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PERSPECTIVES ON TOLERANCE IN EDUCATION FLOWING FROM A COMPARISON OF RELIGION EDUCATION IN ESTONIA AND SOUTH AFRICA

Abstract

The question that prompted this investigation into religion education (RE) in Estonia and in South Africa was whether two countries from such totally different parts of the world, with such vastly different populations and cultures though with somewhat parallel histories, had tackled the same or similar problems regarding the provision of RE in their schools, particularly with respect to the matter of tolerance in diverse societies, and in which ways the solutions they came up with agree with or differ from each other. The question was premised by the assumption that people are the same the world over, and that their problems regarding the provision of RE in schools and the quest for (inter)religious tolerance might be roughly the same, of course depending on the prevailing local and historical circumstances. While the upshot of the comparison itself will be available for discussion during the conference presentation, the purpose of this paper will be to present and discuss some of the parallels, resemblances and differences with respect to RE and the issue of (inter)religious tolerance, and to tentatively advance reasons for what has been observed and concluded. At least five (5) themes pertaining to (inter)religious tolerance that emerged from the comparison will be tabled for discussion: intolerance and state domination - societies in transition; diversity an asset, tolerance and nation.

Some parallels

A study of the education histories of the two countries reveals a number of parallels.

Both countries in transition

Christianity was accepted in **Estonia** in the 13th century (European Studies on Religion and State Interaction, 2012). Since the Reformation in the 16th century, the Lutheran church played a leading role, and the network of public schools that emerged by the end of the 17th century was closely associated with that church (Schihaleyev, 2012: 2). No fundamental changes took place in the education system under Russian rule from the beginning of the 18th century (European Studies on Religion and State Interaction, 2012). After independence from Russia in 1918, however, RE was excluded from primary schools, but was retained as a voluntary subject in secondary schools. After protests and a referendum in 1923, RE was re-introduced in all schools as an inter-confessional and optional subject. Although it was possible to opt out from RE, almost all the pupils took the subject until it was banned in 1940 by the authorities of the Soviet occupation. From then onwards, atheistic ideology was statutorily enforced in Estonia, with the result that religion was shifted into a very deep private sphere (Schihaleyev, 2012: 2).

In August 1991, Estonia became independent from the Soviet Union, and its new constitution guaranteed freedom of religion (European Studies on Religion and State Interaction, 2012). The teaching of religion (RE) once more became officially possible in schools (Valk, 2012: 1). The ensuing debate resulted in the introduction of RE in schools as an optional / voluntary non-confessional subject (Schihaleyev, 2012: 6-7; Schreiner, 2005: 5). By the late 1990s, RE was taught in approximately 100 out of the 730 public schools, mostly in primary classes and at the upper secondary school level (Valk, 2012: 1; Schreiner, 2005: 5).

Regarding **South Africa**: Although the indigenous peoples of Southern Africa were religious in their traditional ways, they only began to Westernise and convert to Christianity from the 15th century onwards. Colonisation from 1652 onwards, coupled with Christian missionary work, led to the large-scale Christianisation of the people of Southern Africa. British domination from the beginning of the 19th century brought no change in this. After 1652, schools in South Africa were intended to prepare (especially White) children to become fully fledged members of the (Reformed) Christian churches. Both Catholic and Reformed Missionary education (i.e. for Black and Coloured children) had the purpose of converting people to the Christian religion and to prepare children to become literate members of the church.

On 31 May 1910, South Africa became independent from Great Britain. Because of the traditional intertwinement of state and religion, including the church, there was no strict separation between state and church. The four provinces of which the new Union consisted were each allowed to offer RE as before Union, and missionary education was continued by the churches as before. This situation prevailed until 1967, when the National Party recast RE to suit the ideals of Christian-national education for Whites. (Non-Christians could apply for exemption from attending RE classes in state schools.) Schools for Blacks, Coloured and Indians were allowed to offer their own forms of RE, but were tacitly expected to offer Christian RE. Although the theory and practice of Christian-national education were attacked by its opponents, mainly because of its Afrikaner and apartheid links, things did not come to a head before the early 1990s. RE in public schools was neither intended to be inter-confessional nor optional. Christian indoctrination (in the form of Christian-national RE) was a constant possibility. RE was Christian inter-denominational but not inter-confessional (Giliomee, 2012: 75).

The *Bantu Education Act (no. 47)* of September 1953 made education for blacks an integral part of 'separate development', and left the missionaries, who had until then controlled almost all schools for Africans, in a dilemma: either to hand over their schools to the newly-created Department of Bantu Education or to keep them under missionary control without government subsidies (Blumfield, 2008). Many of these schools opted to remain independent church schools. In 1963, Christian-national education (CNE) was extended to the so-called Coloreds by the *Colored People's Education Act (1963)* (Blumfield, 2008). In the same year, the *Education Act* of 1963 removed Colored Education from the Provincial and Government departments, vesting it in a Division of Education in the Department of Colored Affairs. Schools were tacitly expected to offer (Christian) RE. In 1965, CNE was extended to Indians by the *Indian Education Act* of 1965. Two years later, the *National Education Policy Act (39 of 1967)* was legislated. For the first time, the

central government laid down a comprehensive education policy to be followed for Whites in all four provinces. The Act stipulated that Christian RE should be offered in all schools for Whites, and that non-Christians may apply for exemption. Regulation R1192 of 20 June 1975 laid down that religious instruction based on the Bible was to be a compulsory subject for student teachers, though exemption could be granted on the grounds of religious conviction (Blumfield, 2008).

After the demise of apartheid, South Africa became a country with a democratic Government in 1994. The situation described above remained in place until 1996, when the *South African Schools Act* (Act 84 of 1996) was promulgated. This Act brought an end to CNE, and to the compulsory Christian RE in state schools. Like Estonia, South Africa has since been a country in transition.

The new RE Policy promulgated in 2003 relegated confessional religion education to religious institutions and parental homes. Religion / Religious Education may now be offered in only two forms in schools: religious observances and formal, academic Religion Studies as a school subject. RE is taught in practically all public schools in accordance with the 2003 Policy. However, some schools still teach confessional (Christian) RE, in contravention of the 2003 Policy. The post-2003 situation has shifted confessional or sectarian religion to the deep private sphere of the parental home and the church, mosque and synagogue.

Reform issues

In **Estonia**, the legal sources describing the relationship between Church and State are national law (the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia and acts which regulate the freedom of religion), international law and the decisions of the courts about fundamental freedom and rights. Article 40 of the Constitution guarantees *freedom of religion* (European Studies on Religion and State Interaction (b), 2012).

The Education Act (RT 1, 1992, 12, 192) states the following as the *general goals of education*: to create favourable conditions for the development of personality, family and the nation; to promote the development of ethnic minorities, economic, political and cultural life in Estonia and the preservation of nature in the global economic and cultural context; to teach the values of citizenship and to set up the prerequisites for creating a tradition of lifelong learning nation-wide (Official Website Estonia, 2012).

The restoration of independence in the early 1990s *presented a new opportunity for RE*. The interrupted tradition of RE stood between several forces: its historical roots; textbooks for confessional RE translated from Finnish and also doubts about the need for any RE in the minds of many people (Schihaleyev, 2012: 6-7). Developing RE in the Post-Socialist period after 50 years of atheistic propaganda remains a challenging task (Valk, 2012: 1). Estonia remains a Christian shaped country, but only 23 % of the population is members of Christian Churches. 11 % of the population belongs to the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and about 10 % to the Orthodox Church. Other religious communities are much smaller (Roman Catholics, Baptists, Jews, Methodists, Muslims, Buddhists and others) (European Studies on Religion and State Interaction (b), 2012). **This diversity draws our attention to the issue of religious tolerance in Estonia.**

With respect to **South Africa**: Its new Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) entrenches *freedom of religion, belief and opinion* (Art 15). *The South African*

Schools Act, No.84 of 1996, does not state any *general goals of education*, but provides as follows regarding religious observances: “Subject to the Constitution and any applicable provincial law, religious observances may be conducted at a public school under rules issued by the governing body if such observances are conducted on an equitable basis and attendance at them by learners and members of staff is free and voluntary.” (Art 7.)

The advent of democracy presented the new Government with new challenges with respect to RE. The main questions were: (a) how to eradicate the Christian-national education past that had been in force from 1967 to 1994? (b) How to bridge the deep religious, cultural, political, ethnical and racial divide that existed among South Africans at the time? (c) How to promote the values of the 1996 Constitution, among other basic human rights, including tolerance of religious and other differences? (d) How to formulate a Policy on Religion in/and Education that would be acceptable to most South Africans?

After many deliberations, the Minister of Education proclaimed the present *Policy of Religion in Education* in 2003. This Policy is in line with the Constitution, the Schools Act and the *Manifesto on Democracy, Values and Education* of the Department of Education in 2001. Stipulations were made for accommodating religious observances in public schools. A new curriculum was designed for the new school subject known as Religion Studies, which is the academic (comparative) study of religions. Proselytizing is not allowed and no special emphasis is placed on any specific religion. The legacy of the apartheid regime has made people distrustful of the abuse of religion for political purposes. This could be the reason why South Africans have quietly acquiesced when confessional religion was banned from the public sphere in terms of its new Constitution (Act 108 of 1996), its latest Policy on religion in schools (2003) and its Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996).

Just as in Estonia, people wish to find their place in the pluralistic world by themselves. South Africa has never experienced a hiatus in the teaching of RE, but is nevertheless facing serious challenges. There are still two unresolved issues: (a) should confessional RE indeed have been banned from public schools, and (b) what should be the nature of RE in a modern secularised and pluralistic society? Although 70% South Africans are nominally Christians, only a small percentage regularly attends church. The remaining percentage is made up of Muslims, Hindus, Jews and indigenous religions. **This diversity also draws our attention to the issue of religious tolerance in South Africa.**

Tolerance issues that emerge from the comparison of the two systems

Intolerance and state domination; societies in transition

Both countries and their education systems went through periods of religious (and other forms of) intolerance and state domination (Estonia – colonisation; Communism, 1940-1991; South Africa – colonisation; apartheid, 1948-1994). However, both seem to have come triumphantly through those tribulations, and can today be regarded as commendable examples of how religious and other forms of diversity in their populace should be managed. This does not mean, however, that they have resolved all their problems. They both remain societies in transition. After

much trial and error, the two countries – quite independently from each other – came up with the following agenda for solving the problem of diversity and difference.

Diversity an asset, tolerance and nation building

Both countries have come to the realization that diversity is an asset which should be cherished and for which provision has to be made, also in the context of RE. In order to deal with their respective religiously diverse populations, Estonia already from 1917 onwards, and South Africa only as recently as 1996, regarded RE as a means for uniting learners from religiously widely differing backgrounds. Both regard religion education as an instrument to help people live together (*modus vivendi*) in a pluralistic and democratic society. As the Open Society Institute for South East Europe (2004: 11) correctly observed, there are several ways of promoting (inter-) religious tolerance:

- Learning about the main religions in the country through schooling helps to bring about cultural understanding and promotes national identity.
- Human rights conventions and international education standards are sufficient to guide national policy on religion and schooling.
- As far as a child's personal religious or spiritual development is concerned, families and religious or faith communities are responsible, not schools.
- Teaching in schools about the various main religions is necessary to increase tolerance and social cohesion.

These four points, it may be said, is an apt summary of the policy stance taken by the education authorities in South Africa.

Recognition of human rights

To reach the aim of *modus vivendi*, both countries insisted on the recognition of basic human rights such as freedom of religion, expression, conscience and opinion (Estonia from 1917 to 1940, and again after 1991; South Africa after 1996). Both now insist on respect for religious differences. Both have come to realize that RE could contribute to nation-building and can form the basis of social justice. This means, as they both came to understand, that RE should be inclusive (Estonia from 1917 to 1940, and again after 1991; South Africa only from 1996).

Rejection of state and church domination

While both their governments are now playing an important role in promulgating legislation and policies, they both reject state domination (Estonia from 1991, and South Africa from 1996). Both countries also maintain cordial relationships with the main-stream churches and religions, but insist on a separation between state and church (which can be construed as a form of secularism); they reject the notion of a state or national church, and reject any form of church domination. Religion education may also not be used as a means to increase church membership (Estonia from 1917; South Africa since 1910).

RE an important educational instrument

Both Estonia (since 1917) and South Africa (from 1996) regard RE as an important form of education to guide people to spiritual maturity. The subject may therefore only be taught according to pedagogical principles (not state- or church-inspired principles). It should furthermore only be controlled by pedagogical authorities. This finding chimes with an observation by Schreiner (2005: 3): “In many countries ... there has been a development from a confessionally oriented approach to a non-confessional one... (...) Nowadays RE as a subject in schools is taught chiefly in line with the criteria of general education. It is understood as learning about religion (knowledge based) and learning from religion (based on the experience and existential questions of the students)”. In Estonia as well as in South Africa, the authorities have rejected the model of “education into religion” (introducing pupils into a specific faith tradition) and favoured the models of “education about religion” (knowledge about various religions) and “learning from religion” (giving learners the opportunity to consider different answers to major religious and moral issues to help them develop their own views in a reflective way) (Schreiner, 2005: 1).

Didactical aspects

As far as didactical aspects are concerned, the two systems seem to have accepted the following principles. RE in the schools should cover all the main world religions, and should instil dialogical skills and tolerance. Not only should intolerance be rejected, but inter-religious tolerance should be actively promoted (Estonia from 1917 to 1940, and again after 1991; South Africa after 1996). RE should furthermore be inter-confessional (Estonia after 1991) or non-confessional (South Africa after 2003), learners should have the right to opt out (Estonia from 1917 to 1940, again after 1991; South Africa since 1910); there is no place for indoctrination, and it should be offered in public schools wherever possible.

Conclusion

The histories of Estonia and South Africa show such a number of remarkable resemblances that a comparison of the two countries in terms of culture, religion, religion studies / religious instruction, society and diversity has been quite viable. They even share dark periods of state and foreign domination, and some of their key dates broadly coincide. Although they are geographically far apart, and as far as could be established, had no relations, they seem to have struggled with much the same set of problems regarding the provision of RE in their schools. The comparison brought a number of rather clear-cut principles regarding inter-religious tolerance to the surface.

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