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LEARNING  
INTERCULTURALITY  
FROM RELIGION



ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΚΕΣ ΕΥΝΕΤΑΙΡΙΤΙΚΕΣ  
ΔΡΑΣΤΗΡΙΟΤΗΤΕΣ ΕΥΝΑΓΩΝ ΟΜΑΔΩΝ

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## Learning Interculturality From rEligion



# HISTORY AND LEGAL PRINCIPLES OF RELIGION EDUCATION IN GREECE

## *Desk research*

K.S.D.E.O. "EDRA"

*Project Number 2016-1-IT02-KA201-024660*

*The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein*

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## Contents

Introduction.....	3
Modern Greek State and Orthodoxy.....	3
The structure of Greek Education System.....	5
Legal Principles in Greek Religion Education.....	6
Religion Education of the decades followed the Democracy Restoration in Greece.....	7
Greek Religion Educational Curriculum and Timetable.....	9
Methodological approaches of teaching religion according to the curriculum .....	11
Perspectives.....	13
Focus Group Discussion.....	15
Case Studies.....	16
References.....	18



This Desk Research has been implemented for the Erasmus+ KA2 “LIFE” project which concerns providing teachers of primary schools with specific methodologies, in order to respond to the complexity of multicultural and multi-religious societies, starting from the laboratory of citizenship that school is and must be.

For the needs of the project this Desk Research attempts a historical retrospective which links the Modern Greek State and the Orthodox Religion which is the "dominant religion" according to the Constitution of Greece. Statistically, according to a research conducted in 2016, 81.4% of the Greek population declare as Cristian Orthodox. (Χιώτης, 2015)

The Desk Research is also being referred to the Greek educational system and its approach to the religion education as well as to the educational policies and approaches based on the Constitution. There is also a brief overview of phases of religion education through the decades that followed the dictatorship in Greece (after 1974) and finally a presentation of the current curriculum of religion education in primary school as well as the teaching methodological approaches that are used in order to achieve the objectives of the curriculum.

## Modern Greek State and Orthodoxy

The modern period in the history of the Greek Church begins with the liberation of a considerable segment of the Hellenic world from the Turks in 1832. To the five autocephalous (self-governing) Greek-speaking Orthodox Churches of that time, namely, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, and the Church of Cyprus, there was added the autocephalous Church of Greece. The creation of the Greek State put on a new chapter in the relationship of the Church with the newly established State construct. The special position that the Christian Church held to the Ottoman Empire and its recognition as one of the organizational foundations of the Empire, gave the Ecumenical Patriarchate a particular religious role and an important political power.



The above features should be adjusted to the claims of the State for a church with national characteristics. (Μαντζούφας, 2011)

The integration of the church organizational structures to a liberal, secular state was not an easy task, since church had to submit to the institutions and laws. However, this integration, institutionally was formalized with the recognition of its administrative autonomy from the Patriarchate and the Autocephalous (1833), and proved relatively smooth, as the church gradually gained public powers and privileges acquired administrative responsibilities. Since the proclamation of the Autocephalous Church of Greece in 1833, the Church of Greece and the Greek state have been extremely supportive to each other. The dominant element of this relationship was the subordination of the Church to the State, in return for the recognition of its privileged position in Greek society, and the granting of "secular powers" to its leading groups. More specifically, the Orthodox religion that is being followed by the vast majority of Greeks is recognized by the Constitution as the main, "the Dominant" one. This has led to the transformation of the Church into a distinct part of the State. (Μαντζούφας, 2011)

So, from the beginning, Church was organized as a public authority and all its structures are legal entities of Public Law. Its executive members (priests) are funded by the State Budget. According to a press release issued by the Ministry of Culture, Education and Religious Affairs in March 2015, this happens in return for the confiscation of extensive ecclesiastical real estate in 1834, 1909, 1930, 1952 and 1988. The Church of Greece is paying taxes like any other religious community, with provisions concerning non-profit entities. The decisions of its bodies on administrative matters are administrative acts, which are challenged in the courts of the State. The State also intervenes in the organization of the Church with laws, while the ecclesiastical rules apply only within the Church provided that they do not contradict the laws of the State. This system was accepted by the Church, as mentioned before, in exchange for its privileged treatment against other doctrines and religions. Thus, in schools, religion lessons are taught according to Orthodox doctrines. Prayers in military units and schools are a status. Public holidays, official ceremonies and public holidays are held according to the Orthodox Church's



standards. It is also recognized in executive members of the Church jurisdiction in matters of private law such as marriage. (Press Release, 2015 & Καραγιάννης, 2016)

A decade-long pending matter for the Modern Greek society, from the restoration of Democracy in 1974 remains unresolved: The separation of Church and the State. It is a claim that has not been yet justified despite the serious problems it creates not only in the political life but also in the everyday life of Greek citizens. It is a very common situation that members of the Church society are being opposed to important choices of the State considering them as challenging to the church's existence and the Greek Orthodox belief of the citizens on matters such as abortion, political marriage, religious education or the protection of other religions. It is obvious that these kind of problems will continue to grow as the Greek society changes. In a country like Greece mass immigration situation the need of different approach is more than obvious. (Μυλωνάς - Λέκκας, 2016)

## The structure of Greek Education System

The organization and administration of the Greek Education system is affected by the nature of public administration. During the first half of the 19th century, Greece endorsed the Napoleonic model of central government organization, and during the 20th century was influenced by central European countries (France - Germany) with a centralized management and organization model. According to the central – Europe tradition the Government is the one who defines the policy in every sector. The element of the legal approach is dominant as much as the legitimacy which assures that the exercise of state power fully respects the civil rights. (Λαϊνας 2000, σελ. 23-26)

According to the above the education system has a centralized structure and a unified planning under the ministry of Education. The administration of the Greek educational system has three different levels:

- **National or Central Level** (Minister, Deputy Minister, General Secretary and General Managers, Councils)



- **District / Prefectural Level** (Head of Education Departments, Heads of Education Offices, Directors and Deputy Directors of Schools, Teacher's Council)
- **The School Level** (School Unit Director, Assistant Director, Association of school teachers, School Board, e.t.c.) (Ανδρέου & Παπακωνσταντίνου, 1994, σελ. 114, 136- 151)

## Legal Principles in Greek Religion Education

While Greek society had made significant progress and adopted social practices that transcend the religious prejudices of the past (such as the reform of family law, the issue of abortion and divorce), in religion education remained defensively oriented in outdated educational standards. (Χρυσόγονος, 2006, p. 275)

Education, in our Constitution (16 par. 1) is one of the main tasks of the state and defined as mandatory for nine years duration (16 par. 3), which serves specific principles (16 par. 2) among of which is the development of religious consciousness. (Χρυσόγονος, 2006, p. 275)

The article 16 par. 2, states that education should contribute to the "development of religious consciousness". This provision was interpreted in the light of the "prevailing religion" recognizing that compatible with the Constitution is only the imposition of a "mono phonic" education of orthodox dogma. It is a typical excerpt from ruling the Administrative Court "... it means there shouldn't be a religious consciousness according which the student become a partaker of all religious streams and in the future may choose a religion among many, as this would be beyond the will of the legislature, since the purpose of this provision (Article 16 Paragraph 2) is to maintain the orthodox Christian doctrine espoused by the vast majority of Greek citizens "[22]. Also, according to the common law, the course aims to make students partakers of the truths of the Orthodox Christian faith. These principles are reflected in the way that the course of religious textbooks are formed, where as a basic prerequisite arises that the Greek citizen is both a Christian-Orthodox. (Χρυσόγονος, 2006, p. 275)



Based on this argument it was considered by the Supreme Administrative Court (CoE) the compulsory character of the course of the religion, for the exemption of which there should be reliable statement of the students' parents that they are atheists, heathens or heterodox. In the same vein, the Council of State ruled that the education system must ensure the teaching of the course of the religion should take place for a sufficient number of hours per week. Moreover, the official church believed that whatever comes out from the row of bond-catechism lesson, constitutes a hostile act. They also asked to express an opinion on the content of all books of religion at all levels of education. (Χρυσόγονος, 2006, p. 275)

In the above views there was a strong criticism and were raised arguments based on the Constitution (13 paragraph 1) and the ECHR (European Convention on Human Rights) (Article 9) from which it follows that in order to protect the religious freedom of students, compatible with the Constitution would be either an optional religious education or a spiritual-type education. These views were partly embraced by the State Council and at a later judgment in consultative formation [24], made a shift in the case-law, and accepted that the legislator is free to choose the religious model considers appropriate (Spiritual or catechetical) although it highlights that Spiritual responds more to the liberal features of the Constitution (Article 5 paragraph 1, 13 paragraph 1 and 16 paragraph 2). (Χρυσόγονος, 2006, p. 275)

## Religion Education of the decades followed the Democracy Restoration in Greece

Educational matters in Greece began to move after the Democracy restoration (1974) and the reform of 1976, the main purpose of which was the democratization of education. However, despite the fundamental proclamation of the primacy of the school's cognitive orientation and the weakening of ethnocentric educational philosophy, the religion education – along with the lessons of history and language remained the main “weapons” of establishing national and religious identity for the students in the Greek Schools. (Γιαγκάζογλου, 2014)



More specifically, the general purpose of religion teaching in the primary school was "the development of students' religious sentiment, the consolidation of the faith in the Christian Religion and enhancing their active participation in our people's religious life." (Γιαγκάζογλου, 2014)

The Religion teaching wasn't enriched by the international religion and pedagogical concerns of the 60s and 70s which tended to have a more open-minded view. The result was for the lessons to remain in the suffocating, regulatory conditions of religious education of the previous decades and keep the "Preachy" character, assuming that all school pupils are faithful Christians. The textbooks compiled during 1977-1981 were distinguished by lack of child –centered orientation not only to the contents but also to the presentation form. (Γιαγκάζογλου, 2014)

The axes of theological reflections of the 80's, directly related to the role of religion teaching were the recovering of the Orthodox church's self-consciousness, and also the need for dialogue between the Orthodox ecclesiastical consciousness and the contemporary modern Greek reality. Both were considered top priority issues for many theologians. From the early 80's series of interventions is being carried out in order to capture in the teaching content the national, cultural and linguistic diversity that characterizes the classrooms. New books, changes in the curriculum and manuals attempt to include more and more references to the pupils' particular culture and to show positive images for the respective national cultural groups. (Γιαγκάζογλου, 2014)

Since the 90's, in the context of social developments and discussions on the role of the religious lesson, the Greek school made the first attempt on the methodical teaching of other religions mostly in secondary education. (Γιαγκάζογλου, 2014)

Hereafter, taking into account the special characteristics of Greek society, we made a step towards the teaching of religions in the three cycles of compulsory education. In the latest program of religion studies Christianity remains the main religion for study and retains a special and "privileged" position, while six other religions are gradually being approached: Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism (with a greater focus on Judaism and Islam). Students often hear and use terms such



as God, Jesus Christ, Madonna, prayer, sin, etc. Christianity, whether students perceive it or not, is part of their spiritual supplies. (Γιαγκάζογλου, 2014)

According to the guide book for the teachers of the primary schools (which teach the religion lessons, as in Greek pedagogical program for primary schools it is no specialized teacher of religion), the religions of the world are not presented to the students simplistically and schematically as closed belief systems, whose substance is expressed in a series of propositions or doctrinal positions. In the recent educational program there is an attempted to highlight the potential and evolutionary character of religions, since students are invited to understand religion as:

- timeless search for meaning and value of life and answers to fundamental questions of people
- Everyday life of people and communities
- a prominent factor in culture
- Live presence in the modern world

At the same time, it is considered as very important for students from other religious traditions, to understand the types and essence of Christianity, to become accustomed to the culture of the country in which they are located. In addition, with the expanded study of all dimensions of Christianity (dogmatic, historical, social, functional, moral, empirical) in such a way that answers to the great questions of all people; the scientifically appropriate way of approaching a religion is revealed. One last difficulty concerns the question of "which Christianity?" The new educational program proposes the approach of Christianity to the real - that is, its historical dimensions - starting with and concentrating on the Orthodox tradition first and gradually extending to the other two great Christian traditions (the Roman Catholic and Protestant). (Γιαγκάζογλου, 2014)

## Greek Religion Educational Curriculum and Timetable



<b>Third Grade of Primary Schools: We discover faces, images and stories (56 hours)</b>	<b>Fourth Grade of Primary Schools : We discover faces, images and stories (56 hours)</b>	<b>Fifth Grade of Primary Schools: We discover texts, monuments, places and events ( 30 hours )</b>	<b>Sixth Grade of Primary Schools: Ανακαλύπτουμε κείμενα, μνημεία, τόπους και γεγονότα (30 hours)</b>
Living together (6 hours)	When people pray (6 hours)	Teachers and Students (6 hours)	The First Christians: Difficulties and Adventures (6 hours)
The joy of Celebration (6 hours)	The Mother of Christ (6 hours)	Walk together with limits and rules (4 hours)	Persecutions and Spread of Christianity: Persons and Testimonies (2 hours)
Sunday: An important day of the Week (6 hours)	Grate “Kids” (6 hours)	Walking ahead by changing (6 hours)	The Bible: An Historical and Timeless Book (4 hours)
Christmas: God becomes a man (8 hours)	All Equal, All Different (10 hours)	Prophecies of the Bible: Calling for repent and announcement of the Messiah’s coming (4 hours)	The Divine Eucharist: Source and climax of the Church’s life (6 hours)
Celebrating Pasha (8 hours)	Holly Places and Sacred paths (10 hours)	Jesus Christ’s Church in History (4 hours)	From the Christians of our country to the Christians of the World
Our world is a gem (8 hours)	Christian Saints and Sacred Persons of other Religions (8 hours)	Missions for the “Good News” (4 hours)	Religions in our Country (4 hours)

From the teacher’s guide for teaching religion in primary and secondary school, edition 2014



## Methodological approaches of teaching religion according to the curriculum

Teaching strategies for the above curriculum have the orientation of:

- do not regard teaching as a process of providing and receiving information but as an active knowledge-building process involving learners actively and interactively.
- adopt the view that knowledge and thought are formed through the person's contact with the world and the social context.
- Explain and serve the fundamental principles of approaching the religious cognitive object, as embodied in the new curriculum, i.e. interpretation, dialogue and critical literacy.
- develop equally and consistently both the objectives and the contents of the curriculum, highlighting the methodical process as a functional part, which is a central choice of a Process Procedure
- Selected and organized exclusively by the teacher according to the conditions and requirements of his class, not considering them exclusively technocratic but continuously investigating their relationship with the humanistic and moral basis of teaching. (Γιαγκάζογλου, 2014)

**Participatory** forms of teaching promote a learning procedure in which all students are treated equally, diversity is treated with respect, opportunities are created to improve the lives of children with difficulties, and student marginalization tends to disappear. (Γιαγκάζογλου, 2014)

Also **Exploratory** teaching processes are being implemented in which, the teacher acts as a facilitator and organizer of the work to be done: chooses and provides material - appropriate and accessible to students - from a variety of sources or guides them to identify themselves. In information organization and case-shaping activities, the teacher controls the involvement of all students, supports their efforts, participates in any rewriting of the question, organizes alternatives and activities, and takes care not to create deviations that prevent research. Exploratory teaching is



flexible and can be applied to students of all ages, infrastructure and capabilities but needs serious planning, careful organization and continuous remodeling. Exploratory approaches work more effectively when combined with collaboration groups. (Γιαγκάζογλου, 2014)

The **Collaboration Groups**, especially in multicultural and multinational societies, it is an ideal framework, as - through this method - the school can facilitate the social integration of people of different potentials and origins while at the same time mitigating rejection and competitive attitudes and practices. (Matsagouras, 2000)

The importance of the co-working method for the school religious lesson is more than obvious as the lesson of religion nowadays is oriented towards the view and the cultivation of the relationship between religion and the world. The stake is the transformation of the school class into a field of fruitful dialogue, where issues related to the relationship of religion to the Contemporary social, ethical and environmental issues are the very core of the lesson. (Pedagogical Institute 2011: 41).

Nowadays, more than ever, we are facing a new social reality with strong multicultural characteristics and with different national, cultural and religious elements creating new necessities. So, in this dimension, the students are important to recognize the diversities and in a context of mutual respect and mutual acceptance co-exist harmoniously together.

### **Project Method**

It is a form of group teaching in which teachers and students, participating equally, are in an open learning process whose boundaries and procedures are not strictly defined. The process of a Project starts with an initiative that is expressed as a suggestion and on the occasion of an experience, event or problem, which the participants after exchanging views undertake to investigate. Having agreed on what



they are going to do, jointly define their areas of action and make their programming.

Some of the Teaching technics that are proposed for the curriculum are as follows:

- Brainstorming
- Think, Pair, Share. (TPS)
- Dimensional Analysis (Dimensional Analysis)
- Case study
- Mind map
- Building Online Bridges - Building e bridges
- Online webcasting
- Reflective Journal
- Teaching through art. Patterns of artistic reasoning - Artful thinking
- [I see, I think, I wonder].
- [Think, puzzle, explore]
- [Creative Questions]
- Collage creation
- Painting
- Visits
- Thematic approach
- Round table discussion
- Narrative stories
- Experiential techniques and activities

## Perspectives

Nikolaos Filis, Minister of Education in 2015, attempted changes to the curriculum of the religion education, with the aim of transforming the course, using extra-philosophical and literary texts, and eliminate the orthodox centric character that it has. In the above changes, the Church reacted through the Archbishop's Jeronime, claiming for religious education. The solution came from a meeting between the two



government partners, the Minister and the Archbishop, where the decision was suspended, and a public debate has opened. From this conflict, between the Minister of Education and the Archbishop, the question arises once again whether the Church can interfere with state issues, what is the position of the Church in a modern state, what should be the relations between them. (Μυλωνάς - Λέκκας, 2016)

At this point the Greek Ministry of Education is creating the new Educational approach with new books for the Religion teaching in primary and secondary schools which is going to be more adjusted to the inter-cultural school environment the way it has been evolved the last years. Unfortunately the exact content will be available within the next few months, so for the moment we are not able to include it in our research.

## Pedagogical approaches

Looking through the current and past few years' bibliography various cases of mistakes or inadequacies in the field of creating a multicultural-friendly school environment can be found.

In many schools, foreign children and their families are treated as potential criminals and they are followed by a suspicious attitude from local children. This attitude often reaches racist and xenophobic levels. Consequently, many families come to the solution of giving their children 'christianised' names in an attempt to help them become more easily accepted by the school environment. This example brings to surface the pressure that arises to foreign pupils who- in the name of cultural and religious homogeneity- have to oppress their real identity.

Moreover, as most schools do not have a clear multicultural and anti-discriminatory strategy, teachers feel like they are carrying a personal weight of defending their pupils against racist attacks, often calling forth punishments and verbal attacks towards the offenders.



Additionally, there have been examples where pupils who do not speak Greek very well were rewarded only when they showed significant progress in their language skills. These pupils were falsely given the message that only if they act as Greeks will be treated and rewarded equally.

The above are typical examples of wrong attitudes and behaviours that reveal the necessity of shaping a multicultural pedagogical model that will promote equal treatment of all pupils regardless of their language and cultural background.

### Focus Group Discussion

The current research aims to present the main elements of religion education approaches in the countries involved, identify strengths and weaknesses and- eventually- devise a model that will promote and enhance interculturality in the classroom. For this reason a semi-structured discussion among people who are directly or indirectly involved in religion education was decided to take place in order to collect all the information needed for further analysis.

The discussion took place in K.S.D.E.O. "EDRA" Life Long Learning Center premises in Peristeri, Athens and it was co-ordinated by the President of the Board Directors Ms Maria Kerasoglou and one more member of the research team Mr Eleftherios Chatzitheodorou. A total of seven persons participated, of which five teachers in a primary education school, one teacher of Religion in a secondary education school as well as one member of a Parents' Association from a local primary education school.

The participants identified the pros and cons of the current teaching approaches related to religion education. It was widely accepted that in the lower primary school grades religious messages are presented in an appropriate manner, especially through parables. The fact that many important messages regarding love and solidarity are presented in a clear way was also accepted.

On the other hand, bad-written books were mentioned as a major weakness. It was widely agreed that the current books are written in a minimal inter-religion style



presenting only some very basic principles of other religions rather than promoting a 'dialogue' between religions.

Moreover, both Greek and immigrant parents' attitudes were mentioned as a key factor for the establishment of interculturality in the school context. According to the participants' opinions Greek parents are well open-minded in issues regarding other cultures, however in many cases they are still quite reluctant in mixing and socializing with other cultures. Some of their concerns- such as health issues- were considered to be realistic, however xenophobic feelings are present quite often. Similarly, many immigrant parents coming from strict religious and cultural backgrounds are also reluctant to socializing with the local population.

From all the above, the main conclusion is that religion education- provided that some key changes should take place- could play an important role in the promotion of interculturality. It was widely accepted that key notions such as love and respect of the human existence as well as solidarity should be taught by taking into account the point of view of every religion and coming to common ground conclusions.

Moreover, the participants- as mentioned above- focused not only on Greek parents' attitudes towards immigrants and interculturality but also on the immigrants' personal belief systems that either enhance or hinder socialization with other cultures. The example of a child from Pakistan was mentioned. Although the child was quite willing to participate in Religion class his/her parents were negative and eventually the child was prevented from attending. Therefore, it is crucial for all parents, regardless of origin and religious background, to serve as facilitators of interculturality by encouraging their children to treat each other equally and to respect each other's religious or cultural elements.

## Case Studies

### Case Study 1

In many schools, foreign children and their families are treated as potential criminals and they are followed by a suspicious attitude from local children. This attitude often reaches racist and xenophobic levels.



H.L. is a 6<sup>th</sup> grade pupil. He was born in Greece by Albanian parents who immigrated to Greece about twenty years ago. Since the third grade he has been facing verbal and psychological abuse. Some of his classmates call him nasty names and- what hurts him the most- they call him ‘thief’. H.L. soon started avoiding talking to the children in the classroom, during the breaks he preferred to spend time on his own until one day he even started claiming that he does not want to go to school any more. Been asked by his parents he said that he had started feeling ashamed of his origin and he asked his parents never to talk to him in Albanian again and even not call him by his name while at school. Soon after this, his parents started calling him by the Greek name ‘Antonis’ and talked to him only in Greek.

Many families come to the solution of giving their children Greek names in an attempt to help them become more easily accepted by the school environment. The above mentioned example brings to surface the pressure that arises to foreign pupils who- in the name of cultural and religious homogeneity- have to oppress their real identity.

### Case Study 2

S.F. attends the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. He was born in Greece by Romanian parents. As both of them struggle with the Greek language, they mainly talk to him in Romanian causing S.F. some deficits in Greek vocabulary and in his ability to speak fluently. S.F. has often been criticised by his teachers on his language abilities, making him feel inadequate and unable to express himself properly. As a result, he avoids participating in class activities and socializing with his classmates. His teachers verbally reward him only when they notice some progress in his language abilities, however this attitude causes S.F. more stress as he feels that his acceptance depends on his improvement. This example shows how easily false conclusions may be imposed to pupils from other countries, especially conclusions that deal with the notion that only if they act, feel and speak as Greek they will be accepted in the school environment.



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