

# INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION :

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***Title: Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: Depicting pupils' views throughout Greece***

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**1. Introduction: The Religious dimension in Intercultural Education and Diversity- the case of Greece**

Greece is one European country which during the last twenty years is characterised as a reception, multicultural country. As a result of this new situation, the multicultural diversity has been reflected upon its educational system revealing new educational needs and challenging the existing national school practices and measures, school's lessons, textbooks and curricula.

As far as the lesson of Religion in the Greek educational system is concerned, until very recently, this was a compulsory one. For first time, this academic year, this lesson became an optional one. One of the reasons for this change, amongst others, was that since almost all Greek classes are multicultural ones, this new situation calls the mono-centric religious orientation (i.e. Christian Orthodox) to broaden its spectrum and include also the teaching of other religions.

In many countries worldwide, religion plays an important role in public life. As far as Greece is concerned, it has always been a key element in public and social life, also in the educational system. Until now religious education in Greece is a compulsory module taught in a confessional and catechist way, while Orthodoxy saturates school culture, making the Greek educational system intolerant towards pupils of different religious backgrounds (Efstathiou et al. 2008).

Intercultural Education and diversity consist a new challenge and fundamental aspect of all societies that respects differences between individuals and differences between groups. The existence of multiple identities, values, cultures and faiths within a society challenges individuals and groups to cultivate mutual understanding in order to engage in cooperative interaction and experience cultural enrichment. Without mutual understanding, differences may generate conflicts that, when managed with violence, lead to considerable violations of fundamental human rights. Intercultural Education, encompassing the themes of inclusion and participation and the motto of "learning to live together" provides a means of handling the challenges posed by multiculturalism in a context that promotes democratic standards for conflict resolution (Villano Qiriazzi, CoE-Strasbourg 2007).

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**2. Religious Education**

Religious education curricula, independent from the religion to which they refer to, intend to create an ethos where the children have respect for others. In combating the stereotypes that characterize racist language, cultural and religious categories are not taken to be uniform 'wholes'. The complexity and diversity of cultural interaction needs to be represented. Baumann (1999, p.141) gives the following advice:

*"Try to unrefify all accepted reifications by finding crosscutting cleavages. Whenever the reifying discourse talks about citizens or aliens, purple or green ethnics, believers or atheists, ask about rich or poor citizens, powerful or manipulated ethnics, married or sexual minority believers. Who are the minorities within*

*majorities, who are the unseen majorities right across minorities? Combine every method of questioning to every possible category around you, for the permutations are endless when it comes to questioning reifications”.*

Weisse’s approach to what he calls “intercultural/ inter-religious learning”, combines elements of religious education and education for citizenship (Weisse 1996a, 1996b, 2003). This approach, ethically grounded in human rights codes, aims to foster communication within multicultural societies. Weisse (2003, p.194) sees issues such as relativism, undermining faith and challenging the absoluteness of Christianity as part of the debate that young people should engage in:

*“While the spectrum of topics points to the many similarities between the religions, dialogue in Religious Education is also designed to demonstrate the differences between religious traditions...Dialogue in the classroom fosters respect for other religious commitments, can confirm pupils’ views or help them to make their own commitments whilst also allowing them to monitor their commitments critically”.*

Difference is recognized, and pupils are encouraged to find their own epistemological standpoint. Pupils practise the skills of listening, of comparing and contrasting their own views with those of others, and of empathy. Weisse recognises that dialogue in school can lead to conflict. This is regarded as normal, and conflicts are worked through as part of religious education, with pupils sometimes having to agree and accept that differences cannot be resolved (Weisse 1996b, pp. 275–276; 2003).

Teachers can use the positive aspects and dimensions of religion to foster interfaith and intercultural understandings especially in the Greek educational context that follows a ‘mono-dogmatic and catechistic’ direction (Efstathiou et al. 2008).

However, religious differences as an aspect of multiculturalism continue to raise controversies and challenges in the areas of ensuring equality in education; facilitating inclusion in political, economic, and cultural dimensions of society; and creating a sense of shared citizenship. Specifically, the questions concerning religion in schools have illustrated the highly complex and sensitive natures of the issues involved and demonstrate the need for religious diversity to be addressed as a component of Intercultural Education. Developing the ability to interact productively in a multicultural context is not intuitive but must be acquired, or learned. It is therefore imperative that the management of religious diversity within a democratic framework be included in the larger contexts of intercultural dialogue and education for democratic citizenship. Calling attention to the religious dimension of Intercultural Education will serve to foster a dialogue of common identities, cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution (Villano Qiriazzi, CoE-Strasbourg 2007).

The European Ministers of Education Declaration from 10-12 November 2003 in Athens, Greece, the 21st session of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education adopted a declaration on Intercultural Education in the new European context, acting upon the 2002 decision of the Secretary General —to make intercultural and interfaith dialogue one of the major axes of the Council of Europe’s development. This declaration, in affirming —the diversity of our societies in terms of "ethnicity, culture, languages, religions and education" and asserting awareness of the disturbing persistence in our societies of xenophobic and racist practices, violence and intolerance, "supported the resolution to —make the necessary arrangements to take intercultural education into account as an important component of our education policies" including appropriate measures at the levels of curricula, school governance and teacher training.

In brief, the religious dimension of Intercultural Education is linked to the political motivation of promoting intercultural dialogue as a means of strengthening democracy in Europe.

This study is also an effort to examine the Greek case in the issue of Religion against two different perspectives: the globalist perspective and that of the sceptics.

## 2. Methodology of the study

The *aim* of this study was to explore the views of Secondary Education pupils (14-16 year age group), throughout Greece, towards religious issues, with special emphasis on their views towards the religion diversity and freedom.

In general, the aim of the study was dual: on one hand to depict the current situation in Greece concerning the ideas of pupils about religion issues on an intercultural approach, and on the other hand, to provide specific suggestions concerning the lesson of Religious Education on a European dimension.

Finally, since this is an empirical, comparative study which has been implemented in many European countries, during 2006-2009, the ultimate goal was to take advantage of its results and make suggestions about Teaching Religious and Belief issues at schools on an intercultural basis in order to gain better insight into how European citizens of different religious, cultural and political backgrounds can live together and enter into dialogue of mutual respect and understanding.

A questionnaire (with open questions) was addressed to a random sample of 350 (N) pupils focusing on the issue how religions and religious values can contribute to either intercultural dialogue in Europe rather than constituting an issue of conflict. This study was implemented as part of a broader European funded research project entitled "REDCo": **R**eligion in **E**ducation. A contribution to **D**ialogue or a factor of **C**onflict in transforming societies of European countries. Participating countries are: Germany, Netherlands, England/Wales, France, Russia, Estonia, Norway, Spain and Greece<sup>1</sup>.

The aim of the RedCo Project is (Weisse 2007):

- to establish and compare the potentials and limitations of religion in the educational systems of selected European countries.
- to analyse approaches and constellations that can contribute in making religion into a factor for promoting dialogue in the context of European social coherence.
- to lay the foundation for our understanding of the contribution that religion in education can make towards the transformation processes underway in various European countries.
- to gain the necessary historical depth of perception and analytical clarity in order to address the current problems of, and perspectives on, the core questions of dialogue and conflict between European identities.

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## **2.1. Characteristics of the sample**

The sample consists of 119 boys (38.51%) and 190 girls (61.48%). Concerning the urbanity of the area they live, 31 pupils (10.03%) live in urban city, 227 (73.46%) in town and 51 (16.50%) in villages. As far as the class they attend: 4 pupils (1.29%) attend the 1st year of junior high school (called gymnasium), 61 pupils (19.74%) the 2nd year, 118 (38.18%) the 3rd year of high school, 46 pupils (14.88%) attend the 1st class of High School (lyceum), 34 pupils (11%) attend the 2nd class of High School (lyceum) and 46 pupils (14.88%) attend the 3rd (last) class of High School.

Regarding the nationality of pupils, 303 pupils (98.05%) are Greek, 5 pupils (1.61%) are Albanian and 1 student (0.32%) is from Russia.

Almost all pupils, 304 in total, believe in the Greek Orthodox religion (98.38%), only 5 pupils have different beliefs (1.61%). The majority of pupils were born in Greece, which is 304 pupils (98.38%), only 5 pupils (1.61%) abroad. The same is for their parents, 295 (95.46%) were born in Greece and 14 (4.5%) abroad.

Finally, as far as the language they prefer speaking at home with their parents (family language), 283 pupils (91.58%) speak Greek, 8 pupils (2.58%) speak Albanian and 18 pupils (5.82%) speak the Russian language.

## **3. Presentation and analysis of the results**

Factor analysis extracts factor diagrams (axes and planes) that aid the interpretation of the analysed phenomenon. The analysis in this paper utilized the software application S-Pro v.2.0 (Koutsoupas, 2005).

For each factorial axis, the method produces tables containing informative indices, such as coordinates (1st/2nd Fact), the contribution (COR) and quality of representation (CTR) coefficients for all involved subjects and characteristics/patterns/attributes.

In the resulting axes and planes the arrangement for both row (subject) and column (variable category) points can conveniently be seen, allowing for a quick view on data formations, trends and groupings.

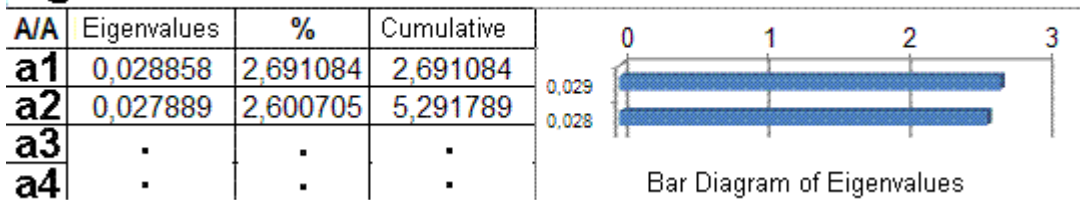
Moreover, the method provides the means for a definition of the level of importance of contribution (COR) and quality of representation (CTR) of rows and columns, for all factorial axes. This aids in focusing to important information in the resulting patterns.

The available data set is analysed using FA (Papadimitriou, 2007) due to the need for simultaneous processing and depiction both of qualitative and quantitative variables. This method constitutes a fit choice after the categorization of quantitative variables (Kioseogloy, 2006), and moreover, the use of FA since it offers the advantage of the absence of statistical hypotheses and data models.

### **3.1. Inertia and eigenvalues**

The following table contains the eigenvalues for the first two axes:

## Eigenvalues for the first two axes



### 3.2. The first factorial axis

Axis  $a_1$  is the closest line to the cloud of points representing the variable categories of the participating subjects and at the same time,  $a_1$  carries the strongest contrast among groups of points. It shows an inertia percentile of about 2,9% (eigenvalue of 0,0288), an acceptable value, taking into account that there are 274 variable categories included in the analysis.

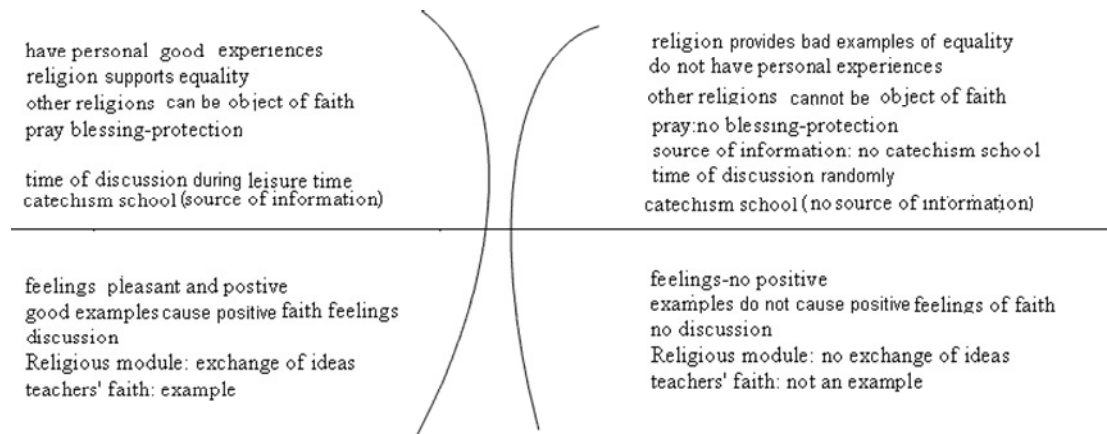


Fig 1: The first factorial axis

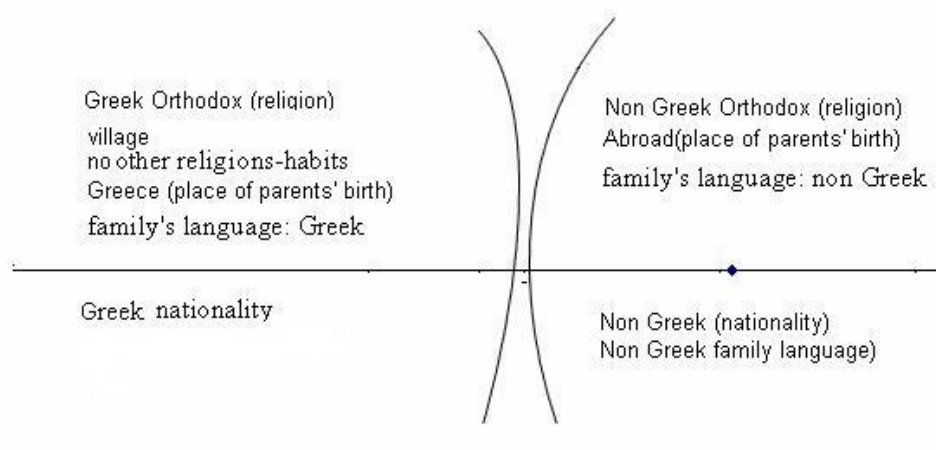
According to the *1st factorial axis*, it seems that there are two different groups of students who are grouped according to their **personal experiences and feelings** as far as their attitudes towards other religions are concerned, also as far as the significance of the Religious module (as lesson at school) is concerned. Group A, on the left, consists of those pupils who appear to have a positive personal attitude about religion because of good experiences they have in their lives. This group has a positive attitude towards other religions (they can be an object of faith), believe that religion supports equality; also that religion offers the opportunity for discussion and exchange of ideas. According to this group, teacher's own personal faith and beliefs can be a good example for his/her pupils. Moreover, these pupils are taught about religion through the catechism method on Sunday School.

On the contrary, it seems that Group B, on the right, do not have good personal experiences about religion, and believe that religion offers bad examples of non-equality. Contrary to Group A, it seems that Group B has not developed a positive attitude towards religion and does not believe that teacher's own personal faith could influence pupils' personal beliefs.

### 3.2. The second factorial axis

Axis a2 carries an eigenvalue of 0,278 and interprets 2,6% of the total available inertia. It depicts looser relations, since usually separates mean from extreme trends among formed groupings:

Fig. 2: The second factorial axis



According to the *2nd factorial axis*, it seems that there are two different groups of students which are grouped according to **their nationality and family language** as far as issues of religious habits, customs and church's practices and celebrations are concerned.

In other words, Group A, on the left consists of Greeks, who believe in the Greek nationality, speak the Greek as first language and do not adopt or are not open to non-Orthodox religions and practices. It seems that group B, on the contrary, which consists of non-Greek pupils, is open and friendly to non-Greek and non-Orthodox customs and practices.

In brief, the first factorial plane ( $a_1, a_2$ ) cumulatively interprets 5,29% of the total inertia, which is higher than any other plane in this analysis. Plane ( $a_1, a_2$ ) incorporates extreme conditions along the first (horizontal) axis and medium along the second (vertical) axis:

### 4. Reflections

According to the results of this study, it seems that nationality and language do not have impact on pupils' personal experiences and feelings towards religious issues.

Pupils' personal feelings are shaped during school years during their interaction with their peers, the discussion and exchange of ideas. They are also influenced, to an extent, by teacher's personal example and beliefs.

In other words, it seems that pupils' personal beliefs about religion in modern Greece are not related with their nationality and family language. Pupils' ideas and beliefs about religion are independent of their nationality and country they live; it seems that pupils are influenced mostly by their peers and discussions at school. Also, it seems that pupils are more open to different religious beliefs compared to adults.

Pupils' nationality and family language are associated with pupils' religious habits, customs, church's practices and celebrations but not with their personal beliefs about their religion as well as other religions.

Growing religious diversity is an important issue associated with pupils' personal development. Accordingly, 'social cohesion' is a frequently cited policy goal when addressing the role of religion in European societies. This is especially evident in the attention paid to the study of religions as a part of intercultural learning and human rights education and is clearly expressed in international documents such as the Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (Council of Europe 2008) and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE 2007). Both documents stress the importance of dialogue between people of different faiths and convictions in the context of intercultural teaching and learning. This is also the focus of REDCo (**R**eligion in **E**ducation. A **C**ontribution to **D**ialogue or a **F**actor of **C**onflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries), a European comparative research project on young people's views of religion, religious diversity and possibilities for dialogue, as well as of classroom interaction and teacher-strategies

Concerning the way Religious Education is taught within Greek schools, it seems that though with the new school textbooks (from school year 2007) it tries to avoid the catechetical and saintly approach in issues that are associated with the faith, the Church, the basic obligations of Christian Orthodox, the principles of Christianity and its values. The induction of students in the Greek Christian Orthodox reality becomes the better way and the acquaintance with the faith has an introductory character in such books of Public school. Relevant questions and issues for discussion develop, to some extent, critical horizons in pupils' thinking.

On the other hand, still in the Greek Religion School textbooks are absent any reports about the Islam, also the reports for the traditional Islam of the minority of Thrace, which constitutes a part of the Greek population and of the Greek modern multicultural reality. These are important issues about which pupils should be informed gradually. An important step in this direction could be considered a late regulation in 2008 (Circular:91109/Γ2/10.7.2008; 104071/Γ2/4.8.2008), according to which all pupils (Orthodox and non-Orthodox) have the opportunity to ask for exemption (on their own, or on behalf of their parents if they are underage) in attending the Religious Education module without providing any written explanation for their preference. Also, in such a case they are not obliged to attend morning praying and church going.

Concluding, from pupils' answers it seems that school is the main possibility for inter-religious contacts. Pupils are keen to enter into an intercultural dialogue. Many pupils want inter-religious understanding on both levels: the personal and the societal one.



We very much hope that the Greek Religious school books in future will substitute the absence of multicultural spirit and will make relevant references about other religions and Islam in early school years (i.e. in lower grades of Primary School) by pointing out their differences, similarities and need for coexistence. Also, that the books will include some reports (e.g. Koran) about the religious beliefs of other people, that will be taught to little children in a pedagogical way. It is also important to move from the spirit of Catechism and Conversion to Christianity and make efforts to set as goal the tolerance for other people and peaceful coexistence in modern multicultural societies (Zambeta 2000 & 2003). On the other hand, it is important, of course, to take into consideration that each country preserves religion as a sovereign depository of its traditions and customs.

In this direction, the *hermeneutic approach* takes into consideration the religious diversity, it acknowledges the interaction between religion and cultures, the different needs as time passes by and the different opinions and attitudes towards religion and belief issues (Jackson 2004a, 2004b, 2003).

In modern multicultural societies it is of major importance to teach mutual understanding, tolerance and acceptance and start respecting the traditions, customs and needs of all people no matter what their colour, language and beliefs are. To conclude, as Stenou points out (1998), concerning the rules of proper behaviour towards the other, the alien and different, it seems that the social ethics of all major religions and cultures coincides.

The findings of this programme will contribute (Weisse 2007):

- to the development of a European strategy in the field of religion and value systems that can serve as an orientation for personal development, but remain open to the emergence of a collective 'European identity' (which must, however, be understood as plural and dialogic rather than as monolithic).
- to a better understanding of how questions of religion and religiosity for children, young people and students can be anchored in the educational process.
- to promote an understanding of the values held in common and develop mutual respect, both in different European countries and in Europe.

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