

Discussing the Secularity of Greek State-Mandated Educational Requirements: An Analysis of Primary to High School Education

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Abstract

This research project investigates the extent to which Greek state-mandated educational requirements, from primary to high school, align with the principles of secularity. By focusing primarily on the mandatory Religious Education class (RE) and its impact on the secular nature of Greek education, the paper examines the concept of secularism, the religious background of Greece and the constitutional framework governing religion and religious freedom. The paper analyses the RE curriculum, the widely observed practices of morning prayer and liturgy attendance, the available exemption clause, and the special accommodations for the Muslim minority in Thrace.

After meticulously examining Greek history, laws and educational practices, the paper identifies significant progress toward a more inclusive, secular education system in recent years. Having concluded its review of the religious nature of various school practices, the paper positions Greek state-mandated educational requirements in the spectrum of secularism, opening the way for policymakers and stakeholders to make informed decisions and promote further change while also adding to the limited existing literature on the topic. After this comprehensive analysis, the paper gathers that while the Greek educational system has made significant strides toward a more secular direction, challenges and areas for improvement remain, indicating that educational secularity is yet to be reached.

Definitions

Scholars like Charles Taylor have viewed secularism as “the free exercise of religion,” “equality between people of different faiths or basic beliefs,” and the hearing of all spiritual families. Others, like Grace Davie, have perceived it as a process that does not necessarily entail the marginalization of religion to the private sphere, concluding that society can be both religious and secular.

Greek scholars have interpreted secularism in a relatively similar way. Tsioumis et al. argue that secularism is not necessarily theistic, atheistic or something in between. Instead, they see secularism as providing a nest for protecting citizen rights. Additionally, Koukounaras-Liagkis and Ziaka believe that “secularism is a multidimensional process that goes back to the historical conditions surrounding the formation of the modern state and the loss of religious power via political legitimatization.”

This paper shall use Taylor’s understanding of secularism to examine the Greek educational system. Consequently, for the sake of this paper, a secular educational system will allow all three requirements of Taylorian secularism – free religious exercise, equality between students of different faiths and freedom of religious expression.

Discussion

The ethnocultural framework within which religion in Greece operates and the format of RE clearly show that Greece is moving toward a more secular direction as both a nation and an educational system. Compared to where it was just a decade ago, Greece has taken brave steps toward a more inclusive, fair and secular education system. The law against blasphemy has been abolished (2014), essential measures to accommodate students of different religions or religious conscience during RE and morning prayer have been taken (2022), and a special Islamic RE class has been introduced in a region of Greece where 50% of the population is Muslim (2014).

Yet, despite the efforts for improvement, several problems must be addressed before the state can reach a secular education system. The close cooperation between church and state, inherent in the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs’ structure, is a continuous reminder that secularism in its separationist form is still not insured in Greece. Simultaneously, the Taylorian requirements for secularism and, therefore, a secular education system seem to be not fully met in the case of Greece.

Finally, freedom of religious expression is not directly obstructed, yet limited by the differential treatment between Orthodox Christian and non-Orthodox Christian students. The religious expression of the first is not only accommodated but also encouraged by activities embedded in the school’s operation, such as the morning prayer and liturgy attendance, while the latter are left to their own devices without any encouragement or support of their practicing needs.

Methodology

This paper draws information from a collection of formal sources such as the Constitution of Greece, the latest version of the Greek Penal Code and the Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and academic, peer-reviewed articles composed mainly by academics at Greek universities and ministry advisors.

Additionally, information for conducting this analysis has been drawn from non-peer-reviewed sources such as the official website of the Atheist Union of Greece and an opinion article of a Greek diplomat.

Conclusions

Overall, the Greek state-mandated educational requirements are far from being entirely secular. Unable to fully meet even one of the thresholds that this paper set as prerequisites for an educational system to be considered secular, the Greek educational system should not be regarded as secular.

On the other hand, labeling it as anti-secular or religious would be unjust, given both the overall state in which it finds itself and its substantial progress over the last decade toward a secular direction. To directly answer this paper’s research question, the Greek state-mandated educational requirements should be positioned somewhere between entirely religious and entirely secular, with a clear, continuing tendency to move toward the latter.

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Acknowledgements

The completion of this project would not have been possible without the support and guidance of several key individuals and organizations. Acknowledgment is due to New York University Abu Dhabi for its assistance and provision of valuable resources. Special thanks are also extended to Dr. Monica Marks for her expertise and insights, which have been critical to the study’s development. Finally, I would also like to express my appreciation to Dr. David Blakeslee for his support and advice. Your collective wisdom and assistance have been pivotal in bringing this project to fruition.

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