

Religion classes could build interfaith bridges

The German Conference of Bishops has published a working document on the future of religious teaching in schools. It calls for deeper collaboration with the Protestant Church. "La Croix" unpacks the proposals.

Delphine Nerbollier, Berlin, *La Croix International*, 30 January 2017



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What are the German bishops proposing?

They suggest working more closely with the Protestant Church to ensure religious education continues in schools. In Germany, primary and secondary pupils can attend religious classes, which are optional, within the framework of public education. This right is enshrined in the constitution.

"Cooperation is of great importance for the future of religious classes," says Hans-Josef Becker, Archbishop of Paderborn and Chairman of the Education and Schools Committee of the Episcopal Conference.

In practice, this implies grouping together Catholic and Protestant pupils as well as those without religion. This is to ensure classes can still take place where pupil numbers are insufficient for separate ones to be held for Catholics and Protestants.

However, the bishops don't want these courses to take on a supra-denominational dimension. "It is crucial that this cooperation is not only organizational but also pedagogical," says Archbishop Becker.

At the same time, 163 academics are calling for further action. They want more cooperation between the two religious institutions but also with other religions, such as Islam and Judaism.

"A plural society needs people who can judge religions with common sense and who ready for dialogue," states the working document.

Why are they taking such a position?

In a country where churches are constantly losing members, the number of Catholic and Protestant pupils is also falling. According to figures from the Episcopal Conference,

Germany had three million Catholic schoolchildren in 2012 and 70,000 teachers of the Catholic religion.

"The number of pupils taking religious classes is declining massively," says Maria Jakobs, director of the Institute of Religious Pedagogy, in the diocese of Freiburg. "On the one hand, this is explained by demographic change and on the other by the fact that fewer and fewer children are being baptized."

"There are also other subjects such as ethics and philosophy that deal with the same issues as Catholic religion classes."

At the same time, the number of Muslim and non-denominational pupils is on the rise and some attend religious classes, changing the previous homogeneity of these courses.

This is the case in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, in the north of the country, where according to figures from the German Protestant Church, Altogether 50% of students take Protestant religion classes even though less than 16% of the local population is Protestant.

Is there already cooperation?

In 1998, the two churches published a joint statement entitled "Towards co-operation between Protestant and Catholic religion classes". Three regions, Baden-Württemberg, Lower Saxony and part of North Rhine-Westphalia, are putting it into practice.

In Baden-Württemberg, for example, teachers are developing a two-year program that must be accepted by both parties as part of a process under the supervision of both religious institutions. The teachers are clearly identified according to their faith and provide a course aimed at "filtering the commonalities and differences" between religions.

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