

# Inter-religious dialogue in schools: A pedagogical and civic unavailability

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## Abstract

*Social and civic conflict inspired by the fundamental convictions of different religious groups seems to be rife all over the world, also in schools. One way of addressing this problem is to promote inter-religious dialogue. To establish the viability of this solution, the authors take several steps. They analyze the phenomenon “religion” and discover that it is constituted of several layers or levels that have to be accounted for in the proposed inter-religious dialogue in schools. After discussing the term “dialogue” they consider several approaches to religious diversity or plurality to find a suitable basis for the proposed inter-religious dialogue in schools. Based on these analyses, the authors argue that schools (teacher-educators and learners) should be allowed to engage in inter-religious dialogue as part of their pedagogical and civic duty. This will ensure a better understanding of others and their religions, also at the deepest spiritual level. Such comprehension can contribute to the more peaceful co-existence of people in religiously pluralist societies.*

## 1. THE PROBLEM

Research by Cnaan, Gelles and Sinha (2004:197) confirms that religion can indeed “serve as a tool for social cohesion and reduced anomie”. The bombing of the *World Trade Centre* on September 11, 2001 in New York also shows, however, that religion, in this case in a fundamentalist-extremist form, can have a seriously deleterious effect on social cohesion and civic peace. This attack was only one in a series of recent incidences associated with conflict inspired by religious differences<sup>1</sup> among people. The conflicts in Northern Ireland and in Darfur in the Sudan are two well-known examples of

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<sup>1</sup> We purposely use this expression and not “religious conflict”. We wish to draw the attention to the societal and civic repercussions of conflict inspired by religious differences, and not to conflict between religious groups as such.

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this phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> In the month after July 2005, for instance, crimes motivated by religious hatred soared by almost 600% in the British capital in comparison with the same month the previous year (SAPA-AFP 2005:3).

This phenomenon raises its head in schools as well. In London, the creation of more religion-based schools for the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities was met with a difference of opinion. While some welcomed the move, others felt that the provision of state-funded faith-based schools would further intensify the religious divisions in British society (SAPA-AP 2001:5). The opening of the first private Muslim school in France (the *Lycée Averroès* in Lille) in 2003 caused a stir in the predominantly Christian (Catholic) community. The Muslims could not understand the uproar since there were already private Jewish, Catholic and Protestant schools (Blignaut 2003:10). In 2004, a Bangladeshi Muslim girl living in Britain lost a legal battle for the right to wear full Islamic dress in school. This followed a similar case in France, where a girl lost her battle with the school authorities for the right to wear her Muslim religious clothing, the *jilbab* (Kelland 2004:5). These two incidents regarding religious dress sparked off a debate in British newspapers (cf. *The Times* June 1, 2004:60).

In South Africa, Jews are concerned about anti-Semitic feelings among their Christian and Muslim compatriots (Du Toit 2005:5). In Nigeria, an unmarried pregnant Muslim teenager was sentenced to death by stoning (but later set free) (SAPA-AFP 2004:9). In the Netherlands, the maker of the film *Submission* showing women with Koranic verse written on their bare skin, received death threats, and was eventually killed in 2004 (Simons 2004:3). The presence of new religious minorities has placed the Dutch nation and its social freedoms under pressure. There are signs, according to Vermeer and Van der Ven (2004:37), of growing tension based on differences of religious conviction. Freedom of speech and of religion, traditionally regarded as two of the cornerstones of Dutch society, recently came under pressure because of radical Muslim *imams'* remarks on television regarding the punishment of women, religious martyrdom and the holy war against the West (Keyser 2002). Conversely, the Iranian Muslim academic Amir Taheri (2004:8) said that his faith could not embrace Western liberalism because its notions of equality were antithetical to the basis of Islam. Buruma and Margalit (2005:*passim*) confirmed this view in their investigation into the hostile stereotypes of the Western world that seem to fuel the hatred of Occidental fundamentalist movements.

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<sup>2</sup> There is also anecdotal evidence of small-scale conflict in schools due to religious differences.

These examples of social and civic conflict in schools and communities worldwide that can be ascribed to religious differences among groups<sup>3</sup> in modern pluralist societies underscore the importance of finding a solution to the problem. They confirm Irvine's (2006:16) cynical observation that many trouble spots in the world are indeed ignited by religious differences. In our opinion, the problem can be overcome by inculcating in learners an attitude of openness towards inter-religious dialogue. We contend that such a dialogue can help learners attain a better understanding of others and their religious convictions, even at the deepest spiritual level of their existence. Participation in inter-religious dialogue, especially in schools, is in our opinion not only pedagogically justifiable but a deeper understanding of the other at the spiritual level (as we will show) will also contribute to social and civic peace in the broader pluralistic community.

In order to substantiate this normative-ethical view, we firstly analyze religion as a phenomenon, seeking to discover its structural possibilities for inter-religious dialogue between adherents of different religions. We then hermeneutically and heuristically examine the term "dialogue" as well as three approaches to other religions, namely inclusivism, exclusivism and pluralism for the purpose of finding a suitable basis for conducting the proposed inter-religious dialogue (Leezenberg & De Vries 2005:148; St Clair 2005). All of these procedures provide us with a theoretical framework against which we can consider the pedagogical necessity of introducing inter-religious dialogue in the school as a societal relationship. Our investigations are aimed at finding a way of eradicating and avoiding social and civic conflict due to fundamental differences between individuals and groups belonging to different religious denominations or groups, and in doing so, also to aim at enhancing the quality of citizenship in such religiously diverse communities.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Religion: Its basic structure

Phenomenological analysis of religion as a consistent set of behaviour among people (Jaeger 1988:326; Boyer 2002:69) reveals that it has the following basic structure:

- Religions have a directly observable outer layer, which is of a cultic or ritual nature (Gr *leitourgia*; Lat *officia*; Eng service, duty, ministry). Believers attend services or worship at shrines, altars, churches,

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<sup>3</sup> Although not strictly speaking a religious group, the agnostics in society should also be taken into account. Their presence can have an impact on the cultural relationships in schools. The proposed debate should also include this group, if only for the purpose of helping these young people to gain insight into their fatalistic outlook on life.

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mosques, synagogues or other holy places. They pray, read from sacred scriptures, sing hymns or incantations and make use of symbols or symbolic activities. Education at this level is aimed at training young people/novices into understanding and practicing the rituals.

- Closely associated with this layer is that of a sense of awe and respect owed to the God or god(s) (Gr *eusebia*; Lat *reverentia*; Eng reverence or worship). The deity is the object of worship, cultic or ritual practices and religious observances. Believers repent their sins and wrongdoings, observe certain rules or customs with respect to food, drink and clothing, and are expected to behave in certain prescribed ways. Education at this level entails guiding the novice into the different aspects of worship.
- Religions tend to have a theological, dogmatic and confessional layer (Gr *dogma*, derived from “dokein”, to seem good; Lat *confessus*, derived from “confiteri”, to admit). Religious leaders study the dogmas, cultic practices and observances of their respective religions, and write or preach about them. Formulations of these religious aspects are ratified by the higher authorities of the particular denomination, and novices are expected to master the tenets of the faith before they can be confirmed as full members. Education at this level centres on the mastery of the dogmas and confessions.
- Religions also have a philanthropic or caring layer (Gr *philanthropia*, *filadelphia*; Lat *humanitas*, *caritas*; Eng love of humanity, brotherly love). One can see a particular religion functioning at this level when believers have a sense of civic or social virtue, and when one sees them caring for others (White 2005:48). Education at this level entails helping the young to understand how to care for others, and to develop a sense of moral duty.
- Religions also have a faith or “pistic” dimension (Gr *pistis*; Lat *pietas*; Eng faithfulness, loyalty). Believers need basic security and they tend to find this in a relationship with what they regard as a higher, transcendent or divine force. In some cases, the deity or the transcendent force is believed to have revealed Him-/Her-/itself in a book and/or in nature. Education at this level is aimed at reinforcing the faith of believers, especially their relationship with the divine or transcendent force.

- At the deepest level, religions have a spiritual dimension (Lat *spiritus*; Eng breath or spirit). All people share certain primordial questions at a deep spiritual (emotional) level though the answers they find to these questions, expressed in terms of the ritual and other levels, can be quite diverse. The spiritual is a subjective experience that points to an orientation towards both an *intrinsic* and an *extrinsic* religiousness. In terms of the former, religion is viewed as something deeply personal to the individual (Allport 1950/1966; Allport & Ross 1967; Valenkamp 2006). Answers to questions such as the following come from this deep spiritual level of humanness: How do I relate to the divine, to evil and unhappiness, to myself, nature, culture, life and death, emotions of happiness or loss, of guilt and shame? The answers that people give to these questions come from the deepest level of their humanity, their inner realm that is timeless, eternal, deeply profound, subjective, intangible as well as multidimensional.<sup>4</sup> Spirituality symbolizes the human being's quest for depth and values, and describes how people relate their beliefs and actions towards god(s)/God and/or otherness, to their own being and core values, and then expresses them in religious practices. In a sense, the spiritual dimension represents the mystical face of religion, the fountainhead of divinity, and the source and essence of the soul.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In somewhat poetic terms, Wilber (2001:5, 13, 15) describes the mystical experience of the spiritual as follows: "... in the mystical consciousness, Reality is apprehended directly and immediately, meaning without meditation, any symbolic elaboration, any conceptualization, or any abstractions; subject and object become one in a timeless and spaceless act that is beyond any and all forms of meditation. (...) In the realm of spirit ... the soul *becomes* Being in a nondual state of radical intuition and supreme identity variously known as gnosis, *nirvikalpa*, *samadhi*, *satori*, *kensho*, *jnana*, et cetera ... in the spirit realm, both soul and God unite in Godhead, or absolute spirit, itself without exclusive boundaries anywhere. (...) (Spirit is) the Ground or Being of *all* realms, the pure *That* of which all manifestations is but a play or modification.'

<sup>5</sup> "Spirituality" as used here does not primarily refer to the currently growing emphasis on a "vulgar" form of hedonism that tends to end up in an entertainment economy. The importance of this form of spirituality should not be underestimated, however. Because of an apparent loss of plausibility in the master narratives of the mainstream religions, there is a tendency to divorce spirituality from traditional religious or cult meanings. This leads to the conviction that human behaviour can be perfected through certain types of spiritual acts. Growth in behaviour patterns seems to become more important than growth in religious belief (cf. Fry 1997; Cobb 1998; Louw 1998:233-242; Alexander 2003:471-493; Edwards & Titchen 2003:450-460; Bathgate 2003:277-285; Takyi & Addai 2002:177-193; Northcut 2004:349-358; Hodge 2005:37; Heelas & Woodgate 2005; Smart 2005:17-19). Another aspect of spirituality that does not receive attention in this article, is that it has become the focus point of the caring professions such as psychiatry, nursing practice/health care, social care, criminology and education. An emerging approach in spirituality studies understands care, education and spiritual practices to be relational and enacted through discursive exchanges among participants within any shared context. Thus, practitioners are understood to be involved in complex discursive practices which involve – amongst others – polyphonic speaking about spirit. This interdisciplinary approach explores the influence of society, ideology, culture, rationality, and different epistemological paradigms on the notions of 'spirituality' and 'spiritual care'. Rather than seeking to determine the meaning of spirituality or spiritual care, it aims at fostering discourses about spiritual care and spiritual formation. This interdisciplinary approach was first pioneered by members of the Centre for Spirituality Studies (<http://www.hull.ac.uk/php/isg/>) at the University of Hull, United Kingdom (also cf. Frid, Bergbom & Frid 2000:695-703; McSherry 2000:*passim*; McCance, McKenna & Boore 2001:350-356; Hardin 2001:11-18; Carson & Fairbairn 2002:15; Flick 2002:5-24).

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In an inter-religious dialogue with believers of other religions one has to take account of each of these layers of one's own and of the others' religions. We have to keep in mind that all the religious levels are involved when, for instance, the participants share something apparently superficial about their religious lives or their faiths, such as when they tell about their food and drink customs at the cultic or ritual level. The inter-religious dialogue with adherents of other religions should be aimed at understanding the other at the deepest spiritual level. Learning about these different layers of one's own and of others' religions should be age-appropriate.

## **2.2 Dialogue**

The term "dialogue" has a pivotal place in our central theoretical statement, which is that participation in inter-religious dialogue, especially in schools, is not only pedagogically justifiable but also that a deeper understanding of the other at the spiritual level will contribute to social and civic peace in the broader pluralistic community. "Dialogue" here refers to the fact that the educator and the child-in-education (the educand) are in a relationship and therefore intrinsically connected to each other. The reciprocal act of communication between speaker and listener is fundamental to education. Speaking is interpreted reality, says Kuytert (1999:104). A speaker is an actor in the world, and in and through his or her speaking the world is interpreted. Speaking is always about something. People communicate for various purposes, among others to inform themselves. Speaking is creating a play about the world, says Kuytert. In the case of inter-religious dialogue, the "play" can be about the religious differences and similarities which the speaker may observe among religious groupings. For a dialogue to be authentic and effective, the speaker should create such a play and communicate it to the listener. The listener, on the other hand, becomes a co-player in this game at the moment of listening. He/she should not only carefully attend to what is being said, but should also be attentive about the purpose and the composition of the play that is being created by the speaker. The speaker can be either the teacher-educator or the educand and the same can be said of the listener. An inter-religious dialogue can be regarded as inauthentic and ineffective if the listener is unable to grasp the thrust of the play being offered by the speaker. This may occur if, for instance, the play is not age-appropriate for the listener (e. g. presented at Piaget's formal-operational level, while the listener is still only operating at the concrete-operational level.)

Good communication is clearly a prerequisite for authentic and effective dialogue.

### **2.3 Approaches to inter-religious dialogue**

Several strategies (approaches, attitudes) have in the past been mooted for the adherents of a specific religious denomination to follow when interacting with adherents of other religions. The question that confronts us here is whether any (or a combination) of them can serve as an acceptable base for such interactions.

#### **2.3.1 Exclusivism/monism**

A radically exclusivist or monistic strategy is based on a form of Aristotelian logic. Believers with this attitude regard their own religion as essentially true and therefore all others as false or heretical (Vermeer & Van der Ven 2004:39). They prefer not to conduct a dialogue with “non-believers”, unless the dialogue can take place on their terms. The conviction that one’s faith is the only true religion can lead to intolerance, says Shermer (2004:233). Rule and Mncwango (2006:253) concur by saying that political intolerance has been demonstrated to correlate with religion and with strongly held group identity. Exclusivists are inclined to think that dialogue with believers of other religions will be limited to witnessing about the truth of one’s own religion. No tailoring of one’s religious message is necessary for particular circumstances or time (Erickson 2001:307 ff). All that is necessary is to proclaim the lasting message in the same form. There is only one pole, that of the authoritative message, and the needs of the receptor makes no difference to the style of the proclamation. There is no real dialogue or dialectic between the source and the receptor. Fundamentalism in all its forms (including Islamic and Christian) can be regarded as an example of this view.

Although we found this approach in itself not to be conducive to the establishment of an inter-religious dialogue with believers of another faith, we also found that we could not agree that it necessarily leads to intolerance. This approach was typical of the work of Mother Theresa, who won the Nobel Peace Prize despite being an astute believer in the Roman Catholic faith, also of Albert Schweitzer and of Mahatma Ghandi, neither of whom could be accused of intolerance. This approach is also typical of Christians who insist on young children not being exposed to other religions because they have not matured yet in the tenets of their own religion (cf. Dreyer 2006; Blaauwendraat 2006; Kole 2006).<sup>6</sup> In its “closed mind” form, this approach is, however, unsuitable as a basis for the inter-religious dialogue that we propose.

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<sup>6</sup> Children who have reached the Piagetian formal-operational phase and who – in other words – are able to think abstractly and theoretically, can be regarded as mature enough to engage in inter-religious dialogue.

### **2.3.2 Inclusivism**

According to an inclusivist strategy the adherents of a particular religion are prepared to regard all other religions as equally true as pathways to the same deity (deities), absolution and/or salvation. The claims of this approach can be refuted however by merely comparing widely different religions such as Presbyterian Protestantism, Greek Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, Baptism and Mormonism (Zecha 2006). One can hardly say that all of these are equal. "Inclusivism" in this sense therefore attests to a misconception of religious reality. "Inclusivism" is realistic however in the sense that all religions also consist of a deep spiritual level, as discussed in a previous section. The proposed inter-religious dialogue should therefore be intentionally aimed at comprehension of the other's religious convictions at this level.

Another form of inclusivism, described by Vermeer and Van der Ven (2004:40), is for believers belonging to a particular religious group to maintain the truth and superiority of their own religious tradition. Where they differ from exclusivists is that they consider other religious traditions in a more positive light as products of divine revelation or as legitimate paths to salvation. This is mainly done by interpreting other faiths in terms of their own and by claiming that other faiths either originated from their own faith or reach fulfilment in their own faith. The difference between this form of inclusivism and exclusivism is only one of degree. In terms of this version, non-Christian faiths would for example be regarded as containing partial or preliminary aspects of Christian truth, and every non-Christian believer as an anonymous Christian (Vermeer & Van der Ven 2004:41). The early Church Fathers Origen and Clement of Alexandria as well as Augustine were exponents of this view that has since been rejected by many Christians. This form of inclusivism would, in our opinion, not be conducive to the inter-religious dialogue that we propose. The conversation partner would certainly be uncomfortable with the notion that his or her religion is being interpreted as merely a (partial) fulfilment of the other's religion.

### **2.3.3 Pluralism**

Pluralists, according to Vermeer and Van der Ven (2004:42), argue that the essence of all religions lies in the human experience of the transcendent; all religions are thus grounded in human experience. The articulation of this basic experience in belief systems is always related to a particular cultural environment and therefore cannot claim absolute validity. Based on this argument, all religions are supposed to offer adequate pictures of the divine. The emphasis is on what is shared by the different religions rather than on what distinguishes or separates them from other religions. It is therefore

impossible for any one religion to claim superiority or absolute truth. All religions are equal and each in its own way a legitimate response to the experience of the real. This approach was followed by the religious pluralism pioneer Swami Vivekananda, founder of the Ramakrishna Mission who insisted that we should acknowledge the wisdom of all religions and try a range of gateways to truth simultaneously (Armesto 2004:362). Also in this case, a comparison of different religions will reveal that they are not all equal or merely different pathways to the truth. Since every religion does seem to have a deep spiritual base or level, however, an inter-religious dialogue is in principle possible among the adherents of all religions.

Dialogical pluralism as defined by Vermeer and Van der Ven (2004:43) goes beyond the pluralist view of different religions as coordinative by stressing the need for an inter-religious dialogue for the mutual enrichment of different religious traditions. The emphasis here is on trying to understand the tenets of the other religion in terms of the other's preconceptions. Dialogical pluralists try to go beyond the mere impartial recognition of religious pluralism by urging religious believers to engage in dialogue with one another and to find out in what respects the various religious traditions differ, what they share and what they can learn from each other.<sup>7</sup> This approach is probably the best foundation for conducting the proposed inter-religious dialogue, especially for persons who have been fully educated in the tenets of their own religion. Exposure to other religious traditions of a person still inadequately acquainted with the tenets of his or her own religion can only lead to mental confusion, which would not be conducive to the aims of being well-educated.

"Critical openness" (Westerman 2001:78) is yet another form of pluralism. One of the approaches described by Erickson (2001:308-309), namely of adapting to a given context by expressing the message in such a way that it would be understandable by those with whom one conducts the dialogue, is similar to the "critical openness" approach. Irvine (2006:16), a proponent of this approach, insists that believers in one faith should be courageous enough to allow their own and other faith communities to become places of openness and freedom, places where the adherents of the different religions can dare to float ideas, affirm awkward truths and speak about one another's beliefs. This approach should also be followed only by persons fully immersed in their own faith and religion and mature enough to distinguish between what is acceptable or not in terms of his or her personal faith.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Vermeer and Van der Ven (2004), the respondents in their empirical study, who were all adolescents, tended to prefer to take cognizance of the variety of religions available to them in their life-world without seeing the necessity of committing to any of them. Whether this finding is valid for all adolescents still needs to be empirically determined.

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“Transformers” follow a strategy somewhere between an exclusivist and an inclusivist approach. They hold that not only the form of expression, but also to some extent the content of the message, must be modified if necessary to communicate with others. Thus, some elements of the message that do not fit in the dialogue with others can be de-emphasized or even deleted, if necessary (Erickson 2001:308). Paul, the author of several letters to New Testament congregations, can be regarded as an exponent of this approach (he claimed to have become a Jew for the Jews and a Greek for the Greeks). This approach can not, however, be recommended for persons not totally immersed in the theology of their own religion.

#### **2.3.4 Conclusion**

A combination of these three approaches can serve as an adequate basis for the proposed inter-religious dialogue. An exclusivist approach can, for instance, be adopted for young children still unable to distinguish between their own and other religions. An inclusivist-dialogical pluralist approach, as repeatedly qualified in the discussion above, can serve as a foundation for conducting the proposed inter-religious dialogue: an inclusive dialogue is promoted among the sufficiently mature adherents of the different religious groupings in a given pluralistic setting.

### **3. THE PEDAGOGICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN SCHOOLS**

The structural characteristics of the school as a societal relationship determine the nature of the proposed inter-religious dialogue to be conducted in schools. The school was instituted for the purpose of teaching and learning. Learners are at school to learn; teachers are at school to facilitate their learning, and school managers are at school to create the conditions for optimal learning (Lagerwey & Lagerwey-Voogt 2005:202). In contrast to the parental home, where the core aim of the institution is to care for the child and – in the process – prepare him or her for life in the broadest sense of the word, and in contrast to the religious denomination such as the church, mosque or synagogue where the core aim of education is to educate the child in the tenets of the particular faith or belief system (see sec. 2 above) and in the process prepare him or her for life in the world at large, the core aim of the school is the development or “unlocking” of the logical-cognitive-analytical potential of the learners. The purpose of the school is to guide learners to cognitively analyze, fathom and master segments of reality in the form of subjects or learning areas.

As in all societal relationships, however, the learners should also be educated for life. Because schools reflect life in general in microcosmic form, learners should not only be guided to analyze and cognitively understand religious differences among people; they should also be equipped (i.e. educated) to cope with such differences and in the process learn how to avoid social conflict inspired by the differences. Activities in schools pivot around the learners; whatever occurs in schools should somehow contribute to their development towards becoming mature human beings and citizens (Lagerwey & Lagerwey-Voogt 2005:348). In a sense, schools have a bridging function: making use of what the learners bring along from other societal relationships such as the parental home and the church, they prepare learners for life in the world.

While it is understandable that the South African government found it necessary to promulgate a *Manifesto on Democracy, Values and Education* (RSA 2001) and a *National Policy on Religion in Education* (DoE 2003) in order to ensure peace and tolerance in schools attended by learners belonging to widely different religious affiliations, the enforcement of these policies should be nothing more than a temporary measure. Policies that suppress potential inter-religious dialogue in schools can not be pedagogically justified because they deprive learners of the opportunity in teaching-learning situations to hone the dialogical skills required for life in a religiously pluralistic society once they leave school. That the current approach to religion in education of the South African authorities should only be a temporary measure appropriate for a period of political transformation, was recently underscored by the European Ministers of Education in their *Declaration on Intercultural Education in the new European context* (2003:1). Among others, they declared:

2. Observing the diversity of our societies in terms of ethnicity, culture, languages, religions and educational systems;
3. Having noted the social conflicts and disagreements that may result from the coexistence of different value systems; [...]
5. Aware of the disturbing persistence in our societies of xenophobic and racist practices, violence and intolerance that sometimes affect education establishments; [...]
11. (We) request the Council of Europe ... to tailor its education programme and working methods in order to implement the following strategies and give fresh impetus to these activities by developing a coherent, feasible and integrated action plan. In this connection, it should: [...]

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help to build understanding of the European dimension of education in the context of globalization, by introducing respect for human rights and diversity, foundations for managing diversity, openness to other cultures, inter-religious dialogue and “Euro-Arab dialogue”; [...]

This Declaration by the European Ministers of Education repeatedly reiterates the importance of schools managing diversity, among others through engaging in inter-religious dialogue. Our plea is therefore that inter-religious dialogue should also be allowed in South African schools and that religion education<sup>8</sup> and religious observances should not be relegated to the parental homes and religious dominations should there be even the tiniest sign of social conflict in the schools due to religious diversity. If well managed by competent teachers, conflict due to religious differences among learners can be both productive and creative, and can afford teachers with excellent pedagogical opportunities. To engage in inter-religious dialogue is part of teachers’ pedagogical duty to prepare learners for engagement with others in the religiously pluralistic world in which they live, especially at the deepest spiritual level of their religions as outlined in section 2 above. How this can be done is briefly outlined in the following section.

## **4. THE PHASES OF AN INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE**

### **4.1 The first phase**

The first phase of an inter-religious dialogue in the school is the information exchange phase. Interactions with adherents of other religions require mutual respect and open-mindedness as well as a tough-minded insistence on working with the “truth” or the “hard facts” relating to all the religions involved. Stereotyping and caricaturing should be avoided at all costs. The participants exchange cognitive, affective, volitional and practical information about the various religions with the purpose of making the discussants aware of similarities and differences between their respective religious traditions. Each participant contrives to understand the other religious tradition(s) by identifying similarities with and differences between religions they already know, including their own. In this phase, the participants in the dialogue exchange knowledge about the first four layers of religion as outlined in section 2 above (understanding of the ritual or cultic aspects of the other’s religion, of the

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<sup>8</sup> “Religion education” should not be confused with the academic subject “Religion Studies”. The former is not an academic subject, but is aimed at the religious education of the learners.

other's sense of awe and respect, the dogmas and theology of the other's religion, and of the other's ethos of caring and philanthropy).<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.2 The second phase

Mere knowledge and information is however not enough to turn communication into true dialogue. In the second phase, both partners should be open to an encounter at the spiritual level, in other words show their willingness to meet and understand each other at the deeper levels of humanity, as described in section 2 above. One contrives to understand the other in terms of his or her religious presuppositions, especially those that pertain to the spiritual level.<sup>10</sup> This level can be detected by attending to the final vocabulary used by the other. Each discussant provides answers to the primordial questions that people ask at the spiritual level such as, Who am I, who is the higher/divine/transcendent being in my life, how do I relate to other people, to nature, culture, to the things in life that I am in awe or afraid of? (cf Van der Burg 1984:55, 226, 230, 233).

For authentic dialogue to take place, the participants should enter into an implied or tacit agreement with respect to purpose, content and harmony. This criterion implies that all the participants in the dialogue or conversation should be sufficiently mature to participate meaningfully. Parents and religious leaders who discourage young children and/or those who have not yet completely mastered the tenets of their own faith to participate in such inter-religious dialogues or conversations are therefore correct in their approach. A lack of knowledge, insight and of a consolidated personal faith can lead to confusion in young minds. On the other hand, a person mature enough to enter into this implied or tacit agreement should share with their conversation partners the belief that the eradication of social or civic conflict due to religious differences and misunderstandings can be located in continued dialogue as described above (cf also Bazin 2003; De Oliveira [s a]).

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<sup>9</sup> As already pointed out, Vermeer and Van der Ven (2004) found that the adolescent respondents in their study seemed to confine themselves to this phase only, viz of understanding what is available to them. They preferred to confine themselves to a cognitive approach, and not to commit themselves to a particular religion.

<sup>10</sup> The dialogue should be conducted much like that in a Jewish *sjoel*, the purpose of which is to communicate for acquiring a deeper understanding of the views of others and of oneself. The purpose of the dialogue is not to debate a point or to convince others of one's view. The conversation is not aimed at advancing truth claims.

## **5. THE FINAL PURPOSE OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: ENGAGEMENT AT THE SPIRITUAL LEVEL**

An effective dialogue can intensify to communication with and comprehension (literally: a grasp of the other's concept of spiritual meaning<sup>11</sup>) of the other's religion and deepest spiritual convictions. Tolerance, empathy, inter-pathy, support, co-operation, communication and respect for others, participation, commitment and reciprocity, as well as openness/open communication, recognition of equal and full partnership, and a readiness to risk with the other in a process of authentic engagement, devotion and entrusted security are both prerequisites for an effective and authentic dialogue to take place as well as quality- and value-added final products of such dialogue (Richardson 2003:8; Friedman 1992:xii, 8, 14, 48). The same applies for a willingness to monitor one's own religious commitments critically, and to reduce the barriers between the participants (Kelly & Rasey 1952:82-83).

The final result of an effective *Begegnung*, as Buber pointed out, is an *untererdische Dialog* that embraces both conversing partners, and helps them discover the spiritual basis of their respective religions. "Geist is nicht im Ich, sondern zwischen Ich und Du," says Buber (1947:49).<sup>12</sup>

The proposed inter-religious dialogue should not only help the participants to understand and accept differences between themselves, but should also have the potential to bind them together as citizens of the same political unit (such as a nation) or a new whole (such as the European or the African Unions) (cf. Kelly & Rasey 1952:13). Inter-religious dialogue of this quality can contribute to the weaving of the (new) moral and ethical fabric of the political unit or community. It can become the basis of a social contract in its 20th century meaning of being a device for defining the various moral conceptions of individuals in a political unit (cf Hampton 2005:856).

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<sup>11</sup> The Hebrew word "jada" seems apposite here. It does not refer to mere superficial knowledge of or about the other, but to the deepest form of knowing. The word is used, for instance, for the sexual intercourse between a man and his wife. "Jada" has all of the following meanings: to know, to perceive, to discern, to be aware of, to be acquainted with, to recognize, to acknowledge, to know carnally, to regard, to care for (cf Davidson 1967:298).

<sup>12</sup> "Spirit is not in the I, but between I and Thou." According to Kent and Nicholls (1972: xii) this means: "The person that appears as I in me appears as Thou in you. ... The I AMness in myself, and the I AMness in you, are not separate but one. ... Here there are no objects any more, but only subject, the one I AMness besides whom there is no other. On this basis we may find ourselves at a point where some of the words once spoken in religion begin to regain an authentic meaning."

## 6. CONCLUSION

Religion is a multi-layered phenomenon. It is something very personal since it touches the dearly held beliefs as well as the deepest spiritual level of people. Social and civic conflict due to religious differences is therefore likely to result from inter-personal encounters. The school as a societal relationship has a certain structure which implies that inter-religious dialogues in the school have to be conducted in a manner commensurable with the cognitive-analytical aims of the school. Although policy guidelines have been promulgated by the South African authorities to avoid conflict and promote peaceful co-existence among learners, pedagogical considerations dictate that inter-religious dialogues should indeed take place in schools so that the learners are not educated in schools in “hothouse” or “pressure cooker” conditions<sup>13</sup> but are prepared for life in religiously pluralistic societies. Learners mature enough to participate fruitfully and responsibly in inter-religious dialogues should be guided to reach understanding of and empathy with others and their religions at a deep spiritual level. The acquisition of this skill will serve them well in life after school.

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<sup>13</sup> “Hothouse” conditions prevail when learners are taught to refrain from inter-religious dialogue. This does not prepare them for the realities of life. The imposition of statutory measures such as currently taking place in the Republic of South Africa does not only create such a “hothouse effect”. It might also create a “pressure cooker effect” in the sense that conflict due to religious differences might unexpectedly erupt in schools and spread to wider communities. These two effects can only be eradicated if learners are helped to master the techniques of inter-religious dialogue early in their lives, also in schools.

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