RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN HORIZON.
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTER-CULTURAL LEARNING

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Since about 10 years, the dangers arising from religious and cultural isolation and confrontation and the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes have become clear to a wider public, especially since 11th September 2001. However, religious values can equally serve as the foundation of the peaceful coexistence of various religions and to justify respect for the human dignity of others, regardless of their religious and political convictions. They can thus act as a pillar for civility. There is a rising public awareness of the necessity to seek dialogue with all that can aid us in preventing conflict and supporting peaceful coexistence in a multireligious and multicultural society. And more and more scholars, who formerly did not touch the field of religion, are taking up this field. Colleagues from different disciplines: from the political sciences, from sociology, from law and from philosophy. An outstanding example is Jürgen Habermas. For decades he refused to take religion into account within his thinking of communication. For a couple of years now he is writing more and more on religion and its function for mutual understanding (Habermas 2005).

Regardless of the wide variety of conditions prevailing in different European countries it appears more and more important to study the increasingly influential factor of ‘religion and religiosity’ and its ambivalent potential for both dialogue and social conflict and tension. Education is a vital field within which this question can be addressed: The degree to which religion serves (or could potentially be made to serve) as a criterion of exclusion or prejudice in schools and universities must be investigated as well as to what degree religious discourse and dialogue in education can promote potentials for the peaceful coexistence of people in Europe. This is especially important regarding people of different cultural and religious backgrounds for whom we need to map out educational strategies to learn from each other rather than perpetuate divisions. This also requires efforts in intercultural and interreligious education. Hasenclever even extends the claim that a positive correlation between religious education and political conduct
can be shown: The lesser the degree of religious education is, the greater the potential is for religious differences to be exploited as a tool for political mobilisation (Hasenclever 2003, 304).

This is the thematic background of our REDCo-project. Before the aims of REDCo will be explained, some basic facts about our project will be sketched: Within the EU-program “Citizens and Governance in a knowledge based society” for the years 2004–2006 one section deals with “Values and Religions in Europe”,¹ we made an application for it in the middle of April 2005. In September 2005 we got a positive answer from Brussels and started the project with the acronym REDCo (Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European countries) in March 2006. This project is funded by the research department of the European Commission over a period of three years with in total of 1,188,000,—Euro. Nine projects from eight different European countries are participating.

The author of this article is the overall coordinator of REDCo.

In the following contribution I would like to start with an overview of the REDCo-project and continue with its theoretical background and a section about the empirical studies. In the end I would like to include information on what we have done within the first 18 months and add some preliminary results.

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¹ The text of the EU-commission reads: “European societies have a long history of dialogue and coexistence as well as of tensions between different cultures, values and religions. The objective is to better understand the significance and impact of values and religions in societies across Europe and their roles in relation to changes in society and to the emergence of European identities. STREPs [specific targeted research projects] and/or CAs [Co-ordination Actions] should explore the role of different values, religions and cultures in European societies from an historical perspective; their different perceptions within and across communities (e.g. ethnic, religious, national minorities, immigrant communities)—including gender aspects—either as an enrichment or a threat to their own identities. The processes leading to tolerance or intolerance and xenophobia—and their relation to changes in society—could be examined in this regard. The role of symbols and cultural heritage in the transmission and diffusion of different values (secular and religious) could be examined as well. Research could also explore how religion is sometimes being used as a political instrument and a factor in social mobilisation, solidarity or discrimination. The challenges posed by religious, ethnic and cultural diversity to legal, educational and political systems in European countries and possible ways to ensure peaceful coexistence of different value systems should be examined. The differing ways in which European countries address these issues and implement various policies and practices in this context could be examined in a comparative perspective as well as their degrees of success in achieving them.” Cf. European Commission: FP6 Specific Programme “Integrating and Strengthening the European Research Area”, Priority 7: “Citizens and Governance in a knowledge based society”, Work Programme 2004–2006, 16f.