

Freedom, State, and Religious Education: In Search of Common Ground



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If an outsider takes a look at the religious landscape in Europe, a variety of odd or even schizophrenic behaviors may be observed. On the one hand, some people claim that they do not believe in God, while on the other, they get caught up in the Christmas shopping frenzy. They neither attend masses nor pray; yet they are excited about Eastern spiritual practices, and so they practice yoga instead. They distance themselves from religious symbols, but end up wearing yin and yang on at-shirt. They do not wish to be preached to, yet they are happy to quote the Dalai Lama on random occasions. These practices show that people of the West tend to regard themselves as spiritual but not religious. It also proves that many Europeans, and Americans too, are giving up traditional churches and turning towards spirituality and Eastern tradition.

Although the Western societies are commonly perceived as secular, they exhibit a need of spirituality. Some may say that religion is a private matter, but when a religious fundamentalist commits a crime religion comes out as a destructive power to European values. Sometimes we forget that European values have their origins in Christian tradition, with institutions such as schools and universities originally being funded and

run by the church. From this perspective, Samuel Huntington's thesis about the clash of civilization is still valid, and religion itself plays a leading role in shaping political, sociological, and cultural discourse.¹

SECULARIZATION OF THE STATE AND SEARCHING FOR SPIRITUALITY

According to Peter Berger, modern societies are increasingly secular and plural.² However, it cannot simply be said that 'God is dead' – god still lives, maybe not just the Christian God. This means that people are not atheists *sui generis*, rather they search for a god or gods and they find him/her/ them in different places, not solely in the traditional, hegemonic Church.³

A traditional church – be it Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran – has long been losing its privileged position in the society since the Reformation, Industrial Revolution, and especially after WWII.⁴ Sociologist Thomas Luckmann argues that religion is a private matter, god is silent, and that religion no longer plays a crucial role in public discourse. It must be noted that secularization may be understood as a decline in the role



LIBERAL STATES
PROVIDE TWO
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OF RELIGION
AND FROM RELIGION

¹ Huntington, S. (1993) "The Clash of Civilizations", [in:] *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 72, No. 3.

² Berger, P. (1967) *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Garden City New York: Doubleday & Company Inc.

³ See, for example: De Castella, T. (2013) "Spiritual, but Not Religious", [in:] *BBC News Magazine*, January 3. Available [online]: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20888141>;

Tan, C. (2013) "Why Do Brits Seek Eastern Spirituality When They Have So Much of Their Own?", [in:] *The Spectator*, February 16. Available [online]: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2013/02/western-feng-shui/>

⁴ Chadwick, O. (1975) *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press;

Gellner, E. (1992) *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. London and New York: Routledge;

Habermas, J. (2006) "Religion in the Public Sphere", [in:] *European Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 14, Issue 1;

Luckman, T. (1967) *The Invisible Religion: the Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. New York: MacMillan.



THE ISSUE OF THE BURKA IS RELATED TO THE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT TO RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

that the Church plays in the Western, liberal state and society.⁵ This does not indicate, however, any struggle with the Church, but rather signifies that it is being ignored and that societies live according to the “*etsi deus non daretur*”⁶ principle.

Nevertheless, people in the West do not resort to apostasy; rather, they abandon traditional religious practices and rituals. Many of them believe that living without God is possible and may perhaps be even better. In his teachings, philosopher Leszek Kotakowski emphasized that faith and religion help human beings overcome every-day absurdities, and may calm existential fears.⁷ This may be the reason why people tend to exhibit a wide range of spiritual practices in the form of myths, legends, esoteric neo-pagan traditions, and off-trail healing methods. These forms of spirituality are competitive to traditional church. People move away from traditional churches and religious rituals, but they still search for non-material values for some

kind of spiritual experiences. This trend was confirmed in the Pew Research Centre survey conducted in the United States – 37% of Americans regard themselves as spiritual but not religious. These people are not affiliated to any religious institution.⁸

The term “spiritual but not religious” has become very popular, recently gaining more and more supporters across the West.⁹ Traditional church is an impostor to these people, while new forms of spirituality offer – just like a free market – many choices and lifestyles. Terence Copley describes spirituality in a rather interesting manner stating that it is “like Lycra underwear according to its advertising claims, spirituality can could itself to fit any personal contour. It is assumed that individuals are expected to conform to a religion and its doctrines: religion is perceived as a take-it-or-leave-it affair. You fit in or you don’t. Spirituality is the bespoke tailoring of the personal life, with oneself as the tailor. Spirituality is moving all the time and cannot be captured in a net or formula”.¹⁰

CITIZENSHIP, RELIGION, AND FREEDOM: STRANGE BEDFELLOWS OR LONG-TERM PARTNERS?

The terms ‘religious’ and ‘religion’ have numerous definitions based on concepts grounded in various disciplines, but what about ‘secular’ and ‘secularization’? These signify something more than a sheer lack of religious institutions in the state and society. Marius Felderhof, a scholar from the University of Birmingham, argues that “pri-

⁵ Eade, T. (2012) “Spiritual and Moral Development” [in:] *Debates in Religious Education*, L.P. Barnes (ed.). London and New York: Routledge.

⁶ Even if God did not exist.

⁷ Kotakowski, L. (2001) *The Presence of Myth*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

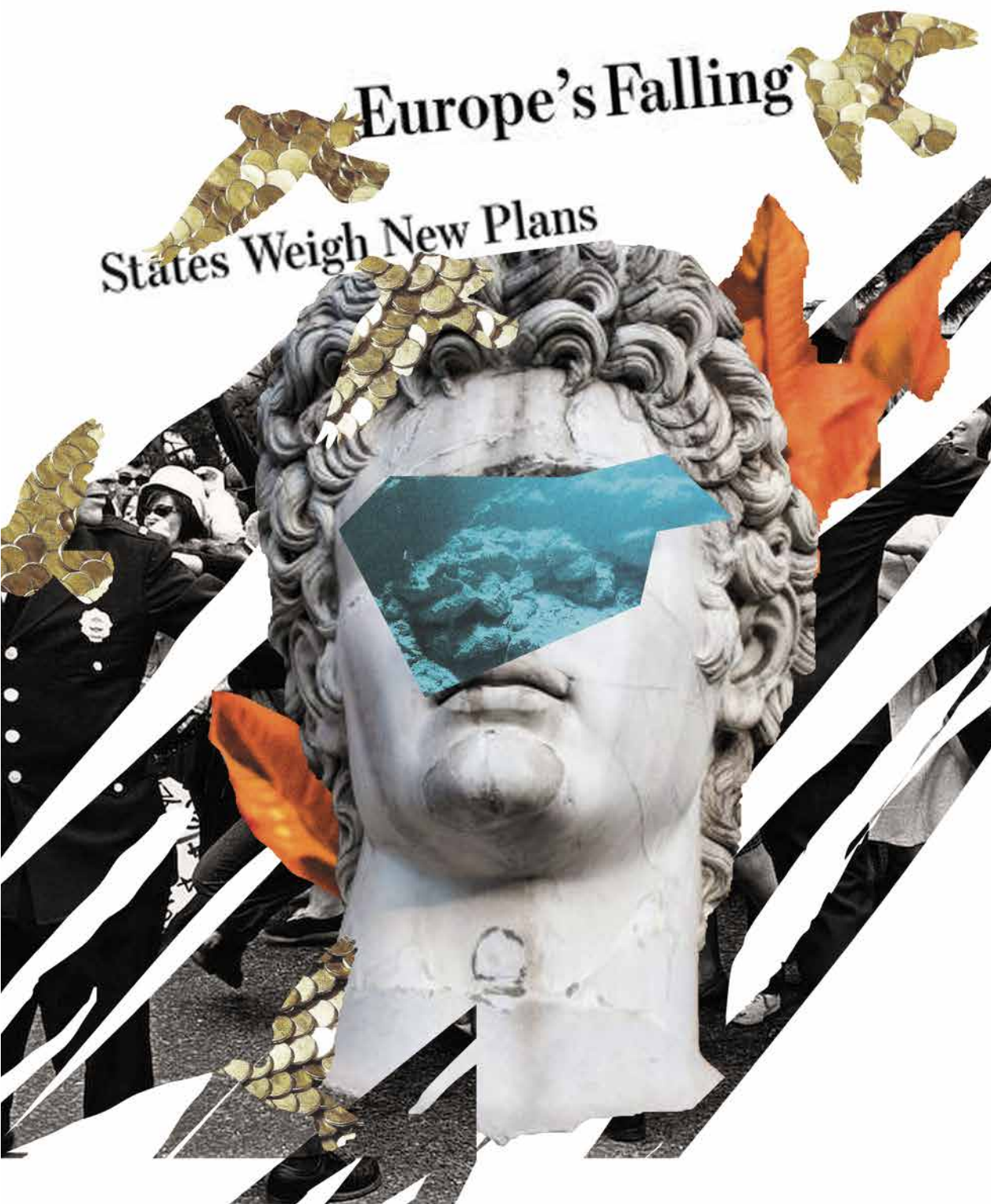
⁸ Per Research Center (2012) “Nones” on the Rise. Available [online]: <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

⁹ Heelas, P. (2009) *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism*. UK: Blackwell Publishing, p. 83.

¹⁰ Copley, T. (2005) *Indoctrination, Education and God. The Struggle for the Mind* London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Europe's Falling

States Weigh New Plans



or to a modern period, religion was simply what everyone did, i.e. it was how they lived".¹¹ Following Reformation, the word 'secular' emerged and shaped the socio-political aspects of human life. As Marius Felderhof, a scholar researching secularization, observes, 'secular' might refer:

1. "to collective life outside monastic walls (...);"
2. "(...) to the world where people can live their lives free from direct ecclesial influence or control but where religious faith could nevertheless freely express itself and where religious individuals and institutions are active and contribute to public debate and decisions about society's collective life (...)"
3. "(...) to a situation where the state has devised an independent value system that impinges on religious life so that the individuals and institutions are constrained or straightforwardly prevented, from operating according to their own standards and purposes in the public life square".

An example of the latter was the introduction to the Catholic adoption agencies injunction, in order not to favor solely heterosexual couples. This practice is not about equity – as the British government suggested – but precisely about secularism.¹²

Today in the West, we are witnessing the discursive struggle over the place of religion in the social life (e.g. debates on burka, same-sex marriages). Samuel Huntington describes it perfectly as a "clash of civilizations".¹³ Moreover, the terms "religion" and "conflict" often appear together

in the public debate. Today, one example of religious conflict in the West is a war waged over headscarves.

Liberal states provide two types of freedom: *of' religion* and *from' religion*.

Let us take a look at France. President Nicolas Sarkozy has spoken out strongly against burkas, stirring up a stormy debate. He claimed that "the burka – a garment covering women from head to toe – reduced them to servitude and undermined their dignity".¹⁴ This attitude is an example of freedom *from* religion. President Barack Obama, contrary to his French colleague, said that freedom is about the possibility of expressing religious beliefs, and the burka is a perfect example of manifesting one's religious convictions.¹⁵ From this point of view, the issue of the burka is related to the fundamental right to religious expression.

The contentious relationship of religion and freedom is also manifested in the matter of same-sex marriages. All three leading world religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) condemn this type of human relationship and perceive same-sex marriage as a heavy sin. Nevertheless, currently, an increasing number of liberal states changed the law to give same-sex marriages the same legal status as opposite-sex marriages have.¹⁶ The religious people who openly criticize same-sex marriages are accused

¹⁴ BBC News (2009) "Sarkozy Speaks Out Against Burka". Available [online]: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8112821.stm>

¹⁵ LaFranchi, H. (2009) "In Battle of the Burqa, Obama and Sarkozy Differ", [in:] *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 23. Available [online]: <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2009/0623/p02s20-usfp.html>

¹⁶ See: Perper, R. (2017) "The 25 Countries around the World Where Same-Sex Marriage Is Legal", [in:] *budinessinsider.com.pl*. Available [online]: <https://businessinsider.com.pl/international/the-25-countries-around-the-world-where-same-sex-marriage-is-legal/kw38chk>

¹¹ Felderhof, M. (2012) "Secular Humanism", [in:] *Debates in Religious Education*, L. P. Barnes (ed.). London and New York: Routledge, p. 146.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Huntington, S. (1993) "The Clash of Civilizations", [in:] *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 72, No. 3.



CITIZENSHIP AND RELIGION SUPPORT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

of being bigots, intolerant, and parochial. Thus, they may experience some kind of ambivalence – on the one hand, they are expected to be tolerant towards other lifestyles (including same-sex couples), while on the other hand they feel obliged to follow religious commandments. The example of same-sex marriage shows how the social tensions in terms of religious issues may emerge.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN COMMUNITY SCHOOLS?

Some scholars (James Arthur, Robert Putnam, Jean Bethke Elshtain, among others) argue that citizenship and religion support civic engagement and social participation.¹⁷

J.B. Elstain, an American ethicist and philosopher, claims that “those among us who seek a thoroughly secularized society, stripped of any and all public markers and reminders of religion in the view that religion

must be privatized and become invisible to public life, wind up, however inadvertently, weakening our civic life”.¹⁸ Moreover, Robert Putnam, an American political scientist who shows the role of the parishes in the local communities, indicates that they help to cumulate social capital (especially bonding). However, he concludes that social capital has been weakening in the local communities, as less people go to churches and attend Sunday schools.¹⁹ James Arthur also points to the significant role of churches and parishes in developing social engagement.²⁰ In the Christian tradition, responsibility is a virtue and participation in social and civic life is a moral duty.

There are two main approaches towards teaching religious education in schools: *from* and *about* religious sources. The former is often confessional in nature, and includes elements of worship, while the latter is phenomenological and academic-oriented.²¹ Most Western state-run schools offer religious education²² (either confessional or phenomenological). When religious education is mandatory in the educational system, it usually employs the phenomenological approach. This is the case for Norway and England and among others. Confessional religious education is usually optional.

¹⁷ See: Arthur, J. (2008) “Christianity, Citizenship And Democracy” [in:] *Education For Citizenship And Democracy*, J. Arthur, I. Davies, and C. Hahn (eds.), Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage; Elshtain, J.B. (2001) “Civil Society, Religion, and the Dormation of Citizens”, [in:] *Making Good Citizens. Education and Givil Society*, D. Ravitch, J.P.Viteritti (eds.). New Haven and London: Yale University Press; Putnam,R. (2001) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, London, Toronto, and Sydney: Simon & Schuster Ltd.

¹⁸ Elshtain, J.B. (2001) “Civil Society, Religion, and the Dormation of Citizens”, [in:] *Making Good Citizens. Education and Givil Society*, D. Ravitch, J.P.Viteritti (eds.), New Haven-London: Yale University Press, p. 272.

¹⁹ Putnam,R. (2001) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, London, Toronto, and Sydney: Simon & Schuster Ltd.

²⁰ Arthur, J. (2008) “Christianity, Citizenship and Democracy” [in:] *Education for Citizenship and Democracy*, J. Arthur, I. Davies, C. Hahn (eds.). London: Sage.

²¹ Barnes, L. P. (ed.) (2012) *Debates in Religious Education*. London and New York: Routledge.

²² Pepin, L. (2009) “Teaching about Religions in European School Systems. Policy, Issues and Trends”. Network of European Foundations.

As Western societies are more plural and multicultural than in the past, the educational systems of Western states adopted to the challenge of dealing with diversity in the classrooms. This is the case for Norway, for example, where for many years religious education used to be compulsory. Christian-oriented Norway lost in the European Court for Human Rights two cases on religious education in schools (in 2006 and 2008).²³ Before these events, schools had been obliged to teach Christian re-

²³ Leivrik, O. (2010) "Models of Religious Education in the Muslim World: Current Developments and Debates on How to Teach Religion and Ethics in Public Schools", [in:] *International Handbook of Inter-religious Education*. London and New York: Springer.



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ligion and ethics. The Court found that Christianity was being privileged (2006) and that the school course, *Christianity, religion, and ethics*, violates the human right to be taught in a critical, plural, and objective way. Consequently, the Norwegian curricula must follow the multi-religious approach – 55% of the content of the religion lessons should be devoted to Christianity, 25% to non-Christian religions and issues, and 20% to philosophy and ethics.²⁴

Today, in many Western societies, the debate on religious education is not so much about its presence in the school system as such, but rather about the content of curricula. After all, the main objective of religious education is to promote tolerance and understanding of the *others*. From this point of view, religious education in schools can help in building and maintaining a multi-cultural dialogue. To achieve this goal, policymakers together with the representatives of the Church must accept pluralism as a core value. Teaching about religious issues is nowadays not about converting people, but rather about searching for the common ground between believers and non-believers.

SECULAR SCHOOLS IN POLAND?

In 2015, my colleagues from the *Liberté!* quarterly magazine launched in Poland the "Secular School" campaign. The aim of this endeavor was for the state to stop financing religion classes in Polish schools. Back then, I did not join the initiative because I believed that the problem is not the existence of classes on religion in the school system or who pays for them. The real problem lies in the curricula, or lack

²⁴ Donnelly, J. (2011) "Folgero v Norway 29.06.07 European Court of Human Rights", [in:] *teachdontpreach.ie*. Available [online]: <https://www.teachdontpreach.ie/2011/11/folgero-v-norway-29-06-07-european-court-of-human-rights/>

EL BILLOR
DEL GOZO

An Audacious Liberal

All Feel the Mood of a New Era



thereof, in what children are being taught and how this process of education is conducted. After 1989, Poland missed its chance to get it right and to discuss the role and purpose of religious education in Polish schools.

Currently, a class on religion in Poland is optional and financed from the state budget. Each school under the Education Act from 1991 is obliged to provide this course on demand for at least seven pupils (not only Catholics). Even though the legal basis for religious education in Poland is non-discriminatory – no interference between secular orientation and religious orientation – there is one aspect that should be modified. The church, especially the privileged in the Poland Roman Catholic Church with 95% of Poles declaring to be Catholics, should be more open and inclusive when planning and conducting classes on religion. It should invite different groups to cooperate in designing the curricula and handbooks. Additionally, pluralism and a multi-cultural dialogue should be encouraged as a vital part of school curricula.

CONCLUSIONS

Teaching *about* religion in schools is a mandatory element of the school system in most of the European countries, even though some may deem it to be a form of indoctrination. Yet, indoctrination can also be secular, with totalitarian regimes looked upon as an example. From this point of view, the school as a micro-world should simply offer pupils a choice. When religion is removed from public discourse altogether, citizens are deprived of the freedom to define themselves by the means of religion. The same happens when only one “true” religion is imposed on whole societies or states. In such a case, an individual is not left with much choice.

All this has already happened in the past – the option ‘without God’ was known in the communist regimes or Nazi Germany, while the option ‘with God’ was practiced in Portugal or Spain. Therefore, religious pluralism, a multi-cultural dialogue, and a balance between religious and secular claims and demands must be acknowledged and protected.

It is worth remembering that religion is a part of European culture and heritage. The people who think of themselves as liberals should be able to learn from this heritage and, build bridges between the past and the future. We must find a future that is not necessarily secular or radically religious, but rather – a golden mean. ●



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