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Recommendation 1720 (2005)¹

Education and religion

1. The Parliamentary Assembly forcefully reaffirms that each person's religion, including the option of having no religion, is a strictly personal matter. However, this is not inconsistent with the view that a good general knowledge of religions and the resulting sense of tolerance are essential to the exercise of democratic citizenship.

2. In its Recommendation 1396 (1999) on religion and democracy, the Assembly asserted: "There is a religious aspect to many of the problems that contemporary society faces, such as intolerant fundamentalist movements and terrorist acts, racism and xenophobia, and ethnic conflicts."

3. The family has a paramount role in the upbringing of children, including in the choice of a religious upbringing. However, knowledge of religions is dying out in many families. More and more young people lack the necessary bearings fully to apprehend the societies in which they live and others with which they are confronted.

4. The media – printed and audiovisual – can have a highly positive informative role. Some, however, especially among those aimed at the wider public, very often display a regrettable ignorance of religions, as shown for instance by the frequent unwarranted parallels drawn between Islam and certain fundamentalist and radical movements.

5. Politics and religion should be kept apart. However, democracy and religion should not be incompatible. In fact they should be valid partners in efforts for the common good. By tackling societal problems, the public authorities can eliminate many of the situations which can lead to religious extremism.

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 behaviour, 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.

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 favour a single one or encourage proselytising.

9. In Europe, there are various concurrent situations. Education systems generally – and especially the state schools in so-called secular countries – are not devoting enough resources to teaching about religions, or – particularly in countries where there is a state religion and in denominational schools – are focusing on only one religion. Some countries have prohibited the carrying or wearing of religious symbols in schools. These provisions have been judged as complying with the European Convention on Human Rights.

10. Unfortunately, all over Europe there is a shortage of teachers qualified to give comparative instruction in the different religions, so a European teacher training institute for that needs to be set up (at least for teacher trainers), which could benefit from the experience of a number of institutes and faculties in the different member countries that have long been researching and teaching the subject of comparative religion.

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.

12. The Assembly observes moreover that the three monotheistic religions of the Book have common origins (Abraham) and share many values with other religions, and that the values upheld by the Council of Europe stem from these values.

13. Accordingly, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

13.1. examine the possible approaches to teaching about religions at primary and secondary levels, for example through basic modules which would subsequently be adapted to the various educational systems;

13.2. promote initial and in-service teacher training in religious studies respecting the principles set out in the previous paragraphs;

13.3. envisage setting up a European teacher training institute for the comparative study of religions.

14. The Assembly also recommends that the Committee of Ministers encourage the governments of member states to ensure that religious studies are taught at the primary and secondary levels of state education, on the basis of the following criteria in particular:

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;

14.2. it should include, with complete impartiality, the history of the main religions, as well as the option of having no religion;

14.3. it should provide young people with educational tools that enable them to be quite secure in approaching supporters of a fanatical religious practice;

14.4. it must not overstep the borderline between the realms of culture and worship, even where a country with a state religion is concerned. It is not a matter of instilling a faith but of making young people understand why religions are sources of faith for millions;

14.5. teachers on religions need to have specific training. They should be teachers of a cultural or literary discipline. However, specialists in another discipline could be made responsible for this education;

14.6. the state authorities should look after teacher training and lay down the syllabuses which should be adapted to each country's peculiarities and to the pupils' ages. In devising these programmes, the Council of Europe will consult all partners concerned, including representatives of the religious faiths.

1. *Assembly debate* on 4 October 2005 (27th Sitting) (see [Doc. 10673](#), report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, rapporteur: Mr Schneider).

Text adopted by the Assembly on 4 October 2005 (27th Sitting).