

CHARL WOLHUTER**PROLEGOMENA TO AN INTERNATIONAL-COMPARATIVE EDUCATION RESEARCH PROJECT ON RELIGION IN EDUCATION****Abstract**

Despite claims that the present age is a post-religious one, evidence is not hard to find of the force of religion in the lives of individual people, in societies and in national and world affairs. From the inception of schools millennia ago, religion and education have been closely entangled. The past fifty years witnessed momentous changes regarding policies on the relation between religion and education. However, all these have been by-passed by the Comparative Education research agenda. In response to this lacuna, the author outlines the planning for an international comparative education research project that is about to commence, and in which conference delegates are invited to participate.

Introduction

Despite claims that the present world is a post-religious world, evidence is not hard to find of the force of religion as a factor in the lives of people and of societies. The challenge of finding an appropriate relation between education and religion also remains unresolved. This paper commences by providing evidence of the force of religion in the world of today. Secondly, the main challenges relating to the relation between education and religion are explained. In view of these momentous challenges and of the persistence of religion as a factor in modern society, the low visibility of the subject of religion in education on the agenda of Comparative Education is disturbing. The author is part of an international research project into certain aspects of religion in education. The paper ends with the outline of the agenda for this research project, and with an invitation to conference delegates to participate in the proposed research.

The persistence of religion as a factor in twenty-first century society

A large percentage of the global population still professes to be religious. In a recent survey in 230 countries, for example, 84 percent of the participants declared that they adhered to some or other organized religious grouping (Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, 2012). Even though those without any affiliation to a organized religious grouping amount to around 1.1 billion people, thereby constituting 16 percent of the global population, making it the third largest religious grouping after Christianity and the Islam, many of those in this category are not atheists or agnostic; 68 percent of the people in the USA who do not belong to any organized religious grouping, for instance, still believe in the existence of God (*Ibid.*; cf. also Butler-Bass, 2012).

Unsavoury incidents of an inter-religious nature frequently raise their head in national and global politics. While 9/11 in the USA comes to mind in this regard, it was not an isolated case. The recent birth of South Sudan was prompted by *inter alia*, religious differences and violent friction between the predominantly Muslim

North and the predominantly Christian South of the erstwhile state of Sudan. Last year, violence was visited upon Westerners and Christians (for instance, the assassination of the American ambassador in Libya) in Libya, Palestine and elsewhere as a result of the production of a cinema film which adherents of the Islam religion felt to be a vilification of and an insult to their religion. Respected analyst, S.P. Huntington, in his publication *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), portrayed the world after the end of the Cold War as a place where eight civilization blocs would be set up against one another. Each of these civilization blocs has a very clearly visible religious base: the Protestant cum Catholic North-American-Western European bloc, the Christian-Orthodox-Eastern European bloc, the Islamic Middle-East and Northern African bloc, the Hindu South Asia bloc, the Confucian East-Asian bloc, the Shinto Japanese and the Sub-Saharan Africa bloc (each with a unique, though complicated religious pattern).

Religion and education

With religion being such a strong force in the lives of individuals and also in the dynamics of societies and the world order, it comes as no surprise that religion and education are, as they have always been, intimately involved with each other. During the largest part of the history of humankind, (public) schools were openly based on certain religious ground motives, and they all had a particular religious mission. According to the best evidence, schools came into being for the first time by around 3 000 BC, shortly after the innovation of writing, with the purpose of training scribes, i.e. professionals with the dual function of administering the state and presiding over organized religion (Bowen, 1981: 1). According to Yehudi Cohen (1970) in his theory on the origin of schools, the function of these early schools was to teach scholars to read and write so that they could become the religious leaders as well as the administrators of the civil service. The final goal of schooling was to ensure the integrity of state. This entanglement between organized religion, political structures and education remained in place through the ages. In the Middle Ages, for example, the only available schools in the Holy Roman Empire (with its twin structures of religion and politics, right up to the positions of the Pope and the Emperor) were church schools, Cathedral schools and monastic schools. This relationship between religion and education continued after the introduction of mass public primary school systems in the nineteenth century in the states of Western Europe and North America as well as during the spread of missionary schools and colonial primary schools in the extra-Western parts of the world (*cf.* Wolhuter, 2011).

While it would be easy, and not devoid of any truth, to portray public schools as places where the dominant religion of the state is foisted upon the populace as part of schools' function to ensure the political hegemony of the state (this is an interpretation of Cohen's hypothesis, a favorite among proponents of conflict paradigms such as that of cultural reproduction or classical Marxism), this is at best an incomplete truth. The presence of religion in schools should be viewed and judged in the light of all the different functions of religion in human and social life, as well as of the nature and aims of education. The functions of religion in human and social life are to give meaning and purpose to life and to the world, to create a common ethical system in society, and to provide support in handling the demands

and challenges of life and of the world (Prouix, 2007: 6). If education is conceptualized as the guiding of the educand to adulthood (to live a meaningful life as an independent adult), then religion becomes a valuable (as far as the religious educator is concerned, even an indispensable) element of the education project.

Be it as it may, after centuries, even millennia, of schools having had a mono-religious ethos and mission, this model became untenable by the second half of the twentieth century - for a number of reasons. These include, firstly, the rising creed of Human Rights. The experience of the Twentieth Century, especially the atrocities of the two World Wars, brought home to the international community the dangers of a disregard of human rights. After the Second World War the issue of Human Rights became internationalized, *inter alia* through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the member states of the United Nations (UN), followed by a host of other international conventions on human rights (South African Law Commission, 1989: 50-63). These Rights entrenched the freedom of religion and conscience as well as the right not to have any religion foisted upon the populace by the state through whatever means, including education (*Ibid.*: 69). The second factor was the rise of increasingly diverse, multicultural societies, including multi-religious societies, in an age of globalization and an increasingly mobile population. A communications and technological revolution resulted in an increasingly mobile global population. One in every 33 people in the world of today is an international migrant (International Organization for Migration, 2012), as opposed to one in every 35 in the year 2000 (Steyn & Wolhuter, 2008: 16). The number of international migrants in the world rose from 79 million in 1960 to 175 million in 2000 (Steyn & Wolhuter, 2008: 16) to 214 million in 2012 (International Organization for Migration, 2012). In Finland, long regarded as an extremely closed society, the number of foreigners as recently as 1990 amounted to only 9 000; this figure shot up to 200 000 by 2008 (Swallow, 2008: 70).

States responded variously to this new context, but generally their education policies fell in with the broader trend of secularization. Put differently, an attempt was made to shift religion out of the public arena to the private space (*cf.* Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2005). A general strategy was to terminate the tuition of confessional religious education in public schools (i.e. education in which one particular religion is taught with the aim of converting students to that religion or to inculcate the tenets of a specific religion in students) and to replace it with a subject called integrated religious education (*cf.* Loobuyck & Franken, 2011). This subject acquainted students with the major religions in the world, one of the main objectives of this approach being to develop knowledge, understanding, respect and tolerance of religious diversity (*cf.* Hagesaether & Sandsmark, 2006). Other variations of this approach include a total excision of religion from education, as was the case in France prior to the appointment of the Debray Commission in 2001.

This approach is, however, also beset with problems. For instance, it does not take into account the nature of religion and the force it represents in the lives of humans (thus rendering it impossible to gain a full understanding of religion by only presenting it in an objective, cognitive, comparative fashion from a distance). It also does not take into account the increasing individualization of religion (for a more detailed explanation of these problems, *cf.* Van der Walt *et al.*, 2010). A complete banning of religion from education, in the process following the creed of

secularization to its absolute limits, is also impossible. Religion is simply too entangled with art, literature, history, civics or whatever subject might be taught in schools (*cf.* Wolhuter, 2012). There is also the problem that the Human Rights referred to above could be interpreted to say that the student is free to decide, or that his/her parents could use their religious freedom and right over their children to decide, about the religious education and religious ethos of the school of their children (*cf.* Malherbe, 2004). Finally, there is the question as to how effective the subject of integrated religion could be in ensuring inter-religious tolerance, how the subject should be taught (method) and what exactly should be taught (curriculum) to reach this objective.

Religion and Comparative Education

Despite constituting a significant force in the lives of individuals and of society, and notwithstanding the momentous changes in policy regarding religion in education during the past half century, and despite the fact that many issues have so far remained unresolved, the Comparative Education research agenda seems to have bypassed this theme. In a recently published survey of the first fifty years of the *Comparative Education Review*, the most eminent journal in the field of Comparative Education, it has been found that in no five year period in this review did more than ten percent of articles focus on religion as a shaping force of education systems (Wolhuter, 2008: 338). Even worse, in no five year period did the effect of education on religious issues constitute more than nine percent of the focus of articles published (*Ibid.*: 339). With respect to the effect of education on inter-religious tolerance, for example, no study comparable to the classical study of Harbison and Meyers (1964) about the effect of education on economic growth exists, or to the many studies on the effect of education on population growth (*cf.* Coetzee, 1990), or to the massive IEA cross-national study on civic education.

Invitation to participate in an international-comparative research project on religion and education

Inspired by *inter alia* the lacunae described above, the author and two colleagues have commenced with an international comparative research project on religion and education, the first leg of which will be to conduct research on the effect of education, in particular religious education, on inter-religious tolerance. At this stage there are participants from South Africa, the Netherlands, Estonia and Greece, and also expressions of interest from Australia and Singapore. Delegates at the conference are invited to participate in this research project.

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