



## Religious Education in the European Schools

*A unique and essential contribution to the next generation of Europeans*

### 1. Context and vision of the European Schools on Religious Education (RE)

Regarding the preamble of the Convention defining the Statute of the European School, these schools have the purpose to educate together the children of the staff of the European Union and to ensure the proper functioning of the European institutions.<sup>1</sup>

A leading principle of the schools is providing the possibility for the social and moral development of the school children.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, the Office of the Secretary General of the European Schools states:

*“In the "religion / moral" learning domain, parents and pupils in European schools have the freedom of choice according to their religious and philosophical orientations and conceptions. Through the respect of diversity but also the origins, convictions and respective religious identities, the students get to know in the context of the taught course the sources (religious culture, fundamental texts, rites, symbols, ...) of the religious or secular community which they and their respective parents have opted for (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim or moral course).<sup>3</sup>”*

In view of the curriculum reform proposals discussed for classes S6/S7<sup>4</sup>, we believe that an in-depth analysis of the relevance of religious education is necessary.

### 2. Why is Religious Education still relevant today in Europe?

#### a. Religious Education provides a space for the discovery of meaning and purpose

Religion has been a foundational force in the development of civilizations from their start. In Europe, Christianity and other religions have played a pivotal role in fostering education for generations throughout centuries. The role of religion for the

<sup>1</sup> PREAMBLE OF THE CONVENTION DEFINING THE STATUTE OF THE EUROPEAN SCHOOLS, 1994

<sup>2</sup> OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE EUROPEAN SCHOOLS, “The European Schools”, p.11, *Schola Europaea*, <https://www.eursc.eu/Documents/Brochure-en.pdf#search=religious%20education> s.n., “Principles and objectives”, *Schola Europaea*, <https://www.eursc.eu/en/European-Schools/principles>.

<sup>3</sup> OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL – PEDAGOGICAL DEVELOPMENT UNIT, “Catholic Religious Education – S1-S3”, 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Board of Governors of the European Schools: *Pedagogical Reform Working Group: Curricular Proposals* (2022-09-D-59-en-2)

development of the human person has always been recognised and cherished, as it **contributes to the integral unfolding of one's personality and takes into account the spiritual dimension of people's lives**. Religious education goes beyond memorization of doctrines and offers a unique space where students encounter existential questions, which are often unaddressed in curricula without RE. A balanced education must include both secular and religious components to foster **spiritual and moral formation alongside intellectual growth**.<sup>5</sup> Theological studies are integral to understanding the cultural and philosophical underpinnings of Western civilization.<sup>6</sup> This exploration of meaning and purpose equips students with valuable tools for navigating life's challenges. Religious involvement can **foster resilience and skills for young people** to cope with stress, anxiety and other mental challenges.

#### b. Religious Education enhances moral and ethical development

Religious Education offers a framework for students to explore ethical principles and develop a moral compass in today's more complex and relativistic world. Religious education has a positive effect on the moral development of children and educates pupils on the moral foundations of our societies, by making it easier for them to learn how to **live in interreligious and intercultural contexts with care and generosity, by learning how to respect the human dignity of each person**. Promoting core values of compassion, service and respect, which many religions share, is a tool to sustain a societal order, facilitate social justice and **encourage active citizenship skills**. At the European Schools (ES), the existing projects carried out in the RE periods are already boosting students to become engaged citizens, fulfilling the mission of the schools.

#### c. The importance of confessional religion

All religions are lived religions and, by definition, this includes questions of faith, beliefs, rituals, religious institutions, as well as the study of religious texts. The teaching of religion as a lived religion also contains the aspect of the **testimony of faith**, in addition to the mere transmission of knowledge. It is self-explanatory that such elements are not the bases of philosophy, which, even when studying religious philosophy, addresses primarily the questions of God and faith. In order to fully comprehend the nature of RE, a **confessional course is needed**, in which the religious and testimonial element of faith can be transmitted - an essential aspect that teachers can credibly provide. Failing to provide confessional RE in European Schools also poses obstacles to the families of European institutions officials to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions.

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<sup>5</sup> MARITAIN, Jacques: [Cirkev a štát](#). In *Člověk a štát*. Praha: Triáda, 2007. s 132 - 168.  
Pew Research Center. (2015). *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050*. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project

<sup>6</sup> Ward, L. R. (1978). Maritain's Philosophy of Education for Freedom. *The Review of Politics*, 40(4), 499-513.

#### d. Religious Education promotes social cohesion and prevents radicalisation

Religious education can act as a powerful tool for promoting **social cohesion and integration** within multicultural societies by fostering respect for various cultural and religious backgrounds. Religious education can even promote a nuanced understanding of and appreciation for diversity<sup>7</sup>, a sense of belonging, and shared values among students from different religious backgrounds, which can also counteract extremist narratives. By encouraging **critical reflection** on religious practices and teachings, RE helps to resist extremist ideologies that manipulate religious beliefs in the long run, fostering an awareness to interreligious dialogue that helps pupils build healthy relationships and develop their religious literacy. In multicultural contexts, RE promotes the discovery of the self and of one's **integral identity** that is necessary to engage in dialogue with others. At the European Schools, where the diversity of languages and cultures intertwines with the multiplicity of faiths and beliefs, pupils can learn about their own Religion and subsequently exchange with their peers on how their experience of faith is important to them and to others. The contribution of religions to intercultural learning have also been reinstated by the Council of Europe<sup>8</sup> and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)<sup>9</sup> on multiple occasions and add to the importance of religious education for dialogue between cultures and faiths. The European Schools, with their broad range of religious education from Christian denominations, Islam and Judaism, offer a special environment for developing dialogue skills.

#### e. Religious Education enhances European identity

Religious education helps students understand the **historical and cultural dimensions of yesterday and today's Europe**. It deepens the understanding of Europe's heritage that is directly linked to Christianity. The absence of confessional religious education from the curricula would mean one of the bases from which the founding fathers built the European Union is ignored. **Christian religious education**, in fact, promotes values such as dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law and fundamental rights, which are at the core of the European project. By teaching Religion, therefore, the European Union itself becomes stronger and more solidly anchored in its convictions and mission, united in soul through the diverse backgrounds that characterise it and a safe space of dialogue between religions, too.

### 3. Conclusion

In the context of the European Schools' curriculum, the teaching of RE – especially through the recently revised syllabi – contributes to the delivery of several **essential**

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<sup>7</sup> Gross, Z., & Rutland, S. D. (2019). *How in-faith religious education strengthens social cohesion in multicultural Australia*.

<sup>8</sup> Council of Europe, *Dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education - Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 and explanatory memorandum (2009)*, retrieved from: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education-and-religious-diversity/-/dimension-of-religions-and-non-religious-convictions-within-intercultural-education-recommendation-cm-rec-2008-12-and-explanatory-memorandum-2009->

<sup>9</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Decision 10/07. Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/f/29457.pdf>

**key competence** <sup>10</sup>, including civic competence, cultural awareness, personal development and literacy and multilingual competences (in fact, in several class levels, Religion is taught in the students' second language). Attending RE throughout the whole cycle permits the students to discuss the topics at increasingly higher didactic levels. In line with the European Parliament's report on the system of European Schools<sup>11</sup> to maintain "the current provision of religious and ethical education", it is evident that RE is paramount in the education of the next generations of EU citizens.

To value **European heritage** and to ensure a **holistic understanding of human dignity and the Common Good** within the school curricula, it is crucial to include confessional Religious Education as part of pupils' formation. For the sake of giving rise to respectful, self-aware and purpose-oriented future generations of adults, it is paramount that RE is taught, providing the possibility for learners at all stages of education to confront themselves with questions of **meaning, spirituality and vocation**. Moreover, Religious Education offers a wealth of positive implications, fostering a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world, boosting respect for religious diversity in our continent and beyond.

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<sup>10</sup> Key Competences for Lifelong Learning in the European Schools (2018), retrieved from:  
<https://www.eursc.eu/BasicTexts/2018-09-D-69-en-2.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> European Parliament resolution of 12 September 2023 on the system of European Schools: state of play, challenges and perspectives (2022/2149(INI)), retrieved from:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0306\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0306_EN.html)  
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