

**Council of Europe 2016 Exchange
on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue**

**The role of education in the prevention of radicalisation leading to
terrorism and violent extremism**

*Paper presented by Dr. Dominique Side, Vice-President of the European Buddhist Union,
Superior of the Tibetan Buddhist Congregation of Lerab Ling, France and
author of a school textbook on Buddhism*

Summary

- In schools religion is often depicted in a negative light in history, sociology, psychology and philosophy classes, and this undermines the effectiveness of religious studies. National education strategies need to ensure there is coherence between the teaching of different subjects or at the very least provide pupils with tools to bring them together in one world view.
- Religious education in schools tends to emphasise the **differences** that characterise each religion, which are definitely necessary to learn about, but we also need to highlight the values we have in common if education is to help prevent radicalisation and extremism.
- The shared values of our common humanity can serve as the basis for community action that is justified differently according to each faith or system of thought.
- For pupils to take values such as compassion, kindness, equality and mutual respect seriously they need to be embodied and modelled by educators which is a major challenge. When this is not the case pupils are simply bored with receiving information without any dynamic enthusiasm behind it.
- Secular approaches such as mindfulness and compassion training can be very effective since they complement religious education by teaching our common values experientially and in an inclusive way.

Recent research in the USA shows that the percentage of hate crimes led by religious bias was about three times higher in 2012 than in 2004. Many of the violent hate crime leaders are school age. If educators encourage students to understand and respect people of different religious beliefs, it will immensely help lower the percentage of these hate crimes.

Emma McCloughlin, Hastac, 2015 (USA)¹

Education about religion in schools has been identified by Hastac (USA) as crucial for fostering respect and mutual recognition in a multicultural society with religious diversity. In some countries of Europe such religious education is already happening, but there are very significant challenges if it is to be really effective in preventing radicalisation and extremism.

1. Lack of consistency between different subject approaches

Based on my experience teaching Buddhism in secondary schools in the UK, I know that schools teach contradictory truths about religion, leading to confusion and a lack of enthusiasm for religious studies. For example, in sociology, psychology and history, courses often highlight the violent and divisive role of religion throughout history and depict religions as politicised institutions driven by self-interest. The education system does not help the student relate that knowledge with what one learns in religious studies. If religious education is to play a constructive role in preventing prejudice then such discrepancies need to be addressed and different subjects need to be connected up. National education strategies need to offer a coherent picture of the world, and where contradictions occur provide the tools for students to link views together.

2. Focusing on the differences

Teaching about the world's religions usually emphasises the *differences* between religions in terms of their beliefs and cultural traditions. It is certainly vital to understand these beliefs and traditions because it opens the mind to accepting that there are many different ways of seeing the world, and this does prevent radical views.

¹ <https://www.hastac.org/blogs/emmamclaughlin22/2015/03/25/religion-education>

However, there are dangers if we do not go beyond the differences. For example, teenagers might tend to see followers of other religions as simply 'weird' and strange, and this would be counter-productive. Furthermore, simply learning about unfamiliar traditions can feel like an anthropological study of cultures that are foreign to us. We are not relating to the followers of other faiths with any empathy or human understanding, on the contrary, such learning only exacerbates the sense that they are foreign and different. Taken on its own this approach is therefore to be avoided.

3. Focusing on themes for discussion

One strategy that has proved popular and effective in the UK is to look at different themes and consider the ways in which various religions address them². For example, the way religions address war, abortion, surrogacy, end of life, the status of women, and so on. This is very stimulating and is very helpful in preventing extreme views. One disadvantage is that it is a philosophical approach to religion, and in the process religion can easily be reduced to a set of philosophical principles when actually religion itself is so much more than that. Another disadvantage is that the religious upbringing of some pupils discourages open discussion.

4. Head versus heart

Surveys show that many pupils dislike religious studies when they become too academic and when they cannot see the relevance to their lives³. Studying religions in school within a secular context is limited by law to teaching information *about* religions and the emotional component of religion is taboo. School teachers cannot offer pupils the opportunity to experience any religion from the inside—for instance through prayer, meditation and the social support of a faith community. This is problematic insofar as radicalisation and extremism are not simply philosophical perspectives, they carry a

2 Especially in the GCSE and pre-GCSE curriculum for 14-15 year olds.

3 Children's Right to RE: Insights from an English school context by Rebecca Nye, CoGREE, November 2013.

strong emotional component as well, and this means that, on its own, intellectual knowledge of religion will not be sufficient to counteract them. Teaching *about* religion in a secular context therefore has in-built limitations that will weaken the possibility of attaining the objective we are discussing here. An experiential component is crucial for people to really change their attitudes in the long term.

5. Emphasising our common humanity

Instead of focussing solely on the differences between religions we need to also highlight the values and principles that we all have in common.⁴ These shared values are the basis for collaborative action that can be justified differently according to the various systems of thought. This approach will help build bridges between the various faith communities, and between faith communities and those who have no religion. Values such as love and compassion, kindness, generosity, respect and equality are essential for eradicating radicalisation and extremism. At present Religious Studies in schools does not usually strengthen our common humanity in a clear, explicit way.

Research⁵ shows that one crucial factor for the successful outcomes of such education is that these universal values need to be embodied by educators otherwise they are not taken seriously. Faith communities can play a vital role in this process, sending spokespeople to schools to inform and to serve as examples and models of the values they teach. This will bring an experiential component into the educational process that has the potential to inspire tolerance, respect and open-mindedness.

For this approach to be effective, the common human values we share need to be taught and emphasised by each individual religion within the framework of its specific teaching. This will help to prevent sectarian and inter-religious conflict.

4 *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World* by H.H. the Dalai Lama, Rider, 2012.

5 Nye *ibid*.

6. Secular approaches

Secular approaches can be very useful since an average of 23% of people in Europe state they do not follow any religion⁶, while in Czech Republic and Estonia the numbers are 75% and 60% respectively⁷. Secular approaches currently offered include both character education and value education which instil a sense of equality and inclusiveness. Secular methods also use tools such as mindfulness and developing love and compassion for oneself and others.⁸ All these measures complement religious education very well by providing a personal experiential component. In this way they directly help to prevent radicalisation and extremism.

If our efforts are to be effective and really make a difference, we need to address all these different points (and more) in a comprehensive strategy.

6 Eurobarometer Poll 2012

7 *Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. 18 December 2012.

8 As taught, for example, by MindwithHeart in the UK.