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Religious diversity and cultural pluralism in Greece: Mapping of the situation and educational prospects

Christos N. Tsironis

Abstract

The following analysis presents and studies the religious diversity and cultural pluralism in Greece. The Church of Greece (The Greek Orthodox Church) is the established/ majority church in Greece while older and newer religious communities live in the country along with an unspecified number of people that don't have any affiliation with a religious community. The Greek state ensures access to education for all children regardless of their ethnic origin, or their cultural and religious affiliation. The analysis presents data of school attendance in preschool and school classes focusing on the mapping of the cultural and religious diversity in the Greek education and on the relevant challenges in a modern, democratic, and inclusive school. A meaningful fact in this perspective is that the University Faculties of Theology and Education in Greece are developing curricula and training programs for pre- and in-service teachers to develop their knowledge and awareness on cultural and religious issues. The analysis concludes with the framing of the religious education role and the current challenges and perspectives in the field of education.

Key words: diversity, religious communities, Greek education, religious education

A. Introduction

After World War II and the international rearrangements that followed, various theories were developed trying to interpret the place of religion in the modern environment. Not few were those who interpreted phenomena like the separation of religion and politics, the weakening of the



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normative character of religious teaching as well as the declining of religious service attendance in the multicultural democracies of Europe, in the USA and elsewhere as presage of the withdrawal of the religion from the public space. Some people even risked the prediction that the phenomenon of the religions will disappear in the modern world.

Nevertheless, today one can note that the religion(s) element not only still exists in modern societies, but it also constitutes a field of particular interest for a wide range of scientific approaches, of political and social analysis, but also for a dialogue-sometimes of convergence and sometimes of confrontation- in the public space. The religious communities are rearranged internationally, they redefine their activities and their way of expression, and they are reorganizing their present and structures within the environment of modern multicultural democracies. The endless mobility of people and exchange of ideas, images, goods, and practices¹ create new conditions and new challenges of religious expression and of social realization of the religious values, New and dynamic processes of the collective identities structuring come to the fore. The freedom of religious faith and beliefs, expressions and practices are crucial in the modern democracies, and they are related with the human rights, the Rule of Law, the social norms, the public space and the public order, the dialogue on issues of personal and collective liberties, the identity, and many others.

These issues appear rather often in the education area for several reasons: young people are always the most sensitive recipients of change and consequently the relevant debates appear in schools and generally in the education field with an extreme velocity and multimodality. Moreover, the educational policy is an important issue of the general political directions of modern societies. It is in this field that the basic social priorities, values, and targets are being projected, cultivated, and

¹ Arjun Appadurai talks about the creation of new “identity landscapes” created by a constant (inter)movement of people, images, ideas, and other, and characterized by parallel tendencies of homogeneity but also heterogeneity. Under these circumstances the local element is in dialogue with the global and forms new “ethnoscapes” that is people and cultures in interaction through many and individual capacities as residents, refugees, tourists etc and “mediascapes”. The aspects of cultural (inter)movement are completed by ideoscapes, technoscapes and financescapes. Appadurai Arj., “Global Ethnoscapes. Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology”, in R. G. Fox (Ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology. Working in the Present*, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991, 191–210. Appadurai Arj., *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.





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promoted. Therefore, the political stake is very important. Especially as it concerns the today's condition it should be underlined that in the educational field people of every community group and of every identity reference come together having the fundamental right of equal participation. This fact favors the expression of religious identity, the claim of conditions of security and the acknowledgment of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.² Furthermore, an increase in the phenomenon of radicalization among young people has been recorded in recent decades. It is also with great anxiety observed that in certain cases the people involved in social and political conflicts and even more in terrorist actions might have been youngsters that grew up in a European society. This concern gives direct priority to the development of an educational system that cultivates respect, dialogue, and collaboration instead of polarization, of a defensive communitarianism and of the closed communities and of the social tensions in the European societies. Finally, it is important to note the fact that diversity is not only appearing *between* communities but also *within* the communities. This fact reinforces the need for a better understanding of the role that religions hold in mobilizing social action and in constructing a broader dialogue on the role of values, of moral principles, of worship and religious practices in the configuration of the public space in multicultural societies³.

B. Religious diversity in the Greek reality: A mapping attempt

Sociological studies and the modern social theory have demonstrated through the comparison of data coming from many and different countries that in the late modernity the meaning of diversity

² Article 10, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (2000/C 364/01): «1. Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right involves the freedom of change of religion or beliefs, as well as the free expression of religion or its beliefs, personally or collectively, publicly, or privately, with worship, education, the exercise of religious duties and the ceremonies”. The constitutional provisions in Greece for the protection of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as the international legal frame of reference are presented by the General Secretariat on the web page: <https://www.minedu.gov.gr/gepo-menu-m/nomothesia-2/26522-syntagma-2>. Access: 22.03.2022.

³ See also: Ferrari S., Pastorelli S. (Eds.), *Religion in Public Spaces: A European Perspective*. London: Ashgate, 2012. Beckford, J. Public religions and the postsecular: critical reflections. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, v. 51, n. 1, 2012, 1-15. Calhoun, C. (Ed.). *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.





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receives much more broader and complicated dimensions. The differentiation regarding the cultural or even the religious reference, the moral choices, the way of life, the traditions, and the way of participating in modern societies exist to a great extent as built-in realities. Diversity therefore exists not only between different communities but also within the communities⁴. Even though religious communities present a much greater inner cohesion, stability, and tendency for homogeneity (in comparison with other institutions) and seem to develop over time ways of cultivating and controlling this inner homogeneity with doctrines, cult practices, long-lived traditions, and establishment of certain models, the development of differentiation tendencies is recorded in various cases.

The rise of extremism, the acts of violence and terrorism *despite* the declarations of religious organizations for peace, the split of the religious communities and the “cultural wars” affirm the existence of various differentiations and tendencies on the religious field. At the same time, they are probably leading to a cautious attitude over possible generalizations. So, when it comes to “homodox” and “heterodox”- about “Christians” or “Muslims”, it is wise to perceive these categorizations as methodological choices. These categorizations could help the general understanding of religion phenomenon, but also should be always studied separately. Therefore, when we talk about the “Muslims” in a country there should always be a particular distinctive understanding approach as it concerns which “Muslim communities” in this country. This methodological approach should be applied for every religious community in the same country, instead of a generalized grouping.

Under these circumstances, the map of the religious communities in Greece contains a large majority religious group, older and newer religious communities but also an unspecified number of people that don't have or don't want to have any affiliation to do with a religious community. Therefore, there is a majority religious group, minority religious communities, Christian and non-Christian communities, and older and newer religious communities. The largest religious community is the orthodox Church of Greece, which has religious, cultural, political, and social bonds with

⁴ Beck U., *A God of One's Own: Religion's Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence*, Cambridge, Malden, MA, Polity, 2010.





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modern -but not only- Greece. The Orthodox Church as prevailing (Constitution, Article 3, par.1. “1. The prevailing religion in Greece is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ.”)⁵, is the Church of most Greeks and it is recognized as an important entity and institution regarding issues of the religion, the culture, and the education of the country. It has 81 H. Dioceses and the Archdiocese of Athens while in the country there are also 8 Dioceses in Crete as well as the Archdiocese of Crete, as well as five more Dioceses in the Dodecanese (and the Exarchate of Patmos). There are also other Christian communities, like the Roman Catholic Church with special historical bonds in certain islands of the Cyclades and in others like Corfu. The R/Catholic Church is the second in size Christian community, and its members are raising due to people who came to Greece as economic migrants. There are also the protestant-evangelical communities mostly in urban centers. Additional reference should also be done in the various orthodox churches of an ethnic character, like the Coptic Christians, or other communities like the Anglicans, the Pentecostals, and finally communities with rather fewer members. The Muslim community⁶ is concentrated mainly in Thrace and it is recognized as a religious minority with its rights recognized by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). This community has members that belong in different language and even ethnic groups (Pomaks, Turkish-born, Roma,), while new communities of Muslim refugees and immigrants are developed in the urban centers in the last years, which in certain cases belong in different religious sub-groups (Sunnis, Shiites etc.). This confirms the initial hypothesis on the development of inner diversifications. The Jewish community⁷ was rather prosperous in Greece and has a special importance because it is consisted by the Greek Jewish Holocaust survivors. Thessaloniki had a very important worldwide center of the Jewish

⁵ See: <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/en/Vouli-ton-Ellinon/To-Politevma/Syntagma/> Access: 02.05.2022

⁶ Tsitselikes K., *Old and New Islam in Greece: From historical minorities to immigrant newcomers*. Leiden, Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2012. Ziaka Agg., *To Islám sti Byzantiní, Metabuzantiní Kai Neóterh Ellhnikí Grammatéia: Polemikí kai Díalógos*, Thessaloniki: PAMAK, 2016. Asemakopoulou F., Chrestidou-Lionaraki S., *H μουσουλμανική μειονότητα της Θράκης και οι ελληνοτουρκικές σχέσεις*, Athens: Livane, 2002. Askouni N., *H εκπαίδευση της μειονότητας στη Θράκη. Από το περιθώριο στην προοπτική της κοινωνικής ένταξης*, Athens: Alexandeia, 2006.

⁷ Naar D. E. *H Θεσσαλονίκη των Εβραίων. Ανάμεσα στην Οθωμανική Αυτοκρατορία και τη Νεότερη Ελλάδα*, Athens: Alexandeia, 2018; Saltiel L., *The Holocaust in Thessaloniki: Reactions to the Anti-Jewish Persecution, 1942-1943*, London: Routledge 2020; Karampampas An., *Στα ίχνη των Εβραίων της Ελλάδας*, Athens: Psychogios, 2022; Sidiropoulou M. *Οι Έλληνες εβραίοι στη σύγχρονη Ελλάδα: η περιδίνηση στη νεωτερικότητα*, Thessaloniki: εκδ. ΠΑΜΑΚ, 2020.





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community. The Greek Jewish Community continues its presence in the Greek society even though has been dramatically reduced. Finally, there are the communities of Jehovah Witnesses, Sikhs⁸, Buddhists', Baha'i and others.

Specific quantitative data for the members of the religious communities are not officially kept, as these data are sensitive personal data. However, the Orthodox Church of Greece counts a significant number of members in the general population, taken in consideration the percentage of the baptized and based on relatively recent research, such as Eurobarometer (2005), Kappa Research (2015) and others. According to the first research (Eurobarometer) the percentage of the Greeks who state that they believe in the existence of God reaches 81%⁹, while according to the second research (Kappa Research) the percentage of those stating to belong to the orthodox faith reaches 81,4%¹⁰. Based on the above percentages it seems that there is a solid religious and cultural reference to the Orthodox Tradition, something which is also evident from the thousand churches, the monasteries, the Holy Springs, and the holy places that are scattered around the Greek territory. On the other hand, research confirm the reduced participation in Church life and the distinction between the religious commitment and everyday life in Greece. Studies rather show a variation of attitudes and reactions in the religious community concerning the presence and the role of faith in the life of Greeks but also in the collective reference of the country. In a recent study¹¹ Greece has a very high position between countries of the so-called Western World regarding the importance of faith in God for the development and cultivation of moral values, while 80% answers that religion is important or very important in their lives. Research highlights a variety of diversions within the population depending on age, income, educational level etc.

⁸ Papageorgiou N., *Θρησκεία και μετανάστευση. Η κοινότητα των Σιχ στην Ελλάδα*. Thessaloniki: Kornelia Sfakianaki, 2011.

⁹ See Special EUROBAROMETER 225, "Social values, Science & Technology", 2005, 9-10.

¹⁰ See Κάπα Research, Πανελλαδική έρευνα. Πάσχα, Θρησκευτικές συνήθειες, Εκκλησία, Πίστη & Κοινωνικές αντιλήψεις. 2015.4: https://kaparesearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/KapaVima_Religion_GR.pdf πρόσβαση: 16.03.2022.

¹¹ Tamir Chr., A. Connaughton and Ar. M. Salazar, *The Global God Divide*. Spring 2019 Survey Data, Pew Research Center, July 20, 2020: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/20/the-global-god-divide/> access: 14.03.2022.





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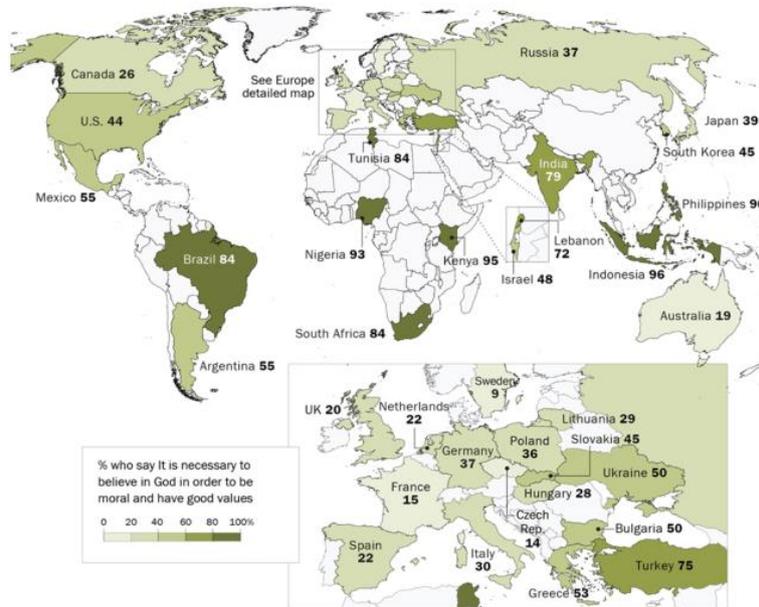
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Majorities in emerging economies connect belief in God and morality

% who say it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values



Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey, Q30.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2019 Survey Data

In another research, conducted during the pandemic, Greeks in the question “where do you find meaning in your life” responded “to the family” at 54% while the faith is a choice that ranks low between the given answers¹². It probably seems that “the phenomena of individualized approach to the religious life and the disconnection of religious faith from the practices and institutions of the religious communities (believing without belonging or belonging without believing) make their appearance in the Greek space as well”... It’s therefore necessary that every analysis must take into consideration that “... the most inner dimensions of the religious experience remain almost inaccessible for the social recording and analysis. So measurable recordings of participation of the

¹² Silver L., P. van Kessel, Ch. Huang, L. Clancy and Sn. Gubbala, What Makes Life Meaningful? Views From 17 Advanced Economies, Pew Research Center, November 18, 2021: https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/11/PG_11.18.21_meaning-of-life_Topline.pdf access: 14.03.2022



ΑΡΙΣΤΟΤΕΛΕΙΟ
ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ
ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗΣ



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ecclesiastical life can offer a general view of the incorporation of religion in the structural function of the society, but it should not be forgotten that they are being formed in a dynamic, almost liquid field of social change.”¹³.

Regarding the other religious communities in Greece, General Secretariat for Religious Affairs under the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs does not keep numerical data of members but has data on the existence of religious communities that are registered in Greece by religion and doctrine as well as on the places of worship that they have. After a request to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs for providing data in order to write the current study in the context of the *Innovative Religious Education NEtwork: educating to the religious diversity (IRENE) project* (ERASMUS+ programme), relevant information derived and the analytical data appear in the table that follows¹⁴:

	CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES PER DOGMA	TOTAL OF WORSHIP HOUSES
A	CATHOLICS	228
B	PROTESTANTS	304
B1	ANGLICANS	4
B2	EVANGELICALS	98
	a. EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF GREECE	38
	b. SOCIETY OF FREE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES OF GREECE	46
	c. EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF THESSALONIKI	2
	d. SOCIETY OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHES	8
	e. ARMENIANS	1

¹³ See also Tsironis C. N., «Οι έρευνες για τη θρησκευτικότητα στη σύγχρονη Ελλάδα. Επιστημολογικά προλεγόμενα», in *Culture and Research*, Vol. 1|2012, 67-82: <http://ejournals.lib.auth.gr/culres/article/view/2715>

¹⁴ Υπουργείο Παιδείας και Θρησκευμάτων, Γενική Γραμματεία Θρησκευμάτων, Διεύθυνση Θρησκευτικής Διοίκησης, Τμήμα Διοικητικών Υποθέσεων & Μητρώου, 16/03/2022 Αρ. Πρωτ.: 29722/Θ1





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	<i>f. GERMAN SPEAKING</i>	3
B3	PENTECOSTALS	109
	<i>a. THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH OF PENTECOST</i>	17
	<i>b. FREE APOSTOLIC CHURCH OF PENTECOSTE</i>	92
B4	THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS	3
B5	ADVENTISTS	10
B6	OTHER NO ORTHODOX	80
C	CHRISTIANS JEHOVAH WITNESSES	104
D	ORTHODOX (PRECHALCEDONIAN)	14
	EGYPTIAN COPTIC ORTHODOX	4
	ETHIOPIANS	1
	ARMENIANS	9
	SYRIANS	1
E	GENUINE ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS (Old Calendars)	195
	OTHER NO CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES	
A	JEWISH COMMUNITIES	13
B	BUDDISTS	5
C	HINDUISTS	3
D	ISLAM	14
E	BAHA'I	6
F	GREEK NATIONAL RELIGION (NEW PAGANISM)	1
G	ANCIENT GREEK RELIGION (NEW PAGANISM)	1

It is true that in the last decades new religious communities are emerge in Greece due to the migrations, and that there are not only the horizontal categories of diversity but also the vertical ones. In the horizontal categories are included the particular cultural aspects of identity concerning the language, the religion, the cultural, ethnic or any other reference. On the other hand, the vertical



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categories are related to the social and economic situation, gender and other social aspects that define, give meaning, or favor empathy regarding the cultural diversity¹⁵. It's obvious that the socioeconomically degraded groups of students face greater chance of depreciation, social stigma, and marginalization because of their diversity.

C. Institutional framework and educational challenges

Public institutions don't officially record data that are directly referring to the religious beliefs of children studying in Greek schools. Consequently, the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) does not grant –for reason of confidentiality – data for refugee students in Greece and their religious beliefs. Thus, the connection, comparison, and analysis of the existing data mainly for preschool and the primary education, along with middle school, (school attendance of children from ages 05-15) are very useful to understand the current situation. During the school year 2019/2020¹⁶ in preschool education were registered 6671 foreign students (male 3523, female 3148), from whom 541 arrived from EU countries and 5657 from countries outside the EU, while 473 have been registered were of unknown nationality. In the primary education have been registered 24655 students, from whom 1777 arrived from EU countries, 19143 from non-EU countries, while 3735 were of unknown nationality. In the lower secondary education schools (gymnasium) have been registered 10549 foreign students, from whom 852 arrived from EU countries, 9314 from non-EU countries, and 383 were of unknown nationality. It should be noted that while in the entire student population, children with diverse ethnic

¹⁵ See Tsironis C. N., *Κοινωνικός αποκλεισμός και εκπαίδευση στην ύστερη νεωτερικότητα: Προκλήσεις στην ελληνική εκπαιδευτική πραγματικότητα*. Thessaloniki: Vaniyas, 2003, 298 passim. Plexousaki, A. *Κοινωνικοπολιτισμικό πλαίσιο: Πολιτισμός και Σχολείο*, Κλειδιά και Αντικλειδιά. Athens: Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, University of Athens, 2003.

¹⁶ SOURCE: ELSTAT. The data was asked and analyzed within the research context of the *Innovative Religious Education Network: educating to the religious diversity (IRENE) project* (ERASMUS+ programme), data have been uploaded in the web pages: <https://www.statistics.gr/el/statistics/-/publication/SED11/> and <https://www.statistics.gr/el/statistics/-/publication/SED12/> and <https://www.statistics.gr/el/statistics/-/publication/SED21/> access: 01.04.2022.





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origins or religious beliefs do not appear to have a rather high percentage, there are areas or school units in which the participation rate can be very high¹⁷.

ΠΙΝΑΚΑΣ 14: ΠΡΩΤΟΒΑΘΜΙΑ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗ - ΠΡΟΣΧΟΛΙΚΗ ΑΓΟΓΗ (ΝΗΠΙΑΓΩΓΕΙΑ)
ΑΛΛΟΔΑΠΟΙ ΜΑΘΗΤΕΣ ΚΑΤΑ ΠΕΡΙΦΕΡΕΙΑ, ΝΟΜΟ, ΦΟΡΕΑ ΚΑΙ ΦΥΛΟ
ΣΤΟΙΧΕΙΑ ΛΗΞΗΣ ΣΧΟΛΙΚΟΥ ΕΤΟΥΣ 2019/2020

Περιφέρεια, Νομός	Σύνολο			ΧΩΡΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΕΕ			ΧΩΡΩΝ ΕΚΤΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΕΕ			ΑΓΝΩΣΤΗΣ ΥΠΗΚΟΟΤΗΤΑΣ		
	ΣΥΝΟΛΟ	ΑΡΡΕΝΕΣ	ΘΗΛΕΙΣ	ΣΥΝΟΛΟ	ΑΡΡΕΝΕΣ	ΘΗΛΕΙΣ	ΣΥΝΟΛΟ	ΑΡΡΕΝΕΣ	ΘΗΛΕΙΣ	ΣΥΝΟΛΟ	ΑΡΡΕΝΕΣ	ΘΗΛΕΙΣ
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
ΓΕΝΙΚΟ ΣΥ	6671	3523	3148	541	283	258	5657	3012	2645	473	228	245

ΠΙΝΑΚΑΣ 21: ΠΡΩΤΟΒΑΘΜΙΑ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗ - ΔΗΜΟΤΙΚΑ ΣΧΟΛΕΙΑ
ΑΛΛΟΔΑΠΟΙ ΜΑΘΗΤΕΣ, ΚΑΤΑ ΠΕΡΙΦΕΡΕΙΑ, ΝΟΜΟ, ΦΟΡΕΑ ΚΑΙ ΦΥΛΟ
ΣΤΟΙΧΕΙΑ ΛΗΞΗΣ ΣΧΟΛΙΚΟΥ ΕΤΟΥΣ 2019/2020

ΠΕΡΙΦΕΡΕΙΑ, ΝΟΜΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΦΟΡΕΑΣ	ΣΥΝΟΛΟ			ΧΩΡΩΝ ΕΕ			ΧΩΡΩΝ ΕΚΤΟΣ ΕΕ			ΑΓΝΩΣΤΗΣ ΥΠΗΚΟΟΤΗΤΑΣ		
	Σ	Α	Θ	Σ	Α	Θ	Σ	Α	Θ	Σ	Α	Θ
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
ΓΕΝΙΚΟ ΣΥ	24655	13027	11628	1777	910	867	19143	10203	8940	3735	1914	1821

Δευτεροβάθμια εκπαίδευση - ΓΥΜΝΑΣΙΑ
Πίνακας 15: Αλλοδαποί μαθητές κατά περιφέρεια, νομό, φορέα, υπηκοότητα και φύλο
Λήξη σχολικού έτους 2019/2020

Περιφέρεια, νομός και φορέας	Σύνολο			Χωρών της ΕΕ			Χωρών εκτός ΕΕ			Άγνωστης υπηκοότητας		
	Σ	Α	Θ	Σ	Α	Θ	Σ	Α	Θ	Σ	Α	Θ
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Σύνολο	10549	5781	4768	852	439	413	9314	4959	4355	383	383	

Source: ELSTAT

The Greek state should ensure access to education for all children regardless of their ethnic origin, their cultural or religious references. The recognition of the right to education and of the necessity to protect the integrity of life of all children living in the country has been institutionally guaranteed both by ratifying of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989/ratification in Greece, Law 2101/92) as well as by the relevant Greek legislation on the protection and ensuring of participation of all children. Foreign children have the right not to participate in religion course¹⁸, although in many cases they do choose to join these classes. During the last years the University Faculties of Theology and Education in Greece are developing special training programs for teachers to enforce their knowledge and awareness on cultural and religious issues. These efforts for more than 15 years are extended to all levels of education and are

¹⁷ Kesidou, A., Διαπολιτισμική εκπαίδευση: μία εισαγωγή. Ένταξη παιδιών παλιννοστούντων και αλλοδαπών στο σχολείο, στο: *Οδηγός Επιμόρφωσης - Διαπολιτισμική εκπαίδευση και αγωγή*, Thessaloniki: EPPAS, 2008, 21-36.

¹⁸ According to L. 1566/1985 - OGG 167/A/30-9-1985 the Religion course is included with the same arrangements that apply to all other sources of the curriculum program with the condition that (article 1, a.) "The freedom of the religious conscience is inviolable", and at the same time is recognized the right of students and guardians to opt out, and special provisions are made for the religious education at the Muslim minority of Thrace in accordance with the Joint Ministerial Decision n. 182721/A3/29-11-2013.





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complemented with special courses in the University programs, where pre-service teachers learn how to respond to the present conditions of the Greek society and the educational environment. Moreover, research is carried out and reports are being published on ethnic-religious groups aiming for a better understanding of their presence in the Greek society¹⁹.

Over the last years an unprecedented number of refugees from the Middle East and other countries have reached Greece. Since April 2016 many refugee accommodation structures are operating in Greece. The Greek State²⁰ has taken certain measures to face the basic issue of education of minor refugees (L. 4415/2016 and L. 4547/2018)²¹. With a Joined Ministerial Decision of 2016 (No 152360/ΓΔ4) it was regulated the integration of minor refugees in the public school. Special Reception Structures for the Education of the Refugee Children (**Α.Υ.Ε.Π.**), support and information programs as well as educational material were created by the Ministry of Education and with the participation of NGOs, humanitarian organizations and church institutions.

D. The Greek educational reality and the religious diversity: challenges and directions

In the modern world, there is a constant need for communication and development of synergy skills and peaceful conflict resolution. This need does not only emerge in periods where the migration flow is high. As Hannerz noted early on: «From the First World metropolis to Third World village and popular culture, by way of missionaries, consultants, critical intellectuals and small-town

¹⁹ See Sotireli G., *Θρησκεία και εκπαίδευση*, Athens: Ant. Sakkoulas, 1993. Karamouzis P., *Πολιτισμός και Διαθρησκειακή Αγωγή. Η συγκριτική διδακτική των θρησκειών και της θρησκευτικότητας στο σύγχρονο σχολείο*. Thessaloniki: Epikentro 2012. Karamouzis P., Athanasiadis E., *Θρησκεία, Εκπαίδευση, Μετανεωτερικότητα. Η Θρησκευτική Αγωγή στο Σύγχρονο Σχολείο*, Athens: Ekd. Kritike, 2011. Zampeta E., *Σχολείο και θρησκεία*, Athens: Themelio, 2003. Tsironis, C. N., Stamou N., Από την προσφυγιά στο σχολείο: Τα παιδιά των Γεζίιτι στην ελληνική εκπαίδευση, in Ασκούνη Ν., Θάνος Θ. (Eds), *Εθνοπολιτισμικές Διαφορές και Ανισότητες στην Εκπαίδευση. Κοινωνικοί αποκλεισμοί και πορείες ένταξης*. Athens: Gutenberg, 2021, 66-82. Papageorgiou N.- Tsironis, C. N., «Φύλο, Μετανάστευση και Οικονομική κρίση στην Ελλάδα: Η τρέχουσα συζήτηση» in *Culture and Research*, Vol 2 (2013), p. 101-120 Ανάρτηση: <http://ejournals.lib.auth.gr/culres/article/view/3943/3995>

²⁰ For the Legislative frame related to refugees and asking for asylum see at Asylum Service: <https://migration.gov.gr/nomothesia-1-2/#metanasteusi>.

²¹ EE: European Commission > EACEA National Policies Platform > Eurydice: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions-33_el Access: 11.04.2022.





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storytellers, a conversation between cultures goes on»²². The basic educational goals for both educational initiatives and religious education are completed in a framework that includes **respect** for religious and cultural identity, the **inclusion** of all students and the **development of dialogue and collaboration skills**, as well as the familiarization and **deepening** in the tradition or identity of one's own.

Therefore, a proper and timely education-training of the school teachers on religious diversity is necessary, as well as for its relation with other forms of cultural diversity, because the teacher “is not a passive observer of students’ physical maturation....On the contrary, he/she carefully organizes the factors, the ways, and the means of this process and tries to activate the characteristics of the human resources in the classroom, with benefits both in a collective and individual level”²³. To this end, new adaptations have been made to Higher Education curricula, so that teachers can respond to the new social conditions of the classroom by inserting courses, such as sociology of education, intercultural and interreligious dialogue and more.

In the near future, religious identity seems to be an important aspect of the identity of children integrated in the Greek education system. The way in which religious reference will affect social reality, the children's inclusion, as well as the educational, social, and political perspectives and priorities of Greek society is a serious issue that concerns scientific research and enhances the need for new educational policies. The ability of religion to mobilize human action has been extensively explored²⁴. It is therefore important to understand the role of religions in motivating social action in a pluralistic environment, because the classroom is a field of multi-faceted interaction as “interaction

²² Hannerz, Ulf, ‘The World in Creolization’, *Africa* 57(4), 1987: 546–59 (here 555).

²³ Tsironis, C. N., Κοινωνική αλληλεπίδραση και κοινωνικές σχέσεις στο σχολείο. Ο ρόλος του εκπαιδευτικού στην ενσωμάτωση των μαθητών. Στο: *Ένταξη παιδιών παλιννοστούντων και αλλοδαπών στο σχολείο: Οδηγός Επιμόρφωσης - Διαπολιτισμική εκπαίδευση και αγωγή*, Thessaloniki: EPPAS, 2008, 123. See also: Chatzichrestou, Ch. *Διαφορετικότητα και πολιτισμός. Βιβλίο για τον εκπαιδευτικό δευτεροβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης*, Athens: Typothito, 2004. Sakka, D. (2009). The views of migrant and non migrant students on cultural diversity in the Greek classroom. *Social Psychology of Education*, Vol. 12, 21-41 (here 25).

²⁴ Wuthnow R., *Acts of Compassion. Caring For Others and Helping Ourselves*. New York: Princeton University Press, 1991. Wuthnow R., *Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004. Tsironis, C. N., *Θρησκεία και Κοινωνία στη Δεύτερη Νεωτερικότητα: Λόγοι, διάλογοι & αντίλογοι στο έργο του Ul. Beck*, Thessaloniki: Mparmpounakis, 2018.





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is realized in the form of collaboration, cooperation, conflict, distancing, active initiatives and passive reactions”²⁵. The question is whether religious identity is going to be soon a factor of peaceful dialogue and coexistence in the Greek school environment, as well as how this factor will interact with other cultural aspects of the identity. The possible emerge of new, hybrid cultural identities (such as those described in Derek Walcott’s emblematic verse “either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation”, "The Schooner Flight") is also a new question.

Equality in education remains a major social and political issue, that “is constantly proclaimed but never realized”²⁶. Inequality in the access of educational goods seems to play an important role in shaping and reproducing not only social inequality but also social exclusion, lack of opportunities for access to public goods and of social cohesion, and rise of radicalization. Religious identity does not in itself cause social inequality. However, the multiple levels of differentiation and the correspondent social discriminations are related to each other. If differentiation regarding social identity is combined with poverty, low educational level, and other elements of diversity, then this differentiation can determinately intensify social exclusion. So, in this case religion holds a double role: a. may contribute to an active attempt to dismantle racism and discrimination speech and b. it can and should turn public attention on the anthropological bases of the religious teaching (which is particularly true in the case of Orthodox tradition in Greece) on human equality and respect for the integrity of human life. Going from the micro-level of the local community (school, neighborhood, parish) at the macro-level of the international scene, religious education can also contribute to a peaceful dialogue between different political entities, cultures, and religions, to reconciliation and healing the wounds²⁷. In this respect, religion course can become par excellence course of reconciliation.

²⁵ Tsironis. C. N., *Κοινωνικός αποκλεισμός και εκπαίδευση στην ύστερη νεωτερικότητα: Προκλήσεις στην ελληνική εκπαιδευτική πραγματικότητα*. Thessaloniki: Vaniyas, 2003, 261-262.

²⁶ Piketty, T. (trans. Rendall S.), *A Brief History of Equality*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022, p. 176.

²⁷ As Robert Crawford notes “the benefit of understanding beliefs, customs and cultures of others is great; in addition, it is essential in a pluralistic society and in a globalized world to educate children for something like that ... Consequently, what we need to encourage is the conversation, the collaboration, and the brotherhood with the stranger and not the hostility and racism”, in: Crawford R., *What is Religion*, Athens: Savvalas, 2002, 170-171.





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Conclusions

The analysis of the situation in Greece confirms the initial hypothesis of developing differentiation not only *between* religious communities but also *within* them. After all, these data are also confirmed by similar trends internationally. This is an existing trend²⁸ that one can observe in the religious field. Pluralism seems to be a reality that brings new challenges, new questions, but also doubts for everything was taken for granted not only in the religious field but also in other areas of social life²⁹. In the modern environment of constant changes and rearrangements it seems that the lack of knowledge on religion can cause serious problems, and particularly the development of fundamentalist views and radical attitudes *enface* of every form of diversity prevailing in the social field, based on poor and instrumentalized information on religions. On the contrary, documented, and integrated knowledge about religions can contribute to a rational and democratic dialogue based on scientific knowledge and leads to the realization of the goals of modern democracies. Religious education that leads to learning *about* religion but also *with* religion³⁰ can be achieved in the best possible way if it is cultivated by Higher Education institutions and transferred to schools by well-educated teachers and trainers. In this case, knowledge and democratic dialogue can contribute to the restriction of extremism and instrumentalization of religious diversity.

Therefore, there is still space for the development of educational approaches aiming in a course of inclusion and equal participation, in the Greek society. Approaches according to which moderation, participation of children in education and the rational dialogue can create fertile

²⁸ Riis, O. Modes of Religious Pluralism under Conditions of Globalization. In: Koenig M & Guchteneire P. *Democracy and Human Rights in Multicultural Societies*. Hampshire, England: Ashgate; 2007, 251-266. Roy O. *Is Europe Christian?* Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2020.

²⁹ Response by Detlef Pollack: Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociology of Religion? in P. L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*. Boston: De Gruyter; 2014, 111-122.

³⁰ Jackson, R. "Teaching about Religions in the Public Sphere: European Policy Initiatives and the Interpretive Approach." *Numen* 55, no. 2/3 (2008): 151–82. Keast J. (Ed.), *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: A Reference Book for Schools*, Council of Europe CEED (2006)14, 2007.





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conditions so that the given multiculturalism of modern societies can be treated as a field of dialogue and development of social collaboration³¹.

In the field of intercultural education, the value of an ecosystemic theory (see also Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory 'EST'³²) has been emphasized in various ways. In the context of ecosystem planning, interventions are made at the level of educational policy and school classroom, concerning all children and the proper training of the teachers. The concept of identity is in any case par excellence multidimensional³³ and the approach of its various aspects demands a dynamic and sophisticated approach to the school environment. Especially, the role of sensitized και skilled teachers is important. As I noted on another occasion, teachers can become factors of positive change for their students: "Teachers therefore who seek to ensure the conditions of integration of all students:

- ✓ They explore and try to understand the social/cultural reality *of all* students. They give them opportunities of self-knowledge and deepening of their personal identity, because teachers and students who know their identity act and communicate without phobic attitude.
- ✓ They adapt the educational procedure to the students' needs, talents, and skills on an individual and collective level.
- ✓ They respond to the challenges that society puts in education (i.e. understating the difference and the possibility of cooperation in cultural pluralism).
- ✓ They enrich the educational process, the knowledge and own values horizon of the students and the simultaneous understanding of diversity in human principles, needs, characteristics.
- ✓ They promote the dialogue and interaction of students aiming at broadening interpersonal relations (exchange of information, approaching individual experiences with empathy) and

³¹ Cohen-Almagor, R. *Just, Reasonable Multiculturalism: Liberalism, Culture and Coercion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

³² See: "An ecological orientation points to the additional importance of relations between systems as critical to the child's development (e.g., the interaction between home and school, family and peer group)." In: Bronfenbrenner, U. (1974). Developmental research, public policy, and the ecology of childhood. *Child development*, 45(1), 1-5.

³³ Dragona, Th. (2003). *Ταυτότητες και Ετερότητες: Ταυτότητα και Εκπαίδευση*, Κλειδιά και Αντικλειδιά. Athens: Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, University of Athens.





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the critical understanding of social and international conditions in which their experience is included.

- ✓ They cultivate respect and interest in human life and put in critically explore stereotypes, prejudice, and other negative factors in social interaction "34.

As the above analysis showed, cultural pluralism in Greece is now a fact that also accompanied by religious pluralism. This reality brings to the fore the necessity of information, sensibilization, awareness and developing dialogue and synergy skills. To this end the four Schools of Theology that have been operating in Greece for decades have a de facto very important role. They are involved in the formation of primary and secondary educational curricula, in organizing educational and academic meetings, in the interchristian and interfaith dialogue on a national and international level. Especially, religion course can contribute to the general goals of education as a course that gives students the opportunity to know and understand the **religious experience**, to deepen into their own tradition and debate with the global developments of religious phenomenon.

In the description of the goals of the Religion education of Muslims students in Thrace, the Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs gives a comprehensive description of the aims of the official Greek educational policy today, regarding religious and cultural diversity in the Greek school: "The Religious Education today must respond to the modern educational needs of the students, serving, on the one hand, the general purposes of education and, on the other, a "religious literacy", that contributes to the creation of citizens religiously conscious and open to dialogue. This religious education aims at a religious literacy, but also at the sensibilization and the self-reflection of students as far as concern their own religious and moral concern."35. Modern pedagogical approaches acknowledge the role of religious education in the modern school. To achieve the above-

³⁴ Tsironis, C., Κοινωνική αλληλεπίδραση και κοινωνικές σχέσεις στο σχολείο. Ο ρόλος του εκπαιδευτικού στην ενσωμάτωση των μαθητών. Στο: Ένταξη παιδιών παλιννοστούτων και αλλοδαπών στο σχολείο: Οδηγός Επιμόρφωσης - Διαπολιτισμική εκπαίδευση και αγωγή, Θεσσαλονίκη: EPPAS, 2008, 123-140 (here: 130).

³⁵ <https://www.minedu.gov.gr/dimotiko-2/didaktea-yli-dimot/18393-29-02-16-proairetiki-i-didaskalia-tou-koraniou-gia-tous-mousoulmanous-mathites-tis-thrakis-2>





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mentioned objectives, good practices need to be collected and tested in different educational conditions and countries; use of research data and a long-term educational planning to create conditions that respect students' personality, the democratic principles of European Union and the aim of the complete development of students in primary and secondary school. The IRENE project is another essential step in this prospect.



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