

THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN EDUCATION IN CYPRUS

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1. Religious instruction organised during the school hours (in lower and in secondary education) in state funded schools

I.1 Question: Religious instruction organised during the school hours (in lower and in secondary education) in state funded schools. Is – and if affirmative please refer to the provisions in the law (add the text separately) – the teaching of religion in your country organised during school time in public educational institutions: in primary education, in secondary education.

Answer:

Religious instruction is organised during the school hours in both primary and secondary education. Religious lessons given in primary and secondary schools follow the doctrine of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In secondary education, the courses are given by graduates of university schools of divinity, while in primary education they are given by the class teacher. Attendance is compulsory for Orthodox pupils; atheists or members of other religions, however, may be excused. In the 1996 Curriculum of the Ministry of Education and Culture, the subject of religious education is under the title ‘Christian Orthodox Education’ and it is provided that the aim of the lesson is to enable the students to realise that they are members of the Christian Orthodox Church, to learn the fundamental truths of Christianity and to experience a loving relationship with God. According to the Curriculum pupils should be assisted to understand the presence of God throughout history and the apocalypse of God as an answer to the fundamental questions of human existence; they should experience the figure and teachings of Jesus Christ and experience the Christian way of love towards all people, regardless of colour, religion and race.

It is further provided that pupils ought to be introduced to the basic aspects of other religions and develop a critical attitude towards them, so as to become able to understand and respect the religious beliefs of others. Orthodox education should provide pupils, according to the Curriculum, with the skills to appreciate the meaning of the Orthodox ethics, traditions and prayer, and the beneficial influence of the Church to the development and progress of civilisation. In addition to the above, Orthodox education should develop the understanding of the collective worships of the Church and encourage the students to participate in such worships and teach them to respect the value and importance of the various ecclesiastical monuments. It should also promote each individual’s responsibilities for the continuation of the Orthodox faith and way of life.²

Some of the textbooks used in Cypriot schools are edited by the Ministry of Education of Cyprus, while some other textbooks are edited by the Ministry of Education of Greece. The aims of religious education in the Greek curriculum are nearly identical to the aims of religious education in the Cypriot curriculum, namely to teach the pupils the Christian Orthodox way of life, tradition and values, to develop their religious identity and to enrich their relationship with God. In addition Orthodox education in Greece aims to teach children the meaning, the symbols and tradition of the Orthodox faith, the meaning of the Gospels and the moral and spiritual values of Orthodox Christianity.

Religious education textbooks are written by committees appointed by the Government of Cyprus, or Greece respectively. Cypriot textbooks are edited by the Ministry of Education and Culture and distributed to every pupil in public schools for free. Teachers of theology in public schools are required to teach the content of such textbooks in order to promote the

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² Ministry of Education, *The National Curriculum of Cyprus* (Nicosia, 1996, in Greek): 128 (in Greek).

aims of the Curriculum; certain teachers of theology are even members of the clergy. Textbooks include topics from the Bible, both the Old and the New Testament, the history of the Orthodox Church, the lives of the Saints, hymnography and hagiography, as well as moral teachings.

I.2 Question: What choices amongst the religious education possibilities are offered in public educational institutions, e.g. catholic religion, Islamic teaching,

Answer:

There is not a possibility of religious education for members of other religions in public schools, with the exception of Maronites and Turkish Cypriots; the religious instruction of Maronite children who attend public schools is taught by Maronite priests who receive a monthly salary by the state. Similarly, where there is an adequate number, Turkish Cypriot pupils may be religiously educated in their mother language and in their own religion, even in Greek - speaking schools. The fact that the State cannot offer religious education consistent with every single individual religion or creed is not of course surprising; the great majority of pupils in each non -Turkish public school adhere to the Orthodox Christian religion and thus, it would be practically unfeasible for the State to provide religious education which would meet the demands of all parents. This is why the State has opted to assist children belonging to religious groups to attend private schools of their choice, if they so desire, and further why non Orthodox Christians pupils may request to be exempted from religious education, including collective worship.

II. State funded denominational schools and state supervision

II.1. Question: Are there state funded denominational schools in your country? If affirmative, what is the numeric importance of state funded schools. If affirmative, what is the numeric importance of Islamic state funded schools. Please refer to statistical information on-line

Answer:

The right of religious groups to set up and operate their own schools is safeguarded, and such schools are financially assisted by the State. It could be well argued that there is a continuous effort to maintain the special characteristics of the various religious communities with regard to education. In principle financial assistance is provided to the three religious groups of the island (Maronite, Roman Catholic and Armenian); religions and creeds, other than the five major religions of the island (Orthodox, Islamic, Maronite, Roman Catholic and Armenian), may set up and operate their own schools if they so wish, but will not be financially assisted by the State. The numeric importance of state funded denominational schools is very limited and it is estimated that students who attend these schools are less than 0.1% of the student ratio. Islamic state funded schools are very few due to the fact that most Turkish Cypriots (Muslims) do not reside to the areas controlled by the Republic of Cyprus due to the abnormal situation pertaining in the island since 1974.

II.2. Question: Are there non-state funded denominational schools in your country (private)? If affirmative, what is the numeric importance of private schools. If affirmative, what is the numeric importance of Islamic private schools. Please refer to statistical information on-line

Answer:

The Orthodox Church and the other Christian creeds operate Sunday schools, without State intervention; the right to operate Sunday schools, or provide private religious education in houses or other establishments is allowed for all religions and creeds. The hieratic school 'Apostolos Vanavas', bearing the name of the founder of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, operates in Nicosia, under the supervision of the Holy Synod, as a dependence of the Monastery of Kykkos. The school also functions as a boarding house for those pupils who wish to stay there during their courses. All expenses of the school are covered by the Monastery of Kykkos. Non-state funded denominational schools, that are not Sunday schools, is a virtually non-existing phenomenon in Cyprus.

II.3. Question: How do the authorities control the teaching in state funded denominational schools and are there any special questions about the control of the content of teaching in state-funded denominational schools? Please refer to the provisions in the law.

Answer:

The authorities do not control the content of teaching in state funded denominational schools. However, the State may safeguard that the level of teaching corresponds to that of public schools.

III. Refusal or limitations on the number of pupils of another conviction/belief by the governing board of a confessional (catholic) school

III.1. Question: Does the head of a state funded denominational (e.g. Catholic) school has the right to refuse pupils from other religious beliefs? Please refer to the provisions in the law.

Answer:

The issue has never arisen due to the fact that confessional schools are very rare in Cyprus.

III.2. Question: Does the head of a state funded denominational (e.g. Catholic) school the authority to limit the number of pupils from other religious beliefs (e.g. Muslim pupils) in order to support the specificity of the project?

Answer:

IV. Point of views of the authorities concerning the teaching of Islam in denominational (Catholic) education, Islam instruction or instruction on other convictions/beliefs in denominational (catholic) schools for (a number of pupils requesting it) and alternative ethical course

IV.1. Question. Is there a legal obligation to organise, if parents ask for, classes of Islamic religion in denominational (Catholic) education funded by public authorities? a. for any pupil for whom a request has been made? b. from a minimum number of pupils for whom a request has been made?

Answer:

As already state, denominational education is a very rare phenomenon for Cyprus. There are no pupils of Islamic religion in denominational education. In public education, classes of Islamic religion might be taught if there is a minimum number of pupils for whom a request has been made.

IV.2. Question. Does the same obligation exist for the offer of (a) other religions and/or philosophical convictions, (b) an alternative class of conception of life, philosophy, ethics

Answer:

See above

IV.3. Question. Can you shortly mention the pro and contra standpoints that have been expressed concerning the respect of fundamental rights (among others, freedom of education and right to education) in relation with this obligation?

Answer:

Objections have been raised with respect to the doctrinal character of religious education in Cyprus; undoubtedly, religious education in Cypriot schools does not refer to an objective study of the various religions and creeds, but rather consists of a purely doctrinal presentation from the point of view of the Orthodox Church. This becomes obvious not only from a mere reading of the purposes of the curriculum of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Cyprus, but also from the everyday manner religious education is carried out in Greek speaking primary, or secondary schools. In addition collective worship only takes place in Orthodox Christian churches, collective prayer is based on the Orthodox tradition, while school religious festivities follow the Orthodox tradition. It could be argued that substituting

such doctrinal character of religious education with lessons of neutral religiosity, or neutral religiosity in addition to doctrinal education, could be more education - friendly towards non Orthodox pupils and would promote pluralism.

It could be further argued that religion is a private matter and as such, it is not appropriate within a state funded public school; there is no doubt that such an educational reform would definitely be strictly opposed by the Church. Actual criticism of the content of religious education in Cyprus has been rather rare until now, a situation which could be explained by the fact that the State assists pupils belonging to religious groups to attend private schools of their choice, by covering all fees and expenses of such students, and by the fact that non - Orthodox Christian pupils had until recently been few in Greek - speaking primary and secondary schools.

In order to avoid the possibility of discrimination there are two possible ways of reforming the system: either religious education could consist of neutral religiosity instead of doctrinal education, or, if the doctrinal character of religious education is to be retained, students could be asked to opt religious education as a non - compulsory course; the latter option would have the advantage of allowing parents to ensure that their children receive religious education according to their own religion, while at the same time avoiding, or at least restricting circumstances of indirect discrimination on grounds of religion. A solution intends in principle to achieve a balance between the will of the majority to have a religious education of its choice on the one hand, and the right of the minority not to be embarrassed on the other.

IV.4. Question. Reference to the legal basis, with Website address, and also if possible to the parliamentary preparation of texts.

Answer:

Article 20 of the Constitution provides that every person has the right to receive, and every person or institution has the right to give instruction or education subject to such formalities, conditions or restrictions as are in accordance with the relevant communal law and are necessary only in the interests of the security of the Republic or the constitutional order or the public safety or the public order or the public health or the public morals or the standard and quality of education or for the protection of the rights and liberties of others including the right of the parents to secure for their children such education as is in conformity with their religious convictions.

V. Teaching of Islam in denominational (e.g. Catholic) schools at their own initiative

V.1. Question: Is there in your country a general guideline for teaching of Islam in denominational (e.g. Catholic) schools at their own initiative defined by (a) the Bishops' Conference, (b) another body, namely. . .

Answer:

As already mentioned there are virtually no denominational schools in Cyprus and there is no teaching of Islam in such schools. The number of Catholics in Cyprus is not really high.

V.2. Question: If affirmative, does the guideline implies that (a) the teaching of other religions is organised when: one parent asks for, or a sufficient number of parents ask for (how many?), (b) only teaching of Islam is offered as alternative religion when one parent asks for or a sufficient number of parents ask for (how many?)

Answer:

V.3. Question: There is no guideline and: (a) in fact, teaching of Islam is never proposed in Catholic schools, or (b) the teaching of Islam is organised in some schools, which have taken themselves the initiative. If possible, explain the importance of this option

Answer:

VI. Religious symbols in public schools

VI.1. Question: Are religious symbols (e.g. crucifix) in public schools compulsory, allowed, or forbidden?

Answer:

They are allowed.

VI.2. Question: Is a teacher allowed to wear the Islamic headscarf and manifest her religion? Please explain if not allowed on which grounds.

Answer:

They issue has never actually arisen in practice.

VI.3. Question: Is a pupil allowed to wear the Islamic headscarf and manifest her religion? Please explain if not allowed on which grounds.

Answer:

The issue has never actually arisen in practice.

VI.4. Question: Who decides on the dress code in schools. Please refer to the law.

Answer:

The Ministry of Education issues guidelines on the dress code in schools.

VI.5. Question: Can a pupil and/or a teacher be exempted from the dress code when she considers it her religious duty to wear the Islamic headscarf?

Answer:

The issue has never arisen.

VI.6. Question: Who is the regulatory authority in this sphere?

Answer:

The Ministry of Education.

VI.7. Question: What kind of disciplinary measures and proceedings are taken if the pupil or teacher fails to comply with the rules on dress codes?

Answer:

VI.8. Question: Please describe the case-law in your country.

Answer:

VII. After-school education in private religious institutions. Islamic instruction organised after the school hours (age 6-18)

VII.1. Question: Is there any form of Islamic teaching (for children and youngsters of age 6-18) in your country organised after school time in private religious institutions:

Answer:

VII.2. Question: Is there any form of Islamic teaching in your country organised in primary education age (6-12)

Answer:

VII.3. Question: Is there any form of Islamic teaching in your country organised in secondary education age (12-18)

Answer:

VII.4. Question: How many such institutions are there in your country providing Islamic instruction organised after the school hours?

Answer:

VII.5. Question: How many children take part in the activities of Islamic instruction

organised after the school hours?

Answer:

VII.6. Question: How is the pedagogical quality of Islamic instruction organised after the school hours safeguarded?

Answer:

VII.7. Question: How would you characterize the public debate about this form of Islamic instruction organised after the school hours?

Answer:

VIII. Additional comments

XI. Bibliography

A. Emilianides, Law and Religion in Cyprus, Kluwer, 2010.