RELIGIONS, SECULARISM AND EDUCATION

Religions and education in Europe (nineteenth to twenty-first century)

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ABSTRACT

Religious institutions have traditionally played a major role in Europe in matters of schooling, with some educational organizations still being connected to religion today. While the emergence of modern public authorities led to the secularization of educational systems, this dynamic has varied depending on the national context and historical period.

"The removal of crucifixes from schools in the city of Paris". Drawing by Léon Gerlier published in *La Presse illustrée*, n° 673, 20 February 1881. © Musée Carnavalet.

A nursery school run by the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians in Torino, Italy, in the 1930s. © Archivio Museo dei Lavandai. Source : Museo Torino

Educational institutions in Europe were still largely fragmentary in the early nineteenth century, in the absence of compulsory schooling, genuine administrative organization, and full literacy. The religious divisions inherited from the sixteenth century had an impact on education. With the Reformation, Protestant countries promoted learning how to read and write in the name of reading the Bible in the vernacular. In Prussia, King Frederick II established a "school regulation" on August 12, 1763, which made schooling compulsory. In Catholic lands public authorities largely delegated instruction to ecclesiastical authorities, although they did not ignore it entirely, especially in France with the royal order of December 13, 1698, which encouraged instruction in parish schools partly to school children from Protestant families after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Gender inequality in instruction was also highly present in Catholic countries, where women's education was largely left to religious institutions: in France, the demographic thresholds for opening girl's and boy's schools were unequal until the Duruy law of 1867.

The early nineteenth century represented a decisive break, with states taking a more active interest in educational matters. In 1806, the school reform in modern-day Holland required local towns to establish a school. In 1808, Napoleon I established the "University," which is to say an educational system closely controlled by the state. In 1812, the "Cadix" constitution in Spain mentioned education, while the schooling law of 1842 in Sweden gradually professionalized schoolteachers, who moving forward were less frequently pastors. However, these reforms did not deprive religious institutions of their influence, as elementary school teaching often included an emphatic religious dimension (class on religion or religious morals, presence of ecclesiastical personnel, religious books and texts), as underscored in France by the royal order of February 28, 1816.

The nineteenth century saw heated confrontations, especially in Catholic Europe, between liberal or republican movements and religions regarding the role of faith in educational institutions. Evolution was not linear, nor did it always converge toward an inevitable march leading to secularization. In France, the Guizot law of 1833 recognized the existence of private and public schools in elementary education, while affirming public control over both. It was followed by the Falloux law in 1850, which opened the way for private secondary schooling (largely Catholic), and gave greater influence to religious personnel in school administration. In fact, it was during discussions surrounding the Falloux law that figures such as Edgar Quinet and Victor Hugo developed the notion of secular education , which is to say one that is separate from religion and taught by "lay" teachers (not members of ecclesiastical institutions). In Spain, the Moyano law of 1857 seeking to establish compulsory elementary education was the victim of confrontations between public and Catholic authorities. The same was true in Italy in the process of unification with the Casati law (1859), which made education into an area of state intervention within a highly religious society.

The last third of the nineteenth century confirmed the rise of educatory states throughout Europe, with varying interactions between educational policies and religion ranging from confrontation to collaboration. The Elementary Education Act of 1870 in Great Britain recognized the role of religious schools, which were crucial in the British educational landscape. By contrast, the Ferry (1882) and Goblet (1886) laws respectively removed religious teaching and personnel from public schools in France. Changes were sometimes tortuous in this area as well, as demonstrated by the School Law of 1881 in Luxembourg, which secularized public school curricula, but was broadly amended in 1898 by a new law that made weekly religious instruction compulsory. There were still major confrontations in Catholic Europe during the first third of the twentieth century. The 1931 Spanish Law on

Education largely secularized the public educational system, a reform that the Francoist dictatorship challenged in 1936, especially through its elementary school reform of 1945.

Fascist and Nazi totalitarianisms were simultaneously hostile to secularization (seen as the legacy of the French Revolution) and linked by a concordatory logic (1922 for the Mussolini regime, 1933 for the Third Reich) to various Christian faiths. They were nevertheless suspicious of the influence that religious institutions had over youth, which they fought through their own para-educational organizations (Opera Nazionale Balilla, Hitler-Jugend). In the USSR, the communist regime's antireligious policy beginning in 1917 led it to ban all cultural traces of religion from public service and to wage violent state campaigns against religion, which went as far as mass assassination, such as that of Orthodox priests by Lenin in 1922. School was one of the key drivers and issues in these practices. The dictatorships of the Eastern bloc partially reproduced this pattern until 1989, although without reaching the level of violence in the USSR. These confrontations were rare in democratic and Protestant Europe: the school reform of 1944 in Great Britain confirmed the role of religious schools in the educational landscape, and allowed them to display acts of faith during school time.

The question of the role of religion in education grew calmer in Western—and more specifically Catholic—Europe, as the participation of Christian networks in the antifascist struggle, the need for more educated labor, and the dominant trend of mass schooling eased conflicts between religions and public authorities in the field of education and made them less topical. In Belgium, the "school pact" of 1958 struck a compromise by simultaneously recognizing religious and public schools. In France, the Debré law of 1959 created financing for private schools (said to be "on contract"), in exchange for increased state control. In countries where religious teaching was highly present (in both private and public schools), the modernization of societies and economies gradually challenged this presence. In Ireland, where in the mid-1960s 55% of teachers in (largely private) secondary education were still Catholic clergymen, the reform of 1967 encouraged the creation of public secondary schools.

The period initiated by the 1990s saw contrasting changes. Religious practice decreased overall, with recourse to private schools often being explained primarily by non-religious reasons, for example to avoid school districting or to flee degraded public institutions. Private teaching, which is sometimes religious, has experienced a sharp rise in certain countries, at times driven by religious minorities. According to the Association of Muslim Schools, the number of Muslim private schools rose in the United Kingdom from 5 in 1983 to 156 in 2013. In Stockholm, "independent" (private) schools outnumbered public schools starting in 2006. At the same time, some aspects of school curricula (history, life and earth science, moral education, sexuality, health) are the subject of confrontations between religious groups and public authorities, as demonstrated by contestation of the ABCD l'égalité teaching program (activities promoting equality between boys and girls) by some parents in France in 2014, or the desire to ban sexual education within the Polish party PiS in 2019.

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