

# THE ALTERNATIVE

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Dear Reader:

It was a tradition of this Newsletter to have a biennial report in the Fall issue on the meetings of the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values. Maria Harris was able to capture some of the personalities and the themes of each conference. With Maria's sickness and death, I am forced into the role of reporter.

This year the group of about 135 members from thirty countries met in Driebergen, the Netherlands, during the last week of July. The setting was a return to one of the group's early meetings in 1982. During the last twenty-four years the makeup and spirit of the group has slowly evolved. In 1982, the thirty-five members tended to split along a UK and US division and the two sides spoke conflicting languages of religious education. Over the years, an increasing cultural and religious diversity has created a group more representative of its international claim. This year a half dozen Turkish Muslims made a significant contribution to discussions in plenary and collegial sessions. The theme of the meeting was appropriately "Religious Education in a World of Religious Diversity." The choice of the next meeting place in Ankara, Turkey, is evidence of the group's desire to continue to broaden its perspective.

The setting for this year's meeting just outside Amsterdam was also appropriate and encouraging. There have been stories in the press that since the murder of the film maker, Theo Van Gogh, the Dutch were retreating from their more than three centuries of cultural and religious tolerance. That may be so but I did not have any sense of that while in the country. The Dutch were their usual kind and helpful selves, amazing in their ability to speak other people's languages. True, my first taxi driver spoke Arabic and not much English but a New Yorker is used to that.

I found this year's meeting to be optimistic. That came as a surprise to me, given that the world seems to be increasingly a collection of mad bombers. But paradoxically the last five years seem to have set off positive movements in religious education. I have to admit that I missed the significance of September 11, 2001. When people immediately proclaimed that "everything is now changed," I thought they were chauvinistically attributing world-shaking importance to a disaster that ranks nowhere near the top of world disasters. I have repeatedly been surprised to find people in other countries who attribute world-changing significance to September 11, 2001. That could be just

recognition that George W. Bush has shamelessly exploited the event for unleashing a horrendous war in the Middle East. But a few positive changes may also be seen.

The encouraging aspect of recent changes is reflected in the cooperation of European countries in education, especially religious education. Ten years ago, attempts at European unity seemed trapped in bureaucratic tangles. The bureaucracy is still there but there are serious efforts to bring political will to educational reform. And, surprisingly, religion now has a place in these educational discussions. Immigration problems in countries such as France, Germany and the Netherlands have raised questions throughout Europe for the need to understand religious and cultural differences. The bid of Turkey to join the European Union is an outstanding test of whether a Europe rooted in Christian history can be joined by an Islamic country that has tried to incorporate a form of enlightenment.

The odds are against Europe succeeding at this cooperation, but the possibilities are there and the efforts are admirable. Most positive is that the work at European unity does not represent a turning inward to a Eurocentric world. The people working hard at bringing together European nations are well aware that Africa and Asia are the context of the effort and the next round of cooperative members.

What remains outside these efforts at cooperation is the elephant on the table, the United States of America. It is difficult to see grounds for optimism here. People generally believe that religion in the United States has flourished because the government has kept out of the way and religion is not in the curriculum of the state school. The federal government's role has been indirect and when Washington does get involved ("No Child Left Behind") it can make one happy that its involvement has been minor. Still, if the government does not supply structures for cooperation, alternative forms of organization are needed so that different religions can converse and educators can get an intelligent picture of religion. The need for such dialogue has become urgent but the organizational attempts are fragmented.

Faced with increasing diversity in 1903, the United States and Canada tried to form an international organization for religious education. The organization was to include Catholics, Protestants and Jews; and bridge the state school and religious congregations. The U.S. was ahead of the curve in envisioning such an organization. For a variety of reasons, the religious education association failed at its mission. It is unclear who or what might lead a movement to address the serious problems of religious ignorance in a serious manner.

Gabriel Moran

The following three essays are excerpts from papers of the plenary sessions. The first is by Mualla Selcuk of Ankara University in Turkey; the second is by Robert Jackson of Warwick University in England; the third is by Siebren Miedema of Vrije University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

## DEVELOPING AN INTERFAITH DIMENSION IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

By Prof. Dr. Mualla Selcuk

In understanding and expressing Islam, we need new methods that fit the needs of a pluralist society. An in-depth investigation reveals that in the course of time some attempts were made by the companions of the prophet and by succeeding generations to develop new understandings and re-interpretations of the message of Islam. Many Islamic disciplines, particularly Islamic Theology (Kalam) and Islamic Jurisprudence (Fıkh) became the main fields in which religious knowledge has been generated in the light of the Qur'an.

We can easily find a pluralist feature in the interpretations of Islamic Tradition which does not require a monopoly in interpreting religious knowledge. This has been confirmed by the emergence of numerous schools of thought in history. But within this pluralist structure, the expressions of the Qur'an such as "Surely, the true religion in the sight of Allah is Islam" (3:19) or "God has chosen Islam as the way of life for you" (5:3) have been dogmatized in the historical contexts, and those who stayed outside of these movements have been excluded (Exclusive interpretation).

In this framework, salvation has been assigned only to a certain type of interpretation, perception and school of thought (*mazhab*) and those who stayed outside of this group have been accused of infidelity (*tekfir*). On the other hand, some inclusive interpretations indicated that the term *Islam*, in addition to its being a proper name for the religion of Islam, also meant in general "to submit" not only to the God of Islam but any submission to one God. These liberating advances gradually lost their popularity and significance in public. Thus, the dogmatic version of understanding Islam prevailed with its exclusivist interpretation in history.

In recent years religious education, which since 1982 has taken its place among compulsory subjects, has been rearranged and put into practice in 2000. The new arrangement in the religious education syllabus allowed educators to include modern advancements in perceptions and the new theological interpretations in religion. For instance, the topic of pluralism has gained more importance compared to its former version. With regard to Religious Pluralism and Pluralism in Islam, the religious education program can be called: "Religious education syllabus with a non-confessional and multi-religious dimension".

The term "non-confessional" refers to the method of transferring the Islamic perspective of pluralism into religious education in the classroom and in general it can be stated as follows: non-confessional religious education refers to a descriptive teaching of beliefs, rituals and ethics of Islam without being bound to an understanding and interpretation of a certain Islamic school of thought (*mazhab*). However, this never means to disregard

the schools of thought, or misrepresent, transform or change them. On the contrary, they are introduced as enriching cultural and intellectual accumulations.

The non-confessional approach aims at teaching the basic values of Islam which is common to all Islamic movements considering the Qur'an as their main source. In addition, this approach also fits well with the expectation of state schools that are to be open to every Turkish citizen; it is not shaped with the concern of making pupils believers or pious (confessional). On the contrary, it teaches the phenomenon of religion from its main sources and equips all students equally with knowledge about religion and culture. After teaching the basic values of Islam with "random learning experience" in the first years, the more various and specific interpretations of Islam are included in the subsequent years. Especially in primary school, the concern is not to reduce Islam to a single historical interpretation. The schools of thoughts (*mazhabs*) and their understanding of Islam, which emerged as the institutionalized forms of different religious understandings, are presented only as *interpretations* developed by Muslims that should not be equated and identified with Islam.

What sort of approach has been adopted in integrating other religions into the religious education syllabus which is overwhelmingly Islamic? Religious education has two parallel aims (a) Students will learn and understand Islam in a comprehensive way. In other words, religious education will ensure the development of students within their own tradition (b) Religious education will teach about other beliefs, religions and traditions so that students relate to "the other" in a constructive manner. This new responsibility of schools cannot be defined only from a theological perspective. Theological method must embrace pedagogical, psychological and didactic approaches. When considered from within this general framework, the overall aim of religious education can be stated as follows: Religious education aims to enable students to develop an authentic cognitive, emotional, and skilful learning.

It is true that a rapid shift and transformation has occurred in the perspective of theologians in a relatively short period of time in Turkey. This paradigm shift was described by Turkish theologians with such names as "Re-thinking Islam", "Re-construction in the religious field", and "Re-understanding and re-explanation of Islam". Enlightenment in the Muslim cultural heritage has been re-interpreted in a scholarly and critical approach.

Another positive dimension of this movement is that academics can express their critical views without feeling any social pressure such as inhibition and intimidation by being labelled as apostate or infidel. The major Hadith/Tradition compilations (sayings of the Prophet) such as al-Bukharî and al-Muslim, have been exposed to critical analysis. References to the historicity of the Qur'an have been raised, and studies on the hermeneutical aspect of the Qur'an have increased. More currently, new attempts to present the relationship between Islam and other religions is investigated within a holistic approach in the Qur'an taking into consideration the historical *raison d'être* of the revelation of the verses (*asbâb al-nuzûl*).

## EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS AND STUDIES OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

By Robert Jackson

Issues about the study of religion in public education are being discussed internationally as never before. The discussions include specialists in religion, but also many outside the professional field of religious education – politicians, civil servants, NGOs and other groups within civil society as well as educators concerned with fields such as citizenship and intercultural education. This is partly due to the global attention given to religion as a result of the events of September 11, 2001 in the USA, their causes, on-going consequences and associated incidents that have affected people in many parts of the world.

Of course, positive events involving religion also have an impact on public consciousness in relation to issues within civil society, whether through the constructive activities of inter-faith networks, or the example of outstanding personalities such as the Dalai Lama in relation to peace and environmental issues or Archbishop Desmond Tutu as Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. It is also interesting that several research projects are being conducted at the moment on the theme of religion as social capital, aiming, for example, to explore the extent to which faith organizations and members contribute to, or appear as obstacles to, ‘the bridging and linking of social capital required to achieve well-connected communities’.

In the present discussion, there is no intention of implying that the study of religion in schools should be solely justified through attention to social and political events and issues. I agree with the Delors Report in considering that education should include learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. It is arguable that religious education should be concerned with all of these, especially the fourth. The present discussion focuses on the third, but does not ignore the others. The discussion responds to recent and widespread international interest in the study of religions in schools, with particular attention to European institutions, prompted by various political events and social issues

A familiar way of making distinctions is from the point of view of the aims of the subject. The distinction is sometimes made between educating *into*, *about* and *from* religion. Educating *into* religion deals with a single religious tradition, is taught by ‘insiders’ and often has the objective of enabling pupils to come to believe in the religion or to strengthen their commitment to it. Educating *about* religion confines itself to using descriptive and historical methods, and aims neither to foster nor to erode religious belief. Educating *from* religion involves pupils in considering different responses to religious and moral issues, so that they may develop their own views in a reflective way. Here the main objective might be seen as enabling pupils to develop their own point of view on matters relating to religion and values. With this taxonomy, the Italian system would be an example of educating into religion, the Estonian system would exemplify

educating about religion, while the English community school system would combine educating about and educating from religion

Mention should also be made of discussions prompted by the then Commissioner for human rights, Mr. Alvaro Gil-Robles, who set up a series of annual meetings to discuss the role of religious bodies in promoting human rights and addressing social issues in member states. The meetings brought together representatives of the main religions traditionally present in Europe, representatives of the authorities of the Council of Europe's member states, academics and politicians (including some members of the Committee of Ministers). These annual seminars began in 2000, turning their attention to religious education at the meetings in Malta and Kazan in the Russian Federation .

The Maltese consultation discussed the possibility of establishing a foundational programme for religious education in all member states of the Council, and considered the establishment of a European Centre for Religious Education focusing on human rights. The recommendations of the Maltese seminar were considered by the Parliamentary Assembly in 2005, which made specific recommendations to the Committee of Ministers, including that it should:

- examine the possible approaches to teaching about religions at primary and secondary levels, for example through basic modules which would subsequently be adapted to different educational systems.
- promote initial and in-service teacher training in religious studies.
- envisage setting up a European teacher training institute for the comparative study of religions.
- encourage the governments of member states to ensure that religious studies are taught at the primary and secondary levels of state education.

Such an education should include ensuring that pupils are informed impartially about religious diversity in Europe and aware of the human right of freedom of religion or belief (including the right to have no religion). The objective of this form of teaching should be to promote understanding, not to instill faith, even in countries having a state religion. Teachers providing this kind of education, from whatever discipline, would need specific training. Teacher training (for an impartial education in European religious diversity) should be provided within each state, and generic syllabuses (produced under the auspices of the Council of Europe) should be adapted to each country's particular needs and to the different ages of children.

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION BETWEEN CERTAINTY AND UNCERTAINTY.

By Siebren Miedema

Pluralism and diversity as core elements of Modernity undermine all taken-for-granted certainties, in religion and in other domains of the lifeworld. But an individual or collective religious commitment is compatible with uncertainty. It is possible to hold beliefs and to live by them even if they no longer have the status of taken-for-granted verities. "Pluralism affects the *how* of religious belief, but not necessarily the *what*," writes Peter Berger.

This aspect of certainty versus uncertainty is an important one, especially in respect to the strategies that groups and individuals use to cope with them. Adults, as well as children and youngsters, can meet this growing diversity in at least two different ways.

First, diversity is quite often experienced as a burden of uncertainty, and people strongly strive to get rid of it. In its most foundational forms and expressions this approach may lead to orthodox or even fundamentalist religious views, positions and communities; to segregation of cultures and groups; and to the search for a reaffirmation of what is felt to be lost. So, instead of a full-blown *aggiornamento*, a complete updating with the modern world, not an adaptation but a rejection of secularizing aspects will be propagandized. It may result in what I like to characterize as forms of institutional 'pillarization' or segregation, that is creating collectives and institutions as, for example, schools for people with the same religious commitments, convictions, and compatible moral and societal ethos. What is intended here is that pluralism should hardly affect the *how* of religious belief, but definitively not the *what* of such a belief.

The rise of certain Islamic schools and particular Evangelical schools in the Netherlands is understandable from this perspective of dealing with the uncertainty of secularizing forces. Their unambiguous religious commitment and inspiration in combination with a holistic view of religious life, is attractive for those parents and pupils who want to avert the danger of secularizing forces. Peter Berger rightly points here at the growing Evangelical and Islamic movements and groups that are on the rise from a world wide perspective, and that are precisely using such a rejection strategy.

An interesting example here are the so-called Christian immigrant churches in the south-east part of Amsterdam. While the number of church members of the established 'white churches' is still diminishing, the number of 'black' church members, for example, of the African International Churches, is fast increasing. The majority of them belong to a Pentecostal or Evangelical denomination, and most of these churches are theologically speaking strictly orthodox and they embody strong counter-secularizing forces. But the youngsters attending school or having become school drop-outs are very often quite active in all kind of practices related to sex, drugs and crime. So, there is on Sundays the world completely devoted to the sacred and godly domain and during the week there are the apparent seductions of the secularizing forces.

The challenge for both state and denominational schools already is, and will become only stronger in the future, how to accommodate these secularizing forces and counter-secularizing forces at the same time in the same class or group and within a particular school setting. Those issues can also be seen from the perspective of the aim of citizenship education, more specifically the aim of religious citizenship education in schools.

A more pedagogically suitable strategy in coping with diversity is the presupposition that diversity is an unavoidable aspect of modernity, and that it could most fruitfully be interpreted as a possibility and a challenge. Diversity can lead to meaningful encounters between people who are adherents of different religious traditions and who take part in different religious practices and rituals. It offers an opportunity to become self-reflective and transparent, and to justify vis-à-vis each other with all sort of means - being it cognitively, experientially, emotionally, anthropologically and religiously – individual and collective judgments and practical actions within the framework of an over-arching social-democratic society.

Following this second line of thought I first want to stress the importance of the place and role of religious belief and practices in the public domain. My plea is for a legitimized place of religiosity in that domain. This is due to the role of religion as being a binding agent for individuals and institutions in society. If we want to keep the dialogue between groups going, then we also need to take into account the religious infrastructure be it mosques, temples, churches or synagogues. Besides, religious belief and religious practices are overwhelming sources of power not restricted to the private domain or to the inner circles of civil society. Such sources may be manifested positively in individual responsibility, a strong concern for other people and concrete practices of solidarity and humanness. This source could also be used positively in the public domain, for example, to put a stop to potential and blameworthy undercurrents in religious relations, practices and situations that result in oppression, misery, social isolation and segregation, and to foster in the plural society the needed social cohesion and dialogue between people with different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

Second, I would underscore that for religious education the issues arise here of the organization in schools of the possibilities for encounter between children and youngsters representing a diversity of religious traditions and (sub)cultures, and of the selection of adequate subject matter to foster such encounters for the benefit of the formation of their religious identities. After the murder of the filmmaker and writer Theo van Gogh on Feb. 2, 2004, we can see more clearly, and not only in the Netherlands, that the flourishing of a pedagogy of religious diversity is an urgent need to tackle the dangers of the first approach, that is the quest for certainty, in dealing with diversity. This first approach may possibly sow the seeds of separatism, fundamentalism and very often a quasi-religious radicalism that forms a constant threat to the social cohesion of a society.

