

Religious Education in the European Context. Comparing aims in the Swedish and Greek curriculum

Sofia Antera* 

ABSTRACT

Over the previous decade, a rise in terrorism combined with the growing discrimination on multi-religious societies, have put global peace in danger, highlighting the role of religious education (RE) and the need to be brought in discussion anew. Globalization of the education arena has led to supranational organizations having increasing influence over national policymaking, raising questions about the extent that the suggestions of international institutions are reflected in the national curricula. This article looks into the cases of Sweden and Greece. A comparison of curricula, and more specifically aim catalogues, demonstrates how the same suggestions can take different forms in different national contexts.

The Council of Europe has refrained from defining religious education. However, acknowledging the important role religious education can play, the intercultural education approach has been linked with religious education in an attempt to develop critical empathy and dialogue that will foster respect for the rights of others. For that purpose, it is suggested that the aims and values of intercultural education should be infused in the subject of religious education. Therefore, both Greece and Sweden are expected to comply with the *learning about* and *learning from religions* approach. *Learning about religion*, or education *about* religion, refers to the acquisition of knowledge about different religions and non-religious outlooks of life. Moreover, *learning from religion* or education *from* religion, aims to assist students widening and deepening their understanding of religions.

The method of the study is thematic template analysis. This style of analysis is more flexible regarding the format of the coding template, since it does not suggest a specific sequence of coding levels. The themes emerging are compared with reference to the Greek and Swedish curriculum, but also with the themes emerging from the suggestions of supranational organizations on the subject of religious education.

* Department of Education, Stockholm University

Findings indicate that the Swedish and Greek general aims coincide to a large extent, as both promote the principles of religious freedom, non-discrimination, and independence of religion and politics. On closer examination, this proves to be an illusory similarity. The Greek curriculum seems to lack independence due to the confessional approach that the country has adopted. Hence, the curriculum focuses on students perceiving and understanding the complicated and crucial role of the Orthodox Church in the formation of the neo Hellenic culture, making an implicit reference to the *Hellenic–Christian* civilization as the source of national identity.

On the other hand, in the Swedish case, it is obvious that religious education has been a concern of the state and the scholars for several years. Adopting a different perspective, the pedagogics of religion are approached as a scientific discipline indicating that religion is perceived as a philosophy of life and religious education as a mean of exploring it and understanding society more thoroughly. According to the comparison and the analysis of the curricula, the Swedish approach seems to better supports the development of critical thinking and respect through reflecting on societal issues, ethical models and historical aspects of religions.

In conclusion, the emergence of multicultural societies is a unique opportunity to recognize the positive contribution that religious education can have to maintaining social cohesion. Students as future citizens need well-rounded, multifaceted education, which will provide them with skills and attitudes, in order to explore the world and themselves. Religious education can serve as self-exploration tool, as it did since the beginning of the humankind.

Keywords: religious education, curriculum, comparative studies, international education

Introduction

Europe has a long history of religious tradition with Christianity being prevalent in most of its states; however, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism have significantly influenced the religious scenery (Pepin, 2009). The result is a composition of diverse approaches toward religious education. This study explores religious education within two European countries, Sweden and Greece, with a focus on the aims they set for the 7th–9th grade.

Religious plurality has led to an intercultural and multi-religious situation in European states that has forced leaders to confront the challenges of incorporating minority religions, a problem that tends to be intensified by the trends of globalization (Pepin, 2009). Moreover, the Council of Europe has addressed this issue through recommendations for intercultural education (Council of Europe, 2006), while the question remains on how each state will decide to put them into practice.

Addressing the facilitation of religious plurality through religious education, the aim of this study is to identify to what extent the suggestions of international institutions are reflected in the national curricula and syllabi of Sweden and Greece. In order to explore how different countries adopt and integrate international recommendations in their national curricula, the study compares the aims of the Swedish and Greek curricula with the aims set by international organizations. More specifically the research questions are:

- To what extent are the recommendations of international organizations reflected in the national curricula and syllabi of Sweden and Greece?
- With regards to religious education aims, what are the similarities and differences between Sweden and Greece?

As Bråten (2016) points out, comparative studies in religious education support questions about how international processes can have different forms in different national contexts. To explore such cases, the explicit comparison of two or more countries facilitates better identification of reasons for similarities and differences.

Defining religious education

Religious education has little consensus towards a singular approach, as through the years, societies have interpreted it differently according to their cultural and historical background. Religious education has been used to describe the initiation of religious understanding through the processes of learning and religious practice. For the same initiation, terms like *religious instruction* and *religious nurture* are used as well. Nevertheless, *religious education* suggests and therefore, promotes an inclusive, public understanding of religion. Examples of such use include the terms *inclusive religious education* (Jackson, 2014) and *integrative religious education* (Alberts, 2007).

Religion and education are related in three ways; education *into* religion, education *about* religion, or education *from* religion. The first, education *into* religion or *learning religion*, refers to the student's introduction into a specific religious tradition with aim to promote the individual's personal and moral development through building a religious identity that fits in the particular tradition. It is often the case that con-

fessional approaches apply learning *into* religion, indicating that students are expected to live in accordance with specific religious practices. The second approach, education *about* religion or learning *about* religion, supports a more detached exploration of beliefs and practices of several religious traditions, addressing questions that usually concern academic disciplines. Finally, education *from* religion, or learning *from* religion sets the student's personal experience as the point of departure. The purpose is the enhancement of the student's reflective capacity upon major questions of life. In other words, the aim is to learn *from* different religious traditions and outlooks of life (Berglund, Shanneik & Bocking, 2016).

The concept of religious education can take various forms and interpretations, while its definition is often not clear even in curricula. In Sweden, the field of didactics in religious education is relatively new, thus the definition of religious education has not always been consistent (Dalevi & Niemi, 2015). In Greece, the term *Θρησκευτικά* is used, meaning religious (issues) in plural form. A country comparison can offer better insight and understandings of the concept. According to Schreiner and the international standards for religious education (2013), religious education is currently strictly taught in accordance with the criteria of general education and it is perceived as learning *from* religion and learning *about* religion (Schreiner, 2013). In this paper, religious education will refer to the school subject as it is described in each country's curriculum and it will be abbreviated as RE.

Religious education in a European context

Religious education exists in nearly all European countries, but it has been influenced by different traditions and approaches (Jackson, Miedema, Weisse & Willaime, 2007). In many states, religious education is contested. The debates take place between those who see RE as a relic of former times and should remain in curricula, while there are also those who think that RE no longer has a place in democratic modern school. A third perspective, approaches RE as contributing to identity formation and the cultivation of dialogue, which is necessary in an increasingly plural Europe. The quality of the above mentioned approaches is a central discussion topic for the political and academic world. Should

religious communities influence RE? How 'religious' should the character of the subject be? These are only some of the questions emerging.

The religious landscape of Europe is summarized with the south being dominated by Catholicism, while the Scandinavian countries are Lutheran-Protestant. In central Europe, there are mixed religious landscapes, whereas Orthodoxy dominates the most Eastern European countries and Greece. Finally, Turkey, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina are Islamic (Kodelja & Bassler, 2004).

Another important aspect of RE is the relationship between state and religion. This can be exemplified as a clear separation (Sweden), or structure that sympathizes with religion with the church having relation to the state (e.g. Ireland, Greece). The level of sympathy and collaboration can vary (Schreiner, 2013). Regarding the subject provision, there are three types of RE, while a fourth alternative is the absence of RE in school:

- Religious education is offered by religious communities (denominational, confessional, catechetical) and it is usually an optional subject (e.g. Poland, Italy, Ireland);
- RE is administered in collaboration between the state and religious communities. It can be denominational, confessional/non-confessional, optional and/or obligatory (e.g. Austria, Germany, Greece);
- RE is administered exclusively by the state and it is a non-confessional, obligatory subject (e.g. Denmark, Norway, Sweden).

With respect to the aims and objectives for RE within Europe, a survey has shown that there is more in common than expected even with the variety of approaches and understandings. The most common element is that formal RE differs from any religious instruction occurring outside school. The following objectives have a vital place in the majority of RE curricula within Europe:

"(1) to encourage pupils to be sensitive to religion and the religious dimension of life; (2) to provide orientation among the variety of existing religious traditions and worldviews including non-religious convictions and (3) to provide knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and experiences" (Schreiner, 2013: 10).

Therefore, it is clear that religious education is widely perceived as learning *from* religion (knowledge derived from students' experiences and questions on life) and learning *about* religion (religious knowledge). In agreement with these aims is the duty of RE to facilitate dialogue and

identity development, in order to contribute in accommodating the existing religious plurality (Kodelja & Bassler, 2004).

Several comparative research projects on religious education cover broad thematic areas from RE impact on general education to religious diversity and competence. Their findings indicate a changing picture within Europe. A project often discussed in the literature reviews regarding RE is the REDCo project¹ highlighting students' interest in learning about different religions and their desire for peaceful coexistence irrespective of religious preference (Jackson, 2015).

International organizations and religious education

Whereas the academic world sets the research focus on the application of RE, international organizations are concerned with the values the subject promotes. Nevertheless, there is no international or European RE curriculum. There are only documents and processes that serve as advice regarding the RE curriculum. The most discussed among them in the literature is the *Toledo Guiding Principles* (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE] and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights [ODHIR], 2007), and the *Recommendation CM/Rec (2008)12* for RE from the Council of Europe (2008). None of them are legally binding.

The Council of Europe has refrained from defining RE because of the importance of religion in some member states, as well as a wish to maintain a neutral position toward issues of validity or falsity of religious beliefs (Council of Europe, 2006). However, the significance of defining the values promoted through religious education is acknowledged. The intercultural education approach has been perceived as beneficial for the development of critical empathy and dialogue with aim to foster attitudes of respect for the rights of others (Council of Europe, 2002). Although an important issue, the development of guidelines or concrete activity recommendations on how religious education should be incorporated in schools has been avoided (Council of Europe, 2002).

Approaching religion as a *cultural fact*, for which an understanding is highly relevant to sustainable communities, makes it a matter of public policy (Council of Europe, 2006). In terms of policy, the recommendations of the Council is that all children should receive religious education as

part of intercultural education, regardless of how this is positioned in the curriculum. Attitudes emphasized included “encouraging tolerance for different religious and secular points of view, education in human rights, citizenship and conflict management, and strategies to counter racism and discrimination in a religiously diverse world” (Jackson, 2007: 38).

The Council of Europe decided that the development of a guide for teachers and policy makers offering recommendations for dealing with the issues of religious diversity in schools could be beneficial (Council of Europe, 2006). This book, entitled *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: A Reference Book for Schools*, provides aims and learning outcomes, methodological approaches in intercultural education in relation to religious education and promising practices.

In line with the Council’s main condition, the suggested framework for cultivating interreligious respect is intercultural education, which should aim to develop “personal autonomy, a critical spirit, openness to diversity, and a feeling of belonging to the community as a whole, as well as nurture a sense of trust, uniting citizens beyond their moral and religious differences” (Council of Europe, 2006: 15). In relation to the religious dimension of intercultural education the aims are to achieve tolerance, reciprocity and civic mindedness.

Religious diversity and its relation to intercultural education is theoretically and conceptually advocated in the *Toledo Guiding Principles* (OSCE and ODIHR, 2007), which is objective oriented and constitutes an attempt to outline the standards for RE. Three fundamental principles are declared, freedom of thought and conscience, non-discrimination and mutual independence of politics and religion. Based on these principles, RE constitutes an important part of compulsory education, which relates to the framework and the objectives of intercultural citizenship and human rights education (Declaration, 2003 as cited in Miedema, Schreiner, Skeie, & Jackson, 2004).

Schweitzer identifies commonalities of RE throughout Europe as a result of the increase of international and international influence within the European arena. His attempt to define international standards for RE is summarized as (Schweitzer, as cited in Schreiner, 2013: 11):

- “(1) Religion must and can be taught in line with the criteria of general education (*educational quality*).
- (2) Religious education is of relevance to the public and must be taught accordingly (*contribution to general education*).

- (3) Religious education must include some type of interdenominational and interreligious learning, in line with the increasingly pluralist situation of many countries (*dialogical quality, contribution to peace and tolerance*).
- (4) Religious education must be based on the children's right to religion and religious education (*child centred approach based on children's rights*).
- (5) Religious education teachers must be professionals in the sense that they have reached a level of self-reflexivity based on academic work which allows for a critical appropriation of their religious background and biographies (*professional teaching*)."

Hence, it is clear that RE is perceived as having a positive value and being able to reduce and prevent the spread of stereotypes. For these reasons, its importance has been increased.

Methods

The study has a comparative design, with curricula comparison centered around different aim catalogues for RE. The 7th-9th grade curriculum has been selected, because at this age students are already accustomed to the study of religion. National curricula are selected as the documents that define the general approach and directions of RE. For the case of Sweden, the curriculum used has been prepared by Skolverket (Swedish National Agency for Education) in 2011 and revised in 2018 (Skolverket, 2018). In the case of Greece, the respective agency is the Institute for Educational Policy (IEP) under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. The Greek curriculum on religious education has also been created in 2011 and revised in 2016 (IEP, 2016).

The literature review on religious education in an international level has highlighted some areas of interest. While a need for supporting RE and defining its aim is apparent, there is no binding set of recommendations on how to apply it at the national level. The most discussed projects are the European research projects, namely REDCo and a European policy discussion document, the Toledo Guiding Principles (TGP)² (Berglund et al., 2016). They are considered the most influential projects on an international scale (Gearon, 2012) and have raised several debates (Jackson, 2015) regarding their agendas. Since REDCo focuses on the re-

religious influence on stereotypes and its role as a source of dialogue, its contribution to the current paper is limited. On the contrary, the Toledo Guiding Principles (OSCE & ODHIR, 2007) offers a very clear structure of aims for RE and, therefore, is similar to a curriculum, allowing a comparison with national curricula.

The researcher performed a thematic template analysis (King & Brooks, 2018), which in contrast to other thematic analysis styles, suggests the development of a coding template based on a subset of data. This first template is later applied to the remaining data, revised and refined until it reaches the final shape. This style of analysis is more flexible regarding the coding template format, since it does not suggest a specific sequence of coding levels. Template analysis adopts a pragmatic approach in relation to inductive versus deductive coding. Instead of insisting on either bottom up (themes derived inductively from the data) or a top down (themes informed by previously theoretical or practical concerns) coding, this analysis style allows the combined use of both.

In this study, the first stage involved the *familiarization with the data* (King & Brooks, 2018: 225). The researcher read the three selected documents to have a complete picture of the context under which they were created and the general message they convey. During the second stage, *preliminary coding* took place starting with the documents prepared by international organizations that provide suggestions on RE. This selection aimed to answer the question addressing the similarities between national aims and those set in an international level.

The themes deriving from the preliminary coding were *tolerance and respect, knowledge about different religions, religion and its relation to human rights, multi-perspectivity, historical context for development of religions, importance of religious beliefs for the individual, similarities and differences between different religions, questioning negative stereotype and civic responsibility*. This stage produced the first template as a result.

The second stage included the use of the initial template in coding the rest of the data. While the template proved to be relevant in the case of the Swedish curriculum, the Greek one required adding two extra themes, *religious literacy* and *religion and culture*. In comparison to the first template, *civic-responsibility* has been removed. *Civic responsibility* has been incorporated to *religion relation to human rights* addressing the understanding that lack of respect can lead to disrupted social cohesion and lack of peace.

The final template consists of the codes and themes as presented in the following table:

Table 1. *Codes and themes*

Themes	Codes
tolerance and respect	tolerance respect right to believe in religion right to not believe
knowledge about different religions	knowledge about different religions knowledge about different outlooks of life awareness of the variation within religions
religion relation to human rights issues	freedom of religion freedom of expression (incl. sexuality) social cohesion/peace conflict (incl. violence in society)
multi-perspectivity	critical perspective interpretations from multiple angles
historical context for religion development	knowledge of the contexts knowledge of historical events (geographical and cultural perspective)
importance of religious for the individual	rituals lifestyle identity critical life points
negative stereotypes	life purpose in popular culture relationships in popular culture love in popular culture sexuality in popular culture
religious literacy	skills of religious literate person attitudes of religious literate person stance of religious literate person importance religious literacy
religion and culture	religion and greek culture religion and greek identity religion in art

The two countries, Sweden and Greece

The case of Sweden

The Swedish education system became highly decentralized after 1991, when municipalities were assigned with increased financial responsibility for compulsory and upper secondary education. Two years later the funding system reformed to a general grant system (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010). Nowadays the responsibility of interpreting and implementing the curriculum remains on schools, although its preparation takes place in centralized way.

The Swedish education system's base is democracy (Education Act, 2000 as cited in Skolverket 2018). The non-confessional character of RE is distinctly stated in the curriculum (Skolverket, 2018); however, its values are in agreement with the ethics derived by Christian tradition and Humanism (Skolverket, 2018). The importance of religious education is clearly indicated at the first part of the curriculum, as religious approaches and other outlooks on life are considered sources of values and ethics, serving as the core of the curriculum in total.

Historical perspective

The Swedish system has its roots deep in Christian religious instruction, while the former Lutheran State Church has been the first provider of education. Religious instruction was the most important school subject until 1919, when a major revision on curriculum introduced the era of secularization in Sweden. In 1969, the subject was renamed Religious Education (*religionskuskap*), in order to demonstrate the change towards teaching about religion, involving other religious approaches too. At this time pupils and *life-questions* were in the center of religious education (Berglund, 2010: 21).

At the end of the 20th century the Swedish society gradually became diverse. Aiming for cohesion, the new curriculum of 1994 introduced freedom, equality, solidarity and integrity as fundamental values (Skolverket, 2006). RE was established as a compulsory subject for all in 1996 (Berglund, 2013). The final changes came with the 2011 reform, which set various religions and views of life in the center of religious teaching.

In the Swedish history an attempt to move from a confessional to a secular approach (Dalevi & Niemi, 2015) can be identified. Approaching the pedagogics of religion as a scientific discipline indicates that religion is perceived as a philosophy of life and religious education as a mean of exploring it, and understanding society more thoroughly.

The case of Greece

The Greek education system is centralized, with the curriculum provided by the Pedagogical Institute, later followed by the Institute of Educational Planning (IEP) and approved by the Ministry of Education. Textbooks, written based on the curriculum, play a remarkably important role in teaching. The Greek curriculum defines not only the aims and content, but also the teaching methods and tools, suggesting even specific activities (Pedagogical Institute, 2014).

After the 2014 reform, the Pedagogical Institute published separate curricula for each subject, in which aims and methodology are clearly stated. However, in a general introductory document the values of democracy, respect of human rights, peace and freedom are declared as fundamental to the education process (Pedagogical Institute, 2014).

Historical perspective

The history of RE in Greece is characterized by the use of the *Hellenic-Christian* (equal to Greek-Orthodox) civilization as the source of the Greek national identity. The Orthodox religion was constitutionally recognized as the dominant religion in 1975, when the development of national and religious consciousness was set as the prior aim of education (Greek Constitution, 1975, art. 16.2), demonstrating its central role in the *Hellenic-Christian* civilization (Sotirelis, 1998). However, a contradiction between this declaration and the policy about the inviolability of religious freedom and consciousness has been identified (Efsthathiou, Georgiadis, & Zisimos, 2008).

In 2003, the cross-curricular framework was meant to represent a new educational approach towards RE (Pedagogical Institute, 2003). Unfortunately, no other religions were included in education³. Moreover, students were allowed to be exempted from the RE subject with their

parents' consent. This modification was made to serve the principle of freedom of religious consciousness (Sotirelis, 1998).

The Greek case presents a distinct contradiction between the autonomous human and the development of their identity, as a European perspective derived from Enlightenment, and the loss of individuality in favor of God's will, as a principle of Orthodox religion. In these terms, religious freedom is interpreted as the right of other churches to exist, influencing the reformation of education values and aims (Markoviti, 2013).

Comparing Sweden and Greece

At first impression, the aims set from the two curricula appear to be similar and in agreement with the values expressed at an international level. The two curricula coincide to a large extent, as both promote religious freedom, non-discrimination, and independence of religion and politics. The risks of increasing racism are also recognized. Furthermore, it is clearly stated that they wish to serve pluralistic societies (IEP, 2016; Skolverket, 2018).

The majority of the themes are represented in both national curricula. This applies to *tolerance and respect*, as well as *knowledge about different religions*, *historical context for religion* and *religion in relation to human rights*. With reference to the latter, the Swedish curriculum goes beyond human relationships and stresses gender equality and sexuality. The Greek curriculum remains on a very abstract level however, mentioning the contributions of RE to peace making and social cohesion. Finally, the theme of *importance of RE for the individual* is also quite adequately presented in both curricula, highlighting the application of the approach of learning *from* religion, where the religious experiences of the student act as the starting point of further exploration.

Divergences are largely in relation to the level of religious freedom established. To begin with, both curricula include the introduction of more than one religion and religious approaches, but in the Greek case this is not a matter of prior concern. Christianity and Orthodoxy are mentioned twice more often in the Greek curriculum than in the Swedish, thus they are given significantly more attention and teaching time. Of course, this can be explained by the confessional character of the Greek religious

education and is not in opposition to the perspective present in international documents either. However, the independence of religion and politics is doubted, especially when considering the great influence of the state Church in education issues, influence indisputably obvious in the name of the Greek ministry (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs) (Minedu.gov.gr, 2019). On the contrary, Sweden maintains an established tradition, according to which religious orientation should not start from the wish of the parents, but from the children themselves (Almen & Øster, 2000).

Furthermore, Sweden seems to have an equal dissemination of the aims set in relation to the aims as described in the *Toledo Guiding Principles* (OSCE & ODHIR, 2007). The Swedish curriculum addresses at least one aim for every respective learning outcome in the *Toledo Guiding Principles* document, which indicates a distinct agreement between the two approaches. Nevertheless, influence from the *Toledo Guiding Principles* to the Swedish curriculum cannot be argued, since the later has been formulated earlier than the first. Notwithstanding, Greece is lacking aims set for the identification of *negative stereotypes* deriving from religious differences. *Multi-perspectivity* is another aim poorly addressed in the Greek curriculum. Nevertheless, the general aims in the Greek curriculum discuss extensively the necessity for a critical approach facilitated by understanding the approach of other religions through their own lenses.

Two additional themes are present in the Greek curriculum. The first theme, *religion and culture*, refers to the influence of Christianity in the development of the Greek and the European culture as they are today. Although this theme could be associated with the aim of developing knowledge of the contexts in which major historical events have been connected and affected by different religions, the distinct use of the word civilization (πολιτισμός) repeatedly indicates a separate interest. “Πολιτισμός” (translated either as culture or civilization) addresses both cultural-historical developments and, in a broader sense, civilization, culture and national identity formation. As stated in the Greek curriculum, students should be able to perceive and understand the complicated and crucial role of the Orthodox Church in the formation of the neo Hellenic culture (IEP, 2016). This is an implicit reference to the *Hellenic-Christian* civilization as the source of national identity. In conclusion, it is obvious that RE in Greece has been perceived as means not

only for individual identity development, but also for the cultivation of the national identity.

The second additional theme, *religious literacy*, refers to the ability to interpret religious documents and become aware of religious otherness (IEP, 2016). This theme is given considerable space in the aim catalogue, highlighting its importance for the authors. Religious literacy is the key concept supporting the new curriculum modernization towards ideals in agreement with the European standards of inclusive education. Introducing a greater focus on other religions, refers mostly to Christian traditions encountered in Europe (Willert, 2014), continuously emphasizing the importance of Orthodox theology. Combined with the possibility of exemption from the subject, the comprehensive character of religious education in Greece is highly criticized.

Discussion

Based on the analysis, Sweden appears to be in greater agreement with the values expressed by international organizations, but further research is needed to demonstrate whether these aims are implemented in practice. The fact that the Swedish curriculum has been partly formulated before the release of the recommendations from OSCE and ODHIR and the Council of Europe, indicates that the values presented in it have derived from the Swedish approach to RE and the Swedish culture. Nevertheless, the agreement in the structure of the aims between the three documents can be indicative of an intention to follow the international trends, in an attempt to create a European approach on the issue.

Greece, on the contrary, has a more confessional character and a focus on its national cultural identity. The Greek Orthodox Church is very influential on the education ministry, whereas the Hellenic combined with the Christian Orthodox element are deeply ingrained in the national identity of Greeks. While the attempt for modernization of RE through the adoption of an intercultural approach is obvious, the constant pressure from the Church and the lack of agreement between Greek stakeholders becomes a hinder for its implementation. Under these conditions, the change in the curricula seems to be externally appointed and highly debatable; therefore hard to be implemented.

When discussing the adoption of an intercultural approach in RE, an

overarching issue emerges, the tension between the identity and priorities shaped on a national and on an international level. Balancing the two identities, which sometimes contradicts, is a challenge states must face. This challenge is apparent in the case of Greece, where current developments show that RE supporting an intercultural approach in education has been an external initiative that was adopted in the curriculum but could not find solid ground in the Greek reality. The Hellenic Council of State (2019), which is the Supreme Administrative Court of Greece, decided that the current RE curriculum is anti-constitutional and against the European Convention on Human Rights. The curriculum was judged as insufficient for developing the Christian Orthodox consciousness, which is seen as the main aim of RE, and therefore it needs to be changed.

The interreligious and intercultural approach is very weak and superficial in the Greek aims for RE. This superficiality combined with the decision of the Hellenic Council of State gives prominence to three points. At first, Greek RE has proved to be *education into religion* and not *from religion* or *about religion*. The focus on the dominant religion is so heavy that even the supreme court has decided to use RE as a subject for educating Christian Orthodox students in their own confession, leaving the rest of the students without any learning activities at that time. Secondly, the promotion of the national identity in the Greek case has been prioritized over the facilitation of an international approach concerning the role of RE. This raises questions regarding the role of RE in education. Is it a means to strengthen the national identity or to facilitate social cohesion in pluralistic societies? Can both aims be served by a different type of RE?

Thirdly, it becomes clear that introducing contested curriculum aims is only a short term solution that would soon turn out to be problematic. As also shown in the Swedish case, RE approaches that support pluralistic and multicultural societies should not only derive from international organizations, but also from the cultural and historical course of the country. In other words, the aims of education should not be in conflict with the aims of the dominant culture.

When RE is approached from an international perspective, the emergence of multiple interpretations is inevitable, although the intercultural approach is supposed to be the overarching framework. The comparative approach can be supportive not only in highlighting the differen-

ces and commonalities, but also in demonstrating the context importance in the emergence of specific developments. Comparing Swedish and Greek RE questions the thin line between teaching about religion and teaching religion. How can this differentiation be made explicit in the curricula? How can it be reassured that teachers will interpret the curricula accordingly and implement the approach of their authors?

Finally, in this multicultural world, the rising interest in religious education should be perceived as an opportunity to reconsider the importance of philosophy and ethics. Taking advantage of religion as a phenomenon through which we are able to form identities and teach attitudes can enhance cohesion in society and improve the conditions in which we live together. Religion has served as self-exploration tool since the beginning of the humankind. In an increasingly globalized world such a reflective activity is still vital.

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Notes:

1. Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries
2. developed by OSCE and ODHIR in 2007
3. Muslim and Catholic minorities had established separate religious schools

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Την τελευταία δεκαετία, η αύξηση της τρομοκρατίας σε συνδυασμό με τις πολύ-θρησκευτικές κοινωνίες έχουν θέσει την παγκόσμια ειρήνη σε κίνδυνο, υπογραμμίζοντας την πιθανή συνεισφορά της θρησκευτικής εκπαίδευσης στην κοινωνική συνοχή. Το παρόν άρθρο εξετάζει το μάθημα της θρησκευτικής εκπαίδευσης (θρησκευτικά) στη Σουηδία και την Ελλάδα, υιοθετώντας μια συγκριτική προσέγγιση ως προς τη σκοποθεσία του. Τα προγράμματα σπουδών εξετάζονται με θεματική ανάλυση. Τα αποτελέσματα υποδεικνύουν συμφωνία των στόχων του μαθήματος μεταξύ του ελληνικού και του σουηδικού προγράμματος σπουδών, καθώς και τα δυο προωθούν τις αρχές της θρησκευτικής ελευθερίας, της αποφυγής των διακρίσεων και της ανεξαρτησίας της πολιτικής ζωής από την θρησκευτική. Ωστόσο, το ελληνικό πρόγραμμα σπουδών δεν είναι εντελώς ανεξάρτητο από την εκκλησιαστική επιρροή. Ενώ η σουηδική προσέγγιση υποστηρίζει την ανάπτυξη της κριτικής σκέψης και του σεβασμού μέσω του αναστοχασμού κοινωνικών θεμάτων, ηθικών μοντέλων και ιστορικών γεγονότων, η ελληνική θρησκευτική εκπαίδευση είναι πιο συντηρητική, αφήνοντας ελάχιστο χώρο για άλλες θρησκείες ή μη θρησκευτικές προσεγγίσεις της ζωής.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: θρησκευτική εκπαίδευση (θρησκευτικά), αναλυτικό πρόγραμμα σπουδών, διεθνής εκπαίδευση, συγκριτική έρευνα