely to promote the development of both their critical thinking, and their capacity for impartiality. Finally, Gerdien Bertram-Troost, from the Amsterdam group, reflects retrospectively on ways in which, in a fast-moving project working to tight deadlines, longer and more focused conceptual preparation could have improved the quality of the quantitative questionnaire.

The contributions show the richness of the project and give a hint of the high volume of material produced by the REDCo researchers. The detail can be read in the volumes produced in the *Religious Diversity and Education in Europe* series. However, the project team were committed to disseminating research findings to potential user groups, including politicians, policy makers, teacher trainers and teachers. The presentations given at the European

Parliament in December 2009, while acknowledging contextual differences between and within the participant countries, attempt a generic summary of project findings. These include the following:

- Students wish for peaceful coexistence across differences, and believe this to be possible
- For students peaceful coexistence depends on knowledge about each other's religions and worldviews and sharing common interests as well as doing things together
- Students who learn about religious diversity in school are more willing to have conversations about religions/beliefs with students of other backgrounds than those who do not
- Students wish to avoid conflict: some of the religiously committed students feel vulnerable
- Students want learning to take place in a safe classroom environment where there are agreed procedures for expression and discussion
- Most students would like the state-funded school to be a place for learning *about* different religions/worldviews, rather than for instruction *into* a particular religion/worldview

The various presentations at the European Parliament, plus summaries of findings, can be read at <http://www.redco.uni-hamburg.de/web/3480/4176/index.html>

Dissemination of the REDCo Project continues and the project team's thanks go especially to Claudia Lenz and her colleagues at the Council of Europe-related European Wergeland Centre, based in Oslo, who have organised dissemination workshops and conferences in Austria, Norway and Germany during 2010. A report on these activities can be read at <http://www.theewc.org> Dissemination work shows a particular synergy between the findings of the REDCo project and the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2008) and there is scope for developing materials and training programmes drawing on the REDCo findings and the Ministerial Recommendation.

Looking back, high points of the project include the wonderful educational and cultural experience of working in one another's countries and universities, resulting in the

development of an international research community of friends and colleagues; reporting project findings at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and at the European Parliament in Brussels; and sharing in the success of younger researchers who completed their PhDs during or soon after the completion of the project. The building of new capacity in European RE research has been a very important aspect of the project and a significant factor in the development of *collaborative* religious education research in Europe. The lowest point was the illness and death of the co-ordinator of the Estonian branch of the project and of the project's quantitative research. Dr Pille Valk died from cancer in September 2009, having managed to complete the editing of the quantitative book (Valk *et al.* 2009). Many REDCo researchers took part in a tribute to her at the University of Hamburg in November 2009, and attended the memorial conference held in her honour at the University of Tartu in September 2010. This publication is dedicated by all the contributors to Pille Valk's memory.

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