

# **The Council of Europe and the European Wergeland Centre: Intercultural Education and Education about Religious Diversity**

**Robert Jackson**

It is a privilege to speak at the inauguration of the European Wergeland Centre. I would like to concentrate on my own field of religious diversity in relation to intercultural education, and its role within the Council of Europe and the European Wergeland Centre. It is an especially appropriate point to consider the important work of the Council of Europe in the field of intercultural education. 2009 is the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Europe and 2008 was the European year of intercultural dialogue, in which the Council published its important White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (Council of Europe 2008). The Committee of Ministers' recommendation to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education was approved in December 2008. And today we have the inauguration of the European Wergeland Centre! The idea of a Centre for Intercultural, Citizenship and Human Rights Education, including issues related to religious diversity, has been discussed for some years within the Council of Europe. Now we have the concrete realisation of that idea, thanks to the commitment of staff and politicians at the Council of Europe and the generosity of the Norwegian authorities.

From the point of view of official projects, on intercultural education for example, the Council of Europe offers a structure which fully integrates development and political processes. Project proposals are approved by the Council's political institutions and project findings and recommendations are considered and approved by them or sent back for further development. There is an expectation that, in turn, member states will be influenced by them in policy development. The Council is thus a powerful instrument for European integration within its fields of operation. However, the outputs of the Council's projects need further dissemination and discussion, in relation to policy making and teacher training, for example. The

European Wergeland Centre's activities will include the active dissemination and discussion of the Council of Europe's work in the fields of intercultural, citizenship and human rights education, including the dimension of religion to these fields.

### **Intercultural Education and the Challenge of Religious Diversity and Dialogue in Europe**

Within the Council of Europe, a view of intercultural education gradually emerged, concerned with developing competences and attitudes enabling individuals to respect the rights of others, developing skills of critical empathy and fostering dialogue with others from different backgrounds (Council of Europe 2002). This approach was developed in projects in history, education for democratic citizenship, modern foreign languages and the Roma, but did not include attention to religion. Religion was avoided because of the different relationships between religion and state across Europe, because of the diversity of current arrangements in member states on the place of religion in schools – reflecting histories involving religious conflict – and especially because, as a public body, the Council has to maintain neutrality with regard to the expression of views on the truth or falsity of religious claims.

However, at the political level, the atrocities of September 11, 2001 triggered a shift in policy. Through the Committee of Ministers, the Council of Europe formulated its response to include safeguarding fundamental values and investing in democracy. In relation to the latter, the then Secretary General, Walter Schwimmer, affirmed that intercultural and inter faith dialogue would become a key theme for the Council, proposing:

...action to promote a better understanding between cultural and/or religious communities through school education, on the basis of shared principles of ethics and democratic citizenship. (Council of Europe 2002)

9/11 thus can be regarded as a symbol for the entry of the study of religions as a new priority for European public policy on education. The new priority became an extension of previous efforts to combat racism and promote democratic citizenship

within the Council agreed at the Vienna Summit in 1993. In early 2002, the Council set up a working party to examine the issues, prior to the establishment of a project suggesting methods and approaches for integrating the study of religion into intercultural education in the public domain. The Working Party's action plan reflects the view that all countries face common challenges expressed in different environments, that they have much to learn from each other and that they should be prepared to review their policies in dialogue with the relevant stakeholders.

The key condition for including religion as a pan-European topic in education was that, despite different views on religion at the personal and societal levels, all could agree that religion is a 'cultural fact' and that knowledge and understanding of religion at this level is highly relevant to good community and personal relations and is therefore a legitimate concern of public policy. This was not a form of intellectual reductionism, but a pragmatic recognition that the fact of the presence of religions in society was a cultural reality – religion was out there as part of human social life.

The Working Party's proposals were discussed at a forum on 'Intercultural education and the challenge of religious diversity and dialogue' in Strasbourg in September 2002 and subsequently, in modified form, adopted by the Committee of Ministers. Experts in religious and intercultural education from different parts of Europe met in Paris in June 2003 in order to identify the key issues in relation to religious diversity and the religious dimension of intercultural education, to tease out the implications of these issues for pedagogy and to make policy recommendations for the Education Ministers' conference on intercultural education held in Athens in November 2003. The 2003 Athens Conference of the European Ministers of Education endorsed the project and also recognised its significance in promoting dialogue beyond Europe.

Issues related to the project were discussed at a high profile conference on 'The religious dimension of intercultural education', held in Oslo in June 2004. Participants included educational decision-makers from most member states and from observer states, education professionals and representatives of civil society involved in intercultural education. The conference proceedings were published by the Council

(Council of Europe 2004).

Following the conference, the Council appointed a group of specialists in religious and intercultural education to work together to produce a guide for teachers, teacher trainers, administrators and policy makers to deal with the issue of religious diversity in Europe's schools (Keast 2007). The first section deals with theoretical perspectives that teachers and others need to be aware of in considering the dimension of religious diversity in intercultural education. The second begins to relate the conceptual elements of intercultural education to various approaches to teaching and learning. The third section considers wider questions of religious diversity in schools, including school governance and management, dealing with how to apply intercultural education principles (participation, inclusion and respect for human rights) in different educational settings. The final section includes some examples of current practice in some member states of the Council of Europe.

Based on the project's findings and on ideas from the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (Council of Europe 2008), the Committee of Ministers (the Foreign Ministers of the member states) issued a recommendation providing a set of principles that can be used by all member states on the management of religious and 'convictional' diversity in schools.<sup>1</sup> One important task of the European Wergeland Centre's work in intercultural education will be to disseminate this recommendation and to facilitate the development of policy and good practice in different parts of Europe.

### **The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue**

A vitally important part of the Council of Europe's recent work has been the development of its White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (Council of Europe 2008). The publication of this important document was a highlight of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue is discussed specifically in section 3.5, pp 21-23. Other initiatives from the Council of Europe

---

<sup>1</sup>[https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?Ref=CM/Rec\(2008\)12&Language=lanEnglish&Ver=original&BackColorInternet=DBDCF2&BackColorIntranet=FDC864&BackColorLogged=FDC864](https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?Ref=CM/Rec(2008)12&Language=lanEnglish&Ver=original&BackColorInternet=DBDCF2&BackColorIntranet=FDC864&BackColorLogged=FDC864) The most relevant sections of the text are in the appendix.

include an interdisciplinary project on intercultural autobiography (including religion),<sup>1</sup> and an ongoing series of ‘exchanges’ (the first was in April 2008 and the second will be in June 2009), in which representatives from religious and humanistic organisations, plus various non-governmental organisations, meet to discuss the role and coverage of religions and beliefs within public education.

### **The European Wergeland Centre**

What is vital now is that each member state puts itself into dialogue with the very positive developments coming from the Council of Europe. There is no expectation that every state will approach studies of religious diversity in exactly the same way. Long national traditions of particular approaches to religion in schools, together with some deeply embedded views of pedagogy in some countries, make this too much to expect. However, there is much scope for collaborative initiatives, and for international exchange and discussion in developing just and fair approaches to religious difference in education. The European Wergeland Centre will take an important role in facilitating teacher training activities and discussions about developing appropriate national policies, as well as identifying European research priorities. The European Wergeland Centre also looks forward to facilitating the networking of researchers, teacher trainers, policy makers and practitioners in its fields of interest across the Council of Europe’s member states.

### **References**

Council of Europe. 2002. Education for intercultural and interfaith dialogue: Proposal for a new project, unpublished working document prepared by the Secretariat, Educational Policies and European Dimension Division, Directorate of School, Out-of-School and Higher Education, Directorate General IV.

Council of Europe, ed. 2004. *The religious dimension of intercultural education*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

Council of Europe. 2008. *White paper on intercultural dialogue: ‘Living together as equals with dignity’*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

Keast, J., ed. 2007. *Religious diversity and intercultural education: A reference book for schools*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

Council of Europe publications are available from the Publishing Division, Palais de l'Europe F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex: E-mail: [publishing@coe.int](mailto:publishing@coe.int)

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* project has produced materials adapted for different age groups (primary school students, older students, adult learners) that promote a structured reflection on personal encounters with people of different cultures and religions and encourage the development of intercultural awareness and competences. The *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* project materials are available free of charge on <http://www.coe.int/t/DG4/AUTOBIOGRAPHY/>