

**SEMINAR ON THE 'IDENTITIES AND MODERNITIES IN EUROPE' PROJECT - 29 FEBRUARY
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**COMMENTS BY DAVID POLLOCK ON THE PRESENTATION ON 'THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN
EDUCATION IN BULGARIA, CROATIA, FRANCE AND THE UK'**

Given the expertise of the researchers and the findings they have just presented, I thought my most sensible role would be to consider how we reached where we are now. From the time of the Westphalian settlement, when states stopped trying to impose their religion on other states in the wars of religion and decided instead that *cuius regio, eius religio*, governments have taken sides on what religion their citizens should follow and have only slowly come to concede individual liberty.

That slow progress, marked by significant events such as the English civil war, the American declaration of independence and the French revolution, led by stages, via finally the collective determination to allow no repeat of Nazism, to the European Convention on Human Rights and religious freedom.

But no state has fully followed through the implications of individual freedom of religion or belief, even in countries with significant religious minorities, let alone those with a dominant and well organised religious majority. Bulgaria and Croatia, as we have heard, have travelled less far than France and the United Kingdom, but France's secularism tends to the doctrinaire, paying with infringements of religious liberty for maintaining the alleged purity of the *laïcité* of the state (while all the while ignoring the state subsidies to the church of well over €150 million a year!)

In the UK there are no such subsidies, and a strong awareness of the multi-faith, multi-cultural nature of society has led to a wish to use equality and non-discrimination laws to bind in minority groups - albeit at the risk of alienating the traditionally privileged Christian churches. Indeed, the difficulty of providing equal rights to religious minorities - to any minorities - is extreme for any democratic government: it can only be done with the consent of the majority, and that requires a process of education - of 'softening up'. The UK is currently paying the price of inadequate preparation of its population for its Human Rights Act.

The difficulties are of course proportionately greater where the religion of the majority is more solidly entrenched. Most of the UK census's 72% of Christians have only a weak and purely cultural identification with the religion and the Church of England, only one among many churches, is a non-assertive, broad and tolerant body - unlike, for example, the Roman Catholic church with its 88% hold on Croatia or (I imagine) the Eastern Orthodox church with its 76% of Bulgarians.

Even though strong churches produce strong anti-clerical movements, governments still offend them at their risk, given their organised voice and institutional power in society. A minority willing to vote according to their church's interests will generally win over an

opposed majority whose feelings are not strong enough to affect their votes.

Even so, European standards are, at least formally, secularist - in the sense of neutral as between different religions and beliefs. Defenders of church privilege try to depict a secular state as an atheist state. They are wrong, and sometimes cynically and consciously wrong. A secular state, by not taking sides for or against religion or atheism, for or against one belief or another, is the best guarantor we have of freedom of religion or belief. Europe has espoused secularism, human rights and equality and non-discrimination. Thus in the field of education we have the excellent 'Toledo' guidelines on religion in schools produced by the OSCE, and equally good recommendations from the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

In this neutrality, this secularism, the European institutions reflect the views of the population. Europeans are increasingly alienated from religion and religious institutions. This has been repeatedly demonstrated in the EU's own Eurobarometer surveys, carried out across Europe. In 2005, barely half of Europeans said they believed in God and nearly one in five rejected even a belief in a 'spirit or life force'. Almost equal numbers agree (46%) as disagree (48%) that religion has too important a place in society. Religious institutions are trusted by only 40%, while 50% distrust them. And when asked to choose from a list of twelve values the three that are most important to them personally, only 6% of Europeans include religion in their top three, preferring values such as human rights, individual freedom, rule of law, equality and tolerance.

So I believe that the contrasts brought out by today's research are reflections less of fundamental differences between the four states studied than of the distance each has travelled towards secularism in its role as guarantor of freedom of religion or belief from their hugely different starting points. Thus their historical backgrounds, rather than any principled policy-making, has determined where each country stands on the treatment of religion in school. Consider the many different paradigms by which such treatment can differ and be analysed. There are, I think, at least six:

(a) school legal or administrative structures

Schools may be run

- by the state or other public authorities (e.g., local councils), or
- by bodies such as charities or trusts, including churches or other religious organisations, or
- by private companies or individuals, sometimes as businesses.

Any of these may be wholly or partly paid for from public funds. Sometimes churches or other external bodies may be responsible for life stance education within an otherwise secular institution (e.g., a church may provide a course about Christianity in a public school).

(b) scope of syllabus

Another key distinction relates to the scope of the teaching provided. A school may offer

- no relevant teaching at all (as in France)

- a course about a single denomination of a single religion (as in Croatia with Roman Catholicism)
- a course about a single religion (as until a few decades ago in the UK with Christianity)
- a course about more than one religion (as largely now in the UK with courses on the “six great world religions”)
- a course about both religions and non-religious beliefs (as is increasingly emerging in the UK with courses embracing world religions plus Humanism).

(c) pedagogical approach

An important distinction is between

- those courses that suggest that one particular lifestance (or category of lifestance, e.g. religious) is correct and
- those that adopt an open, objective, educational attitude.

(d) facts or morals

There is in addition a distinction between

- courses that concentrate on the ‘facts’ related to lifestances (e.g., Bible knowledge, the history of religion) and
- courses that focus on moral teaching derived from lifestances (e.g., Christian or humanist moral education).

(e) parental and pupil rights and options

- Sometimes parents can choose between a range of alternative courses (which may or may not be comprehensive).
- Elsewhere parents are given the option to withdraw their child from the relevant teaching offered in the school.

In addition, sometimes pupils at a certain age are themselves allowed to exercise these choices.

(e) worship

There is another question, separate from those regarding teaching:

- In some schools there are acts of religious worship in accordance with a single religion or religious denomination (and in this case they may be conducted by clergy or by teachers).
- In other schools there may be acts of religious worship that are syncretic or ‘inter-faith’ or that even try to accommodate the non-religious.
- Other schools may have no acts of worship or anything like it.

Where there is religious worship, it may take place

- within the school day or
- outside the normal teaching hours; and

it may be

- compulsory or
- optional at the wish of either the pupil or the parents.

But the picture is more complicated even than this. In real life, since states will rarely have uniform systems, approaches will often be muddled, usually resulting from pragmatic politics rather than from consideration of the principles involved; and the religious element will anyway be given more or less emphasis or importance. Nevertheless, analyses on the basis of these paradigms will always be revealing.

Even within the European Humanist Federation we found it impossible to agree a policy on religion and education until we realised that the differences in history, culture, administration, institutions and so on meant that we had to confine ourselves to high level principles, on the level of (for example) "Education should ensure that children are informed about a range of religious and nonreligious lifestyles and have autonomy in their choice of their own lifestyle".

Against, then, this background of huge complexity, I think we owe our gratitude to today's researchers for doing so well in producing an interesting, informative and provocative paper.