Umeå University

This is a published version of a paper published in *European Educational Research Journal (online)*.

Citation for the published paper:

Alexiadou, N. (2006)

"United in diversity?: The place of religion in state education in Europe and in Greece"
European Educational Research Journal (online), 5(1): 71-76

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/dx.doi.org/10.2304/eevj.2006.5.1.71>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-51538>

<http://umu.diva-portal.org>

United in Diversity? The Place of Religion in State Education in Europe and Greece

NAFSIKA ALEXIADOU (n.alexiadou@keele.ac.uk). Keele University, United Kingdom

Correspondence: Dr Nafsika Alexiadou, Department of Education, Keele University, Keele ST5 5BG, United Kingdom

School and Religion

E. ZAMBETA, 2003 ; Athens: Themelio, pp. 230, €13.00, ISBN 9 603102 97 0

In 2004 the European heads of state signed the treaty that established a Constitution for Europe, a document that defines the rules of political life in the new Europe of 25 states. The preamble to the new Constitution states that the European Union (EU) draws its 'inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe', while article 1-2 presents the values of the EU as those of 'respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities' (European Communities, 2005).

Even though this still needs to be ratified by the member states in order to take effect, these opening parts of the Constitution are symbolically significant both for what they include, and what they do not. One of the issues that the Constitution deliberately excludes is reference to the Christian heritage of European societies and references to God. Both points proved to be highly controversial in the earlier drafting stages of the document, and points of conflict with (particularly) the Catholic Church and the Vatican.[1]

We could see this discursive omission of references to European Christian roots and to God as part of an ongoing process of secularisation of the political process, and the declining social significance of religion in Europe. This would be consistent with changing attitudes amongst the European population. Research evidence suggests a religious decline amongst Europeans over the last 15 years, although the 1999 European Values survey shows a trend for the development of 'religiosity without belonging' (Lambert, 2004).

The persistence of religious feelings in modern societies would have been a surprise to early modernist thinkers, who saw science and rationality at the antipode of 'faith' and predicted a decline of religion and its eventual extinction. This process, which included a separation between state and the churches and the 'structural differentiation' of other social institutions that gradually gained autonomy (such as state education and social welfare), did not take into account the place that religion held in the cultural sphere (Crouch, 1999). Religion as a form of identification and the bearing of collective meaning continues to bind individuals to particular communities of faith even if attendance of religious ceremonies has declined. But, there is another important dimension of religion, and in particular of the institutions that represent them, and that is their interface with politics and nationalisms. Bruce (2003) makes the argument that religion is still a potent force over contemporary political matters (such as divorce, abortion etc.), but that it is also a powerful player in the formation of national and ethnic identities. As such, most religions in the world have been very successful in binding their political power together with that of nation states, and in firmly associating themselves with particular national identities (Bruce & Voas 2004).

Few places in Europe today demonstrate these connections more clearly than the state of Greece where the Orthodox Church has identified itself with the nation state and the forging of an ethnically based nationalism. The Greek Constitution establishes the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ as the prevailing religion, and the relationship between the church and the state opens up interesting questions on political sovereignty and secularism in modern Greece. The Greek Government decided in 2000 to issue new identity cards that should no longer record religion. The Church strongly opposed this move, arguing that 'Our faith is the foundation of our ethnic identity', but the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to require religious affiliation on identity cards (Bruce, 2003, p. 172). Against this isolated case where the state managed a victory over the powerful control of the church we have numerous examples where the Orthodox Church has a firm grip over public life.[2] State education offers such a space.

Evie Zambeta's book, *School and Religion*, deals with the controversial relationship between religion and the modernisation project across the EU as this is played out within state education systems. She focuses on the 'conflictual symbiotic relationship' between religion and modern education institutions (p. 14) in EU countries and Greece in particular. This is a remarkable book for two reasons: first, the depth and breadth of conceptual and historical frameworks that construct the background for the empirical study and the arguments that it offers; and second, for issuing a relatively rare challenge to the powerful status quo of Orthodox Christianity within Greek education (and polity in general), by taking a secular perspective with regard to the place of religion in education institutions. The key argument of the book can be summarised in the sentence: 'the school has no right to practice religion' (p. 17).

So, while organised religion has had a long history of providing education everywhere in Europe prior to the construction of modern nation states and state education systems, the secularisation of European education systems is not a completed process in many member states. The specific management of the relationships between education and religion is tightly connected to the social, political and cultural frames for the constitution of the state itself, and is expressed in all or most social institutions, including education (p. 49). Using a typology of state secularism in the EU as constructed by Foundedaki and based on the constitutional relationships between the state and religion, Zambeta reviews a spectrum of practices that range from a total separation between religion and the state (as in the cases of Belgium, France, Holland and Portugal), to that of states with an official religion (in all cases an official 'church'), such as Denmark and the United Kingdom.

The book begins with an extensive introduction followed by a chapter that examines the development of the relationships between religion, states and education from sociological and historical perspectives. Religion is examined as a social construction that becomes 'practised' through certain institutional formations (in the case of Europe until very recently, this would be the churches). Churches have a social organisation that reflects the internal hierarchies of Christianity, and aim at the spreading of the 'message' as well as at the spiritual control of their subjects (p. 30). Education has been a particularly important space that has been used by religion in order to achieve these purposes, and later by the newly formed nation states in order to systematically secularise the political and social life and defy the power of the churches. Zambeta discusses the major challenges to the theocratic political and educational institutions of earlier centuries through the social and intellectual reforms brought by the Renaissance and gradually developed since the fifteenth century. She examines the role of various Christian denominations in the provision of education from the east to the west of Europe, and the ways these have reached different levels of 'compromise' with the state education. Paradoxically, despite the powerful distinction that the Renaissance thinkers made between 'rational critical thought', and 'faith', many European education systems today exhibit a symbiosis between 'rationality' and the traditional values of religious indoctrination. In many systems today, the 'moral education of citizens is bound with religion' (p. 34).

Zambeta challenges the widely held myth in Greece that western EU countries have 'modernised' education systems where religion has little space in the school organisation and curriculum. Through an examination of religious education (RE) teaching in state schools in Europe (the degree to which the subject is compulsory, the nature/focus of the subject, and the presence of an alternative option in the curriculum) she concludes the following:

1. the relationships between religion and state as these are drafted in the national constitutions of member states do not necessarily correspond to the degree of educational secularisation and the real or symbolic place of religion in the school;
2. Greece is not an exception within Europe with regard to the relationship between state–church–education;
3. still, Greece represents an extreme example of catechism where dogmatic teaching of RE excludes all other options in the curriculum, and in doing so conflates Orthodox Christianity with Greek identity in a tightly bound and exclusive relationship.

This is confirmed by the explicit religious references in the Greek constitution in defining the aims of education: 'Education is a basic mission of the state aiming (at) ... the development of the national and religious consciousness' of Greek citizens, with subsequent laws specifying that the school should: 'encourage the student's loyalty to the country and faithfulness to the authentic elements of the Orthodox Christian tradition' (in Zambeta, 2000, p.149). Thus, the role of education as inscribed in the legal framework is partly to bind Orthodox Christianity to the Greek national identity. The nature and position of religious instruction in the school curriculum follows from these legal parameters. Religious education is compulsory in the Greek school curriculum and focuses exclusively on the Orthodox Christian religion. The aims of the religious curriculum are to 'strengthen the citizen's *right faith* in God ... to cultivate the stable inclination to a life "according to Christ" and *the regulation of children's behaviour according to his divine will*' (in Zambeta, 2000, p. 149). Attempts to reform this curriculum have always met with strong resistance on the part of the Church.

Is any of this problematic? I would argue in agreement with the book, that it is very problematic for the following reasons.

(a) Nature and Control of School Knowledge

Two key questions that we need to discuss with regard to the role of religion in schooling concern the values and purposes of education, and who decides what these are. The role of the school in shaping identities and contributing to children's socialisation into certain social, political and civic norms and values is well established. So, in evaluating the place of religion within education, we can juxtapose the value of autonomous and critical thought that could only (although not necessarily) be developed within a secular school, to a school that draws on faith in order to construct a set of values and framework of thinking. The frequently used phrase by Greek religious representatives, 'believe and do not question' (*pisteve ke mi erevna*), reflects exactly this juxtaposition and places faith as a superior element to that of research and critical thinking. But, marginalising or displacing critical thought by faith would seem to be the characteristic of education systems of a long-distant past, where the purpose of education was primarily to 'keep people in their place' and to develop 'subjects' rather than free thinking and democratic citizens.

In Greece, where all pupils and teachers receive their textbooks from the Ministry of Education, school knowledge is defined exclusively by the state with no alternative options or room for flexibility. Based on her analysis of Greek school textbooks (of Religious Education, Language, History, Social and Political Education) Zambeta argues that religious matters are not limited to the subject of RE but permeate school knowledge in general, especially in the subject of Language (chapter 5). Religious education as taught in the Greek school context is not a critical examination of various religions in their social and historical context. It is of a denominational character and does not allow any space for questioning or presenting alternative ways of thinking. This, Zambeta argues, makes RE entirely faith-based as opposed to knowledge-based, and so by definition should not be a school 'subject' (p. 124). It is not framed by either empirical examination of the world or the practice of rational reasoning. Instead, it is defined by

‘revelation’ based ‘truths’ and so, it should not be offered as a subject of an equal status to that of history; mathematics, or physics (p. 124).

Zambeta suggests that the transmission of values of religious tradition could be the responsibility of churches and even offered within the premises of state schools but not as part of school ‘knowledge’. This could be in a framework of pluralistic instruction whereby other faiths would be respectfully represented for those parents who wish their children to be introduced to them (p. 125). I would argue instead for an entirely secular school model where religious instruction (of a denominational nature) has no place in the curriculum, and the school premises are free from religious influences of any type. Religion should be a private affair exercised freely by people in time and space outside that of education or other civic functions. In other words, I think that the principle of secularism as it features in the French and Turkish states is one that should be adopted by all modern states that wish to foster civic values.

The differences between the ‘pluralistic’ model of religious representation in public life in Britain and that of secular France have been very much in the British media during the end of 2005 because of the recent riots in the French ‘banlieues’ from some parts of Muslim youth. The discussion about the French banning of religious symbols within school premises has been central in the discussion about ‘causes’ for the unrest, and symbolically have been given high significance. So, many British commentators discuss the ban as a violation of the human right to express one’s identity and religion. But the discursive significance of the ban of course goes further than that: if pupils are allowed to carry religious symbols within the school, why not introduce or allow other forms of religious practice? Who would then decide and on what criteria where the line needs to be drawn with reference to instruction of particular areas of the curriculum (for instance; the recent controversy and legal battle in the United States around ‘evolution’ and the instruction of ‘intelligent design’ as part of the Biology or RE curriculum); instruction around sex education that would find objectors amongst the conservative parts of faith communities; withdrawal of pupils (mainly girls?) from certain school activities and/or subjects (sport; sex education); interruption of the school day for prayers, etc. Once religion is part of the school life and features as an integral part of educational practices all of these issues are negotiable between the educational establishment and the faith communities. School knowledge and citizens’ identities should be constructed on the basis of rational thinking (i.e. not based on faith), scientific developments and the humanistic values of respect for others, equality and free thought. These are mostly values that are not represented in the practices of organised religions.

But, the logical contradictions inherent in a curriculum that combines revelation-truths with the desire to develop rational thought are not the only problem identified with giving denominational religious instruction a place in the curriculum. Another problem relates to the exclusive nature of religious practice and the desirability (or not) of institutionalising this within the education system.

(b) Social Divisions and Religion in Education

The British situation offers some interesting insights to this issue. In 2001 the British Government published a White Paper that proposed a significant expansion of ‘faith schools’ that would receive substantial financial support from the state (Judge, 2001). The same year, and following riots by young people mainly of Muslim origin in northern towns of the country, ‘religious diversity’ was included as part of a critical multicultural education (Jackson, 2004). The Labour Government introduced citizenship education that requires ‘knowledge and understanding of the diversity of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the UK’ (in Judge, 2001, p. 5) and since their coming to power in 1997 they have tried systematically to ‘co-opt faith communities’ into their project of political modernisation (Smith, 2004, p. 185). However, the British Government’s attempts have been criticised by researchers on the following grounds:

1. in circumstances of unequal and conflictual social relations, people use religious identities and discourses as cultural resources in community based conflicts – a view far removed from the Government’s naïve representation of religion as a ‘glue that binds society together’ (Smith, 2004, p. 201);
2. the expansion of faith schools in the UK (and their state subsidy) has been criticised as a ‘wounding contradiction of the claims made for those common schools which are open to all irrespective of religious or ideological allegiance, publicly funded, and dedicated to inculcating the values of pluralism and comprehensiveness’ (Judge, 2001, p. 463). These comments raise the issue of social divisions in relationship to religion but also the mediation of such divisions by the institution of the school. I suggest that the encouragement of religious pluralism within education as practised by Britain offers an example to be avoided since, in the words of Harry Judge (2001) it makes a virtue ‘of the magnification of difference, and therefore of fragmentation. ... and institutionalises segregation’ (p. 469).

This is highly relevant for Greek education, which indeed follows in its religious curriculum such a ‘magnification of difference’, although by being exclusive rather than plural. Based on her detailed discursive analysis of the Greek textbooks but also of other religious practices within the Greek school (such as attendance to religious services etc.), Zambeta shows how religious dogmatism constructs a set of social hierarchies within the curriculum whereby certain identities are valued higher than others. School knowledge codifies Greek identity and the Greek Orthodox religion as inseparable concepts: this codification reveals the ethnocentric and highly denominational character of education, but it also serves to exclude or/and to devalue ‘religious others’. Thus, Islam is presented as an inferior religion and culture that clearly corresponds to ‘our enemy’. These issues are discussed in depth in the penultimate chapter of the book, where the focus is on education and ‘religious otherness’. This chapter is based on empirical analysis of

educational practices of the Muslim minority people outside of Thrace [3] (i.e. not studying in minority schools). It attempts to analyse the identity of the Muslim Greek citizen, the reasons for population mobility and the relationship they have with Thrace. Zambeta also examines the terms of social integration for these people, their relationship with the local community and their access to social and cultural rights. Her key argument in this chapter, and the book in general, is that the school cannot function in an inclusive way towards the Muslim pupils since it cannot understand their identity and so integrate them as equals. These pupils studying outside Thrace are the recipients of social hierarchies that are constituted both at the level of school knowledge and at the level of social practice.

Zambeta's book concludes that the Greek school and education policy have to reconsider their practices with regard to religion and to the management of religious otherness. The current practices undermine the social right to education, they are offensive to a large part of the population that does not practise religion or has a different faith, and keep the country distant from the European developments in this sphere: that of pluralism and of respect for difference.

In that respect I would argue that against this paradigm of exclusivity and denominational RE instruction, pluralism of religious practices within the school does not necessarily safeguard against social divisions. It would merely serve to accentuate and reproduce existing hierarchies and divisions as these exist outside the school. Of course, such a paradigm would still be preferable to that followed within the Greek education system.

One of the main strengths of the book is undoubtedly the interesting application of critical sociology of religion to the underresearched area of Greek education and its relationship with religion. The arguments draw on extensive literature on the role and relationships between churches and education in Europe, but also on the legal, historical and political parameters that have framed these relationships. It may be a surprise for Greek readers to realise that so many other European states still give religion a place in their education, although nowhere as prominent as in the case of the Greek curriculum. It will also be a shock to read the very personal accounts of Muslim Greek citizens who experience systematic, institutional and individual forms of discrimination in their every day life and education. These are voices rarely heard and there will be many readers (hopefully also future teachers) who will be moved by the plight of this group of people whose main 'problem' is their different identity to the mainstream. Nobody, of course, holds RE instruction responsible for that plight. But, Zambeta constructs an eloquent and convincing argument where the religious identity of this minority and their low socio-economic position meets the mainstream majority prejudices that identify their different religiosity to that of a different ethnic identity; and thus, of lesser social rights. The way that the school knowledge and social representations in the curriculum draw on the Orthodox Christian religion does nothing to challenge these prejudices – rather, it positively contributes to them and strengthens them further.

The book would be of interest to a larger European audience because of the dangers it exposes when education attempts to nurture distinct religious, cultural and ethnic identities at the expense of a smooth process of integration (Judge, 2003, p. 469). The example of Greece may be extreme in its lack of separation between church and state in education but it certainly is not the only one. Segregation by religion is long-standing practice in Northern Ireland and there are unfortunately many examples of religion playing an active part in the confirmation and reinforcement of social conflict and divisions.

Europe is becoming increasingly multicultural and multi-religious, and the questions of diversity, pluralism, human rights and social integration are central. The European Union mission to achieve 'unity in diversity' as an entity that gathers citizens of different religions and ethnicities, and to guarantee freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is one that draws on the need to protect human rights and the pursuit of social progress and social justice. These ideals, I would argue, would be much better achieved if religion was removed from the public sphere and especially from education altogether and was protected and respected as a purely private endeavour.

Notes

[1] Even though these points clearly promote a secular foundation underpinning the authority of the EU, article 52 (on *the status of churches and non-confessional organisations*) recognises exemptions from European law in cases that the church considers to violate its teachings (<http://www.seechange.org/index.htm>).

[2] It needs to be noted here that it was the state that used religion originally to constitute itself during the nineteenth century (Zambeta, 2003, p. 96). Recent attempts to bring in a separation between church and state in Greece have failed (Zambeta, 2003, p. 109)

[3] The Turcophone Muslim minority that resides in the region of Thrace is covered by the 1922 Treaty of Lausanne and has the right to Turkish language education. Muslims outside Thrace are not covered by the Treaty and therefore do not enjoy the same rights.

References

- Bruce, S. (2003) *Politics and Religion*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bruce, S. & Voas, D. (2004) The Resilience of the Nation-State: religion and politics in the modern era, *Sociology*, 38(5), pp. 1025-1034. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0038038504047184>
- Crouch, C. (1999) *Social Change in Western Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- European Communities (2005) *Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe*, Official Journal of the European Union, 16 December 2004, C series No. 310. http://europa.eu.int/constitution/en/ptoc2_en.htm#a3
- Jackson, R. (2004) Intercultural Education and Recent European Pedagogies of Religious Education, *Intercultural Education*, 15(1), pp. 3-14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1467598042000189952>
- Judge, H. (2001) Faith-based Schools and State Funding: a partial argument, *Oxford Review of Education*, 27(4), pp. 463-474. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03054980120086185>
- Lambert, Y. (2004) A Turning Point in Religious Evolution in Europe, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 19(1), pp. 29-45. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1353790032000165104>
- Smith, G. (2004) Faith in Community and Communities of Faith? Government Rhetoric and Religious Identity in Urban Britain, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 19(2), pp. 185-204. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1353790042000207700>
- Zambeta, E. (2000) Religion and National Identity in Greek Education, *Intercultural Education*, 11(2), pp. 145-155.