

Education, Religion and Politics: The Case of Greece

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I. Introduction

Muslim fundamentalism, whether from immigration or in segments of the local population, is one of the most serious challenges Europe and the rest of the Western world is facing. Many argue that a crucial factor of the problem is the social inequality that has affected many parts of Europe with large Muslim populations (e.g. France, Belgium etc.). The problem of inequality is also very serious in the US as the most recent events at the universities of Missouri¹ and Yale² indicate. It is widely believed that education is one of the best instruments to narrow down social inequality. In what follows, I will refer to an example from Greece where policies related to the education of a Muslim minority has contributed to the narrowing of social inequality and to improving the status of the Muslim minority in Greece and its relations with the Christian majority. Data related to the Greek educational system and also the Muslim minority, not readily available elsewhere, are provided. Finally, religious education in Greece is briefly described.

II. The Situation in Greece

Greece is probably the only European country where religion is supervised by the ministry of education. The Ministry of Education in Greece has recently changed many names.

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¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_University_of_Missouri_protests

² <http://time.com/4106265/yale-students-protest/>

These include: Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs (1995-2009); Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning and Religious Affairs (2009-2012); Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, Culture and Sports (2012-2013); Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (2013-2015); Ministry of Culture, Education and Religious Affairs (January 2015-September 2015); Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs (since September 2015). Only two terms have remained unchanged in the title of the ministry, Education and Religious Affairs. This is an indication of the strong relations between Church and State in Greece and how religion is influencing education in Greece.

Examples of this relationship and the negative attitude of the Church for changing it are:

a. The 1988 clash between the then Minister of Education Antonis Tritsis and the Church, mainly in relation to the property of the Church that the State wanted to acquire (laws 1700/1987 on ‘the regulation of issue of church estate’, and 1811/1988 ‘the yielding of forest and agricultural estates of the monasteries of the Church of Greece to the public’). The Church took the case to the Greek Council of State, which ruled in favour of the state³. The Church insisted on its refusal of the law. This led to the replacement of Tritsis as Minister of Education and a subsequent agreement between Church and State that was never implemented⁴.

b. More recently, it was the teaching of religion in schools and the decision by the Ministry to change the curriculum that led to the replacement of the Minister Nikos Filis in November 2016⁵.

The main issues that preoccupy State/Church relations in education today are:

- A. The education of the minorities in Greece, especially the Muslim minority in West Thrace and the refugees.
- B. The teaching of religion in schools.

These two issues will be discussed further.

³ Council of State, decision 5057/1987, <http://www.valsamon.com/index.php?id=1&subid=1944>

⁴ Fokas, E. (2008), ‘A new role for the church? Reassessing the place of religion in the Greek public sphere’, *GreeSE Paper No 17*, Hellenic Observatory, LSE.

⁵ <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2016/11/05/greeces-church-and-lenders-are-the-winners-in-tsipras-government-reshuffle/>

A. The Education of the Minorities in Greece, Especially the Muslim Minority in Western Thrace

Some Facts about the Greek Educational System

The total number of pupils in Greece for the year 2015 was 1,369,032 breaking down as follows⁶:

Type of School	Pupils
Kindergarten	143,297
Primary School	607,746
High School (Gymnasium)	308,709
High School (Lyceum)	217,299
Vocational High School	89,005
Special Vocational Education and Training	2,976

The population of the Muslim minority in Western Thrace is about 100,000⁷.

The total number of Muslim pupils in Greece was in 2015 60,934 (38,552 in primary education and 22,382 in secondary education), 4.45% of the total pupil population in Greece. In Western Thrace alone, there are 7,181 Muslim pupils attending the bilingual minority schools (5,499 in primary education and 1,682 in secondary education). In 2003, there were 11,197. Muslims in Western Thrace are recognised as a minority according to the Lausanne Treaty (1923) and they are entitled to a bilingual educational system⁴.

The number of foreign students of non-Muslim origin in Greece is 27,405 (2015 data), which breaks down as follows⁷:

⁶ Ministry of Education (unofficial data).

⁷ Ministry of Education (unofficial data).

Type of School	TOTAL
Kindergartens	6,401
Primary Schools	15,296
High Schools (Gymnasium)	3,792
High Schools (Lyceum)	811
Vocational High Schools	1,095
Special Vocational Education and Training	10

In the 2008–2009 school year, the number of Muslim students in Greek state secondary schools in Western Thrace was 4,650, a ten-fold increase from the 400 two decades earlier.⁸ The same year, in the whole of Greece there were 112,082 migrant pupils from pre-school to secondary education including vocational education. This was almost 10% of the students in schools during that period (1,208,040)⁹ with the migrants coming mainly from Albania, Russia, Georgia and Bulgaria.

Affirmative Action for the Muslim Minority in West Thrace

In 1995, when George Papandreou (the later Prime Minister of Greece) was Minister of Education and I was General Secretary, it was decided that some positive discrimination should be given to the young pupils of the Muslim minority in the Thrace. It was thought that by doing so the conditions of the minority would improve substantially. A law was introduced by which 0.5% of those students admitted in every department of the universities and technical institutions in Greece, would come from candidates from the Muslim minority in Thrace.¹⁰ It should be mentioned that admission in Greek higher education institutions is only through a national exam that everyone who wants to enter the universities and technical institutions should sit in.¹¹ At that time, about 167,322 students used to take the exam of whom 45,786 students were admitted¹².

⁸ Huseyinoglu, A. (2012), *The Development of Minority Education at the South-easternmost Corner of the EU: The Case of Muslim Turks in Western ThraceGreece*, PhD diss., University of Sussex.

⁹ I.PO.DE. (2008), *Statistical elements for migrants and Greeks from countries of former Soviet Union*.

¹⁰ [Law 2341/6](#) October 1995, Article 2, Paragraph 1.

¹¹ Legislation no.152.11/B3/790, government gazette B, 129/5 March, 1996.

¹² Ministry of Education (unofficial data).

This was a highly controversial decision and it was challenged in the Council of State¹³. Since 1964 when entrance to universities started to be determined only by the results of the national exam, there had never been any exemption or positive discrimination. This legislation was challenged in the Council of State on May 2, 1996. The claim was that the law was unconstitutional because it treated Greek students with different standards based on religion. Equal opportunity in the national exams for all candidates is considered as fundamental for the Greek people. The Court turned down the challenge. The ruling of the court did not address the issue directly¹⁰. The claimants were Christian orthodox students from Thrace who argued that they had a lower chance of getting entrance to the university since some places were reserved for the Muslim minority. The argument of the majority ruling of the Court was that the claimants had, in fact, a higher chance of getting entrance to higher education. This because they had to compete with fewer candidates, given that the places for the Muslim minority were extra places provided especially for them. So, the Muslim candidates would not count to the general student population competing for the total number of places available to candidates. Five judges sided with the majority. There was a strong descent by two members of the Council. Their argument was that such positive discrimination is not allowed by the Greek constitution and that competition among candidates of only the same religion would result in an easier and privileged way of accessing higher education. This provision of the law was never overturned since then and the results in narrowing the gap of social inequality between the Muslim minority and the rest of Greece are very visible today.

Below are data for candidates from the Muslim minority and their success in the last three years¹⁴.

Muslim Candidates from Western Thrace in the National Entrance Exams for Higher Education		
Year	Positions available	Enrollment in HE
2015	629	493
2014	628	490
2013	614	468

¹³ Council of State, Decision 3118/19 June 1996.

¹⁴ Ministry of Education (unofficial data).

Clearly, there are more positions available for graduates from the Muslim minority than candidates. So, every one of them can have a place in higher education. This would not be the case without the affirmative action law, since the performance of the Muslim candidates in the national exams has always been inferior to that the rest of the candidates, especially in disciplines of high demand like Medicine, Law and Engineering where they could rarely, if ever, get access.

In 2011, as Deputy Minister of Education responsible for the national entrance exams, I introduced another affirmative action legislation by which other disadvantaged groups of the Greek society would be given a special quota for entering the universities.¹⁵ It included candidates of families with three or more children, candidates that were twins, triplets or more, candidates with siblings studying already in the University, candidates from families with victims of terrorism, etc. These quotas varied from university to university and department to department according to the size of the department and the demand for places in each department. Unfortunately, the Council of State struck down this legislation by arguments similar to the dissenting opinion of the 1996 ruling.¹⁶ This is an indication of the importance of the 1996 legislation, given that it seems impossible to introduce affirmative action legislation in the national exams for university entrance.

B. The Teaching of Religion in Schools

The teaching of religion is compulsory for all pupils and it is taught in all school units of primary and secondary education¹⁷. It is a catechetical subject aiming to foster faith and is an important factor of the national-religious identity construction of young Greeks. The curriculum contains basic content derived more from ‘Theology’ (related to a particular religion and faith) instead of ‘Religious studies’ (related to different religions, cultures and traditions)¹⁸. It is possible for pupils who are not Christian Orthodox, and invoke grounds of religious conscience, to be relieved from attending the course. The number of pupils exempted from the religious course in 2015 was 5,253 (290 in primary education (0.05%))

¹⁵ [Law 3966/24 May 2011](#).

¹⁶ Rulings 986-987-988/2014.

¹⁷ Article 16, Paragraph 2 of the Greek Constitution.

¹⁸ Koukounaras Liagkis, M. (2015), ‘Religious Education in Greece: A New Curriculum, An Old Issue’, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 37(2), 153-169

and 4,963 in secondary education (0.8%)¹⁹.

According to the 2011 new framework for compulsory education, entitled ‘New School’, there is a pilot scheme implemented in 188 schools of primary and secondary education. In this pilot teaching, teachers are free within the context of the subjects to devise their own syllabus.²⁰ The basic aim of the new curriculum remains religious literacy and it is focused on educating citizens so as to develop religious consciousness, to enable individuals to begin to make sense of conflicting and contradictory understandings of the universe and their place in it, to be open to dialogue and tolerant to diversity.²¹

The discussion in relation to the teaching of religion in schools was revived lately and created a major confrontation between the Minister of Education and the Church²².

There was a disagreement between the Archbishop of the Greek orthodox Church, Ieronymos and the Minister of Education, Nikos Filis. The Minister was arguing that the religion curriculum should change and be more like religious studies, rather than be taught on the basis of catechism²³. This resulted in the replacement of the Minister of Education, Filis, in the 4th of November 2016 Government reshuffle²⁴.

Furthermore, Ecclesiastical education is provided in Ecclesiastical Gymnasia, the Unified Ecclesiastical Lycea, the Higher Ecclesiastical Academies and Second Chance Seminary Schools. These educational units are productive faculties of the Orthodox Church in Greece and supervised by the ministry of Education.²⁵

The Ecclesiastical Gymnasia and Lycea offer secondary education, and the Higher

¹⁹ Ministry of Education (unofficial data).

²⁰ Kalantzis, M. and Cope, B. (2012), *New Learning. Elements of a Science of Education*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

²¹ Koukounaras Liagkis, M. (2015), ‘Religious Education in Greece: A New Curriculum, An Old Issue’, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 37(2), 153-169; Ministry of Education & Pedagogical Institute (2011), *Teacher’s Guide. RE for Primary and Secondary Education*. 100-101.

²² Koukounaras Liagkis, M. (2013), ‘Religious Education in Greek Public Schools in Western Thrace: Identifying Controversial Issues’, *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(11), 274-81.

²³ The National Herald, 21 September 2016 (<http://www.thenationalherald.com/136208/abp-ieronimos-opposes-schools-teaching-religions/>)

²⁴ <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2016/11/05/greeces-church-and-lenders-are-the-winners-in-tsipras-government-reshuffle/>

²⁵ Law 3432/2006, government gazette A, 14/3 February 2006.

Ecclesiastical Academies are part of the higher education system. The Second Chance Seminary Schools are part of lifelong learning. Education in all these schools is free of charge.

In 2015, there were 7 Ecclesiastical Gymnasia and 3 Ecclesiastical Lycea in Greece, attended by 545 and 230 pupils, respectively²⁶. These schools are managed directly by the Greek Orthodox Church, which defines the content of the curriculum, while the curriculum of religious education in the rest of the schools is being defined by the Ministry of Education.

As a closing remark, I would say that educational policies related to the teaching of religion to minorities in Greece are critical political issues for the country, especially because of the financial crisis²⁷ and the refugee waves and they have to be treated with caution and sobriety. Since the latest refugee crisis in Europe, Greece has been receiving more refugees than any other European country²⁸. Even with this large refugee wave, Greece has kept a tradition that all children of the refugees, no matter whether their parents are legal immigrants or not, are entitled to get education in the Greek educational system. In fact, at the beginning of the 2016 school year, all children of refugees have been accommodated in the Greek educational system²⁹. This has been praised by many world leaders (US President Obama, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon etc.) who have expressed their admiration for Greece.

²⁶ Ministry of Education (unofficial data).

²⁷ The Greek government-debt crisis (also known as the Greek Depression) is the sovereign debt crisis faced by Greece in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007–08. The Greek crisis started in late 2009, triggered by the turmoil of the Great Recession, structural weaknesses in the Greek economy, and revelations that previous data on government debt levels and deficits had been undercounted by the Greek government. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_government-debt_crisis)

²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis

²⁹ <http://www.amna.gr/english/article/15422/School-bell-rings-for-children-refugees-in-Greece>