

Religious Teaching in Schools – *practices in Britain and France*

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In every country, no matter of the continent or the stage of development the implementation i.e. introduction of religious teaching in schools has caused heated debates. There have always been two opposing sides regarding this issue, the church or any other religious institution with its believers, strongly lobbying for it on one side; and the people who believe the church and the state should be separated, and that the church should not be involved in the education process. No matter which side someone will take, there are pros and cons on both sides and most probably the debate will remain a never ending one.

Practices in the EU

The practises around the world dealing with religious teaching are of course different. Even in the European Union the ways it is sanctioned differ quite a lot from country to country. For example, two of the oldest democracies, the UK and France, have totally different laws and practices regarding this issue.

In Britain on the other hand religious instruction and daily worship are statutory requirement in every school. This issue is dealt almost the same across the country with small varieties. For instance, in England schools have to teach religion but parents have the right to withdraw their children from all or part of the lessons, even in church schools. The school is not obliged to provide alternative lessons for those children. In Wales, schools are encouraged to teach children about "Christianity and the other principal religions in Great Britain" but there is no mention of secular philosophies. Scotland's national guidelines on religious and moral education (RME) say that, "while recognising the role of Christianity as the major religious tradition in Scotland, pupils should also be encouraged to develop understanding of and respect for people of other faiths and people who adopt a non-religious stance for living". What children are taught is not how to be religious but how to be religiously and racially tolerant and to have a better understanding and respect for the different communities that constitute the British society.

In France the highly controversial law called, *Law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools* was adopted in 2004 as an amendment to the French Code of Education that expands principles founded in existing French law, especially the constitutional requirement of laïcité: the separation of state and religious activities. France's past is filled with clashes and wars between different religious groups (Protestants, Catholics, Jews, etc.) and for that reason in 1905 a law was adopted which separates the church from the state. What French children study in schools today is some sort of transversal studies about the religions in general through other subjects such as history, geography and literature. This can certainly not be called religious teaching. Religious teaching can only be taught in private religious schools and it is not mandatory.



Picture source: www.bbc.co.uk

Common ground

No matter what it is called, (histories of religions, religious education, ethics, etc.) what the education authorities should do is teach children from early age about tolerance, dialogue, understanding and appreciating differences. This is especially important in multicultural societies for building a solid basis for peaceful coexistence of all different religious groups. In order to avoid any negative impact special attention should be paid to the educators who should be carefully selected from professionals in the field that would not attempt to manipulate the children by promoting certain ideologies. However there are no guarantees and certain dangers will always exist since young children are easily influenced and can be used in someone's propaganda. Most importantly the responsible authorities should always put the children's rights and wellbeing first; children should always have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with their religion as well as with other religions and the morals and ethics behind them.

Sources: *BBC News, Time magazine, Utrinski Vesnik, Wikipedia.*