

**Ethics in Education
and the role of faith communities
in fostering learning to live together
among people of different cultural and religious backgrounds:
towards a culture of living together
through intercultural and interfaith learning**

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Our era is identified by an ongoing financial crisis that appears to be the cause of global political “turmoil” and drives millions of people away from home. Europe welcomes migrants and refugees, but at the same time seems unprepared to provide this new “other” a peaceful life. In order to overcome rising tensions between refugees’ and hosts’ communities, education in Europe needs to steer away from bureaucracy and economism and return to its humancentric roots. This can be achieved by teaching *Philosophy* -specifically *Ethics*- and *Religion*.

Philosophy provides the tools, *reason* and *elenchus*, the socratic “self-control”. But why combine Philosophy with Religion? All religions -even though they significantly differ- ask the same pivotal questions: where does this world come from? Why are we born and why should we die? What defines our destiny? If we aim at an intercultural education of peace, then religion and its diversity should be taught alongside Ethics, by placing emphasis on religions’ common ground: their struggles for peace, freedom and justice, for the protection of human dignity, for accepting and promoting *human rights’ culture*.

In order to combine Philosophy and Religion to create an environment of dialogue and cooperation by discussing existential questions, we need teachers with “heart”, faith, love and hope, with openness, ecumenical spirit and dynamism, with broad cultural interests, such as theatre, music, dance, literature etc. Students do not ever need to hear words such as philosophy or ethics, but the teacher should be capable of directing a “socratic” dialogue, in order to promote *critical thinking*, a spirit of *openness* and not just tolerance. This creative approach can give students the opportunity to get to know and understand each other, witness the “other” as a fellow human being. We cannot communicate with the other, when we do not understand religious diversity.

As of October 2020, I teach the course of Religion in three public schools in Chania, Greece, to 14 and 15-year-olds, where I try to implement the aforementioned ideas. I shall present the following two examples. I should note here that when dealing with younger students, one should implement other techniques, most notably theatre-inspired ones.

Teaching Ethics in a Religion course examples:

- a) I start by posing an ethical dilemma (such as the plank of Carneades, the famous debate of Antipater and Diogenes etc.) or a question (should we eat meat? or is it easier today to be a man or a woman and why?). I try to get as many varying answers as possible. Sometimes I organize them in groups, making sure that each group consists of various national or religious backgrounds. I then provoke them into discussing with each other by presenting them with some perspective (philosophical or religious) upon their opinions and I encourage them to give birth themselves to

a moral answer. After we reach a moral answer, or sometimes several answers, I present them with a philosophical or religious source, that tackles a similar issue or that expresses a similar moral answer.

- b) Sometimes, I narrate a story (such as the Good Samaritan, the Great Inquisitor, Euripides' Alcestis, or a passage from Homer's poems). Then, I engage in conversation around one or more moral subjects. For example, why did Odysseus abandon the nymph Kalypso, when she provided him with everything a man of our times desires -immortality, eternal youth, great food and drinks, daily intercourse, she was literally a goddess, who would remain forever young etc. Depending on the students' approach and combining an actor's improvisation with a teacher's preparation, I direct the conversation towards my goals; for example, to teach that one should care for more than one's appearance, that an educated mind is sexier than a well worked-out body, that Odysseus' true match was Penelope and not Kalypso, due to their *ὁμοφροσύνη*, their unity of mind and feeling that is, etc.

By applying these methods, I aim at making the students realize that they are all humans and that any other designation, such as their nationality or their religion, does not change that. On the contrary, diversity could enrich this realization, if they focus on the humancentric elements of their different traditions.

Introducing Ethics in a Religion course does not betray Christian faith or the course's aims. One of the Orthodox Church's main missions, if not the most important one, is to aid the "other" in need, the migrant and the refugee. We cannot forget that in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the injured in need is nowadays the migrant and the refugee, who awaits a Good Samaritan in all of us. The Church of Greece, for instance, through its NGO "Synyparxis", has organized several shelters in Greece for unaccompanied minors, providing them not only with the essentials, but also offering education and psychosocial support, in order to give those suffering "others" the chance of a normal future life as a European citizen. His All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew 1st, head of one of the founding Churches of the World Council of Churches, has made interchristian and interreligious dialogue His life's goal by organizing several Forums, Symposia, meetings and even marches, standing side by side to those in need and those under discrimination. I quote: "War in the name of religion is a war against religion". His words and acts should inspire us. If we want a society of love and justice, we need to realize that we ought to change ourselves first. As a famous theologian once wrote, if we want to be good Christians, we need to spread the love we receive from God to our fellow humans. We should not forget that the only way to actually meet God

is through the face of a fellow human, to act as a vessel of love. This is what solidarity means. It is not an easy choice, as it requires personal struggles and sacrifice, but it's a road worth taking, as it's full of love, the only way to overcome intolerance and fanaticism.

Let me finish my short presentation by quoting the recently deceased German theologian Hans Küng: "Religious communities ought to have as their primal educational duty the pacifying elements of their faith and their will to discuss with those of different faith. This stance should be promoted in the legislation for Education, in school books, in teaching, in adult training and in teachers' training".¹

¹ H. Küng, *Weltethos für Weltpolitik und Weltwirtschaft: Eine Vision*, Piper Verlag, München 1998, 207 (in German).