Readdressing Diversity and Plurality at School. Religious Education in Greece

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to provide a critical overview of religious education in Greece in the context of addressing diversity and plurality in a culturally diversified Greek society. Recent developments and debates in the field of religious education are examined in a comparative perspective taking into consideration the legislative and intergovernmental provisions across Europe. To highlight this perspective, the Greek and Danish educational models on religion will be compared. Efforts to modernize the national curriculum on religion are presented along with a proposal for future empirical research based on the preliminary findings of a qualitative pretesting on immigrants' own experiences from the religion class in Greece.

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Introduction[1]

The need to (re)address diversity and plurality in the school environment is the result of the complexities of globalization and migration in Europe and the particular tensions manifested in the political and societal domain. Indeed the prevalence of anti-EU and extreme right voices, as the recent European elections (May, 2014) have shown, reveal the tensions over European identity and the risks of trying to reach a common ground of shared democratic norms. In this respect, teaching the young generations how to deal with pluralism and respect diverse opinions remains one of the core challenges of intercultural education.

"The word intercultural", as points out Rey (1991, p. 142), precisely because it contains the prefix "inter" necessarily implies: interaction, exchange, desegregation, reciprocity, interdependence and solidarity. As it also contains the word 'culture", it further denotes in its fullest sense: recognition of the values, lifestyles and symbolic conceptions to which human beings, both as individuals and in groups, refer in their dealings with others and in their vision of the world, as well as recognition of the interactions occurring both between the multiple registers of one and the same culture and between the various cultures in space and time" (CoE, 2007, p. 43).

Thus, dealing with pluralism requires the knowledge of one's own culture and identity and the ability to negotiate and renegotiate the boundaries of both. It also entails the ability to value, respect and accept differing worldviews, customs and attitudes. However, tolerance, according to empirical finding[2] (Stathopoulou, 2014b, Stathopoulou & Kostaki, 2014), can be seriously threatened by contextual factors. The levels of social (interpersonal) and political trust have declined all over Europe, even more so in the countries most severely affected by the economic crisis. Moreover, the scarcity of material resources, precarious employment conditions and the widening of social inequalities have increased distrust and intolerance, threatening social cohesion and leading to "a resurgence of old dichotomies" (Stathopoulou & Kostaki, 2014, p. 275). These dichotomies become most

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[2] From the analysis of European Social Survey data (rounds 4 and 5, in 2009 and 2011 respectively).

apparent in religious beliefs. Religion is interconnected with ethnicity and culture inasmuch as it is a parameter shaping personal and social identity. In modern plural societies, contested identities redefine the established interpretations of the religious and secular domains, at the core of the very notion of modernity.

Scholarly discussions of multiple conceptions of modernity (Eisenstadt, 2000; Beck & Grande, 2010) have questioned the link between secularity and modernity ever since the dynamic "resurgence" of religion in the public sphere that was manifested in the return of young people to churches in former socialist regimes (Lambert, 2007) or in the heated public debates and the European Court of Human Rights jurisprudence on the appearance of religious symbols in public space.

The place of religion in state mechanisms, in society and in the public sphere (Stathopoulou, 2010), and the particular links between church and state, or between religious communities and the state, help define the role of religion at school. Religious education is, thus, a critical field for training young people to deal with diversity and plurality and give them the "hermeneutic and critical reflective skills" (Vermeer, 2010, p. 110) to form their own personal and social identity.

Intergovernmental provisions for religious education

The theoretical and conceptual elaboration of religious diversity in intercultural education is advocated in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Toledo guiding principles (2007) on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools. The Toledo guide clearly states that "curricula should be sensitive to different interpretations of reality" (OSCE, 2007, p. 41) based on three pedagogical principles:

Representation. Religious traditions should not be represented as static and homogenous, but should entail the variety of understandings within every tradition.

Interpretation. The comparison and contrast of one's own tradition to other religious traditions "is crucial in order to consider 'the students' own perspective [as] an essential part of the learning process" (Jackson, 2004, p. 88; Jackson, 2011).

Reflexivity. Students should reassess their own experiences and perceptions or worldviews of their own traditions in relation to the ones

they are attempting to interpret.

"Thus, the interpretive approach clearly conceptualizes the link between religious studies and young people's personal development. There should be a reflexive, ongoing process of comparison and contrast between material from religious traditions and pupils' own ideas" (Jackson & O' Grady, 2007, p. 21). As is pointed out by Vallianatos (CoE, 2009) "managing and teaching socio cultural diversity is not a method. It is a student-centred pedagogy that incorporates a variety of different viewpoints and perspectives in the classroom combined by a variety of teaching methods".

Moreover, the Recommendation 1720 on Religion and Education by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2005)[3] states that:

11. The Council of Europe assigns a key role to education in the construction of a democratic society, but study of religions in schools has not yet received special attention.

Since this statement was drafted, several comparative research projects have focused on religion in schools in several countries in Europe. These projects include REDCo, Religion in Education (2009) and Religious Education at Schools in Europe (Rothgangel et al., 2014). The first programme included the participation of eight countries[4], while the second covered 49 countries across six European regions[5]. Single country studies have also been carried out, including those by Buchardt (2014) and Willert (2014). Buchardt's study is a close examination of identity politics in the classroom in the Danish public school based on fieldwork focusing on 'religion' and 'culture' as knowledge and social classification. Willert's research is an analysis of discourses in the debate on changes in the religious education curriculum in Greece. Markoviti (2013) examines

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[3]   http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta05/EREC1720.htm (accessed 27 May 2014).

[4] Germany, England and Wales, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Estonia, Russia and Spain. A case study from Greece was also part of the project (The project website can be found at http://www.redco.uni-hamburg.de/web/3480/3505/index.html accessed 27 May 2014).

[5] Only two volumes of this comparative research project on religious education in Europe have been published to date. According to the project website, the regions of South East Europe and Eastern Europe have not yet become fully included in the project since there are only a few researchers from these areas (http://www.rel-edu.eu/authors/ accessed 27 May 2014).

Greece and France in the context of the Europeanization of religious freedoms and education. 'Accept Pluralism' was a 7th Framework research programme addressing cultural, ethnic and religious diversity in 15 European countries. The sheer quantity of publications and new journals on religious education over the past ten years indicate that the study of religion in school has been given increasing priority since the above observation in the Council of Europe recommendations.

These recommendations not only point to the lack of studies, but also address normative statements about the importance of education in relation to religious co-existence:

6. Education is essential for combating ignorance, stereotypes and misunderstanding of religions. Governments should also do more to guarantee freedom of conscience and of religious expression, to foster education on religions, to encourage dialogue with and between religions and to promote the cultural and social expression of religions.

7. School is a major component of education, of forming a critical spirit in future citizens and therefore of intercultural dialogue. It lays the foundations for tolerant behavior, founded on respect for the dignity of each human being. By teaching children the history and philosophy of the main religions with restraint and objectivity and with respect for the values of the European Convention on Human Rights, it will effectively combat fanaticism. Understanding the history of political conflicts in the name of religion is essential.

Keywords in these recommendations include the combat of ignorance of religions through education and the teaching of the history and philosophy of 'the main religions' with 'restraint and objectivity'. Religion in education should, according to these recommendations, lay the foundations for tolerant behavior and thereby combat fanaticism and encourage dialogue with and between religions. Furthermore, education about religions should emphasize the knowledge aspect as stated in the following recommendation:

8. Knowledge of religions is an integral part of knowledge of the history of mankind and civilisations. It is altogether distinct from belief in a specific religion and its observance. Even countries where one religion predominates should teach about the origins of all religions rather than favor a single one or encourage proselytising.

In particular, state education on religion should underscore that religion is not an identity marker that makes people different human beings:

(14.1) The aim of this education should be to make pupils discover the religions practised in their own and neighbouring countries, to make them perceive that everyone has the same right to believe that their religion is the "true faith" and that other people are not different human beings through having a different religion or not having a religion at all.

Thus, at an overall European level there have been efforts at studying and developing education on religion in the name of tolerance and co-existence. This focus is not at all surprising in the aftermath of the Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks in the USA (2001), Spain (2004) and Britain (2005), as well as the increasingly multicultural and multireligious composition of European populations.

In the next section we will present a legislative overview of the models of religious education across Europe, followed by a specific comparative focus on the Danish and Greek educational model. We will first discuss recent changes in the demographic composition of Greece that have challenged the mono-religious and confessional religious education system. We will then introduce the legal framework and pedagogical practice of the religion class in a historical perspective and conclude with the recent attempts to modernize the religion class to adapt it to a plural society. Finally, we will point to the lack of empirical research concerning the pupils' perceptions and attitudes about religious education in Greece. As a first step towards addressing this gap, we will present examples from a pilot interview study conducted amongst first and second-generation immigrants in Greece regarding their experiences with and opinions of religious education in the Greek school system.

Legislative provisions for religious education across Europe

Religious education was addressed at the European level during the 1950s in the Convention of Rome (1950). The relevant article states that:

"No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions". (Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms as amended by Protocol No. 11, Paris 1952).

Thus, the state is responsible for the design of national curricula as regards religious education. This very process is affected by four factors (Hull, n.d, p. 1): (i) the presence of majority and minority religions in the country; (ii) the particular link between religious and secular elements; (iii) the historical specificities in each country; and (iv) the prevailing ideas on religious education provided by the state. These ideas are usually expressed and embedded in the legal framework of religious education. Therefore, the role and status of established churches (religions), the recognized religious communities or organizations, the relationship of these two with the state, and the level of heterogeneity within societies all collectively shape the religious education landscape across Europe. The presence and proportion of immigrant populations and ethnic minorities is crucial, accounting for the challenges of diversity and plurality in the school environment. The following table provides a snapshot of the current situation in Europe. Greece falls in the same "compulsory denominational' category as Cyprus, Malta, Austria, Germany and Belgium.

Table 1 summarizes the models of religious education across Europe based on national legislative frameworks. Doe (2011) distinguishes five models of state-provided religious education.

In the first model, religious education is compulsory Christian, either taught as a history of Christianity, for example in the case of Denmark, or having a broad Christian orientation, as in the case of U.K. According to this model, the state is the main funder of religious education and is responsible for the design, content and implementation of religious curricula in public education.

In the second model, the teaching of recognized or majority denomination is mandatory (Malta, Greece and Cyprus). The design and syllabus is under the authority of the state or the recognized churches or religious communities. The state is responsible for funding religious education.

The same holds for the third model according to which the state, apart from having the primary role in designing the curricula, provides the funds for religious education together with the recognized religious organizations. Denominational education is optional in the sense that parents or adolescents (14 or 15 years old, according to the country) may request an opt out.

Table1. Models of Religious Education across Europe (Public schools)

	Compulsory Christian	Compulsory Denominational	Optional Denominational	Non-Denominational	Prohibition
Design	State	State – RO**	RO-State	State	
Syllabus	State	State –RO	RO-State	State	
Funding	State	State	State -RO	State –RO	
	Denmark	Malta	Italy	Sweden	France
	Finland	Greece	Spain	Estonia	Slovenia
	UK	Cyprus	Portugal	Bulgaria	
		Germany*	The Netherlands		
		Austria*	Lithuania		
		Belgium*	Poland		
			Hungary		
			Romania		
			Slovakia		
			Latvia		

Based on Norman Doe (2011).
* Only for recognized churches or religious communities
** Religious organizations

In the fourth model, religious education is optional and religious classes are provided only if a certain number of pupils (13 in Bulgaria, 15 in Estonia) request it. Religious education is non-denominational and the state is the main provider and funder of religious education. In France and Slovenia, religious education is not allowed in state schools but it is permitted in privately funded schools, as is the case of faith schools.[6]In many European countries the right to opt out from a religious education

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[6] In France 18% of the student population is found in private schools the majority of which - 90%- are Catholic. In Belgium where a different religious education model applies the respective number of Catholic schools is 60%. Cited in Doe (2011, p. 24).

class and in some cases, like in Estonia, parental permission on exemption from religious education is not required for secondary education pupils, between 14 and 16 years old, depending on the country.

Constitutional provisions for religious education in Greece and Denmark – a comparative perspective

According to article 16, paragraph 2 of the Constitution of Greece (2008 [1975]) "[e]ducation constitutes a basic mission for the State and shall aim at the moral, intellectual, professional and physical training of Greeks, the development of national and religious consciousness and at their formation as free and responsible citizens." (Hellenic Parliament 2008). It is obvious that the intention of the paragraph is to ensure that the State not only provides citizens with what they supposedly need in terms of training but also that they are socialized into 'responsible citizens' with a 'national and religious consciousness.' The paragraph raises at least two crucial issues regarding the purpose of education in general and more specifically in a state with a heterogeneous population. Namely, the specification of those who are entitled to education as 'Greeks' and not 'Greek citizens' or 'citizens of Greece,' and the lack of specification as to what is meant by '(national and) religious consciousness.' It is characteristic that in the Constitution of Greece the subjects of the State are named 'Greeks' (14 times all in all) without a definition of who shall be regarded as Greek.

In comparison, the Constitution of Denmark has only two references to 'Danish citizens' (section 71 and 87) while all other mentions of subjects refer simply to 'citizens'. This does not mean that the Danish Constitution was necessarily drafted in a less ethnocentric spirit than the Greek because an ethnic understanding of citizens could be implicit. However, it does make it easier to read the Danish Constitution in more inclusive terms compared to the Greek which defines its subjects with ethnic labels.

The provision that the training of 'Greeks' provided by the State shall aim at the 'development of their religious consciousness' is complex because it does not define what is understood by 'religious consciousness.' Again, in comparison, the Danish Constitution does not specify the purpose of the education provided by the State but indicates only that all children in

the age of compulsory education have the right to be educated in the public school system[7]. The current legislation on public primary and lower secondary education (Folkeskolen [People's school]) does state in detail that the purpose of the school is to 'give the pupils knowledge and skills that prepares them to further education and spurs their interest in further learning, makes them familiar with Danish culture and history, provides them with understanding of other countries and cultures, contributes to their understanding of humans' interaction with nature and encourages each pupil's balanced development'[8]. Furthermore, 'the People's school shall prepare the pupils for participation, co-responsibility, rights and duties in a society with freedom and democracy. The school's activities must therefore be characterized by intellectual liberty, equality and democratic organization.' The section on religious education specifies that 'the central area of knowledge of the teaching of Christianity is the Danish People's Church's Evangelic-Lutheran Christianity. In classes of older pupils, the teaching shall also include foreign religions and other philosophies of life.' Exemption from religious education can be granted in the beginning of the school year after a child's parent or guardian's written statement indicating that he/she personally will undertake/guarantee the religious education of the child (section 2, article 6).

Cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity in Greece

Even though various minority, ethnic, linguistic as well as religious groups have existed in Greece, since the independence of the modern Greek state in the 1820s, only a few have been officially recognized. The idea of a homogeneous Greek-speaking Orthodox Christian population amounting to 97% of the population has dominated discourses on Greek culture throughout the twentieth century. In the course of the 1990s, however, Greece for the first time became a country of immigration rather than emigration. The country's membership in the European Union (EU) and its rapid economic growth made it an attractive destination for immigrants

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[7] Parents or guardians are even allowed to privately teach their children as long as the teaching conforms to the demands of the public schools. Thus, there is no school duty, only education duty.
[8] https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/r0710.aspx?id=163970

from former Communist countries in East- and Central Europe, as well as from poorer developing countries in Asia and Africa. By the late 1990s, Greece's population had increased by an influx of immigrants from mainly Albania and the former Soviet republics, many of whom claimed ethnic, linguistic and religious Greek ancestry. In the early 2000s, a second wave of immigrants, assisted by international networks of human trafficking, entered Greece just as poverty and armed conflicts erupted in the Middle East and Africa. The first wave of partly 'repatriated' Greeks did not on the surface challenge the national homogeneity, however, on a social level the arrival of these groups triggered an increasingly racist reflex in Greek society, particularly towards Albanians. The second wave of immigrants coming from Asia and Africa changed more decisively the image of Greek society as ethnically and religiously homogenous. As second and third generations of immigrants grew up, the need to revise the official version of Greece as a mono-cultural society became all the more pressing. Today, almost 10 per cent of the population consists of immigrants[9], many of which belong to other Christian denominations or non-Christian religious communities. These changes in Greek society over the past decades, including increasing immigration, modernization and secularization, have prompted many debates on the need for religious education to adapt to the new realities.

Developments in religious education in Greece

Article 3 of the 1975 Greek Constitution states that the prevailing religion in Greece is the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ (Hellenic Parliament 2010) and according to article 16, paragraph 2, education constitutes: "a basic mission for the State and shall aim at the moral, intellectual, professional and physical training of Greeks, the development of national and religious consciousness and at their formation as free and responsible citizens" (Hellenic Parliament, 2010).

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[9] According to the 2011 Census, 911,929 are foreigners, EU and third-country citizens residing permanently in Greece (www. statistics.gr). Undocumented immigrants were estimated to be 390,000 on December 2011 (Maroukis, 2012, Clandestino database on irregular migration).

The formulation 'the development of national and religious consciousness' is often interpreted as the Greek State's obligation to provide a faith-based religious education according to the Eastern Orthodox creed, that in the preamble and article 3 of the Constitution is stated to be the prevailing religion of Greece. However, the article only prescribes the development of religious consciousness and, therefore, the Constitution, as such, cannot be used as an argument for religious education based on the teachings of the Greek Orthodox church. It could be argued though that as 'national consciousness' is not defined, but implicitly understood as Greek because it is the Constitution of Greece, 'religious consciousness' is also implicitly understood as 'Greek Orthodox' since this is the creed that the Constitution states as the prevailing religion.

According to a 1985 law on education (Act 1566/85), the class entitled 'Orthodox Christian Instruction' is mandatory for all school children throughout primary and secondary education. The national curriculum of 1991 states that: "The purpose of the Orthodox Christian instruction (religious topics) in primary education is to provide the children basic features of the Orthodox Christian teachings, tradition and life, to contribute to the development of their religious consciousness and to assist the strengthening of their relationship with God as Creator and Father". (cited in Karamouzis, 2007, p. 92).

Here it is obvious that the emphasis is exclusively mono-religious and confessional, if not catechist. Twelve years later, the 2003 curriculum added that the purpose is also to 'approach our own religious beliefs and traditions as well as those of others with respect and without prejudices, stereotypes and fanaticism' (cited in Karamouzis, 2007, 94). Thus, for the first time a pluralistic aspect is introduced. However, the intention of approaching the religious beliefs and traditions of others could not realistically be based on knowledge since the content of the class allocated no more than four teaching hours out of a total of 161 to other Christian denominations or religious traditions and only in the last year of primary school (cited in Karamouzis, 2007).

According to some critics, the mandatory nature of religious education within a specific creed collides with the right to religious freedom stated in article 13, paragraphs 1 and 2 of the Constitution. Since the 1980s, following the demands for modernizing reforms, from all levels of Greek civil society (human rights organizations, atheist organizations etc.) to supranational organizations (EU, Council of Europe), there has been

intense public debate over the nature of religious education in Greece. In response, the proponents of a catechist or confessional class have developed a discourse based on the idea that religious education is under threat (Willert, 2014, pp. 90-91). In 2008, in an attempt to comply with EU recommendations, the Council of Europe, the Greek Ombudsman ensuring the protection of privacy and personal data protection, and the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs issued three successive circulars to state schools stating that any pupil who wished could be exempted from the religion class without providing any reason. Until 2008, a valid reason was required to be exempted from the religion class if a pupil did not belong to the Orthodox faith, which forced citizens to indirectly reveal their non-Orthodox affiliation. The first two circulars resulted in a severe critique from religious and nationalist milieus pointing to the dangers of losing young generations that 'don't care about the Orthodox heritage' who would, therefore, ask to be exempted even if they were members of the Orthodox Church. This urged the Minister of Education and Religious Affairs to issue a third circular according to which 'non-Orthodox pupils, i.e. pupils from other denominations or religions, who according to the circular 104071/Γ2/4.8.2008 are exempted from the religion class for reasons of freedom conscience, must attend a different course in lieu of the religion class'[10]. Willert (2014, p. 132) concludes that 'according to the first circulars no reason needed to be stated for exemption from the religion class whereas, the third circular indirectly confirmed that only non-Orthodox pupils should be exempted. Owing to the lack of clarity in the circulars, the issue has not yet been resolved and the case is handled locally on a case-by-case basis; school principals can thus accept or reject exemption requests from pupils and their parents.'

The religion class is taught from the 3rd grade of primary school to the 3rd grade of upper secondary school. In primary school, the classes are taught by primary school teachers, while in lower and upper secondary education the classes are taught by teachers with a degree from the theological faculties of the Kapodistrian University of Athens and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

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[10] Circular ΥΠΕΠΘ Φ12/977/109744/Γ1/26-8-2008.

Modernising the National Curriculum on Religion

Greece's school system is, or has until recently been, one of the most centralised school systems in the world. The curricula describe in detail the topics that teachers must cover and the textbooks, which are centrally published and distributed by the Ministry of Education, leave no room for creativity on the part of the teacher. An analysis of textbooks in a variety of subjects, including history, geography and Greek language, has revealed that these textbooks reproduce a highly ethnocentric view of the world. Furthermore, the school system as a whole transmits contradictory messages, on the one hand, praising the unaltered virtues and diachronic global importance of the Greek nation, and on the other, creating the impression that the nation is under severe threat from alienating forces (Frangoudaki & Dragona, 1997). Also, the religion class and more broadly the role of religion in the school system have been evaluated as ethnocentric (Zambeta, 2003).

According to Stavros Yangazoglou, the principal advisor on religious education at the Pedagogical Institute, religion has been taught in a catechist manner since the foundation of the Greek state. But after 1989 the teaching of religion has changed for the better: 'abstract moralism gave way to a theological approach and dialogue with the problems of contemporary man' (2005, p. 129) [11]. Yangazoglou is a spokesman advocating the importance of religious literacy in a contemporary social and historical context: "The curricula (of 2003) call attention to the fact that Christianity offers a coherence and quality of life in the modern world, an understanding of the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of contemporary society and a supranational and ecumenical character of the Christian message; this leads to the recognition that an inter-Christian and interfaith dialogue is needed". (Yangazoglou, 2005, p. 129). According to Yangazoglou (2005), Christian theology can play a central role in today's education:

> This is the era when the unifying power of the nation state is in decline, while other unifying bonds, such as language, culture, religion, are emerging. […] Within such framework it seems that the ghost of religious

[11] Yangazoglou (2005) provides a thorough historical overview of the changes in the content and pedagogical models of religious education in Greek schools.

fundamentalism, but also of religious decline, will play a crucial role in future multicultural societies. […] In this new world of religious pluralism, Christian theology is called upon to engage in a creative dialogue with the cultural and religious diversity of the contemporary world. It ought to rediscover its true ecumenism and tolerance in order to overcome intolerance and fanaticism. (Yangazoglou, 2005, p. 135).

This proposal differs from ethnocentric arguments of the teaching objectives of the Orthodox faith (as part of the Greek national identity) in that it takes into account the plurality that is inherent in contemporary societies. Yet, it is questionable how pluralistic a teaching can be if it has as its point of departure a particular theological position, that of Orthodox Christianity. The ideal of a theologically grounded pluralistic approach to the religion class is at the core of the new programme of study, implemented in pilot schools since 2011 and planned for general implementation starting with the 2014-2015 school year.

State responses to the religion class in Greece

In March 2010, Anna Diamantopoulou, the then Minister of Education, presented a draft bill entitled 'New School: Focus on the Pupil'. The bill included the development of a new national programme of study, which was tested through pilot programmes in 2011–2012, 2012–2013 and 2013–2014. In this context, 150 theologians and schoolteachers were trained in the Inter-Orthodox Centre of the Church of Greece under the auspices of the Institute of Educational Policy. Essentially, the new programme of study aims to decentralize the education system by developing a more flexible curriculum that does not restrict teachers to the strict chronological reading of the centrally issued textbooks. In terms of religious education, the term 'religious literacy' is given prominence:

Religious education is called upon to provide "religious literacy" […] Besides, the main goal of cultural acclimatisation, which is part of religious literacy, is not only directed towards the Greek or Orthodox pupils, but to all [schoolchildren] regardless of their national origin or religious and confessional identity. (Ministry of Education and Pedagogical Institute 2011, p. 14).

Apart from the reference to 'religious literacy', the text also refers to 'cultural acclimatisation', which hints at the inclusion of all pupils regardless of religious or other cultural background in a non-confessional class. The concept of 'religious literacy' is used to adapt the new programme of study to the ideals of a secular national education system that is in compliance with European standards of inclusive education, while at the same time preserving the values of Orthodox theology. The intention of embracing 'a creative dialogue with modernity, pluralism, multiculturalism and difference' is sought through the introduction of a greater focus on other religions, especially 'the large Christian traditions that we encounter in Europe' (Willert, 2014, p. 147). The focal point of the class remains the local Orthodox tradition, but two further "series are added introducing the pupils to other religions, first the Christian denominations and then the other monotheistic religions" (Willert, 2014, p. 147).

The new programme of study emphasizes the continued importance of Orthodox theology, probably in an attempt to anticipate criticism that the new programme is too progressive and too pluralistic, but also in order to justify why the class is to be taught by theologically trained teachers. The argument goes:

> Of course, we cannot possibly have a Greek school where the discourse of Orthodox theology and tradition is not central. Through the religion class this discourse is called to go beyond modernity and to embrace pluralism and difference in such a way that it simultaneously does not devalue, or relativize or even depart from its self-consciousness. Elements of a theological understanding of multiculturalism, such as mutual respect, acceptance and peaceful co-existence with a religious or any kind of Other, are scattered through the Bible, the patristic heritage but also in the texts of modern and contemporary thinkers. […] Besides, Orthodox theology by its nature does not disregard the religious Other but engages in dialogue with them; without this meaning of course, it betrays itself. (Ministry of Education and Pedagogical Institute, 2011, p. 16).

According to Willert (2014, p. 148) such argumentation ensures that Orthodox theology appears as "a perfectly suited method to meet the challenges of multiculturalism in Greek school and in Greek society." She further concludes that:

the new programme of study attempts to take into account the current social and cultural conditions in Greece and in the rest of the world by promoting inter-culturalism and respect for otherness. Alongside the above-mentioned demands on the teacher, the Guide ensures that the new religion class is suitable to all pupils, regardless of their religious or non-religious affiliation; yet, it is 'by no means contradictory to a Christian vision of faith and education" (Ministry of Education and Pedagogical Institute 2011a, pp. 27–28). "Religious education is, therefore, expected to play a role in the pupils' ability to responsibly and creatively deal with 'pluralism' and engage in dialogue with 'the Other'. The Guide also argues that, with the new Programme of Study, the educational aims stated in article 16 of the Greek Constitution regarding the development of the pupils' 'religious consciousness' can be achieved through pedagogical means but without religious or ecclesiastic criteria (Willert, 2014, p. 273).

The intentions of the new programme of study to respond to the challenges of a pluralistic society through an inclusive and intercultural teaching practice of religious education are clear. The main obstacles lie in the practical implementation of the new programme. In such a centralized school system the Greek teachers have been used to following a clearly defined teaching material, but the new programme demands a high degree of creativity and planning skills by the teachers. The teachers do not typically receive training of such skills so in-service training is absolutely necessary. However, given the severe budget cuts due to the economic crisis, it is obvious that it will be difficult to provide teachers with the necessary training to implement the goals of the new programme. Angelos Vallianatos (2012), who has been heading the pilot implementation of the new programme, considers the usual practice of adhering to specific teaching materials and textbooks the most serious obstacle for the implementation of the new programme.

Even if the new programme of study is developed to address all pupils, the class was still optional in the sense that anyone could be exempted[12] according to the above-mentioned Ministry circulars issued in July-August 2008. In January 2015, two days before the national elections which

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[12] The majority of the students who actually exercised the right to the exemption (20% of the total student population) were Greek. A 10% opted out for religious conscience reasons and another 10% because they wanted to reduce their study load (Vallianatos, telephone interview, 30.4.2014).

brought Greece's first left-wing government to power, the minister of the conservative-liberal party New Democracy issued a circular that confirmed the compulsory nature of the class for all Christian students.[13] Thus, only students who declare that they are not Christian can be exempted. The circular is clearly targeted towards those (Christian) students who asked exemption simply to reduce their study load and nothing indicates the Ministry's intention of providing an inclusive and pluralistic class that can be followed by all students regardless of their religious background[14].

However, the political and economic instability in Greece largely affects the educational system, which means that the new measures and programmes have not yet been implemented, even after three successive years of pilot implementation, and the religion class continues to be taught according to the programmes implemented in 2003.

Another obstacle to the implementation and success of the programme, at least as far as the issue of inclusion, socialization and respect for diversity is concerned, might prove to be the lack of participation of representatives from the non-Orthodox or immigrant communities. Opinions from other religious communities or immigrant organizations can enrich the further development and implementation of the new programme of study for religious education that has been undertaken exclusively by Orthodox theologians. A more thorough empirical investigation of religious education should take into account the views of non-Orthodox groups in the development of a pluralistic approach to religious education (Stathopoulou, 2014a) We will, therefore, present a pre-testing enquiry based on five qualitative interviews, three with second generation immigrants[15] and two with representatives of immigrant organizations in order to highlight their experiences and views on the religion class and religious education in Greece.

Two organizations were selected: the Tanzanian community, first set up in 1999 and legally recognized in 2002, and Generation 2.0 RED (Rights, Equality and Diversity) a youth civil society organization, set up in 2006 and taking a legal status in 2013, that represents a new generation of Greek

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[13] Circular no. 12773/Δ2

[14] For further discussion of the compulsory nature of the religion class in Greece, see Liagkis, 2014.

[15] The population of foreign non-EU students was 107,500 for the school year 2011-2012 in primary and secondary education (www.statistics.gr).

people, and includes people of migrant and Greek origin that were born and raised in Greece. Two different interview guides were used[16]: the one addressed to the persons heading the immigrant organisations apart from their personal views and experiences of religion class in Greece, is focused on the knowledge of the respondents on the religious education status in the European setting, and potential complaints or requests about religious education addressed to them from organization members.

The interview guide addressed to the members of G2.0 RED was focused on the personal experiences, views and thoughts of the interviewees as regards the religion class in Greece. The selection criteria of the respondents were their age, (15-25), country of origin, their religious affiliation, if any, and the attendance of religion class in Greek school. The cases presented below are by no means conclusive or representative and should be read as an exploratory attempt to open the discussion towards an empirical investigation of the attitudes towards the religion class in Greece.

Individual responses to the religion class in Greece

The analysis of the interview material[17] shows that the views of the respondents depend highly on the religious or non-religious background of the family and the attitudes of the parents towards religion at large. Experiences at home account for the negative or positive stances on religious matters. However, personal experiences in the school environment also affect their views but to a lesser degree. The schoolteacher is a decisive factor in shaping their overall opinion and their personal interest or quest for religion is subsequently a very strong predictor in shaping their opinion.

A plea for openness and dialogue lies at the core of all the interviews. Learning about other religions is the most frequent request by the interviewees. The way religion is taught in Greek schools is quite restricting in this respect and it is up to the teacher's initiative, abilities and knowledge to engage in a dialogical exercise with the pupils.

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[16] The interview guides are available upon request.
[17] A similar approach was used by Triandafyllidou & Kouki (2012) in the Accept Pluralism project.

Most of our preliminary observations seem to agree with the research findings of the qualitative study of the REDCo project. The aim of the study was to record and examine pupils' attitudes towards the religion class, focusing in particular on the role of religion in school, the content of learning, the religiosity of teachers and the learning models. In their analysis, Knauth & Kors (2011) emphasize the role of the teacher, the family background, personal experiences as well as the need of students to engage in a dialogical form of learning and avoid conflict inside the classroom.

It should be noted that the respondents were no longer pupils at the time of the pilot, therefore their views, thoughts and opinions were the result of a recall and not a concurrent account of their experience of learning about/from [18] religion in the classroom interaction. Although the interviewees came from a varied religious background, Muslim, Catholic, Pentecostal, they had not been forced by their parents to either attend or be exempted from the religion class. Only two of the respondents declared that they are religiously affiliated with a specific denomination. The others have a nominal religious affiliation but they do not consider themselves active members of a religion even if they have been baptized as Christian Orthodox (one respondent). They all have in common a liberal background experience and a mixed family background in terms of ethnicity.

A recurrent motive for attending the class was that because it counted in the average score of their overall grade, the respondents opted for taking the lesson instead of being exempted. The respondents who had an official position in the two organizations did not have knowledge of the institutional provisions for religious education across Europe.

The presentation below presents the individual responses [19] to the religion class in the following narrative sequence: "My parents" refers to the family's attitudes towards attending the religion class and "my children" refers to the respondent's views on parental stances. "The teacher" and "the lesson" refer to the learning content and classroom interaction. "Being different" denotes perceptions of diversity. "If I were a country" is a

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[18] Referring to Grimmit's (2000) distinction between knowledge based learning and learning based on experience.

[19] Details on the respondents are presented in the appendix (indicated with "I").

metaphor for the place of religion, "out there" in the world, outside the school and family environment, in the world of adults.

My parents

"I have learned from my home to respect all religions and at school I was taught to respect Orthodoxy and nothing else. I was raised in a diverse family, we always 'embraced' difference. My father was Catholic, my mother Orthodox. What I learned about the Catholics at school was not at all pleasant" (I[4]).

"My parents reacted very normally [when they learned I had the right to exemption]. My father never told me not to attend the religion class, he has never forbidden me to go to church" (I[2]).

"My parents and I aren't fixated. When I was at school, I recited the morning prayer, I went to church, I was feeling it. It is something you grow up with, I was raised with that, nobody has pushed me anywhere because my parents aren't fixated on this" (I[3]).

My children

"As I believe and especially for my daughter, because she is young, I always try to tell her, don't believe, because you are Muslim, that Islam is better than the Orthodox. This is not right. I mean, she learns from her early years that ah! I am Muslim but I can live together with Olga who is Orthodox. This is what I believe. From very early on. This is something that these bishops or the teachers at schools don't do"(I[5]).

"Everyone in the place where they are born, there is a religion in which mum and dad have nurtured them. It is not bad for the children to see what is exactly going on with religion. It is better than growing up and listening somewhere out there without having an in-depth picture from school. So it is good to have it [the religion class] (I[5]).

"Since children are raised exclusively with the Orthodox Church, they will have learned the basics, and believe. Other religions should be open to them and they should choose if they want to remain in the Orthodox [religion] or since they are aware of the others, to adopt another religion" (I[2]).

My teachers

"There were only two teachers that I liked, both of them in upper secondary school. Because they didn't focus so much on the Orthodox Church, they also taught us the other [religions]. Comparing with lower secondary and in particular when we were younger, they tried to squeeze the Orthodox Church into our heads, they were rigid: that regardless of the religion that each of us may have from home and our beliefs, we have to be Orthodox, otherwise we are not good people"(I[2]).

"The last teacher I had, it was in the 3rd grade of the Gymnasium, he gave me the courage not to attend the religion class the following year […] he didn't force me to do something that was not pleasant for me. He told me I don't want to push you ... it will be good to let the other teachers know" (I[4]).

"I have encountered teachers who were racists, I have met teachers who were very open minded in this subject. I have met teachers who listened to all views of the children and we talked about other religions. It was a lesson to open your mind, to learn five [some] things" (I[3]).

The lesson

"Ok, because the country is religious, since all here are Orthodox, it is not bad to have it at school. I don't see it as bad" (I[5]).

"Well, I don't find it very important, but as a country, as a symbol, it is as important as the flag I think, so yes, it [the religion class] has to be there" (I[1]).

"Here the religion class doesn't help the Greeks, the Orthodox, for example, to tolerate another religion" (I[5]).

"Look, the religion class was like the history class. It was very ethnocentric. The prevailing religion is that. The Muslims, Islam and the other religions, we didn't consider it good"(I[4]).

"What I want is the religion class to be optional. If I can suggest something it is for the class to be optional and nothing else, not mandatory, and apart from Orthodoxy, speak honestly about all other religions" (I[4]).

"Well, the majority in Greece are Christian Orthodox. I think that in order to have a lesson called religion class, and not Orthodox Christianity, this means that other religions should be taught"(I[2]).

Being different

"The way they are dressed, the mentality at home [this is what matters for socializing with others]. For example, families that are dressed that way [wearing pants, headscarf] it means that they are more conservative" (I[2]).

"In some cases, when I was younger, I said that I was Christian [in order to be accepted]" (I[3]).

If I were a country

"If I were a country, I would want the children and all those who come to learn that this is who we are, that it is the tradition of the country, the Orthodox. So, yes, I respect that, but I could accept the point of young people, and it appears boring and irrelevant to them. For them what counts is the next coffee, the next game on Play Station, just to pass the class. Most children go to school because their parents force them. Few children understand that 'I go to school, so that I can be socially useful tomorrow, to make some money and to become educated as a person. I believe that any child if they wake up they would prefer to play games at the Play Station for six hours rather than to go to school"(I[1]).

Out there

 "Of course. [I want the class to have a varied content]. Because when you go out there you are not prepared to face the other who is different". I[4]

"My view is always that people who don't believe and have a different religion, they themselves have to attend the lesson. Apart from their religion, they have to know what is going on out there. Because most people, you know what they say? I have learned that, I support that, I don't want neither to learn, nor to know, not even hear, and this is wrong. But in Greece the system has to be fixed, they have to talk about all religions. They should not force [pupils] something, but just know that beyond Christianity there are some other things that are interesting" (I[3]).

Concluding remarks

The overview of the current state of affairs of religious education in Greece indicates modernizing attempts to reform the national curriculum on religion responding to the needs of multicultural transformation of Greek society. Reactions and debates over the necessity of such modernizing

efforts spanned the period 2010-2013 when the pilot of the new programme was implemented in selected schools. At the time, the public sector was restructured due to the economic crisis, thus leaving its imprint on the educational landscape. The shift from a compulsory denominational model of religious education to one that could ensure reflexivity, representation and interpretation remains a challenge to be addressed.

At an intergovernmental and supranational level (CoE, OSCE), relevant dilemmas have been answered, at least in principle. However, the general framework of principles set by these bodies, do not have a binding agreement for the country members leaving their application at the discretion of national governments. The constitutional and legal provisions across Europe display similarities as regards the arrangements for recognized religious organizations and established churches. Focusing on the legislative aspects of religious education we can understand more clearly the constraints of choices as regards the religion class and the particular topos where didactics of religion are taking place.

The classroom is the place where state and society responses meet with the individual responses to the religion class. This is where there is a considerable gap. In Greece there is an almost complete lack of empirical research in the field of religious education. Sporadic and mostly qualitative research has been conducted in the context of specific research studies. A survey in the general student population would make it possible to include the students' own perspectives in the discussions on teaching and learning from/about religion. Furthermore, an analysis of religious diversity in the school environment should include the perspectives of the immigrant student population. Our exploratory analysis on the subject is a starting point in this direction. Researching the field of religious education should incorporate the views of teachers and parents, in addition to the constitutional provisions, violations of human rights legislation, and civil society responses. Our overview has shown that the road from religious plurality to religious pluralism is predominantly a strenuous one.

Appendix

Informant 1(I[1]): Male, b. 1990, attended Greek school from 4th grade, origin Nigeria, Pentecostal.

Informant 2 (I[2]): Female, b. 1995, born in Greece, origin Pakistan and Philippines.

Informant 3 (I[3]): Male, b. 1993, attended Greek school from the 1st grade, origin Albania.

Informant 4 (I[4]): Male, Generation 2.0 director, 33 years old, origin Nigeria.

Informant 5 (I[5]): Male, Tanzanian community secretary, 52 years old, origin Tanzania, Muslim.

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