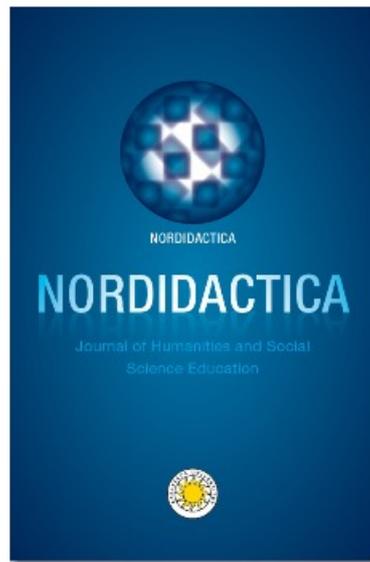# Presentation of a Council of Europe Project

Policy, Research and Practice for 'Inclusive' Religious Education – Swedish and Norwegian Translations of Signposts now available

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Presentation of a Council of Europe Project

Policy, Research and Practice for 'Inclusive' Religious Education – Swedish and Norwegian Translations of Signposts now available[1]

By Robert Jackson

Practice, Research and Policy in English Religious Education

When I became a teacher of religious education in England in the late 1960s, it was clear that the nature of the subject was changing. My own experience showed that many older students were interested in the study of religions, but were highly resistant to anyone telling them what they should or should not believe. This 'on the ground' experience was confirmed by school-based research. For example, classroom-based research conducted by Harold Loukes showed that traditional Biblical education was felt by many older secondary school students to be irrelevant to their personal questions and concerns (Loukes 1961). A survey of upper secondary school students by Edwin Cox showed their perception of religious education as lacking breadth and opportunities for critical analysis and discussion (Cox 1967). Pluralization through migration, especially since the 1960s, was also an important factor in influencing both students and teachers to shift the focus of religious education in fully state-funded schools from a form of single faith religious teaching to a 'non-confessional', inclusive, multi-faith approach, including learning *about* the religions of relatively newly-established minorities such as Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in addition to Christianity and Judaism. Formal recognition of a change to the subject came through *local* policy development, rather than through a change in the law. Locally produced 'agreed syllabuses' began to acknowledge the changes that were taking place in schools in a 'bottom-up' fashion. National law was eventually broadened in relation to religious education through the 1988 Education Reform Act. In short, changes in practice at school level in response to the processes of secularisation and pluralisation – changes monitored by empirical research – gradually influenced local policy and finally influenced national law.

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[1] A detailed account of the development of *Signposts* is available in Jackson, R (2018) 'The Emergence of an Intercultural Perspective in English Religious Education and the Development of European Policy Documents' in Olof Franck and Peder Thalén (Eds.) *Interkulturell religionsdidaktik: utmaningar och möjligheter* [Intercultural Religious Didactics: Challenges and Possibilities], Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Policy, Research and Practice in the Council of Europe

In the case of the Council of Europe, a European human rights organisation, an attempt to disseminate human rights policy through educational activities, resulted in a project which reviewed a good deal of European research on issues of classroom practice in relation to teaching about religions and other world views. In this case, policy based on human rights principles led to the development of publications closely influenced by examples of research and good practice from different European states. The key publications were a ministerial recommendation (Council of Europe 2008), and a book – *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious World Views in Intercultural Education* (Jackson 2014).

The Council of Europe was founded in 1949 following the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Based in Strasbourg, it now has 47 member states, and aims to protect human rights, pluralist democracy and the rule of law and to seek solutions to problems such as xenophobia. This it does partly through its educational programmes. The Committee of Ministers – the Foreign Ministers of the member states – makes recommendations, often based on Council of Europe educational projects. These projects focus on human rights, democratic citizenship and intercultural dialogue, which are seen as closely interrelated (Council of Europe 2013). Connected with these are topics such as language, history and, from 2002, religion. A project entitled 'The Challenge of Intercultural Education Today: Religious Diversity and Dialogue in Europe' began in 2002, with the human rights principle of freedom of religion and belief as its foundation. Thus, a policy principle was the starting point for a project that then, through its team members, consulted European research and practice in schools in relation to approaches to teaching and learning about religions and beliefs. A milestone for the project was a major conference held in Oslo in 2004, which resulted in the publication of a book (Council of Europe 2004). Another was a reference book for schools across Europe published three years later (Keast 2007). The project team's work was scrutinised by the Committee of Ministers, who decided to issue a recommendation to member states based on the materials and papers already produced. This recommendation (Council of Europe 2008) was distributed to the 47 member states late in 2008.

Although the principle of freedom of religion and belief was fundamental, the project's aims extended well beyond increasing tolerance of religious and non-religious diversity. As the Project proposal notes, adding the dimension of religion '…requires revisiting and updating the concept of intercultural education in general, to ensure that all education contributes harmoniously to the four pillars of education for the twenty first century outlined in the Delors Report' (Council of Europe 2003). These are: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be (UNESCO 1996).

Signposts: A Project on Disseminating the Recommendation

To facilitate the use of the Recommendation from the Committee of Ministers, the Council of Europe and the Oslo-based European Wergeland Centre set up a joint committee in 2010 to help policymakers and practitioners to utilise its ideas in their own national settings. A questionnaire was distributed to Education Ministries in the member states, asking respondents to identify difficulties in their country in applying the Recommendation. Analysis of questionnaire responses identified common issues, notably:

- ambiguity/lack of clarity in terminology;
- a need to understand the component elements of 'competence' for understanding religions;
- how to make the classroom a 'safe space' for dialogue;
- how to help students to analyse media representations of religions;
- how to integrate a study of non-religious worldviews with the study of religions;
- how to tackle human rights issues in relation to religion and belief;
- how to link schools to wider religion/belief communities and organisations in order to increase students' knowledge and understanding.

I was asked to write a book addressing these issues – published as *Signposts* – on behalf of the committee, drawing on relevant research and good practice (Jackson 2014). Thus, a project that began with a human rights policy principle, drew on a variety of research studies of educational practice, including research on religious education in different parts of Europe, in order to provide advice on the development of an open, pluralistic and impartial approach to the study of religions and other life views in schools.

Swedish and Norwegian Translations

Originally, the plan was to publish *Signposts* in the two official languages of the Council of Europe, namely English and French. It soon became clear that the book would have a much wider impact on practice and policy development if it were available in more European languages. Some of the translations now available were initiated within the Council of Europe. Others have come at the request of educators from particular countries, or as the result of offers to translate *Signposts* into particular languages.

In the case of the Swedish translation, I talked about the development of *Signposts* at the annual Södertörn lecture which I was invited to give at Södertörn University, situated close to Stockholm, in November 2016. I mentioned the need for a Swedish translator and, at the end of the lecture, Paul Moerman, a member of staff from the University, came up and offered to do the translation. In the case of the Norwegian translation, I mentioned to Oddrun Bråten, of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, that we needed a translator. She sent round a circular email to many Norwegian colleagues. One of these, Anders Aschim, from Inland University in Hamar,

contacted his daughter, who was studying for a masters degree in English, with a specialism in translation, at Oslo University. Thus Anne Marie Hovland Aschim became the translator of *Signposts* into Norwegian. I am immensely grateful to Paul and to Anne Marie for their translations of the book. One feels that serendipity plays a significant part in the dissemination of educational thinking! My hope is that the translations of *Signposts* by Paul and Anne Marie might be useful in contributing to developments in religious and intercultural education practice and research in Sweden and Norway.

(Currently, Arabic, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Norwegian, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish and Ukrainian versions are available in PDF format and are freely downloadable from the European Wergeland Centre website: http://www.theewc.org/Content/Library/COE-Steering-documents/Recommendations/Signposts-Policy-and-practice-for-teaching-about-religions-and-non-religious-world-views-in-intercultural-education)

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