

## ***Religion, Modernity and Social Rights in European Education***

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### **Abstract:**

*Religion, as social construct and institutional reality, has played a pivotal role in shaping European societies. In spite of the impact of Enlightenment theories in the formation of European Modernity, institutionalised religions and established churches have managed to maintain their influence in the public domain. Educational systems, the par excellence institutions of Modernity, represent an interesting example of the peculiar co-existence between tradition and Modernity in European societies. The implications of the persistence of religion within the institutions of Modernity are both epistemological and political. While the foundations of modern knowledge on reason are challenged in several aspects of school knowledge, fundamentalism, nationalism and social exclusion can result from school systems that encourage catechism and religiosity. The aim of this paper is to discuss the role of religion in contemporary European education systems and to reflect on the socio-political implications of this relationship, especially in the realm of social rights.*

### **Introduction**

The growing impact of religion as a socio-political force has recently become central to the interests not only of social scientists, but also of mass media and politicians (Haynes 1998). The increasing social awareness regarding religion has been analysed in several different ways, varying from interpretations relating religion to the politics of identity that fuel nationalist movements (Duijzings 2000) to interpretations that are prepared to see religion as part of culture without religiosity, such as the phenomenon which is coded as 'religion without God' (Kepele 1993). Social phenomena related to religious affiliation, such as the headscarf movement in several European countries or the faith schools movement (Gardner, Cairns et al. 2005), are challenging the foundations of European Modernity and represent fields of political contestation. The place of religion in public education systems represents one of these terrains of contestation.

Recent studies of the relationship between religion and education in Europe seem to adopt the view that the study of religion is a precondition for tolerance and social awareness of religious diversity, as well as a prerequisite for personal development and social responsibility (Jackson, Miedema et al. 2007). In certain cases religious education is perceived as part of 'bildung' and a presupposition of citizenship education in its broader sense. This position challenges the foundation stones of enlightenment thought as an attempt to distinguish between knowledge and faith or citizenship and congregation.

The resurgence of religion and the increasing fundamentalisms are expressed in education institutions today in several ways, either in the form of revitalisation of religious instruction in countries where secularisation had been performed as a top-down process (such as in the former communist countries) (Nagy 1998; Nagy 2003;

Valk 2007), or as a backlash of denominational religious teaching in the form of faith schools in western countries. In some of these schools theories of creationism and “intelligent design” are replacing science (Schneider, Kertcher et al. 2006; Dawkins 2007). Rationality is under attack in several ways in modern educational systems and religion is one of the agencies of irrationalism within education. This paper argues that denominational teaching has both epistemological and social implications within educational systems.

### **Modernity, knowledge, education and religion**

Religions as such, (not the sociology of religion) are not a field of epistemic inquiry. As Durkheim has put it, religion is a subject for science rather than a science itself (Durkheim 1995). Religions are formulations of doctrines that lie beyond the system of reason. The discourse of religion is not based on any system of dialectic argumentation and is not subjected to refutation or falsification. In these terms religion lies at the opposite end of epistemic knowledge, since its discourse is definitive. Therefore religions, despite their establishment and deep influence in the foundation of European Universities, and education institutions in general, are not epistemic subjects. This peculiar co-existence between unverified doctrine and reason within education institutions represents a survival of tradition in the context of Modernity.

Educational institutions constitute a field of expression and at the same time a compression of the contradictions of the Modernity project. Education systems, apparently, constitute a systematic attempt towards secularisation and displacement of church in the control of education. State intervention in education and the development of educational systems, through the institutionalisation of free of charge and compulsory education for all citizens, is a process which took place in the European states and the USA during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the main, and has contributed in the political construction and the amalgamation of cohesion of the called nation-states (Green 1990). The secularisation process, however, is not either universal or equally radical throughout all European societies. In some cases it continues to be uneven and not fully accomplished, while educational provision is often mixed, allowing an essential intervention on the part of the churches. The celebrated quest of rationalism regarding the separation between reason and faith might be expected to have found its political expression in educational institutions. However, this is hardly the case. In European states the churches are entitled to establish confessional schools, while in many countries curricular contents allow or even impose catechism. In Greek public schools religion is a compulsory confessional subject referring exclusively to the dominant religion, while in Denmark the compulsory subject of religion is defined as ‘Christian Studies’. In this sense, it could be argued that in European societies, the modernity principles of rationality and critical reflexivity present a peculiar symbiosis with traditional values of religious catechism. In several European education systems morality is confused with or it is constructed as equivalent to religiosity. In countries such as Germany, Belgium, Poland, Lithuania and Luxemburg the subject of secular ethics is placed in the curriculum as an equivalent alternative option to the subject of religion (Zambeta 2003).

Contradictions such as these are expected to emerge at the level of society where different attitudes and ideologies coexist. The same contradictions though can be traced in the discourse of the Enlightenment theorists as well. The basic assumptions of French Enlightenment as they were epitomised by eminent representatives, such as Diderot and Voltaire were that, firstly, the state was the institution which would promote rationality through the displacement of the church dominance in education and, secondly, that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century society the bourgeoisie was the par excellence social group susceptible to rational thought (Vaughan and Archer 1971). While education was perceived as a precondition for the realisation of democracy and for the emancipation from superstition and prejudice, social emancipation was restricted to the new social elite which was the bourgeoisie. The separate roles of state and church were recognised but religious teaching was acceptable in primary education, as an effective mode of social control for the populace. Secondary education, which at the time was an exclusive terrain of the bourgeoisie, should be free from religious teaching.

In this sense, the Enlightenment quest for social progress, rationality and emancipation, to a large extent, gave way to the aim of maintenance of social stability and reproduction of existing social hierarchies. Education, in the form of state education systems, serves mainly the latter. The contradictions observed in the management of church–state relationship in Europe and the subsequent education policies have their origins in this genuine contradiction of the modernity project, which on one hand facilitates social emancipation and at the same time serves social reproduction. The survival of religion in the context of Modernity has been performed through, on one hand, the immense potential of the hierocratic organisations of religions (churches) to exercise spiritual power over people and the use of religion on the part of the state for political legitimisation and social control on the other (Weber 1983; Weber 1993).

Modern states have reached to a *modus vivendi* with the churches varying from a pure secularist model that governs the church-state relationship, such as in France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal and the USA, to states with an established state church, such as in Greece, Denmark and the UK. In other cases the historical compromise with the churches has led to states with quasi-separation between church and state such as those of Germany, Austria, Spain, Italy or Finland (Foundethakis 2000). In the case of quasi separation, there is no established religion, but the church and the state can collaborate in several aspects of social policy, while churches are usually funded by contributions of their registered members. However, the way church-state relationship is defined in the constitution does not account for the place of religion in European schools (Zambeta 2003). Educational institutions have been a battleground where forces of secularism and religion have confronted each other.

Universities represent the most interesting example of the historical compromise between modern knowledge and religion. Theology and Classical Studies, Medicine and Law were the first subjects to be developed in the early European Universities. For centuries medicine has been practised by the clergy who considered disease as the outcome of supernatural intervention and was mainly interested in the cure of the soul rather than the body. The secularisation of Medicine was accomplished through the development of the subject in the context of universities (Benedek 1973). The research and discovery of the human body involved practices severely discouraged

and condemned by the official church which, for centuries, did not allow its members to participate in medical actions that presupposed the shedding of blood. Interestingly, the churches have never condemned war for similar reasons. On the contrary they supported and blessed the crusades.

## **Education and Social Rights**

Some of the basic achievements of the Enlightenment political thought are related to the establishment of principles of freedom of thought and speech and to the promotion of religious tolerance as fundamental rights of the citizen. The political discourse on rights is not any sort of humanitarian utopianism that ignores power relations in society. It is constructed in the context of Enlightenment thought as the institutional vehicle for the limitation of power of the monarch within an agreed social contract. It does not presuppose the existence of equity, social justice or even democracy, in a sense of a representative system. The social contract only implies that political power is mediated by 'volonte generale', so it cannot be ruthless, unlimited, unconditional and beyond a generally acknowledged system of rules. The agent that addresses this issue is the particular social class, namely the bourgeoisie in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the working class in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The political implications of the Enlightenment project is the construction of principles of political rationality that put an end to the system of 'in the name of God Monarchy'.

The place of religion in public schools confronts us with fundamental questions regarding the social role of education institutions in modern representative democracies. To whom do schools belong? Whose interests should they serve and satisfy? Does the school have the right to adopt a specific religious faith and disseminate it through systematic education? Does the dominant religious majority have the right to dogmatise through public education? What are the implications of such a position for those students who do not adhere to this specific religion, or for those secular families who irrespectively of their religious believes, or non-believes, would not wish to receive a denominational type of instruction? Certainly the answers to questions such as these are quite complicated and are far from consensual in modern societies. These answers are critical for the conceptualisation of democracy, religious freedom and social rights. The fact that social consensus with regard to the content of education is extremely hard to reach sometimes leads to an easy adoption of a relativist argument that encourages diversity: since there is no consensus on what is to be taught in schools, let us leave it open to the choice of the local community. If there is no consensus among the local community, then let us allow diversification in schooling. The withdrawal of public engagement in the construction of social cohesion through social services, such as education, represents one of the major political dilemmas that educational institutions and current states anticipate which is related to the rationale of education as such. Education systems, funded through public taxation, are perceived as a form of redistribution of income aiming at public welfare with universal provision for all citizens. On the other hand, education is also perceived, and not only on the part of liberal political thought, as a social right related to identity formation protected by international treaties that safeguard the right of the individual to receive education according to his/her own faith.

Education has been the critical institution for the appropriation of social goods and a key to social rights in the past (Marshall 1994). The dissemination of literacy and the combating of superstition and naivety has been one of the achievements of public education systems, which have facilitated the access of the poor and the less socially advantaged to the social heritage. No matter how severe the critique of public education can be for its many failures in combating inequality and social exclusion, it is hard to envisage a more effective institution for the dissemination of knowledge than the public education systems. In contemporary times, however, the cohesive capacity of educational institutions is jeopardised not only by the fact that other agents of socialisation, such as mass media, fashion, sports et cetera, tend to become more influential in shaping young people's consciousness, but also because of the blossoming of new forms of religious fundamentalism (Coulby 2005). The establishment of fundamentalist faith schools or schools that teach creationism and "intelligent design" is becoming quite common policy in Europe and the USA

### **Religion and Education Politics**

Enlightenment thought is in danger of being silenced in school and universities today due to the rise of religious fundamentalism. Religious schools are expanding, not only in terms of numbers, but also in terms of social impact and influence leading to new politics of segregation within education. The restoration of religion in educational institutions and the establishment of faith schools seek legitimacy in two different sorts of arguments: scepticism and resistance towards globalisation, on the one hand, and postmodernism on the other.

#### *Scepticism and resistance towards the apparently homogenising dynamics of globalisation.*

In a context where global culture is shaped and disseminated through the mass media, the industries of fashion, sport and fast food, leading to the formation of global modes of social behaviour and consumption, the preservation of cultural diversity is perceived by certain social groups as a good in jeopardy. The overwhelming dominance of the English language tends to marginalise the development and use of other less spoken languages. Under these conditions, the segregation and framing of certain social groups in citadels, such as mono-cultural schools, is perceived as the fortification of cultural difference and as a mode of resistance to the dominating and homogenising effects of globalisation. Religious schools are perceived by such groups as a strategy of fortification and in this sense preservation of cultural diversity.

#### *Postmodernism and cultural relativism.*

Complementary to the above argument is the position of postmodernity. The severe critique towards the grand narratives that are attributed to the Modernity project and the disapproval of aspects of Modernity, such as state-nationalism (which has led in the past to the flattening of cultural diversity in the context of the nation-state) has empowered the entirely legitimate argument – and one in fact compatible with the emancipatory quests of Modernity (Harvey 1989)– of respect and recognition of diverse identities. The rejection of any sense of hierarchy of civilisations and the affirmation of cultural diversity has been used as an argument on behalf of certain social groups that wish to manifest their particularity. The establishment of faith schools derives legitimacy in the context of cultural relativism invoking the protection

and preservation of religious diversity. However, the political implications of cultural relativism, related to the rejection of hierarchies among cultures, are not always compatible with the epistemological consequences of the adoption of a relativist argument. The extent to which cultural relativism is compatible with religion is questionable, since religion claims the access to absolute truth and as a result it is against any sense of relativism in the acquisition of knowledge and in the formation of value judgements.

While the political implication of cultural relativism with regard to religion would be the establishment of religious tolerance and the encouragement of interculturalism, the epistemological implication of a religious theory of knowledge constructs hierarchies since it attempts to prove the fallacious character of any other religion. If the resistance to globalisation and the postmodernist affirmation of cultural diversity have offered legitimacy to the restoration of religion and to faith schools, they have provided an ideological alibi for two different aspects of social conservatism.

#### *Traditional conservatism and racism.*

The startling expansion of religious schools has been, of course promoted by the established churches and other religious groups but it finds fertile ground to flourish among fundamentalist and conservative social groups, which perceive modernisation as a threat to traditional values and the new populations in education as a threat to cultural purity and diversity. In several cases the persistence on religion and tradition is related to the development of xenophobia and racism. Undoubtedly fundamentalist religious schools are supported by extreme conservative social groups.

#### *Neoliberalism.*

Public Choice theory and neoliberalism have provided legitimacy in the rapid expansion of religious and faith schools. The perception that the parents, as consumers of educational goods, are those who are entitled to choose and decide on the content of education to be provided for their children leads to the deregulation of the public character of education and to the growing diversification of schooling (a policy which has been consistently continued under the revised social democracy of the Third Way). The flourishing of religious schools is a predictable result of the neoliberal education policy since it is in tandem with the 'freedom of individual choice' and the development of internal diversity and hierarchies within the educational system. In this way, neoliberalism expands its political influence and attracts an electorate among the advocates of social conservatism and fundamentalism, as well as among the post-modernist devotees of cultural diversity, from whom it draws wide legitimacy.

On the other hand the official discourse of the agencies which are supposed to be acting for the protection of human rights does not adopt a strictly secular view towards religion but it encourages the abolition of denominational teaching. The Council of Europe has issued a report (COE, Parliamentary Assembly, Doc. 10673, 19-9-2005) in which it asks its member states, even those with a dominant established religion, to teach the history and philosophy of religion rather than proselytising the students in any specific religion. The above report recognises the fact that European educators are not qualified to teach a non denominational subject of religion and it draws the attention to the need to establish a European Institute for teachers' training

on the comparative study of religions. Another resolution of the Council of Europe which refers to the implications of religious fanaticism on women (COE, Parliamentary Assembly, Resolution 1464 (2005) it is established that the principle of religious freedom is subject to the control of human rights and it is in no way a principle superior to that of human rights. According to the same resolution, religious or cultural relativism does not legitimise infringement of human rights.

### **Irrationality and Social Risk**

Some religious schools in England, officially supported by the Church of England, have asked for permission to be exempted from the regulations of the equality of opportunities law in order to be able to teach that homosexuality is a sin as it is not compatible with the doctrines of the Bible. They claim that religious schools should be free to decide on the content of their teaching, according to each particular faith (Paton 2006). According to the Church of England's position and the faith schools belonging to it, social discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in this case is legitimised because it derives from the religious beliefs of the individual and, as a result, it is constructed as an issue of religious freedom and freedom of consciousness! In this sense the fundamental principles of Modernity, those of isonomy, equality before the law and social tolerance are perceived on the part of religious fundamentalism as inferior principles to a supposedly 'religious freedom'. When religious freedom leads to the infringement of fundamental rights, it is transformed into religious absolutism. When in the name of the preservation of religious diversity young people are educated in cultural superiority and intolerance, then religious freedom is transformed in a force of hatred. When in the name of safeguarding religious identity young people are deprived from access to the basic premises of modern knowledge and science, then religion is transformed into a force of obscurantism.

Fundamentalists of any type, Christian or other, believe that they command the unique and absolute truth and do not recognise the fact that the expression of their faith in the form of morning prayer, the teaching of the Bible, or through the implementation of a specific curriculum that is based on theories such as Creationism, infringes upon human rights (Provenzo 1990) and is against the basic principles of democracy – of any type of democracy, not necessarily against a French type of republicanism founded on the principles of laicite. The advocates of cultural relativism could argue that against religious fundamentalism there is the fundamentalist rationalism of Enlightenment, as Gellner has put it (Gellner 1992). However, the basic quest of Modernity is the trust in the interpretative and verifying capacities of rationality and the confinement of religion in the private sphere. The quest of the Enlightenment is not the wiping out of cultural diversity (and of course of religious diversity). On the contrary, the right to difference derives from the principle of freedom of consciousness as well as that of tolerance.

The establishment of faith schools that encourage monoculturalism can have critical repercussions in the development of social tolerance and social cohesion. Of course, fundamentalist schools are not the only space of infringement of rights in education. However, the irrationalism that is deliberately cultivated in these schools has genuinely socially selective implications. While, for middle class children, it might

provide for yet another cultural experience (perceived even as a luxury), which nevertheless does not obstruct the achievement of their social goals, for the working classes it is the road to social exclusion.

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