



“Education and Social Cohesion—  
Religion in the Classroom”

Panel discussion in cooperation with the Herbert-  
Quandt-Foundation/ALTANA AG

May 31, 2006

Berlin City Hall

The panel discussion “Education and Social Cohesion—Religions in the Classroom” was a joint project of the institute for cultural diplomacy (icd) and the Herbert-Quandt-Stiftung/ALTANA AG (HQS).

The panel was a part of the Herbert-Quandt Foundation’s school contest “Trialogue in Schools—European Identity and Cultural Pluralism,” which will be conducted for the second time this year in Frankfurt/ Main and Berlin.

The school contest, which applies to all schools from grades 5 onwards is aimed at fostering inter-religious dialogue and understanding in schools by integrating interreligious and intercultural knowledge on a broad and interdisciplinary level. HQS is committed to enhancing inter-religious awareness in German teacher education.

On May 31, the HQS hosted a preparatory workshop and Panel Discussion for contest participants. The preparatory workshop, organized by the Herbert-Quandt Foundation, aimed to collect project ideas that would incorporate inter-religious and inter-cultural knowledge into classes such as Art, Music, and German language. The second part of the event consisted of a panel discussion, and was a joint event organized by the Herbert-Quandt-Foundation and icd,. Here, school experts, teachers, Embassy representatives, and members of inter-religious and political institutions discussed the challenges and opportunities German schools encounter in their efforts to foster intercultural understanding in Berlin.

Background:

The federal state of Berlin will introduce the subject of “Ethics” into the obligatory school curriculum beginning fall 2006 and though federal states are responsible for education policy in Germany, Berlin attracts particular attention due to its dual status as both a state and federal capitol.

“Ethics” as an obligatory school class in Berlin aims to encourage a broader intercultural understanding among German students. It aims to promote the appreciation of differing cultural and religious settings.

The introduction of “Ethics” is thought to be a compromise. Some social groups are supporting “Religion” as a school subject (in some federal states it is still an obligatory class), while other groups lobby against any form of required religious course.

Panel Discussion:

In his introductory remarks of the panel discussion André Schmitz, State Secretary of the Berlin Senate, emphasized the positive potential of the new German federal school law.



Dr. von Kalnein, Director of the Herbert-Quandt-Foundation, Mark Donfried Director of the institute for cultural diplomacy, and Dr. Jörg Schulte-Altedorneburg, Director of the Berlin representation of the Herbert-Quandt-Foundation, affirmed in their introductory remarks, that providing for a fundamental religious understanding of Christianity, Judaism and Islam in schools could serve as a valuable first step towards the long-term goal of a "Trialogue. of Religions".



Following the introductory speeches, Prof. Dr. Schreiner, Chair Religious Studies and Judaism, University of Tübingen gave a profound historical overview of the subject, focusing particularly on the theoretical background, but also emphasizing the urgency of a broad and multilevel debate on the issue of interreligious and intercultural dialogue on a both national and international level, referring to current political conflicts particularly in the Middle East.

Participating panelists included:

- Sanem Kleff, Member of the Board Teachers Union and Project Director of "School Without Racism," expert on intercultural education,
- Maya Zehden, Director Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit, expert on intercultural dialogue,
- Dr. Gerdien Jonker, Professor of Religious Studies, Georg-Eckert-Institut for the International Study of School Books, expert on Educational Science, and
- Birgit Kröner, Berlin State Senate Official, Office of Education Policy.



Lukas Wallraff, journalist of the German "Tageszeitung" (taz), served as moderator of the panel discussion. Panelists agreed that there was an urgency to enhance interreligious and intercultural knowledge in schools. The implementation of the school subject "Ethics" alone, however, would not suffice in bringing about substantive knowledge. Therefore, integrating cultural and religious knowledge into other school lessons such as Arts, Music or Literature was seen as an additional possibility to present students with a multicultural view on a range of subjects.

Sanem Kleff maintained that the current lack of religious knowledge promotes prejudice among students, and that the German Federal government, in its capacity of democratic authority was responsible for providing for broad and interdisciplinary intercultural understanding in its education policy. Intercultural and inter-religious education must become part of the accepted norm.

In providing a thorough overview of her thoughts concerning Jewish-Catholic dialogue in Germany, Maya Zehden concluded that the time had not yet come to call for a "Trialogue" among Christians, Jews and Muslims. She reminded the audience that even the dialogue among Christian and Jewish communities had not yet been sufficiently addressed on a federal level, which in turn had led to limited institutional dialogue among representatives of religious communities.

Dr. Gerdien Jonker focused on general and systemic questions of lacking intercultural knowledge, and concurred that inter-culturalism needs to be recognized as essential in common knowledge. She saw a great deal of potential in the implementation of the new school subject this fall. Dr. Jonker held that

larger financial commitments in the education sector are necessary in order to arrange for smaller classes and more teachers. This would permit more individual attention and bring about engagement and intercultural teaching methods.

Birgit Kröner of the Berlin Office of the Senate referred to German unification and the subsequent significant social changes that followed. This had in turn lead to a lack of focus on subjects of inter-religious education on the federal and state level. She continued to emphasize that Berlin found itself in a particularly difficult situation with regard to religious education. In East Germany, religion was not a school subject, while in most of West Germany, it was an obligatory school class. Ms. Kröner reminded the audience that Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities were not distributed in even proportions in Berlin, and that different parts of Berlin therefore reflect individual cultural influences; and this would need to be taken into consideration when addressing such sensitive, intercultural issues.

Panelists agreed with Dr. Jonker, that Germany's federal system made organizational changes in the education sector difficult, due to both the federal and European compliance requirements. One possible solution, in her opinion, was to sustain education policy on the federal level, but to create a general obligatory catalogue of inter-religious educative movements at the government level.

In the event's 30-minute discussion round, teachers commented that the "Ethics" curriculum was too abstract and could leave major subjects, such as Fundamentalism and Islam, unaddressed.

Dr. Peter Stolz, a seminar teacher of History and a contributor to the new curriculum, responded that topics such as fundamentalism and details of the Islamic faith are subjects that will be addressed in later grades. He added that the main responsibility of fostering intercultural knowledge continues to rest with teachers, who are encouraged to incorporate intercultural aspects into their respective fields of expertise.

The panel discussion provided a valuable forum for the exchange of ideas in a multicultural and interdisciplinary setting. icd plans to continue to substantiate the debate by organizing workshops as well as other events aimed at teachers committed to enhancing and fostering intercultural knowledge as to support their efforts by providing them with continued access to experts in the field.



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