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**« RELIGION AND EDUCATION:  
THE POSSIBILITY OF DEVELOPING TOLERANCE  
THROUGH THE TEACHING OF RELIGIOUS FACTS »**

Seminar organised by

The Commissioner for Human Rights,  
Mr Alvaro GIL-ROBLES

Valetta, Malta  
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**Background paper**

## **Religion and education: the possibility of developing tolerance through the teaching of religious facts**

### ***Why ought religions to be taught at school?***

Aristotle wrote: “The city is a plurality which must be restored, by education, to a community and a unity.”<sup>1</sup> It is a statement that seems just as relevant today. School, as a compulsory stage for the individual in any democratic society, contributes greatly to forming the citizen. It may have an important part to play in enabling a society’s members to coexist despite their differences.

Cities are changing fast nowadays; they are infinitely more heterogeneous than those of antiquity, but also more than those of 30 years ago. Today’s national communities in Europe, described as post-industrial, have been transformed by immigration and interbreeding. Life in these societies has lost much of its traditional knowledge, and intolerance seems evermore present than in the past. It is harder nowadays to bring the different sectors of the national community together without leaving certain groups and certain interests aside. Given the growing heterogeneity of European societies, tolerance has become a more demanding exercise, and one more difficult to attain. Yet it is more necessary than ever if community life is to be made easier.

But where do we learn to be tolerant? To begin with, we should note that every child learns about the world around him and the society to which he belongs. The first stage in this learning process takes place in the family; it is here that the child acquires his first notions of right and wrong, of the outside world, of other people and of himself. It is here, first of all, that he should learn to accept others, however different, and here first of all that he should develop tolerance. Then the child goes to school. This is designed to impart knowledge to the child, explain the world to him and prepare him to become a citizen. School will help give him the wherewithal to carve out a place in society, and this should be the second place where tolerance is learnt.

Religion is one of the factors that have influenced life in society throughout the ages. It is a source of personal fulfilment and contributes to defining a person’s identity. As the root of the word (Latin *religare, to bind*) indicates, religion enables those who so choose to bind themselves – to others and to things intangible. Given the importance of religion in many people’s lives, democratic societies must make its observance possible. They must also leave individuals free to choose their religion and able to decide on the depth of their commitment to it, or free not to commit themselves at all. In addition, they must ensure that religions coexist within society without placing any one of them at a disadvantage and, more important still, without placing those who practise it at a disadvantage. This presupposes such individual rights as freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. It also presupposes freedom to manifest one’s religion, individually or collectively, in public or private, through worship, teaching, practice and ritual.<sup>2</sup> These fundamental rights are enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights of 1950.

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<sup>1</sup> *Politics*, II, 5, 1263 b 36-37.

<sup>2</sup> Church-State relations and the exercise of the right to freedom of religion, background paper for the seminar in Strasbourg on 10 and 11 December 2001, Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights.

It is too often forgotten that rights and freedoms do not exist in isolation but imply the existence of countervailing duties. Religious communities have a duty to ease the tensions which can arise between members of different religions or with non-believers on a religious point of view. Religion can have a twofold consequence within a society: on the one hand it tends to foster cohesion among the followers of a religion and to open up dialogue with those of other religions or philosophies; and on the other, it can create the possibility of tension with the followers of other religions and individuals of no religious persuasion. Where people with different religious and philosophical beliefs live together in the same community there is a risk of incomprehension, which in turn may generate intolerance and threaten the harmony of that community. Religious communities should then act to prevent these situations from arising, and the state should intervene to the same end.

Consequently the role of the state is not just to help organise relations between denominations and convictions, but also to safeguard public order. This obligation must be performed, not only by force and coercion, not only by repairing or mending, but also through prevention. Education is a major tool in this work of prevention. Hence the role of the school, which is of course the place where the child learns about himself and about others, in order to understand and respect them. The purpose of teaching about what is different must be to encourage acceptance of others and help to dispel ignorance and misconceptions, which are fertile ground for prejudice. Eradicating prejudice is important, because it can give rise to animosity and even hatred.

The issue of knowing about other people's religions has arisen in an acute form in recent times. As religion is a factor that defines the identity and customs of an individual and a group, it could be taught in order to afford a fuller knowledge of others, and this fuller knowledge will foster tolerance.

### ***What should be the substance of this teaching?***

If we agree on the importance of knowing about others, including their religious dimension, one question arises: how should this religious dimension be presented? First, what exactly should be taught? And what should that teaching contain? The main purpose should certainly not be proselytism or propaganda, as some may fear, but to broaden knowledge of a cultural and spiritual phenomenon which has an important influence on the identity of individuals. Above all, the aim should be to give an overview of a central element of civilisation, to teach culture, what is different and unfamiliar. More particularly, it is proposed that religious facts be taught.

By "fact" we mean something that can be verified and demonstrated. Teaching religious facts would thus mean presenting religions in a relatively objective way. It would certainly not mean teaching dogma. Régis Debray presents the distinction in these terms: "Nobody must confuse catechism and information, the suggestion of faith and the offer of knowledge, testimony and reporting (...) The sacramental relationship to memory seeks to increase and refine belief; the analytical relationship to increase and refine knowledge."<sup>3</sup> Our aim should be to increase and refine knowledge, not faith, which remains and will always remain a strictly personal, indeed private, matter.

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<sup>3</sup> Régis Debray, « *L'enseignement du fait religieux dans l'Ecole laïque* », report submitted to the Ministry of Education, February 2002, p.10.

Presenting religions in a concrete and relatively objective manner presupposes dealing with them as cultural and “civilisational” phenomena rather than from the philosophical and spiritual standpoint. So it appears desirable to teach religions via a set of historical and geographical observations and through the description of ritual, ceremony and celebrations.

Of course, the presentation of any fact may influence its interpretation, and this applies equally to religious facts. Since the purpose of the teaching is to foster social harmony and as emerged from the conclusions of the seminar on “Human rights, culture and religion” held at Louvain-la-Neuve, the teaching of religion should encourage a positive, voluntarist interpretation of religions:

*“...the founding texts and standard-setting texts could be subject to varying readings and interpretations (...) these readings may lead to different practical results, in some cases even violence, which must be excluded.*

*Consequently, the texts and their interpretations call for in-depth analysis by specialists. (...) This is a task that must be carried out within each denomination, within each religion, and subsequently lead to comparison and pooling of the positive results.”<sup>4</sup>*

The positive interpretation of monotheist religions may lead to the shared conclusion that respect and love for one’s neighbour, and the tolerance that follows from them, lie at the heart of these religions.<sup>5</sup> Above all, therefore, the teaching of the monotheist religions should place the emphasis on this common feature: they promote tolerance.

Teaching religion would thus aim to bring about the realisation that, even if another person’s religion may be different, he is not. Moreover, the monotheist religions already convey a message of tolerance and their teaching should emphasise this message. For it is by stressing the points that unite rather than those which divide us that we shall manage to preserve the harmony of a heterogeneous community.

We then come to the question: what religions should be taught? The first objective is to explain the things which affect daily life. So we should talk about the principal religions that have influenced, and continue to influence, Europe’s social, political, cultural and geographical development. We believe it is vital to cover Judaeo-Christianity, which is pivotal in Europe. It is also important to present Islam, a central religion in some member states of the Council of Europe; it is deeply rooted in some of the continent’s countries and has established itself in several other member states over the past 30 years.

However, European societies do not consist solely of people who believe in the monotheistic religions: they also include those who follow polytheistic religions as well as atheists. Can this teaching be imposed on them in state schools? An affirmative answer is not out of the question, given that the aim is not to convert pupils to traditional European beliefs but to familiarise citizens with Europe’s traditional religions, as a factor of civilisation, and with their contribution to the shaping of Europe as it exists today.

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<sup>4</sup> Conclusion of Mr Alvaro Gil-Robles, Commissioner for Human Rights, on the seminar « Human rights, culture and religion: convergence or divergence ? » held at Louvain-la-Neuve, 9-10 December 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

*What means should be envisaged to this end?*

How can we prepare to carry out this ambitious plan? What steps should be taken to reach the goals we set out?

Before that question can be answered, a rapid survey of the present situation with regard to the teaching of religion or other related subjects is needed.

While it is true that the situation varies from one member state to another, one might nevertheless present some common features shared by the great majority of European states. The fact is that there is usually no general teaching of religion in European schools. We are left with the very widespread situation that private schools teach religion, while religious education is also provided for children in out-of-school institutions of the catechism or Talmud Torah kind. These two types of teaching present a common characteristic – they offer denominational religious education, imparted to children belonging to this or that faith by teachers of the same faith and intended to familiarise the children with the foundations of their religion.

It is therefore quite natural that this kind of education, in the best hypothesis, does not discuss other faiths and does not broaden the children's horizons, especially with regard to other people's religions, traditions, customs and history. This educational approach is certainly positive. But the fact remains that it does not in itself give the future citizen a global picture of religious and spiritual diversity and its manifestations.

On the other hand, there remain a large number of pupils who receive no religious instruction and remain wholly cut off from knowledge of the subject. Thus a great many young people completely lack any reliable, impartial information on religious matters, which is likewise very unsatisfactory.

In either case, whether a pupil has access to denominational education or receives no religious instruction at all, the consequences can be very damaging. If you know nothing about another person's traditions, be he your next-door neighbour or your classmate, you will find it difficult to understand and accept the fact that he is different. Intolerance is born of ignorance and offers fertile ground for the negation of human rights.

Furthermore, it would be necessary to reflect on the role of the religious world in the teaching of tolerance. Human Rights, around which the member states of the Council of Europe are united, have their roots, among others, in the Book and other sacred texts of the three monotheistic religions. Yet, the message of Human Rights does not appear sufficiently in the present teaching of clergymen to the faithful, when it should not only be present but insisted upon with greater strength.

Given the present situation, one which saw a rise of intolerance, of communitarisms and, thus, a closing up of people on themselves, it is the responsibility of those teaching religions to their believers - and so create the religious identity of important parts of our societies - to reinforce the message of tolerance and of respect for Human Rights, a message present in all of the monotheistic religions.

As has been noted in prior seminars, each religion carries as well a message of tolerance and of love of one's fellow man as a certain refusal of others. It is up to religious authorities, in their sermons and in their teachings to the faithful to privilege the message of tolerance and of Human Rights. The duty of interpreting the millennial message and adapting it to today's realities as well as to the needs of our societies should attract the attention of the religious world.

For all of these reasons, it is very important for religious education courses to be introduced in secondary education.

Such a plan cannot succeed without methodical effort over a long period. It cannot be put into effect in the absence of a permanent structure dealing with the teaching of religion. Accordingly, and as the Louvain-la-Neuve seminar "Human rights, culture and religion" reported, the creation of a European religious education institute might be envisaged.

*"In order to ensure the best possible quality of teaching which is both vital and sensitive, the participants consider that the time has come to set up a specific training centre where a methodology could be developed for the incorporation of human rights into the teaching of religions, and for the incorporation of the religious dimension into general education."*<sup>6</sup>

The Council of Europe is an ideal organisation to host such an institute, by reason of its experience in the management of European affairs, its pan-European character and the support on which it is able to call from experts in the member states.

The institute could perform three roles: prepare the content of religious education; train the teachers; and be a place for research and exchange on tolerance and religion.

In performing the first of these tasks – preparing the content of religious education – the institute could develop syllabuses and methodologies, and even textbooks. Curricula and textbooks could vary from country to country to suit the particular features of each national community, while retaining a common core which could be designed by a representative panel of experts in cultures, educational theory and psychology together with scientists and representatives of major religions.

A heavy burden lies upon the teacher: he will have to steer between several potential dangers. To quote Régis Debray again, "These people (the teachers) will have to be encouraged, reassured and freed of their inhibitions and, to that end, better armed intellectually and professionally to cope with a matter that is always sensitive, because it impinges on the deepest identity of pupils and families."<sup>7</sup>

Teachers being the pivotal element in this project, they must be given strong support. The second possible task of the institute might be to train teachers. To begin with, the institute could train trainers who would then return to their own countries to prepare teachers of religion in conjunction with national further training colleges for teachers. At a second stage, the institute could organise study seminars in various countries and offer study sessions to enable teachers to develop their classroom skills and perfect their technique.

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6 Conclusion of Mr Alvaro Gil-Robles, Commissioner for Human Rights, on the seminar « Human rights, culture and religion: convergence or divergence? » held at Louvain-la-Neuve, 9-10 December 2002.

7 Régis Debray, « L'enseignement du fait religieux dans l'Ecole laïque », report submitted to the Ministry of Education, February 2002, p.17.

Finally, the third task of the institute could be to serve as a place of reflection. It could be a centre for research and discussion on religion and tolerance. It could be a place where contacts are made, fostering exchanges on the subject – among researchers in a range of academic disciplines, among authorities in the different faiths, among scientists and believers, and so on.

Having begun this paper with a quotation from Aristotle, it seems appropriate to conclude with the philosopher's words as well. "A man who is called upon to be good must receive the education and the habits of a good man."<sup>8</sup> If we agree to undertake the task of teaching religion in order to promote tolerance, we ought to do so with this objective, that of training good men and women.

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<sup>8</sup> Nicomachean Ethics X, 10, 1180 a 14-16.