**ReligioWest Workshop**

**“Knowledge about religion and religious knowledge in secular societies”**

Organized by Kristina Stoeckl & Olivier Roy

**Date:** 28 October 2014 (Tuesday), San Domenico di Fiesole – Florence, Badia Fiesolana, Sala Capitolo

**Background**

The ReligioWest program is a research-project interested in the ways in which religion is framed in public debates and policies in Western Europe. The underlying hypothesis is that we observe an implicit process of “formatting” of newcomer religions, chiefly Islam, into an understanding and practice of religion that is informed by Christianity. At the same time, we observe a broader “formatting”-process of a different kind, which affects all religions, newcomer or not, and this process has been called by O. Roy the “disconnect” between religion and culture. By this he means that religions are getting more similar to each other by becoming more and more detached from a general secularized background culture.

In the context of this research-program, the question of religious education is interesting. Initially the idea was to look at the teaching of Islam in Europe as a straightforward process of “formatting”, of moulding the practice of teaching Islam into a basically Christian model of teaching religion. The creation of Faculties for the Study of Islam and of Departments of Pedagogics of Islam in different European countries is a case in point. But as we were discussing this topic, it became apparent that we cannot ignore the second meaning of “formatting”, namely the fact that all religions today in Western Europe are nested in a thoroughly secularized background culture. And in the end we decided that it is this second question that interests us above all.

It is first and foremost a question about pluralism. Religious education in public schools (we want to focus on schools) today is not taking place in a situation of multi-faith pluralism, but in the context of pluri-faith-secular pluralism: pupils come with many different religious backgrounds and with non-religious backgrounds. On the whole, educators have responded to this development with the creation of non-religious curricula: ethics, non-religious humanism, or the study of world religions.

In recent debates, an additional argument for religious education has been voiced, and it is neither religious, nor ethical, it is purely political. The argument goes that knowledge about religion in modern secularized societies is declining, with possibly serious effects both for democracy (the reciprocal understanding of religious and secular citizens is at stake) as well as culture (the historical cultural memory, often tied to a specific religious tradition, risks to be no longer correctly deciphered and interpreted). For this reason, secular intellectuals like Regis Debray have called for education in “secular knowledge about religion”.

One of the questions at stake is how we think about the acquisition of knowledge about religion: is it merely knowledge about religion (historical and cultural features), or do we mean also knowledge that is transmitted by religion (learning “from” religion), and what about the aspect of learning “in” religion – through the participation in ritual, for example.

Another issue to be explored is that of the disconnect between religion and culture that is characteristic of modern societies. How does religious education deal with the fact that people are less and less “at home” in a religion but may experience the legitimate desire to belief in something (Charles Taylor has described this situation as “secularity III”, religion is no longer a default-option, but people continue to look for orientation in their lives.)

A third question to be explored is who actually benefits from different forms of religious education or education about religion: the pluralistically aware citizen (the democratic argument)? the culturally literate individual (the cultural argument)? the informed moral subject (the educational argument)?

The aim of this workshop is to take stock of the debate about religious education in secular societies. It will bring together theologians of different backgrounds who are experts in confessional religious education as well as scholars who defend a model of secular education about religion in order to engage in a debate about the future of religious education and education of religion in Europe.

**Invited Participants:**

1. Joachim Willems *confirmed*

2. Matthias Scharer *confirmed*

3. Khalid El Abdaoui *confirmed*

4. Robert Jackson *TBC*

5. Anna Sthran *confirmed*

6. Loie Lee *confirmed*

7. Regis Debray (someone from his institute) *TBC*

8. Wanda Alberts *TBC*

*9. someone from the European Commission DG Education?*