

International Standards for Religious Education - In Conversation with John M. Hull

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This paper has a dual focus. The title states two purposes - first, the search for international standards for religious education and, second, being in conversation with John M. Hull - which, at first glance, may appear completely unrelated. This is why the first section of this paper is dedicated to the dual question of why we need international standards and why we need international dialogue in religious education. The second section has the task of identifying what I call emerging agreements in European religious education. In the final section I want to discuss the issue of international standards in the context of recent standardized international achievement tests (PISA) which, so far, have been remarkably silent about religious education and values.

1. Why Do We Need International Standards, and Why Do We Need International Dialogue in Religious Education?

Just like many other forms of praxis in church or society, religious education has developed within local or, later in history, within national contexts. As long as the different churches or religious communities more or less coincided with the boundaries of a nation state, or as long as there were only two or three major religious communities within one country as it was the case, for example, in Germany almost until the present, there was not much of a need to look beyond one's own community or nation. In theory and practice, religious education could be carried out and even be improved by relying exclusively on one's own traditions.

So it is no coincidence that the attempt of internationalizing religious education did not really emerge before the twentieth century (cf. Osmer/Schweitzer in print). Even if there may have been earlier examples of international cooperation and research - like John Amos Comenius as an international reformer of the seventeenth century-, their contribution in terms of internationalization has mostly been overlooked and has long been forgotten. This is different for religious educators like George Albert Coe (1911) in the United States of America who based his model for institutionalizing religious education under the conditions of the separation between church and state on an evaluation on experiences in different European countries, or like Otto Eberhard (1930) who, under the influence of the early ecumenical movement, tried to identify worldwide educational tendencies as a basis for future work. Yet it is probably fair to say that it was not before the 1960s and 1970s that internationalization really took hold in the field of religious education. Again the ecumenical movement played a role in this process in that it supported, for example, through the gatherings and conferences sponsored by the World Council of Churches, the growing awareness of the importance of education for all types of

ecumenical work. The concept of ecumenical education or ecumenical learning goes back to that time. At about the same time, more and more religious educators within the academic world slowly came to realize that their work could greatly profit from cooperation with colleagues from other countries. The most important and most powerful institution at this level has been ISREV - the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values - which was founded in 1977 and which testifies to the ingenuity most of all of one of its founders and prime leaders ever since - John M. Hull who later became the first professor of religious education in England and Wales. ISREV's casual and open atmosphere which has become quite well-known way beyond the immediate guild of academic religious educators, is somewhat indicative of the guiding model of internationalization which could be used in the 1970s and 1980s in the field of religious education. This model flourished on the experience of freely exchanging new ideas and theories, insights into current models and fresh data as developed or gathered in different countries.

Roughly speaking with the 1990s, times have changed again, and the issue of internationalization has become much more serious and challenging for religious education. The dual impact of globalization and of the emerging European Community as a political body of its own has made it mandatory to look beyond one's own country not only in terms of an academic exchange of ideas, data, and theories but also in terms of political systems, legal frameworks, and in terms of national and international conflict. Within the political institutions of the European Community, for example, there is a clear tendency to consider religion and religious education as a private matter which should not interfere with public education. Or, to mention a recent example from the field of general education, the much discussed PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment) of the OECD (2001) does not even take into consideration the meaning of values or of religious education as a factor of educational success. Given this situation it has become more and more important that religious education in Europe will develop the capacity of speaking with a voice of its own (cf. Schweitzer 2001). Others, like state agencies or representatives of general education, will not speak for religious education or, if they do, they will probably speak in a way which is not helpful or acceptable for religious educators' claim to public relevance.

The voice of religious education in Europe must become much stronger, and it must also become more unified if we want the public to listen to it. Therefore we should work towards something like a European Association for Religious Education which could serve as a superstructure for the various existing smaller initiatives which now, in a first step towards this goal, have established CoGREE (Co-ordinating Group for Religious Education, founded in 1999). This association should also be closely related to the churches and religious communities as well as to the representatives of the parents at a European level - an idea which I cannot pursue in any detail here. Beyond the formation of a European association as a political basis and as part of the work of such an association, there is the task of articulating what I want to call *international standards for religious education*. These standards should refer to what specialists in the field of religious education can agree to

internationally. In other words, I am thinking of agreed standards of good practice in religious education.

Saying this, I am of course aware of how difficult it may sound to reach any agreement about such standards. There clearly are many divisions and open debates in this field, and there have been long-lasting disagreements between certain approaches in different countries, etc. Meaningful agreements can only be reached if this situation of pluralism and open discussion is taken into account. Yet I am still convinced that, underneath or above the respective debates, there is something like an emerging agreement at least among many professional religious educators in Europe and even beyond. And this is why I think that it would be quite worthwhile to make the attempt of uncovering this agreement.

For obvious reasons which are an immediate implication of the aim pursued in the present paper, such an attempt can only be undertaken in a joint international effort. So this paper which has been written by a single German author, can only be a very modest first step or, rather, it can only open the discussion by suggesting the direction into which further steps should be taken.

With this in mind, I want to suggest five possible points of agreement about standards for religious education in Europe. And I will do so, as a German religious educator, in dialogue with J. Hull, a representative from the UK and one of the most influential voices in the field of religious education at an international level. In doing this, I do not intend to do justice to J. Hull's work in any comprehensive sense. Rather, I will offer my own perspectives on some of his major publications, in order to make visible what I consider emerging agreements in European religious education.

2. Emerging Agreements in European Religious Education

1) Religion must and can be taught in line with the criteria of general education:

In my understanding, this is the basic agreement on which religious education in public schools in Europe is based today. In contrast to earlier versions of catechetical instruction which were defined and determined exclusively through their relationship to the church, the educational understanding of religious education is based on the tasks of the school and of education in general. According to this view, RE is necessary and legitimate not because the church or a religious community is interested in seeing it taught. Rather, it is necessary and legitimate because it is part of what children and adolescents need in order to grow up in a healthy and intelligent manner, and of what society needs in order to maintain ethical standards, peace and tolerance between the various different groups in society.

This agreement has been reached in different countries roughly during the same period of time, i.e., the time after the 1960s. J. Hull's *Studies in Religion and Education* (Hull 1984) can be considered one of the major publications which, at the same time, summarize and symbolize this educational understanding. Undoubtedly,

it has been this understanding which has made it possible to have RE in public schools after many or most of the legal, political, or social coalitions between church and state have come to an end.

How far does this agreement go? In England and Wales (at least in part) the agreement rests upon the understanding of having, once and for all, made the transition “from Christian Nurture to Religious Education” (Hull 1984, 27ff.). Many colleagues there, and especially J. Hull, consider this transition as mandatory. Yet it is easy to see that many other countries, especially in central and southern Europe, have found different ways of establishing what J. Hull calls “educational religious education” (Hull 1998, 5ff.). This observation suggests that there are in fact different possibilities for maintaining an educational religious education and that these different possibilities deserve closer scrutiny. For my present purposes it is enough to say that the disagreement about the shape of RE should not prevent us from upholding the agreement about its educational character as a first and basic standard for RE in Europe.

2) RE is of relevance to the public and must be taught in line with this relevance:

While agreement on this point may be somewhat less widespread than on my first point, the majority of religious educators in Europe seems to be convinced that religious education and democracy can go together *without* confining religion to the private realm. From the point of view of many religions, privatization means reducing religion to a matter of inner feelings. Opposed to the “cultivation of the inward” (cf. Hull 1998, 65), religion is related to values and to ethical norms which apply to society and from which society can profit for its moral basis.

In virtually all of his publications, J. Hull has maintained the view that religious educators have an important task as critics of social and religious ideologies and that religious education today must particularly entail the critical assessment of the money culture of western societies (see the German collection of J. Hull’s various essays on *God and Money*, Hull 2000). Not everyone will agree with his special approach to this task which is informed, among others, by the Frankfurt School of sociology and by French neo- or post-structuralism. Yet it is again easy to see, that the existence of different approaches to this dimension does not imply that there can be no agreement about the public relevance of religious education which, therefore, I suggest as a second standard for RE in Europe.

3) RE must include some type of interdenominational and interreligious learning:

Given the multicultural and multireligious character of most European societies it is obvious that RE can no longer be confined to introducing children and adolescents to just one religious tradition. It is no coincidence that peace and tolerance between the religions are among the main aims formulated by politicians at a national or

international level today. The Christian churches also agree that the idea of *ecumene* must be included with religious education, and the dialogue between the different religions has at least made considerable headway.

What is still under much debate and what has not received sufficient attention in research is the way in which this kind of learning can be realized in the RE classroom. J. Hull's pioneering work in the context of the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus (Hull 1984) and his model for teaching different religions to young children "A Gift to the Child" (Hull 1996) must be counted among the most advanced examples in this area. Yet by far not all possibilities for including ecumenical and interreligious learning have been explored so far. To mention just one example, the so-called cooperative RE in Germany leads to new perspectives for including different religious traditions and points of view in an authentic manner (cf. Schweitzer/Biesinger 2002). More discussions and more research on processes of learning in this area of RE are needed. But even today there can be no doubt that there can be no legitimate future RE in Europe without ecumenical and interreligious learning so that we can speak of a third agreement in this respect.

4) *RE must be based on the children's right to religion and religious education:*

This argument refers back to the first consideration about RE and general education. Moreover, it refers to children's rights in general and specifically to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) as a corollary of the increasing awareness of these rights. This convention includes "the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development" (Art. 27.1) but it falls short of connecting this right to religious education. Yet J. Hull was among the first to point out the connection between "religious education and the spiritual rights of children" (Hull 1998, 59) thus making it clear that spiritual or religious rights should not only be talked about in the abstract but should have clear educational consequences (cf. Schweitzer 2000).

This view has important implications for the shape of religious education which must be in line with children's right to religion. Independently of all details which can not be discussed here, religious education must be based on the needs and interests of the child, and it must most closely follow the child's development. Moreover, it must respect the religious expressions of the child as his or her own creative production which must not be considered immature or inappropriate only because they are different from the expectations of adults. Again we owe a most wonderful publication to J. Hull who, in his *God-Talk with Young Children* (Hull 1991), convincingly advocates the view that children can be partners in religious dialogue from early on.

The acceptance of children's right to religion and to religious education has not yet been achieved on a legal level. Yet for religious educators in Europe this right stands for a fourth emerging agreement about RE in Europe.

5) *RE teachers must have reached a level of self-reflexivity which allows for a critical appropriation of their religious biographies:*

Anyone who wants to teach RE in line with the standards and expectations of general education and in line with children's right to religion, must not only have studied the field of religion or theology at an academic level which in itself implies the acquisition of a general professional attitude vis-à-vis religious beliefs and convictions, for example, through critical exegesis of the Bible. In addition to this, teachers should have had a chance to critically reflect on their own religious biographies in order to acquire a personal professional attitude vis-à-vis their own religious beliefs and convictions. Only such a personal attitude will enable them to do justice to children whose religious expressions are different from their and which they may even find offensive because of their content or because of their (apparently) childish character.

J. Hull has made important contributions in this direction of biographical religious self-reflexivity as well. His *Touching the Rock* (Hull 1990) is not only a masterpiece of literature which introduces readers to the experience of blindness through the author's own biography. It is also a model for how a religious educator can reflect on his own life history in a religious and theological manner. Moreover, J. Hull's critical study on adult education *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (Hull 1984) also indicates how critical self-awareness and religion in adulthood can and should go together. While the book was written for adult educators, it can no less be used in the context of teacher training and RE.

The fifth and last agreement which emerges in this respect, consequently concerns the training of teachers who will be able to maintain the high standards of RE implied by the first four agreements. From my point of view, biographical self-reflectivity is a key factor for this kind of training but this does not mean that other factors are less important. Again the agreement is about the general quality and direction of teacher training for RE, not about details which will always be treated differently in different countries and contexts.

3. A Current Example: PISA's Silence About Religion and Values

The most recent OECD study on student achievement in international comparative perspective, the PISA study published in 2001 (OECD 2001, for Germany see Deutsches PISA-Konsortium 2001), is a telling example for the need for international standards for religious education. According to many educators and psychologists, PISA is the most detailed and most refined study of its kind. Its main focus is on reading literacy, with a minor focus on achievement levels in mathematics and the natural sciences. Background variables considered in detail are mostly aspects of the students' so-called cultural and social capital (income, educational level and type of employment of the parents, etc.). Values are given very limited attention (mostly in the sense of social orientations in classroom situations). Religion or religious

education are barely mentioned and in any case not included in the PISA research.

The results of PISA have received a lot of attention in Germany (mostly because German students did not do very well on the tests). The findings on German students' level of reading literacy are also of interest for religious education in that low reading ability will also make religious education more difficult. Yet what must be even more alarming to religious educators is the exclusion of values and of religion from what is considered worth testing. Religion and religious education are once more treated as matters of private interest only. Their possible relevance for public life and for judging the quality of an educational system is neglected or denied.

In the absence of even a working agreement about what criteria could be used for measuring the success of RE at an international level, PISA's silence about religion and values may be understandable but it still must be deplored. Or, to put it the other way round: PISA's silence clearly indicates the need for international standards for religious education.

The five emerging agreements pointed out above admittedly can be no more than a very first step in the direction of identifying such standards. More specifically, I do not consider them as standards in any operational sense but rather as a basis on which such standards can be formulated in the future. PISA includes very refined scales for identifying different levels of reading literacy. They range from extracting simple information from a basic text to the more complex levels of interpretation and evaluation of difficult documents. This kind of scales raises the question if it would not be possible or even desirable to design similar scales in the areas of religion and values. For example, students could be asked to explain religious or moral terminology and concepts (for example: What exactly does 'fundamentalism' mean? What are the problems and dangers inherent in the use of this concept? What is 'religious superiority'? etc.). More basic questions could focus on religious knowledge (for example: Which religions have been most influential in Europe? What cultural achievements does Europe owe to Islam? What is the historical relationship between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam? What is the percentage of Europeans belonging to the Orthodox Church?). Others could refer to ethical questions (for example: Evaluate the following statements: 'religions are one of the strongest sources of violence' - 'religious freedom finds its limits where it jeopardizes the public order'. Or more complex and demanding: 'Is religion only a private matter?'). Such questions are obviously in no danger of suggesting that they measure personal faith or religious commitment. And given the political expectations mentioned above, they could certainly lend plausibility to the academic status of RE as well as to its contribution to education for peace, justice, and tolerance.

To the degree, that religious education makes available standards and criteria for student achievement, it can also set forth much more vigorously the demand that international student testing should not--and does not have to be - limited to skills related to language, mathematics, and the natural sciences, unless it should be true that our educational systems have their only true focus on what is marketable and what may strengthen one's own country in terms of global competition.

It has been a major goal of many religious educators in Europe - and certainly of

J. Hull as one of their leaders and spokesmen - that the aims of education should not be determined by the spirit of money alone but should be shaped, at a much deeper level, by the human and divine spirit which can turn enemies into friends, which is the power of liberation from all oppression, and which works toward justice against all the injustices created by a culture of relentless competition and hostility.

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