

ANALYSIS OF DIFFERENT ARRANGEMENTS FOR EDUCATION CONCERNING RELIGION AND BELIEF

Across Europe there is huge variation in the treatment of religion and belief, including non-religious beliefs, in schools. This derives from the differences from place to place in religious, cultural and historical backgrounds.

There are many ways in which these differences show themselves, including:-

(a) school legal or administrative structures

Schools may be run

- by the state or other public authorities (e.g., local councils), or
- by bodies such as charities or trusts, including churches or other religious organisations, or
- by private companies or individuals, sometimes as businesses.

Any of these may be wholly or partly paid for from public funds. Sometimes churches or other external bodies may be responsible for life stance education within an otherwise secular institution (e.g., a church may provide a course about Christianity in a public school).

(b) scope of syllabus

Another key distinction relates to the scope of the teaching provided. A school may offer

- no relevant teaching at all
- a course about a single denomination of a single religion (e.g., Roman Catholicism)
- a course about a single religion (e.g., Christianity)
- a course about more than one religion (e.g., the “six great world religions”)
- a course about both religions and non-religious beliefs (e.g., world religions plus Humanism).

(c) pedagogical approach

An important distinction is between

- those courses that suggest that one particular life stance (or category of life stance, e.g. religious) is correct and
- those that adopt an open, objective, educational attitude.

(d) facts or morals

There is in addition a distinction between

- courses that concentrate on the ‘facts’ related to life stances (e.g., Bible knowledge,

- the history of religion) and
- courses that focus on moral teaching derived from lifestyles (e.g., Christian or humanist moral education).

(e) parental and pupil rights and options

- Sometimes parents can choose between a range of alternative courses (which may or may not be comprehensive).
- Elsewhere parents are given the option to withdraw their child from the relevant teaching offered in the school.
- Sometimes pupils at a certain age are themselves allowed to exercise these choices.

(e) worship

There is another question, separate from those regarding teaching:

- In some schools there are acts of religious worship in accordance with a single religion or religious denomination (and in this case they may be conducted by clergy or by teachers).
- In other schools there may be acts of religious worship that are syncretic or 'inter-faith' or that even try to accommodate the non-religious.
- Other schools may have no acts of worship (although they may have non-religious assemblies that may celebrate values).

Where there is religious worship, it may take place

- within the school day or
- outside the normal teaching hours; and

it may be

- compulsory or
- optional at the wish of either the pupil or the parents.

In real life, approaches will often be muddled and will usually not result from any consideration of the principles involved. However, an analysis on the basis of these paradigms will always be revealing.

[Adapted from the European Humanist Federation website at <http://humanistfederation.eu/analysis-of-different-arrangements-for-education-concerning-religion-and-belief/> - accessed 6 April 2013]