

- «**Compulsory Religious Education: A Justification Based on European Experience**»
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Compulsory Religious Education: A Justification Based on European Experience

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Abstract

In this paper the author presents research into the role of religion in the modern world and into young *people's perspectives on the role of religion in European school systems* attempting to justify compulsory Religious Education. International and European legislation, experiences of different countries and findings of researches in Greece published for the first time, provide a proposal for compulsory Religious Education which has to be based on the constructivist theory according to pedagogical practice in Europe.

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a fruitful conversation about religious education (hereafter referred to as RE) and whether or not it should be a compulsory discrete subject within the curriculum. This topic reflects the actual contradiction between ongoing secularization and religion which continues to enjoy global significance for humankind. Taking into account the arguments of both sides we argue for a consensus on the aims and purposes of RE that makes the subject of RE indispensable to a contemporary curriculum that helps students to cope with the world they live in, and one in which religious practices and beliefs need to be comprehended.

2. Religion and education in the modern world

Since the Enlightenment many people have always expected that, as the Western nations developed and secularized, this process labeled secularization would mean that religion would decline in significance as an influence in the modern world. Despite this expectation religion persisted and continues to influence the public sphere in Europe and to be an important factor in human affairs universally. There are two simultaneous realities. Consider, on the one hand, the demise of

metaphysics in philosophy, the predominance of the scientific method as the means to knowledge, the extinction of any form of religious cosmology and the important impact of the theory of evolution and, on the other hand, the institutional influence of religion in Europe, the re-election of the president of The United States in November of 2004 whose victory was attributed to the strength of religious factors influencing the way Americans voted and Islamic values which seem to have influenced different political events since the 1979 Iranian revolution onwards [1]. With the demise of the Soviet bloc and consequently the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the deposition of the Shah in Iran and the subsequent events in the Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan, religion has been brought by globalization firmly back onto the agenda [2]. Who hasn't heard about the fierce Muslim reaction to the Danish cartoons in 2005 or more recently, this year, about the reactions to the American Baptist pastor's suggestion of rounding up the homosexuals and putting them in a concentration camp? And more recently the Muslim reaction to the American film about the Prophet Muhammad? As Andrew Wright argues, "it is virtually impossible to make sense of the culture and politics of the present age without reference to organized religion" [3].

Secularisation has apparently influenced Western educational systems which are implicitly secular, in some cases more overtly so than in others. Since educational reform has underpinned a curriculum that is based on the sciences and teaching reconceptualized as a scientific activity, scientists were loath to allow theological speculation to interfere with empirical and sensory observation and, as a result, therefore, RE is seen as not fitting into this educational venture and as a consequence religion has no meaning to such an enterprise. At the same time, pedagogical insufficiencies in the subject have not helped matters and have given arguments to opponents who reject theological ideas and are mechanistic and materialistic in condemning RE for indoctrinating, and nurturing in religion and instructional catechesis. In spite of this tendency, RE remains within the schooling system in most European countries. It is influenced not only by the

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idea of secularity, but also by the extent of the secularization of the State which determines the type of RE (confessional, non-confessional, inter-religious etc) wherever it exists. Thus, RE has been influenced by the historical context and experiences in each country and so is, in each situation, confessional (Germany (partly), Ireland, Spain, Lithuania, Romania, Hungary, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovakia, Portugal, Italy, Croatia, Poland, Turkey, Cyprus and Malta) or non-confessional (England, Wales and Scotland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Netherlands (partly), Switzerland, Moldavia, Greece, Estonia and Latvia), compulsory (Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Romania, Serbia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Ireland, Iceland, England, Wales and Scotland) or optional (Malta, Croatia, Italy, Hungary, Moldavia, Russia, Estonia, Poland, Netherlands, Spain and Portugal). In some countries different curricula exist and so the content of the subject is partly confessional or in some cases there are different approaches or optional subjects according to the region of the country or the type of the school. Furthermore, there are countries that are committed to a strict separation of religion and state, where RE does not feature as a subject in the curriculum (France, Albania, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and Slovenia) [4].

3. The compulsory RE

RE is related to factors such as family tradition, the cultural environment, the religious community, the political perspectives and the age of the student. The arguments on both sides, for a compulsory RE or not, are associated exactly with the above but they shed light from a different angle.

Firstly, those who prefer RE to be out of the curriculum argue about privacy. Their main contention is that religious beliefs are personal and too sensitive to be dealt with in the schooling system. Moreover, as teachers have their own beliefs, they consider that it is impossible to avoid influencing their presentation of religions in the classroom. So “the simplification involved will necessarily stereotype traditions and be likely to represent them, differences between pupils will be stressed in a way that could cause trouble, and it is better to stress the sort of human moral values which can be shared by all traditions and none rather than values which divide us” [Cush 1]. Religious people, however, are in the minority according to their point of view and there is no reason for the vast majority of the population to be taught a subject for so many years with content relevant only to small number of people [5]. Finally, there are those who believe that religion has to be excised from the curriculum hence religions have a negative impact on society and

human life and, moreover, all religious traditions are considered as completely false. How, then, can education that is based and focused on scientific evidence and method embrace a subject with such content?

On the other hand, the advocates of the confessional RE believe that within education people have to firmly establish their own identity, first by their family values and secondly by their nation’s or their countries religious and moral values. Of course one religion or one particular faith contains the whole truth for them and children’s education has to contain it because it is important to their lives. Furthermore, countries with dominant or prevailing religions, such as Greece, consider RE to be an important factor in national civic cohesion.

Above all, the advocacy for compulsory RE relies basically on the arguments for a non-confessional RE which is considered as an open-ended educational process that does fair justice to religious pluralism whilst providing religious literacy and supporting students in developing their cultural identity by teaching the world’s religions and other worldviews.

Firstly, it is impossible nowadays to understand contemporary issues, problems and human culture without knowledge of the religious plurality which is a factor that makes the interpretation of the phenomena more difficult exactly because a variety of traditions, religious and philosophical, exist. Educational scope is maintained by exploring within and across faiths, enabling students to learn different religions, beliefs, traditions and values, and their influences on individuals, societies, communities and cultures. Some results of the REDCo –Project (covering 8 European countries) underline the importance of religious literacy which is one of the main aims of education in the post-modern era. Teenagers’ perspectives on the role of religion in their lives, schools and societies illustrate that: 1) Religious pluralism is not only accepted, but welcomed by the students, 2) Students expressed criticism against truth claims that exclude people of other religions or world views and 3) In spite of the awareness of the conflicts caused by religions and the difficulties arising from religious plurality, the majority of students appeared to share a vision of peaceful coexistence in a religiously plural society [6]. Secondly, school is the main recourse and an actual safe environment for learning about religions and religious perceptions of other students, especially for those who have no commitment to one religion or others who are atheists. Besides for those who are members of a religious community, the school provides the main opportunity to come into contact with other religions and beliefs. Thus school offers unique possibilities to promote students’ understanding, communication, tolerance and respect between and towards each other encouraging

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students to reflect on, analyse and evaluate their beliefs, values and practices and communicate their responses. An independent qualitative and quantitative research which was conducted by the author in the period of 2006-2009 in different regions of Greece using qualitative interviews and discussion in focus groups (age 15-24) holding three meetings for each group in one year reveals the same topics and underlines that: most of the young people learn about their religions and the other religions within the school system (72% out of n=356), most of them want to know more about each other's religions and worldviews (77%), most prefer school to be a place for learning about religions and worldviews (71%) and few to be a place for instruction in one particular religion (17%). Finally, many admit that the content of RE has turned out to be useful for their lives and their understanding not only of current world events but also of personal issues (60%) [7].

Table 1. Database contexts
Young people's perspectives for RE in Greece

N=356	
Learn about their religions and the other religions within the school system	72%
Want to know more about each other's religions and worldviews	77%
Prefer school to be a place for learning about religions and worldviews	71%
Prefer school to be a place for instruction into one particular religion	17%
Admit that the content of the RE has turned out to be useful for their lives and their understanding not only of current world events but also of personal issues	60%

In addition, findings of another Greek research project are relevant to the trends above. The research was conducted in the Pedagogical faculties at seven Greek Universities through the completion of 1009 questionnaires about RE. The participants were all students and future teachers who will teach RE in Greek and Cypriot primary schools. Among the trends that emerged from the data, what is important for compulsory RE is that the majority of the students believe that RE is very necessary for public schools (55% out of n=1009) and the content of RE has to be a study of the religious phenomenon (45,09%), religions of the others (31,02), and one religion, Christianity in particular (20,02%) [8].

Thirdly, all youngsters, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 2 guarantees the right to those of all religions, article 18 demands freedom of thought, religious belief and practice and article 26 articulates the right to education) have the right to an education that promotes understanding and tolerance between national, racial or religious groups. That means that RE's exclusion from

education undermines children's right to an education that provides knowledge and ideas to further students understanding of their societies and the role of religions in the contemporary world [9]. Of course parents have to be responsible for the upbringing and development of the child (article 18.1), but it is still the state's responsibility to ensure that all citizens are educated. As far as RE is concerned, it is the state's responsibility again to promote RE that would be a help for all parents and not a cause of problems.

Finally, in the European area there has been a dialogue for inter-religious and intercultural education since 2001. A project on teaching religions in school was launched in 2002 and it argued that regardless of the truth or the falsity of each religion, religion is an integral part of life and culture. Therefore, religion should be understood by all citizens as part of their education. The Committee of Ministers agreed to a policy recommendation (CM/Rec(2008)12) that all member states should include the impartial study of religions within the curricula of their school's systems. This recommendation which incorporated ideas from the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, gives a compelling cultural argument for the study of religions and legitimacy for a compulsory RE. It should be mentioned that its principles provide the intercultural dialogue and its dimension of religious and non-religious convictions as significant factors for the development of tolerance and cultural coexistence. Among its objectives are: nurturing a sensitivity to the diversity of religions and non-religious convictions as an element contributing to the richness of Europe, ensuring that teaching about the diversity of religions and non-religious convictions is consistent with the aims of education for democratic citizenship, human rights and respect for equal dignity of all individuals and promoting communication and dialogue between people from different cultural, religious and non-religious backgrounds [10]. Of course, when somebody speaks in favour of compulsory RE in Europe, one has to bear in mind, moreover: 1) the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (a result of Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe- OSCE based in Vienna) which was produced in 2007 and it is an essential tool for the study and the knowledge about religions and beliefs at schools, based on the rationale of religious freedom [11] and 2) the recommendation 1720/2005 which was adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 2006 (965th meeting/24-5-2006) that encourages the governments of member states to ensure that religious studies are taught at the primary and secondary levels of state education. Furthermore, the recommendation addresses: 1) that the aim of this education should be

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to make pupils discover the religions practiced in their own and neighboring countries, to make them perceive that everyone has the same right to believe that their religion is the “true faith” and that other people are not different human beings through having a different religion or not having a religion at all, 2) it should include, with complete impartiality, the history of the main religions, as well as the option of having no religion, 3) it should provide young people with educational tools that enable them to be quite secure in approaching supporters of a fanatical religious practice, 4) it must not overstep the borderline between the realms of culture and worship, even where a country with a state religion is concerned. It is not a matter of instilling a faith but of making young people understand why religions are sources of faith for millions (article 14) [12]

Of course, all the documents set out the criteria for a RE for all children regardless of their religion or non-religion and human rights remain the bedrock of each policy of Council of Europe [13].

4. Pedagogical approach to a compulsory RE

Today, variability exists in RE pedagogical approaches. But a compulsory RE, based on the criteria of the legislation above and the scientific findings which are mentioned should be a postmodernist approach. This means that RE emphasizes the development of attitudes and skills required to deconstruct and debate objective knowledge. Argument and subjectivity are valued and authority is contestable and negotiable. Moreover the engagement with particular ideas, persons, events and texts is open to interpretation and re-reading by individuals and groups. The closest to a postmodern position is the constructivist approach to RE of Michael Grimmitt [14] and others who expanded his work on pedagogical strategy, such as Clive Erricker. Their three or five -stage pedagogical process, placing a pedagogic emphasis on the development of the learner, using a specific constructivist theory, illustrates a clear grasp of how RE can be situated within what is an overall secular educational environment and make a distinctive contribution to RE pedagogy and to religious studies in general.

5. The right to withdraw from RE

A compulsory RE for all as it is articulated above has limited possibilities for withdrawal. It is obvious that a catechetical RE increases the possibilities that some parents who decide to withdraw their children from RE may through this withdrawal be said to

leave their children open to a stigmatizing effect thus making the children vulnerable to teasing and bullying [15]. Therefore withdrawals have to be justified (mentioning specifically particular reasons) by the parents and to be few in number. A pluralistic and objective RE for all children, whatever their background, wherein all the children learn together as a ‘learning community’ about their heritage and about all religions and secular world views may limit the withdrawals though anyone can deny at least the right of withdrawal. Significant data is provided by Norwegian history and the practice of RE and their experience in withdrawals policies and in the possibility to create a subject that satisfies human rights for all [16].

6. Conclusion

Research and experience demonstrates that RE should be compulsory in public schools provided it responds to contemporary pedagogical principles and to the increasing impact of religious plurality. As has been mentioned the content of the subject and the pedagogical approach to it should be a post-modern endeavour including a variety of religious and non-religious beliefs, interdisciplinary enquiry and above all be of relevance in relation to students’ lives. In this way RE as a compulsory subject might contribute to education in its country. That means that RE should only be the State’s responsibility and, all religious communities should only have an advisory role. As a first step in changing it is useful to construct a European consensus regarding RE based on previous European experience, rationales for studying, particular policies and standard-setting policy recommendations. A development has been occurred, an example of which is REDCo research that proves that religion (we don’t speak about God) is back. Therefore, post-modern, future citizens have to acquire for our own welfare religious literacy.

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