

THE ALTERNATIVE

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Dear Reader,

As is our custom, we devote the first issue of the year to religious education. In this case, we provide a survey of four countries plus an additional essay on transcending the nation state. From this survey it is immediately evident how different each country is. There is not even the beginning of international agreement on language to discuss the question. The commonality is the utterly inadequate educational system that each country has for dealing with its present religious situation. In each country there is a slender thread of experimentation and discussion about the actual problems but the overall language reflects a pre-World War II world.

The countries described are not chosen because of their backwardness. On the contrary, they are four of the European countries noted for their progressive thought and admirable educational systems. It is doubtful that there is a single country in the world that provides what might be a model for the rest of the world. Part of the problem is that the nation state can itself be an obstacle in religious education rather than the organizer of resources to address the question.

As the events of September 11 have helped to reveal, the main conflict in the world is not between nations, and it cannot be solved by a nation's military, however powerful. The conflict, besides being economic, is deeply religious. Unless religious forces can be channeled into life-giving activities and respect for others, they will turn deadly. This is not just a problem for Islam but for Christianity as well. The United States has a chance to develop religious education that avoids the traps that Europe and Asia are heirs to.

The United States up to now has been reluctant to engage in inter-religious dialogue within its own borders or to grapple with religions abroad. During the Iranian hostage-taking in 1979, it was said that everyone in the government is speed-reading the Qur'an. Two decades later, with 6 million Muslims in our midst, the country's leaders remain abysmally ignorant of Islam. There would seem a faint chance that the United States, working with the United Nations, will lead a worldwide religious conversation across national boundaries, but the future of world peace may

depend on that.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN GERMANY

By Peter Schreiner

The place of religious education in the German educational system is influenced by some general characteristics of Germany. The composition of the religious landscape shows that one-third of the population belong to a Protestant church and one-third belong to the Catholic church. There are a significant number of Muslims and minorities from other religions.

The relationship of church and state is founded on a basic separation, coupled with elements of association and cooperation. Germany is a federation of 16 states. The Basic Law, passed in 1949, enshrines the principles which govern Germany as a republic and defines the relationship between federal and state governments.

The Basic Law gives the prime responsibility for education to the individual states. The German educational system is decentralized and there is no uniform model for an individual state to follow. However, states do cooperate with one another, and even set up nation-wide bodies independent of the federal government to facilitate cooperation, notably the standing conference of the State Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs.

The Basic Law provides the conditions for religious education in public schools. Two articles form the basis for the shape of religious education. According to Article 4, the basic right of freedom of religion and world view is a decisive element of the democratic state. The state has to be neutral in terms of religion and world view. At the same time, it is the task of the state to provide space for the expression of religion and religious communities. In Article 7, chapter 3, religious education is defined as an ordinary school subject that is to be taught in accordance with the principles of the religious communities. This means that the provision for religious education is a task of the state just as it is for any other ordinary subject of the public school.

On the other hand, the religious bodies in most states are responsible for the attainment targets and the content of teaching, for certification of religious education teachers and for the textbooks; in some states the responsibility for religious education is shared. In this sense religious education is organized in cooperation between the state and the religious

communities. This does not affect the principle that all school education is subject to the states=authority, and also that religious education has to follow the fundamental school aims according to the general school laws.

In the compulsory schools of most states religious education is mainly taught as Roman Catholic or Protestant religious education, that is, in primary schools and all branches of secondary education including vocational training schools. According to the Basic Law religious education is not limited to the main Christian denominations. In the states of Bavaria, Lower Saxony and North Rhine Westphalia, Orthodox Christianity is also an ordinary school subject for those pupils who are members of a registered Orthodox church. In several states there is a provision for Islamic instruction as part of a voluntary subject aimed to teach the mother tongue to the pupils.

Pupils have the right to opt out from religious education. This must be declared formally in writing by their parents (for pupils under the age of 14) or by themselves. Teachers have to follow the officially agreed upon religious education syllabuses. They have the right to refuse to teach religious education for reasons of conscience. In many states an alternative subject has been implemented with different names (e.g. practical philosophy, philosophy with children, values and norms). Those pupils who opt out from religious education have to take part in the substitute subject.

Religious education teacher training in Germany is as for any other school subject organized in two phases. The first phase is predominantly academic and takes place at a university or an equivalent institution, such as a teacher college. This phase lasts between three and five years; in general, the older the pupils to be taught the longer the training. At the end of this phase students take the first state examination. Those who pass are admitted to the second phase, which is predominantly practical, with emphasis on actual teaching experience. This phase lasts up to two years and ends with the second state examination. Religious education teachers have to be acknowledged by the churches, either with *Avocatio* by the Protestant church or *Amissio canonica* by the Catholic church..

The need today for inter-religious learning is a challenge and a necessity for any kind of religious education. This is due to an increasing number of pupils with different religious backgrounds, but also due to the

need for every pupil to deal with the existing religious pluralism in society.
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC
By Ondrej Sobeslavsky

The new school law, passed shortly after 1989, forbids all political action in schools. It regulates organizational questions, but does not make any specifications about the content of schools or a new ideology. Schools at this time are experiencing a great restructuring. We have experienced the first wave of private schools developing. They should offer better quality but first of all they imply greater expense, which not all sponsors can offer and therefore are not able to open schools

Most of the information in religious education books about Christianity and spiritual values reflect the Catholic faith. It is regrettable that the people in charge of the school ministry are not in favor of non-catholic churches and religions. If someone writes about other churches, it is taken note of but just as a matter of peripheral importance. The result of this is that the media speak of a new ideology or spiritual dictatorship. Only 5% of the pupils are interested in the regular and voluntary religious education.

In former times it was not easy to develop and edit material because the state officials had to give permission to do this. They usually did not give permission because they did not want any other party involved in this field. There was a lot of illegal smuggling of material from the West which we were thankful for, although not everyone was in favor of these evangelical materials. The Roman Catholic church today tends to use old catechisms or translations of materials from foreign countries, especially Austria.

The schools had undergone forty years of experiments, meaning that no one took them seriously and nothing was ever finished. School lessons concentrated on the arranging of facts and knowledge. Science was considered to be the highest authority and almost a deity. Teachers were chosen in the light of their political tendencies and it was their duty to represent the state's ideology. The world was split into two extremes: right or wrong, good or evil. Of course we were always on the right and good side. When the communist power collapsed in 1989 the church found open doors in a lot of schools and other institutions. A generation of inquisitive young people gathered around priests, who in former times had been involved with funerals and visiting older people. But this is already years ago. The time should have come to make things happen.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN FRANCE

By Bernard Kaempf

It is laid down in the constitution that France is a laïque republic, in which all faiths are respected and religious pluralism is acknowledged. Freedom of mind is guaranteed by the state. The state sees the churches as facilitators of symbolic meanings and therefore the state invites them to take part in various committees of public debate, but the state does not judge the spiritual or philosophical value of them.

In principle religious education is not taught in public schools in France. It is a task of the churches and faith communities to do this in the framework of parishes and congregations, in a shape that is normally known as catechism. Religious education should prepare for communion, confirmation or baptism, or in short for initiation into the church. Usually the teaching is organized for a period of two years; at some places it is offered in four year programs. Many lay people are active in this teaching; in the Catholic church mamans catechetes exist for younger children and welcome a small group into their homes.

Wednesday is the usual day for religious education in churches, but the meetings are changed to Saturdays due to special circumstances. In the area of the Protestant Diaspora in France, religious education is held sometimes only once a month, on a weekend. Religious education for adults is offered in bigger parishes, also as bible studies and baptism instruction. The responsibility for these kinds of programs lies with each of the religious communities and they offer or recommend the necessary books and learning materials if not producing them themselves.

Religious education is not taught in French schools but at present a movement exists in France to offer the pupils in secondary schools a kind of religious culture in the shape of religious studies. Although this standpoint has not received official status and it gets no support from the teacher unions, which always refer to a strict understanding of laïcité, seen in the case of the Islamic headscarf, it was supported by governments in recent years.

Religious studies can have a place in schools. Since 1996 it has been introduced in the sixth and tenth grades in connection with history and

French, but it is not generally implemented. Religious culture, which is similar to religious studies, provides understanding and knowledge to the pupils, including non-Christians, about the many signs of Christian-Jewish culture in the areas of literature, art and the daily life of the Occident.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SWEDEN

By Rune Larsson

Religious education in Sweden changed from a confessional Lutheran education up until 1919 to a Christian but inter-confessional approach that existed until 1962. Since that time it is a non-confessional subject, without any legal right for church influence on the public school system. In 1969 the subject was given the name of *Knowledge of religion*.@Notwithstanding the non-confessional and religiously neutral character of the subject, the law gives pupils and parents a limited right to opt out from religious education, if they belong to a religious community that can offer an alternative religious education.

In recent years it has been made easier for churches and other associations to arrange private schools with financial support from the state. These schools are free to form their own religious character but they have an obligation to formulate the basic goals for the school in a way that every child has the same standards of education. All free schools are controlled by the municipal school authority. Today about 2% of the children are educated in private schools.

A new curriculum was introduced in 1994. The syllabus for religious education in the compulsory school presents the overarching task, the goals, the structure and the criteria for grades. Religious education is seen as a resource for the children to broaden their experience and deepen their thinking, and to give them possibilities for reflection on religious and moral questions, and develop their abilities for a responsible way of living.

There are two kinds of contents: existential, ethical and faith oriented questions, and the knowledge of religions and life views. As an argument for religious education the following issues are constantly repeated: personal development, knowledge in the field of religion and life views, respect for others, intercultural understanding and understanding one's own culture.

Only a few years after the new curricula were set, a process of revision

started and continues. One proposal was to take away religious education from some of the programs in the non-compulsory school. An alternative was to make it voluntary. Another serious problem for religious education is the situation in the compulsory school. In many schools the reality of religious education is much more problematic than what is prescribed in the curricula, syllabuses and timetables. Religious education does not take place in many schools and classes. A form of cooperation between a group of subjects eliminates the religious education perspective. Sometimes teachers have a weak training in religious education. Religion is seen as a difficult subject, combined with its low ranking by many pupils.

A more optimistic trend can be seen in reports of teachers about a growing interest in religious education. If this tendency continues, religious education will have a future in a situation where politicians are inclined to give preference of resources to other areas of schooling than religion. The best way to support the subject is to give teachers the best possible training and continuing service training to gain a high professional competence.

A TRANS-NATIONAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

By Gabriel Moran

In looking for a meaning of religious education that would transcend the nation state, some attention should be given to the United Nations. Philosophers, educators and other groups have a tendency to dismiss UN documents as airy rhetoric. Nonetheless, the UN has had remarkable success in getting the world, including philosophers and ethicists, to pay attention to human rights. The world is still at the beginning of establishing enforceable policies on human rights but the progress of the last fifty years is impressive. The UN from its beginning has been aware that religion is unavoidably part of the human rights story. Article eighteen of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Freedom of religion includes the right to change one's religion or belief, as well as to manifest one's religion or belief. This last element has been a source of continuing struggles; one person's manifesting of religion (buildings, holy days, diet, clothing) can intrude on someone else's rights.

This complicated story implies the need for a worldwide religious education that would include not only a study of academic concepts but a

realistic give and take on religious practices. The UN has commissioned surveys of education, the first in 1959 and the most recent one in 1998. Not surprisingly, the surveys have shown education in religious matters to be undeveloped in most countries. States still tend to be insensitive to the rights of minorities who are subjected to instruction in the official or dominant religion of the state.

The UN actually uses the term *Religious education* in several key documents, particularly the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights, both adopted in 1966. These two documents assert that parents have a right to the *Moral and religious education* of their children as they wish. I think it is encouraging that the UN puts forth moral and religious education as something to be understood and practiced universally. I am puzzled by how the UN came to this language.

One surprising offshoot of this assertion of parental rights has been a protest in several parts of the world against what the protesters call *Anti-homophobic* courses in schools. Parents in British Columbia or Tasmania would not have come up with this same idea except for the Internet. These parents maintain that the courses violate their right to control the religious education of their children. It is fascinating to have right-wing political groups appealing to UN documents to protect their rights. Even if school people disagree with the parents, the parental views should be considered. Religious education to be effective has to include both family and school. .

The biggest drawback in the UN language is the assumption that moral and religious education is an affair of young children and their parents. The wishes of the parents should have primacy when the child is six years old. When the student is nineteen - or fifty-nine - years old, the student's own wishes take center stage. Furthermore, the religious and moral dimensions of education may not fit together as they did when the person was six years old. As shown by UN meetings, such as the recent one in Durban, religious education is going to be needed not just to induct children into the religion of their parents but as a continuing process to cope with the world's political, cultural and environmental problems.

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