
Education and religion

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Report

Committee on Culture, Science and Education

Rapporteur: André Schneider, France, Group of the European People's Party

Summary

The Parliamentary Assembly reaffirms that each person's religion, including the option of having no religion, is a strictly personal matter. However, many crisis situations are deeply rooted in cultural and religious tensions. Knowledge of religions is an integral part of knowledge of the history of mankind and civilisations. It is altogether distinct from belief in a specific religion and its observance.

A good general knowledge of religions is therefore essential for a sense of tolerance in society and the exercise of democratic citizenship. Education should provide the tools for combating ignorance, stereotypes and misunderstanding of religions.

The Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers examine the possible approaches to teaching about religions at primary and secondary levels, for example through basic modules which would be adapted to the various educational systems, promote initial and in-service teacher training in religious studies and envisage setting up a European teacher training institute for the comparative study of religions.

I. Draft recommendation [[Link to the adopted text](#)]

1. The Parliamentary Assembly forcefully reaffirms that each person's religion, including the option of having no religion, is a strictly personal matter. However, this is not inconsistent with the view that a good general knowledge of religions, and as a result a sense of tolerance, are essential to the exercise of democratic citizenship.
2. In its [Recommendation 1396 \(1999\)](#) on religion and democracy, the Assembly asserted: "There is a religious aspect to many of the problems that contemporary society faces, such as intolerant fundamentalist movements and terrorist acts, racism and xenophobia, and ethnic conflicts".
3. Knowledge of religions is dying out in many families. More and more young people lack the necessary bearings fully to apprehend the societies in which they move and others with which they are confronted.
4. The media – printed and audiovisual – can have a highly positive informative role. Some, however, especially among those aimed at the wider public, very often display a regrettable ignorance of religions, as shown for instance by the frequent unwarranted parallels drawn between Islam and certain fundamentalist and radical movements.

5. Politics and religion should be kept apart. However, democracy and religion should not be incompatible. In fact they should be valid partners. By tackling societal problems, the public authorities can eliminate many of the situations which can lead to religious extremism.

6. Education is essential for combating ignorance, stereotypes and misunderstanding of religions. Governments should also do more to guarantee freedom of conscience and religious expression, to foster education on religions, to encourage dialogue with and between religions and to promote the cultural and social expression of religions.

7. School is a major component of education, of forming a critical spirit in future citizens and of intercultural dialogue. It lays the foundations for tolerant behaviour. By teaching children the history and philosophy of the main religions with restraint and objectivity and with respect for the values of the European Convention on Human Rights, it will effectively combat fanaticism. Understanding the history of political conflicts in the name of religion is essential.

8. Knowledge of religions is an integral part of knowledge of the history of mankind and civilisations. It is altogether distinct from belief in a specific religion and its observance. Even countries where one religion plainly predominates should teach about the origins of all religions rather than favour a single one or encourage proselytising.

9. In Europe, there are various concurrent situations. Education systems generally – and especially the State schools in so-called secular countries – are not devoting enough resources to teaching about religions, or – in countries where there is a state religion and in denominational schools – are focusing on only one religion. Some countries have prohibited the carrying or wearing of religious symbols in schools.

10. Unfortunately, all over Europe there is a shortage of teachers qualified to give comparative instruction in the different religions, so a European teacher training institute for that needs to be set up (at least for teacher trainers).

11. The Council of Europe assigns a key role to education in the construction of a democratic society, but study of religions in schools has not yet received special attention.

12. The Assembly observes moreover that the three monotheistic religions of the Book have common origins (Abraham) and share many values with other religions and that the values upheld by the Council of Europe stem from these values.

13. Accordingly, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

13.1. examine the possible approaches to teaching about religions at primary and secondary levels, for example through basic modules which would subsequently be adapted to the various educational systems;

13.2. promote initial and in-service teacher training in religious studies respecting the principles set out in the previous paragraphs;

13.3. envisage setting up a European teacher training institute for the comparative study of religions.

14. The Assembly also recommends that the Committee of Ministers encourage the governments of member states to ensure that religious studies are taught at the primary and secondary levels of State education, on the basis of the following criteria in particular:

14.1. the aim of this education should be to make pupils discover the religions practiced in their own and neighbouring 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 rendered any different as human beings by having a different religion or not having a religion at all;

14.2. it should include, with complete impartiality, the history of the main religions, as well as the option of having no religion;

14.3. it should provide young people with educational tools that enable them to be quite secure in approaching supporters of a fanatical religious practice;

14.4. 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 the sources of faith for millions;

14.5. teachers on religions need to have specific training. They should be teachers of a cultural or literary discipline. However, specialists in another discipline could be made responsible for this education;

14.6. the State should look after teacher training and lay down the syllabuses which should be adapted to each country's peculiarities and to the pupils' ages.

II. Preliminary draft report

by Mr André Schneider

A. Introduction

1. Religion is an important aspect of European culture and plays a significant role for many people throughout Europe. The fact that each person's religion is a strictly personal matter is not inconsistent with the view that a good general knowledge of religions is essential to the exercise of democratic citizenship.

2. However, it has become clear that – particularly in so-called secular countries – education systems are not devoting enough resources to teaching about religions, or – in countries where there is a state religion and in faith schools – are focusing on only one religion. At the same time, religious traditions are dying out in many families. As a result, more and more young people lack the bearings they need to help them understand the societies in which they live and to which they face.

3. It was therefore deemed necessary to consider the role of education systems with regard to religion.

B. Earlier committee activities

4. In its 1998 report on religion and democracy (Doc. 8270), the committee stated: "There is a religious aspect to many of the problems that European contemporary society faces such as intolerant fundamentalist movements and terrorist acts, racism and xenophobia, ethnic conflicts.

5. Politics and religion should be kept apart. However, democracy and religion need not be incompatible and can be valid partners. By tackling societal problems, the authorities can remove many of the causes of religious extremism. Education is the key way to combat ignorance, stereotypes and misunderstanding of religions.

6. Governments should also do more to guarantee freedom of conscience and religious expression, to develop education about religions, to encourage dialogue with and between religions and to promote the cultural and social expression of religions."

7. During an exchange of views with the committee on 23 June 2003 the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr Gil-Robles, said that many of the crisis situations which he had encountered were deeply rooted in cultural and religious tensions. The Commissioner also underlined the need to consider the setting up of a European teacher training institute for the comparative study of religions.

8. On 17 November 2003 the rapporteur and others tabled a motion for a recommendation on the comparative study of religions and intercultural dialogue. The motion points out the key role that the Council of Europe assigns to education in the construction of a democratic society and states that the comparative study of religions in schools has not yet received special attention. Knowledge of religions is integral to knowledge of the history of humanity and civilisations. It should be distinguished from belief in or practice of a specific religion. Given the

many possible prejudices and stereotypes regarding religions, it is important to have structured, rational instruction in schools. That would help combat fanaticism, fundamentalism and xenophobia more effectively.

9. The Bureau of the Assembly asked the Committee on Culture, Science and Education for a report and the latter appointed me as rapporteur at its meeting on 29 January 2004.

10. The media – printed and audiovisual – can have a highly positive informative role. Some however, especially among those aimed at the wider public, very often display a regrettable ignorance of religions, as shown for instance by the frequent unwarranted parallels drawn between Islam and certain fundamentalist and radical movements.

11. The committee held its first exchange of views on the subject on 18 March 2004. The issue is a complex and sensitive one, involving deeply rooted religious, cultural and historical beliefs. It is therefore a subject that needs to be treated with great caution. Ignorance often gives rise to intolerance, fanaticism, fundamentalism and terrorism. Schools play a key role because they impart knowledge of and respect for others. Better knowledge of others would help develop intercultural dialogue and religious tolerance. Schools should teach religions, their history, their philosophies and their practices as a comparative study and in a structured and reasoned manner.

12. The committee members think that as well as concerning itself with comparative study of religions and intercultural dialogue the report should adopt a wider approach to the subject.

13. School courses should teach not only factual knowledge but also about the nature of religious experience. They should not confine themselves to European religions but extend to other continents' religions now represented in Europe. Religious instruction must not be bound by national stereotypes.

14. A series of hearings enabled me to collect relevant views on the question, for example from religious leaders and history teachers. It is also important to take in the non-religious as well as the religious stance. As religious beliefs are deeply held, there has to be a modicum of consensus as a starting point. The aim is not to "rank" religions by comparing them but to take a very broad and open-minded approach.

15. On 9 September 2004 the committee held an exchange of views with Mr Alain Mouchoux, who chairs the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), is a member of the NGO liaison committee and heads the NGO grouping on culture and education. He pointed out that while teachers were responsible for actual teaching, a range of parties were involved in education: parents, NGOs, local and regional authorities and the media. New syllabuses should take into account that the Bible and the Koran were not scientific documents. He raised the question of whether this subject area was the sole preserve of history teachers. Religion might also fit into the education for citizenship syllabus. At all events, it should not be left entirely to teachers to draw up the new syllabuses.

16. The following are some of the comments made by committee members:

- the subject is explosive;
- parents should have the right to have their children educated in their own religious beliefs;
- no religious person could accept that one religion was as good as another;
- the subject needs to be treated carefully so as not to be seen as attacking the basis of any particular religion;
- the issue is of concern to others besides teachers;
- everyone should be informed about religions (their own and that of others);
- the ultimate aim is respect for different cultural traditions;
- teachers should not confine themselves to teaching religions but should also foster awareness and a real understanding of other people's religions;
- young people should be prepared for religious experience;
- a certain amount of caution is required and account should be taken of the way in which some religious extremist use religion to foster terrorism;

- religion carries with it certain values, and cannot be taught in the same way as mathematics or other academic subjects.

17. At the end of the discussion the committee decided to hold a thorough hearing with the representatives of the main religions to be found in Europe. This hearing, held in Paris on 2 December 2004, did not have a structured programme. Instead of a series of statements followed by questions and answers, the aim was to enable committee members and the invited religious leaders to debate freely on issues relating to school teaching of religion. For example: Is it necessary to teach about religions in schools and why? What should be the core content of religious instruction? What ways and means should be considered? Who should teach about religions and in what contexts? What account should be taken of the different religions in drawing up syllabuses and in teacher training?

18. The following religious leaders were invited on a personal basis (and not as official representatives of their respective religions):

- Bishop Athanasios, Greek Orthodox Church
- Father Gilbert Caffin, European Committee for Catholic Teaching
- Chief Rabbi René Gutman, Chief Rabbi of Strasbourg and Bas-Rhin
- Rt Revd Peter Hullah, Anglican Bishop of Ramsbury
- Mr Tareq Oubrou, Rector of the Bordeaux Mosque and President of the Association of Imams of France
- Pastor Markus Schäfer, German Evangelical Christuskirche.

19. A number of interesting ideas emerged at the hearing:

- No cultural or administrative centre, be it Paris, Brussels, Rome or Jerusalem, could claim to have the right answers to all the questions they were addressing at the hearing, because each culture had its own unique history, identity and mode of self-expression *vis-à-vis* its people. People therefore had to be able to receive, practise and express education and religion at the local level. (*Bishop Athanasios*)
- Religion should not be a mere item of knowledge complete with its historic and sociological aspects: faith was a phenomenon which gave meaning to the lives of many individuals. Religious education also provided an opportunity for developing the spiritual dimension in students. (*Bishop Athanasios*)
- European education systems varied widely, and consequently did not all share the same point of view on religious education. Traditions in the educational field differed widely, as did the wishes of families. Religions had to be explained not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a living religious experience. It was not a case of transmitting a faith, which was a matter for the different religions, but of helping young people to realise why millions of people drew on these sources. (*Father Caffin*)
- - Religion had to be taught so that people could understand both our similarities and our differences, acknowledge other people's religions and come to terms with their differences. There was no single truth for all places, times and individuals. It was important for the younger generation to understand religion. How was anyone to understand the Renaissance, art, literature or the history of ideas without reference to faith? There was no one exclusive pathway to salvation. Religion should be taught in schools, in the sense of their underlying meaning rather than religious practice and dogmas. Teachers had to be experts in their own religion. (*Rabbi Gutman*)
- Religious education had to be encouraged as it developed the human spirit and deeper understanding of humanity. Education was impossible without information, but should not be confined to information, as it also had to embrace training. Religious education should not be ascribed secondary importance. Religious education should take account of inclusiveness (accepting those who were different), understanding the learning process, understanding development in a given context and lastly the idea of all individuals as travelling companions. (*Reverend Hullah*)
- Religious education should consist in providing diversified information on the various religions rather than teaching about their spiritual and moral aspects. It was an intellectual exercise, which involved informing students about the foundations and sources of religions, depending on intellectual level and age, and on believers' positions on these sources; teaching the content of the religion: dogmatics and history, practices (rituals and morality), adopting a gradual approach; and teaching about religion in

history: civilisational, economic, cultural and political factors affecting religion. (*Rector Oubrou*)

- Knowledge of religions was essential in democratic societies facing an upsurge in religious intolerance and fundamentalist extremism. Information and education were effective means of combating such phenomena. The aim of religious education was not to propagate the churches' positions on various issues, but rather to teach students how to reason ethically so that they could make up their own minds. A further aim was to demonstrate and bring home the interdependence between religions and culture. History, literature and architecture in Europe were incomprehensible without some knowledge of religion. (*Pastor Schäfer*)
- Education should increase students' capacity for tolerance. The state had to retain control over teacher training and the religious education curriculum. Effective co-operation was needed between administrative authorities and churches in developing curricular content. A Europe training institute for the comparative study of religions might be established. (*Pastor Schäfer*)
- Except for the representative of Greek Orthodoxy, the participants were prepared to let their religions be taught by someone of a different religion and Mr Oubrou said he would rather work with a good Catholic than a bad Muslim.

C. Other Council of Europe initiatives

(a) Directorate of Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport (DG IV)

20. In October 1994, as part of its in-service training programme for teachers, DG IV held a seminar on studying religions in social science at school.

21. As part of the project "The new challenge of intercultural education: religious dimension and dialogue in Europe", the Steering Committee for Education held a conference on the religious dimension of intercultural education (Oslo, June 2004).

22. The issues discussed included the relationship between the religious and the moral or philosophical dimension: interdependence or separation? Participants stressed the need to take account of countries' history, particularly their recent history, for example relations between church and state in the Soviet era. Religions could be represented not as homogeneous belief systems but from the standpoint of relations between individuals and groups in the broader context of traditions. Teachers needed a solid basic training combining knowledge, skills and appropriate attitudes.

(b) Commissioner for Human Rights

23. The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights has held meetings with representatives of monotheistic religions to discuss the main societal issues in member states (Syracuse 2000; Strasbourg 2001; Louvain-la-Neuve 2002 and Malta 2004).

24. The conclusions of the Malta seminar were that our societies were currently being undermined by a widespread lack of cultural awareness that particularly affected – though to varying degrees – the younger generations in Europe, with immediate and unwelcome social consequences. Religious institutions had ceased to transmit religious culture to new generations, secularisation having disrupted traditional modes of transmission. Transmission of the sacred and the cultural had long been linked and there had been a parallel decline in general cultural awareness.

25. It was therefore essential to revitalise understanding of our cultural heritages, of which religious culture was an integral part. Only one institution was capable of fulfilling that task in society – schools, whether public or private. The conclusions of the seminar called for the setting up of an international institute for co-operation on the teaching of religions at school. This could become a place to meet and share experience in specific areas of training and where a methodology to integrate the religious dimension in education in general could be developed.

26. Schools must be the main vector for collective transmission of cultural traditions in all their diversity. At the same time, schools did not have a monopoly of such transmission. Even if states conferred that task on schools, they still needed the necessary resources and methods to perform it successfully.

(c) Non-governmental organisations

27. The Liaison Committee of non-governmental organisations enjoying consultative status with the Council of Europe held a study day on "Education that takes account of religion: how can this contribute to democratic citizenship?" on 28 April 2005, presented as a contribution to this report. Its conclusions were presented to the Committee on 20 June 2005, and they went broadly in the same direction as our reflections

D. Situation in certain European countries

28. A study carried out in 2004 tried to compare the different approaches to religious teaching in various Council of Europe member states, based on examples of secular states (France, Turkey and Azerbaijan), states with agreements with the religious authorities (Italy and Spain), states that maintain relations with certain religions (Germany and Georgia) and states with established or official religions (United Kingdom, Denmark and Greece).

29. The following is a very general overview of religious education and/or the teaching of religions in these countries:

30. In France legislation enacted in 1882 and still in force, prohibits religious teaching in primary school^[1]. Children enrolled in state schools may only receive religious education outside school hours. Only secular staff may teach in state primary schools.

31. In Turkey, under the Constitution education and instruction in religion and ethics (compulsory) must be controlled by the state. According to the curriculum, the aim is to spread a concept of religion based on intelligence and science, and to emphasise the integrating, relaxing and peace establishing strength of religion. The curriculum must also cast a scientific light on the role of religion in society, history and the solution of everyday problems.

32. In Azerbaijan religious education was reintroduced after independence, but is not compulsory.

33. In Italy Catholic religious education is provided by the state. The teachers and syllabuses are chosen by the ecclesiastical authorities. These frequently include comparative studies of Catholicism and other religions.

34. In Spain young persons aged 6 to 16 receive an hour and a half of religious teaching each week. Pupils may choose between confessional and non-confessional options. Teachers of the confessional option are chosen by the ecclesiastical authorities. The non-confessional option includes different religions and must help to encourage a spirit of tolerance in pupils.

35. In Germany education is supervised by the Länder. Religious education is part of the state school curriculum. The state supervises the education system, without the involvement of the religious authorities. Religious courses may focus on the Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox, Neo-Apostolic and Judaic religions. As an alternative, pupils may opt for a course in ethics.

36. In Georgia the state has declared total religious freedom but recognises the special role of the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Autocephalous Church. Subjects such as the history of religions or, as an alternative, Orthodox theology, have been added to state school curriculums.

37. In the United Kingdom religious education is compulsory. This reflects the fact that the religious traditions are mainly Christian but takes account of the other main faiths represented in the country.

38. In Denmark "Christian studies" are an integral part of the primary and secondary curriculum. The central subject is Evangelical Lutheranism, which is the official religion, but religious education for older pupils includes foreign religions and other life philosophies.

39. In Greece "instruction in religion (Greek Orthodoxy) is compulsory". In all other countries where religious instruction is compulsory, pupils can be exempted at their own or their parents' request

E. Conclusions

40. Many tensions are the result of mutual ignorance and resultant lack of respect. School is a key factor in intercultural dialogue and lays the foundations for tolerant behaviour. It can combat fanaticism effectively by dispassionately and objectively teaching children the history and philosophy of the main religions.

41. Since Europe does not have enough teachers qualified to provide instruction of this kind, we need to look into setting up a European institute to train teachers of comparative religion.

42. It is important for children to be familiar with the different religions. Even countries where a particular church or faith heavily predominates should teach the origins of all religions rather than engage in proselytising.

43. By the end of our discussions the issues had proved just as complicated as I had expected. None the less there is agreement on the need to teach the historical and cultural aspects of the different religions at primary and secondary school. The Council of Europe has a role to play in introducing education of this kind.

Reporting committee: Committee on Culture, Science and Education

Reference to committee: [Doc. 9995](#), Reference No 2903 of 25 November 2003

Draft recommendation unanimously adopted by the committee on 6 September 2005

Members of the Committee: Mr Jacques **Legendre** (Chairman), Baroness Hooper, Mr Josef Jarab, Mr Wolfgang Wodarg, (Vice-Chairpersons), Mr Hans Ager, Mr Toomas Alatalu, Mr Gaqo Apostoli, Emerenzio Barbieri, Mr Rony **Bargetze**, Mrs Marie-Louise Bemelmans-Videc, Mr Radu-Mircea Berceanu, Mr Levan Berdzenishvili, Mr Božidar Bojovic, Mrs Anne **Brasseur**, Mr Osman **Coskunoglu**, Mr Vlad Cubreacov, Mrs Maria **Damanaki**, Mr Joseph Debono Grech, Mr Ferdinand Devinsky, Mrs Kaarina Dromberg, Mrs Anke Eymer, Mr Relu Fenechiu, Mrs Blanca **Fernández-Capel**, Mrs Maria Emelina **Fernández-Soriano**, Mr José Freire Antunes, Mrs Siv Friedleifsdóttir, Mr Piotr Gadzinowski, Mr Ian Gibson, Mr Eamon Gilmore, Mr Stefan **Glavan**, Mr Luc **Goutry**, Mr Vladimir Grachev, Mr Andreas Gross, Mrs Azra Hadžiahmetovic, Mr Jean-Pol Henry, Mr Rafael Huseynov, Mr Raffaele Iannuzzi, Mrs Halide **Incekara**, Mr Igor Ivanovski, Mr Shavarsh Kocharyan, Mr József Kozma, Jean-Pierre Kucheida, Mr Guy **Lengagne**, Mr Peter Letzgus, Mrs Christine **Lucyga**, Mrs Jagoda Majska-Martincevic, Mr Gennaro Malgieri, Mr Bernard Marquet, Mrs Giovanna Melandri, Mr Ivan Melnikov, Mr Loutvi Mestan, Mrs Milena Milotinova, Mrs Fausta Morganti, Mrs Kim Mortensen, Mrs Christine **Muttonen**, Mrs Miroslava **Nemcová**, Mr Edward O'Hara (Alternate: Mr Robert **Walter**), Mr Guilherme de Oliveira Martins, Mrs Elsa Papadimitriou, Mrs Antigoni **Pericleous Papadopoulos**, Mrs Majda **Potrata**, Mr Lluís Maria **de Puig**, Mr Anatoliy Rakhansky, Mr Johannes **Randegger**, Mr Zoltán Rockenbauer, Mrs Anta Rugate, Lord Russell-Johnston, Mr Volodymyr Rybak, Mr Pär-Axel Sahlberg, Mr André **Schneider**, Mr Vitaliy Shybko, Mrs Elsa Skarbøvik, Mr Andrey Skoch (Alternate: Mr Anatoliy **Korobeynikov**), Mr Jerzy Smorawinski, Mr Ninoslav Stojadinovic, Mr Valeriy **Sudarenkov**, Mr Aleksander Szczygło, Mr Mehmet **Tekelioglu**, Mr Ed van Thijn, Mr Vagif Vakilov, Mrs Majléne WesterlundPanke, Mr Emanuelis Zingeris, N....

*NB. The names of those present at the meeting are printed in **bold***

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Committee secretariat: Mr João Ary, Mr Rüdiger Dossow, Mr Chemavon Chahbazian

[1] With an exception for the departments of Bas-Rhin, Haut-Rhin and Moselle where the Concordat still applies.

