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Religion at School in Secular Europe

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Abstract: It is widely accepted that Europe is characterised by a secularised society and states marked by laicism (laïcité). The article analyses how this European secularity observes religious education, highlighting the fact that it does not have a single model. The diversity of interpretations of the term "secularity" is not unrelated to the fact that there is a plurality of approaches to the teaching (or non-teaching) of religion within European education systems. The authors of the article opt for Taylor's approach of defining secularity not by its relation to religion, but by the ends it desires to achieve. Within this framework, the article describes the plurality of models of teaching religion in education systems and how these models articulate the values that secularity seeks to achieve. The analysis takes into account both the guidelines and recommendations of European institutions and the policies implemented by states.

Keywords: religious phenomenon; education system; secularism; laicism; teaching of religion; religious education; pluralism

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Citation: Uriarte, Luzio, and Lidia Rodríguez. 2023. Religion at School in Secular Europe. *Religions* 14: 700. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060700

Academic Editor: Dyron B. Daughrity

Received: 15 April 2023
Revised: 10 May 2023
Accepted: 18 May 2023
Published: 25 May 2023

1. Introduction

Each new generation is a challenge to the established society, insofar as it has to give a reasonable account of the socially created world. This involves a socialisation process that is specific to the human race, since culture is not inherited (Berger and Luckmann 1971, pp. 149–66). Within this process, the education system has its own function, oriented towards the new generations, which has been acquiring strategic relevance in highly developed societies. According to Berger (2014, pp. 23–24), such societies are characterised by the following features: (1) they incorporate the transformations brought about by science and technology; (2) a process of globalisation is developing in them, where the pluralism of beliefs, traditions and ways of life is increasingly universal; (3) they are determined by some kind of secularism, which differentiates the functions of the state and the religious phenomenon in the social life.

In this context, the question we ask ourselves is: what place and function does the European secular approach propose for religious education? We are aware that the terms "religious education", "teaching of religion" and other equivalents are problematic insofar as they are not used univocally (Jackson 2014c, pp. 19–20). Within this article these terms will be used to refer to how the public education system teaches the religious phenomenon, without going into further detail. The public education system is precisely one of the areas where it is possible to observe how secular society responds to this question.

Firstly, we draw attention to the polysemy of the terms "secularity" and "laicism" (laïcité) in the literature, and for this purpose we will use the perspective offered by Taylor (2011) in his understanding of the aims of secularity.

Secondly, we briefly present the regulatory framework of the Council of Europe, a reference institution that has been leading the reflection on the subject since Álvaro Gil-Robles sponsored a series of meetings that led to several initiatives and publications, including *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: A Reference Book for Schools* (Keast 2007). We include the most important recommendations, as well as some texts produced at the initiative of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Thirdly, we identify and describe four models that are currently being implemented in public school systems, indicating that secularised European societies do not respond unequivocally to the question that guides our reflection.

Finally, in the discussion section, we analyse how the different models hierarchise and implement the ends of secularity as described by Taylor, and end with some conclusions.

2. Secularity, Education System and Teaching of Religion: General Framework

There is no doubt that Europe is one of the places in the world with the highest degree of secularisation. In the educational systems regulated by the different states, one of the most controversial aspects is the place (space, objective, method) that the religious phenomenon should occupy in the education of the new generations. In principle, one would expect a society such as Europe's, which has long been characterised by processes of secularisation, to have reached clear criteria on this question or some form of consensus. But, as we will have the opportunity to develop in the following sections of this article, we find very significant differences between states. At the basis of this heterogeneity, we can identify at least two reasons that shed light on our subject and which we will consider below. On the one hand, the very concept of "secularity" is interpreted differently, being identified with or distinguished from "laicism" depending on the authors; on the other hand, secularity must respond to the challenge of articulating the phenomenon of the pluralism of worldviews present in society.

2.1. Secularity and Laicism, Ambiguous Terms

As Taylor points out in the introduction to his landmark work *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007, pp. 19–22) and later insists (Taylor 2011, p. 39), the term "secularity" has an ambiguous meaning. To begin with, some authors propose to distinguish between "secularity" and "laicism", in such a way that laicism would refer to the state as a neutral framework where diverse worldviews can coexist, while secularity would describe a social process (Del Picó 2018, p. 46; González-Faus 2014, pp. 195–96; Bobbio 2005). In this line, Taylor and Maclure point out (Taylor 2011, pp. 15–16):

> [. . .] we must avoid confusing political secularization (laïcisation) and social secularization (sécularisation). Although that distinction must be qualified in several ways, we may say that political secularization is the process by which the state affirms its independence from religion, whereas one of the components of social secularization is an erosion of the influence of religion in social practices and in the conduct of individual lives.

This conceptual distinction seems to clarify the terms, but neither the specialised literature nor the social reality is in line with this theoretical approach.

On the one hand, the scientific literature does not systematically follow this distinction; for some authors, differentiating between laicism and secularity does not contribute anything significant to their understanding of the religious fact (Luckmann 1973), and there are even some who avoid it (Gauchet 2003, pp. 17, 21). As Rodríguez (2015, p. 212) rightly points out, successive attempts at terminological nuancing without reaching a conceptual agreement make the picture even more confusing. Furthermore, both terms are understood and applied in different ways in the scientific literature, which makes conceptual clarification impossible. Moreover, several authors (Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007; Joas 2021) point to the need to distinguish at least three processes within the semantic field of the term "secularisation" that can be linked in different ways, or evolve with little or no mutual interrelation: (1) differentiation of fields of social reality that become autonomous from the religious link; (2) decrease in the rates of religious beliefs and practices; (3) progressive distancing of the religious fact from the public sphere.

On the other hand, the relations established between laicism and secularity seem rather confused when we look at social reality. Simplifying to some extent the scheme proposed by Berlinerblau (2022), we can identify four main models of the relationship between politics and religion: (1) the fusion of the two into a single model; (2) the outlawing

of a particular religion; (3) the segregation of religion to the private sphere; and (4) the separation of the two spheres, but with the possibility to recognise the public dimension of the religious phenomenon. These four theoretical models, however, intersect in practice. Let us look at some examples.

Sweden, Denmark and England–among others–are confessional (not secular) states, but their societies are characterised by very low religious identification and practice, by weak or absent religious convictions in a significant part of the population. In other words, they are largely secularised societies. On the contrary, we have the cases of the United States and Mexico, among others, characterised by being officially secular states (in the case of Mexico, explicitly so), but whose societies show high rates of religious beliefs and practices. Here we could include Atatürk's original project in Turkey, and some other countries such as Italy, which has relatively high levels of religiosity but is governed by a secular state.

To the above intersections we must add a further complicating factor: qualifying a state as "laicist" does not presuppose a univocal political conception of the public role of the religious phenomenon. Indeed, some authors distinguish between "open"–also called "positive", "open", "liberal-pluralist"–and "closed" or "rigid", "republican" laicism (Bouchard and Taylor 2008; Maclure and Taylor 2010). Others prefer to use the terms "laïcité" and "laicism" (Del Picó 2018, p. 50): the former refers to a non-confessional state, but one that maintains positive relations with different religious actors; the latter applies to a state that is indifferent to religion, with policies of denial of its public presence–some would describe such policies as 'hostile'.

2.2. Secularity and the Challenge of Pluralism of Worldviews

It is not the aim of this article to offer any further clarification of the current terminological confusion. But we make a choice in order to situate the concept of secularity from which the religious phenomenon is observed. To do so, we refer to the controversy between Habermas and Taylor on how secular society should treat religion (Mendieta and Van Antwerpen 2011, pp. 61–68). While Habermas is in favour of special treatment of religion, given its specific characteristics, Taylor argues against it. He argues that, in this case, secularity tends to be defined in relation to and/or in opposition to religion. He proposes to treat religion as another case of worldview or, in Rawls' terms (Rawls 1978, pp. 60–66; 1998, pp. 77–79), of the "comprehensive doctrines of the good" that come together in the framework of secular society.

Whether one position or the other is chosen, the challenge of secularity is the same: to manage increasing pluralism and the growing diversity of worldviews; precisely this is the subject of reflection in Berger's latest work (Berger 2014). As this author intuits very well, "pluralism undermines religious certainty and opens up a plenitude of cognitive and normative choices. In much of the world, however, many of these choices are religious." (Berger 2014, p. 20); this implies that "ours is not so much an age of unbelief as an age of doubt" (Berger 2014, p. 64). However, the sociological verification of the pluralism of worldviews does not imply an ontological or epistemological claim about the truth of a statement (Kennedy 2021, pp. 382–84). We are aware that the term "pluralism" is not univocal and, analogous to the term "secularism", different meanings can be identified on both epistemological and ontological levels. Certainly, the choice of meaning that is made will logically affect the argumentation for assessing the study of religion in the school system (Carr 2007). In our case we will use the term "pluralism" in a merely descriptive sense, i.e., as the acceptance that there is in fact a diversity of "comprehensive doctrines of the good" in society and that there is no reason to deny the legitimacy of the truth of the religious phenomenon within that diversity. In any case, an understanding of secularism that implied a scepticism towards religious truth would still be another kind of pseudo-religious belief.

Nevertheless, even in the situation of widespread pluralism, paradoxically, every society needs to share a "collective conscience" (Durkheim 1982, p. 397), a moral foundation that allows it to be minimally cohesive; this cohesion makes possible the solidarity that leads individuals to accept a certain degree of personal sacrifice for the common good (Berger 2014, p. 66).

If we accept Taylor's approach of identifying secularity not by its relation to religion, but by the ends it seeks to achieve, we find a typological formulation in the well-known triad of the French Revolution: liberty, equality and fraternity (Taylor 2011, pp. 39–42). These are three fundamental goods or values proclaimed in the Enlightenment that appear in the European social imaginary with a high degree of acceptance, but without a single model of harmonisation. In *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, after describing each of these values, Spicker (2006) shows that not only do the approaches of the left and the right oppose each other in the way they harmonise these values, but that the two policies have also been internally divided and at odds with each other.

We can apply this same framework of understanding to how secularity deals with specific issues, such as the one that concerns us in this article: the question of what place the religious phenomenon can or should have in a state's public education system and, going into more detail, what it is and how it should be taught. When the above triad is applied to the coexistence of diverse worldviews within the same society, we find that each of the three values in turn needs the realisation of the other two, but tensions and dialectical relationships arise (Taylor 2011; Rawls 1978, 2015; Sen 2010; Vázquez 2006). For example:

(a) Freedom presupposes that people have the possibility to choose between different worldviews and that no one should be forced to adopt one of them. At the same time, different religious traditions must be free to publicly express their proposed meaning. The choice of a particular religious belief and the right to express it is part of the exercise of freedom and shapes a world of values in the process of socialisation. The pursuit of this value can generate tensions in the safeguarding of equality and the achievement of fraternity.

(b) Equality seeks to avoid discrimination on the basis of identification with a particular worldview. Among the implications of this value is the widely held view that no worldview should have a privileged status in its relationship with the state. For the sake of equality, a state may choose to remove any religious preference from the public space, such as the education system, but this also brings tensions for the achievement of the other values. On the one hand, it may consider religion a particular phenomenon suspected of becoming a risk or threat to peaceful and constructive coexistence, but this suspicion does not apply to other comprehensive doctrines of the good that are present in the educational system. On the other hand, eliminating religion from public schools seems to undermine freedom of choice and impoverishes the understanding of fraternity, which is achieved at the cost of hiding diversity.

(c) Fraternity has to do with social cohesion and collectively shared goals. Since secular society does not define in advance what the common good consists of, each worldview can contribute its own particular approach to building this good in a dialogical encounter. Also linked to fraternity is the aspiration to maintain relations of mutual respect and harmony between different worldviews, as well as to arbitrate processes to reach agreements. A commitment to fraternity could lead to the identification of a particular cultural and/or religious tradition as a common basis on which to build social cohesion. This can be very effective, but at the same time affects both freedom of choice and the principle of equality.

In the following pages we will analyse how the ways of harmonising these three values pursued by secularisation allow us to interpret the objective and approach of the four models we have identified in secularised European societies. However, first it is useful to present the main lines of the documents issued by the Council of Europe and the OSCE.

3. Teaching of Religion in Documents Issued by the European Institutions

Reflection on the place that religious phenomenon should occupy in the public education system is relatively recent in the documents issued by European institutions. Some authors point to the 9/11 attacks as a turning point in the reflection on religious education in schools (Wimberley 2003; Jackson 2008, 2009, 2010, 2014a, p. 5; López 2012), which seems to establish a relationship between various documents emanating from the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) with political concern about the spread of violent religious fundamentalisms, often accompanied by concern about the spread of Islam in European societies. Indeed, the OSCE has published several non-binding documents on the subject, the most explicit of which is the 2011 *Guidelines for Educators on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims: Tackling Islamophobia through Education* (OSCE and ODIHR 2011).

The presence of religions in the public sphere—including the school system—is currently a matter of reflection in Europe. As far as the EU is concerned, it has only pronounced itself on religious education in its *Charter of Fundamental Rights* (European Union 2012), in the context of religious freedom and non-discrimination of religious minorities. Since intervention in legal systems in the field of religious education does not fall within its competence, it respects the different models existing among Member States. This could explain why the only publications issued by the European Commission focus on promoting research on forms of the teaching of religion through two initiatives: the REDC project 2006–2009 and the "Belieforama" programme 2009–2012. Neither of these is binding on the Member States.

However, as we saw at the beginning of this section, two European institutions have made explicit statements on religious education: the Council of Europe, which brings together ministers and representatives from 46 European countries; and the OSCE, a supranational institution of lower rank than the Council of Europe. Let us first look at the most important documents issued by the Council of Europe, the institution of reference and undoubtedly the most relevant to the issue at hand. The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950)—the Convention underpins the other texts issued by the Council of Europe—and Article 2 of Additional Protocol 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights (1952) are international treaties that mark a basic legal commitment for the contracting states, which are responsible for incorporating their guidelines into their respective legal systems. In both cases, the argumentation supporting religious education in public schools is framed in the defence of human rights, among which freedom of conscience stands out. In the case of the Council of Europe, Article 9 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950) states that the teaching of religious beliefs is included in the recognition of the religious freedom of individuals and communities. Article 2 of Additional Protocol No. 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights (1952) sets out the terms of the right of parents and guardians to choose the religious and philosophical education of their children at school: "The State shall, in exercising the functions which it assumes in the field of education and teaching, respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their religious and philosophical convictions".

In addition to the documents cited above, the judicial treatment of the issue of religious education in Europe is another relevant area to be taken into account. The Court of Justice of the EU does not have any cases directly related to this issue. With regard to the cases decided in the European Court of Human Rights under the Council of Europe, González-Varas (2018, pp. 35–38) concludes that states are not only entitled to provide religious education in formal public education, but also that such education is a positive obligation of the state.

Continuing with the Council of Europe, the following documents are recommendations and are therefore not binding on member states:

- Recommendation 1202 (1993), on Religious Tolerance in a Democratic Society.
- Recommendation 1396 (1999), on Religion and Democracy.
- Recommendation 1720 (2005) on Education and Religion. This recommendation is undoubtedly the most comprehensive of those issued so far.
- Recommendation CM/Rec (2008)12, on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions in intercultural education. This recommendation has been further developed in the publication *Signposts* (Jackson 2014a).
- Competences for a Culture of Democracy, published in 2016.

The reading of these recommendations seems to indicate that we are immersed in an unfinished process of reflection, still under construction. Nevertheless, the documents listed above unambiguously promote religious education in the framework of public schools. For example, Recommendation 1720 encourages member states to strive to "guarantee freedom of conscience and religious expression, to promote education in religions, to encourage dialogue with and between religions and to promote the cultural and social expression of religions" (§ 6) as part of the defence of human rights. It also urges to "ensure that religious studies are taught at the primary and secondary levels of state education" (§ 14). Recommendation CM/Rec (2008)12 explicitly recognises "the place of religions and non-religious convictions in the public sphere and at school as topic for discussion and reflection".

It should be pointed out that these documents do not limit religious education to the majority religions of a state. Recommendation 1720 of the Council of Europe makes this issue explicit: "the aim of this education should be to make pupils discover the religions practised in their own and neighbouring countries, to make them realise that everyone has the same right to believe that their religion is 'the true faith' and that other people are not different human beings because they have a different religion or no religion at all" (§ 14.1). It therefore calls for "including, with complete impartiality, the history of the major religions as well as the option of having no religion at all" (§ 14.2).

One of the most repeated ideas in the documents analysed is that religious education in public schools contributes to social cohesion in a pluralistic world. Recommendation 1720 identifies what it considers to be serious threats for school education to adress: "ignorance, stereotyping and lack of understanding of religions" (§ 6) and fanaticism (§ 7; 14.4). It suggests initiatives to strengthen cohesion, including dialogue with and between religions (§ 6; 7; 14.6), and training in dialogue skills (§ 6; 7; 13; 14.5).

Finally, interculturality is the educational framework that contextualises the teaching of religious traditions at school. Alongside Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12, on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions in intercultural education and Competences for a culture of democracy, two texts published in 2004 by the Council of Europe should be noted (Council of Europe 2004), whose titles make this connection explicit: *The Religious Dimension of Intercultural Education* and *Signposts. Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education*, which develops pedagogical aspects arising from Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12.

The aforementioned internal EU projects, REDC 2006–2009 and "Belieforama", also make several suggestions in this regard: (1) promote peaceful coexistence; (2) promote diversity management; (3) include worldviews, religious and non-religious; (4) develop professional competence.

Secondly, the OSCE affirms in several documents that participating States will respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, which include freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion (Helsinki 1975, Madrid 1989, Vienna 1989, Ljubljana 2005, Brussels 2006; etc.). Advised by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), it has published the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching Religion in Public Schools* (OSCE and ODIHR 2007) and *Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security. Guidance Manual* (OSCE and ODIHR 2019).

In line with the recommendations issued by the Council of Europe, the Toledo Principles unequivocally promote religious education by stating that religious education is "an essential component of quality education" (Keast 2007, p. 84) and consider the need to "take into account the various local manifestations of religious and secular pluralism found in schools and the communities they serve" (Keast 2007, p. 14) in developing future curricula. They explicitly link individual freedom of religion, thought and conscience to religious education (Keast 2007, p. 84): "Knowledge about religions and beliefs can make us more aware of the importance of respecting the right of all persons to freedom of religion or belief. Moreover, such teaching must also respect fundamental rights (Keast 2007, p. 16): "Teaching about religions and beliefs must be provided in ways that are fair, accurate and based on sound scholarship. Students should learn about religions and beliefs in an environment respectful of human rights, fundamental freedoms and civic values".

4. Models of Teaching of Religion in European States

We have already noted that the Council of Europe does not dictate educational policies, but rather makes recommendations, such as those presented in the previous section. Policies are defined by member states, and although each member state offers different proposals (Jäggle and Rothgangel 2014–2020), all states recognise and accept the framework of secularity. Despite its particular significance and consequences, the European reality is still very heterogeneous (Fabretti 2013, p. 53). Since a detailed study of each case is beyond the scope of this article, we will only describe typologically the educational models in relation to the teaching of religion that are most widespread at European level. However, we are aware that this typology is always somewhat artificial since, as has been rightly pointed out (Schweitzer 2016), the comparison of situations is particularly difficult given the great diversity.

Several authors identify three main trends or models of the teaching religion (Grimmit 2000; Hull 2001; Schreiner 2001; Teece 2010; Pajer 2012, 2015, 2019; Bråten 2014): (1) learning from or through religious and beliefs; (2) learning about religion; (3) learning into religion (into faith). In all three cases it is assumed that the education system must take religious fact into account. Pajer (2012, pp. 8, 96) adds a fourth model, learning out of religion, to refer to the French model of laicism.

4.1. Laicism Model (Learning Out of Religion)

This model leaves out of the public school system the specific teaching of religion. The prototypical case is that of France, in whose school system there can be no religious instruction during school hours or on school premises (Estivalèzes 2003, p. 60; Willaime 2014, pp. 110, 112). The reason given is the neutrality of the state, which seeks to ensure the equality of all religious convictions by removing them from the public space that is the school and entrusting religion to the realm of personal, private decisions.

Albania (Skura 2020, pp. 27–28, 31), Kosovo (Aslan and Hamiti 2020, pp. 125–26) and Montenegro (Saggau et al. 2020, pp. 173–75) basically fall within this model. Slovenia only partially realises it as it has a compulsory ethics subject, but pupils can choose a combination of ethics and religion, although without a confessional character (Gerjolj and Saje 2016, p. 260).

What has been said so far does not imply that the religious phenomenon is not studied in the curriculum. Both the French (Estivalèzes 2003, pp. 65–68) and Albanian (Skura 2020, pp. 37–39) educational systems welcome its study from different disciplines. The responsibility lies with teachers, who are in charge of presenting the religious phenomenon in each of their subjects. On the basis of the 2002 Bayard report (López 2012, p. 63) and the reflections offered by some of the intellectuals consulted (Debray 2002; Wimberley 2003), there is a tendency to introduce the study of the religious phenomenon in a cross-disciplinary way.

Complementarily, several states include some formulation and instruction of a mandatory secular morality that would be proper to all citizens (Willaime 2014, p. 103; Gerjolj and Saje 2016, p. 259).

4.2. Ethical Input Model (from or through Religion and Beliefs)

Slovenia (Gerjolj and Saje 2016, p. 259) may be a good representative of this case, even with the qualification made above. However, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Croatia and Lithuania, among others, offer it as an alternative to confessional teaching of religion in the form of a possible option for ethics. Outside the EU, it is also found in the canton of Zurich in Switzerland (Pajer 2015, p. 7).

In this model, the secular perspective accepts any comprehensive doctrine of the good, as long as it is situated in an ethics of minimums. All have the right to participate in the formulation and identification of the common good that is shared socially, including religious traditions. The school system thus becomes a key arena in which the basic learning of life in society can take place through the sharing of pluralistic worldviews. It presents itself as an opportunity not only to learn from religious traditions, but also, in collaboration with them, as a possibility to develop new forms of awareness and reflexivity (Fabretti 2013, p. 54).

With this objective in mind, the inclusion of the religious phenomenon in the school curriculum does not imply neither giving space to a specific believing experience, nor presenting its doctrinal body (into faith); its perspective is rather functional. It is appreciated that the new generations should be educated in the contributions that religious traditions make today, which presupposes the recognition of the public dimension of the religious phenomenon. From the different religious traditions, its ethical potential is rescued, its ancestral wisdom, and it tries to show that it is an impulse for the achievement of personal wellbeing and to contribute to social cohesion. All this requires the development of specific content and the training of specialised teaching staff, which will not be provided by religious institutions, but by secular state institutions.

As the religious traditions present in the education system are on an equal standing, intercultural and interreligious encounter and dialogue must necessarily be managed.

4.3. Cultural Model (about Religion)

Within the EU, three countries follow this model: Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden. It is also present in the education system of Norway, Iceland and the canton of Ticino in Switzerland (Pajer 2015, pp. 5–6; González-Varas 2018, pp. 41–49). The subject is compulsory in the curriculum, so all students, regardless of their personal and/or family beliefs, must take it.

This approach recognises the contribution that religious traditions have had and continue to have in shaping cultures and, in particular, European cultures. Religions are a fact of reality that must be treated with scientific criteria; they are valued as dense symbolic universes that raise and transmit questions of meaning for personal and collective life. The model tends to privilege those religious traditions most deeply rooted in local history, although it is open to the study of new religions. The basic approach is therefore trans-confessional.

The teachers of this subject are trained in social sciences with a specialisation in the subject of religion, since the teaching of the religious phenomenon is based on the various approaches of the social sciences. As in the previous case, teacher training is regulated by the state and the selection of teachers follows the same academic criteria as for other subjects.

4.4. Confessional Model (into Religion, into Faith)

Contrary to what one might think in a secular framework, this model is by far the most common in Europe; it is carried out, with different versions in 18 EU countries[1] (López 2012, pp. 61–63; Pajer 2015, 2019; González-Varas 2018, pp. 51–98); it is therefore the most

widespread and practised; with nuances, other European countries such as Latvia (Geikina 2014, p. 161) and Lithuania (Rugeviciuté 2014, pp. 186–89) also follow this model.

In this approach, teaching within a religious tradition is privileged because of its special link to the historical shaping of society. The historical framework helps to understand the motivation for this approach. A large part of the European states were born and developed in connection with a particular religious tradition, which has had a strong cultural influence and in some cases has retained legal ties.

The teachers who teach the subject of religion are selected by the respective religious tradition and the contents are in accordance with the established body of doctrine. The aim of the subject taught emphasises the formative cultural component and the rationality of the religious tradition within which it is taught.

In some cases, it is taught as a compulsory subject with the possibility of exemption, and in others the subject offers another subject as an alternative.

5. Discussion

The school system in Europe is a good example to analyse how secularity observes the religious phenomenon. It does not have a single model. Following the current literature already mentioned, we have chosen to work with four models. In this section, we will discuss how each of these models implements the general orientations of the European framework and, on the other hand, how they harmonise the three emblematic values of secularity.

5.1. Laicism Model

Freedom of conscience and non-coercion of individuals in matters of religious belief and in the context of the education system is well supported by this approach (Willaime 2014, pp. 101–2). The model provides a clear criterion for distinguishing the secular sphere from the religious sphere and is congruent with it. However, Taylor and Mclure's point about the ambiguous meaning of these concepts (Taylor 2011, pp. 53–58) may be of interest: it is useful to distinguish the institutional level from the level of personal relations that take place within these institutional spheres. In this sense, the freedom of expression that individuals and groups may have may be restricted to the extent that the model chooses to reduce the religious phenomenon to the private sphere, without it being able to be presented and proposed in the public sphere of the school.

In relation to equal treatment, there is another reflection that should be taken into account: the general impression is that this model perceives the religious fact as a problem to be managed within social life (Willaime 2014, p. 102). This is probably to be understood it in the historical trajectory that social conflicts based on religious arguments have had (Martí 1997, pp. 148–56). If we situate religious traditions within what Rawls designates as comprehensive doctrines of the good, this model removes the religious proposition from the public space of the school. In fact, it is worth asking whether the approach of republican laicism does not in itself entail a certain comprehensive doctrine of the good, with a certain anthropology and global philosophy of life (González-Varas 2019, p. 41; Watson 2007, pp. 3–5). In this sense, the model strains the realisation of the value of equal treatment.

The value of social cohesion is focused on the republican construction as a shared common space, the only conviction that can unite and generate social fraternity, which will be promoted in the school system. But certainly, depending on how this republican objective is realised, the value education promoted by the state can be very committed to a certain approach to the common good, leaving aside other possible proposals (within a growing religious pluralism), which, not being presented, cannot be understood either, and remain on the sidelines in contributing to the construction of social fraternity.

Finally, it seems clear that this perspective does not coincide well with the recommendations of the European framework presented in the second section.

5.2. Ethical Input Model

This approach safeguards the value of the freedom both of religious traditions to express their particular ethical perception and of each individual, since he or she is free to express his or her assessment and to adhere to one of the religious or non-religious approaches. Although the model assumes a positive assessment of the religious fact (and the traditions it harbours) in terms of the sapiential contribution related to good living (personal and social), it entails a certain reductionism in its presentation. What is valued is the ethical contribution, but the religious phenomenon is not reduced to this ethical dimension, so the religious phenomenon as such is not presented. It should be borne in mind that generally the core of religious experience does not stem from an ethical proposal, nor is this the essence of its message, although it certainly has important consequences for the orientation of personal and social behaviour, especially at the level of maximal ethics.

With regard to neutrality in treatment and, therefore, respect for equality, the approach does not privilege any particular tradition. However, this value will be challenged in each particular society insofar as it is the fruit of a historical process in which there are religious traditions that have had more weight than others (Löffler 2020, pp. 122–23). These particular historical conditions will strain this model of encounter and ethical dialogue since new religious traditions may claim that they are already part of the local culture and, therefore, may propose ethical frameworks that contradict those already accepted.

The value of social cohesion and fraternity is on the horizon of this approach insofar as the religious traditions present in society are not left out. Ideally, they should all be on an equal footing when it comes to contributing to the construction of a common ethical space that allows for encounter, understanding and solidarity. This is why this model is a good response to one of the dominant concerns present in the European guidelines: working towards social cohesion in a society that is growing in pluralism and diversity (Fabretti 2013). It seems that the central concern is the value of fraternity. How this model realises the value of social cohesion probably needs further discussion. On the one hand, the relationship between ethics and religion needs to be carefully analysed, as is done, for example, by Küng (1991, 1996) who has had a great influence on the Parliament of religions. To what extent is the ethical model of religious education linked to this dialogue between religions or does it stand apart from it? On the other hand, this model leaves aside the tricky issue of the construction and maintenance of collective identities and the links they establish with each other in a regime of pluralisation of options that tends to relativise personal convictions (Berger 2014); it is important to note the point made above: the identity of a religious tradition is not usually defined by its ethical dimension.

5.3. Cultural Model

With regard to the realisation of the value of freedom, the model is careful not to proselytise in any way and seeks to fully respect the conscience of the pupils insofar as the aim is to present objective data (from the point of view of the different social sciences). This will allow each pupil to make his or her own decisions based on the knowledge he or she has acquired. However, religious traditions do not have the possibility to have their say within the educational system, but the presentation of these traditions is done by the vision of specialists (non-religious and based on the knowledge offered by the different social sciences). As Watson said "to treat God as an optional or exotic extra is already to have lost touch with all the religions which see God as THE reality upon which all the rest is dependent" (Watson 2007, p. 10). It is questionable whether the religious phenomenon is allowed to be presented in its essence or whether it remains only in its cultural functions and consequences (Löffler 2020, pp. 125–26).

Equal treatment of different religious traditions is clearly embedded in this model; all can be presented and none should receive any favourable treatment. But there are at least two aspects that strain the achievement of equality. On the one hand, there is always a certain selection of traditions to be presented in the school curriculum; generally those that have a greater impact within the society in which the school is situated; but our context

is changing and new religious traditions are appearing, sometimes in a significant way. On the other hand, the impartiality of the person presenting the religious fact is always conditioned by his or her personal background (Löffler 2020, p. 126).

The value of fraternity needs some consideration within this model. In this approach, the contribution that the religious phenomenon has had (and still has) in the constitution of today's society and the world of shared values and symbols that contribute to the common good and social cohesion can be clearly shown. But the construction of social cohesion does not take place solely on the basis of history, but is dynamic; the pluralism of worldviews and of different religious creeds energises social and cultural transformations, but it also creates tension in what is shared in common, the construction of the common good. How does this model work on dialogue and inter-religious encounter? Its initial approach falls outside this objective, which is fundamental for the construction of a shared future. It would seem that the subject of this inter-religious dialogue and encounter should be the religious traditions themselves and not the teacher specialising in the subject.

5.4. Confessional Model

Although it is the majority model in Europe, it presents important tensions when it comes to realising the fundamental values of secularity and to some extent departs from the model recommended by European institutions.

The model respects the freedom of the majority religions to present their conception of life in a more comprehensive way; in this sense, it avoids religion being reduced to its ethical, social or cultural functions. It also respects the freedom of conscience of families and pupils by giving them the opportunity to choose a particular religious tradition or none at all. But the realisation of this value of freedom presents a tension with the principle of equality. Equal treatment requires the state to avoid privileges (Martínez de Codes 2013, p. 179) and, therefore, to impartially regulate the rootedness of each religious tradition and other comprehensive doctrines of the good without favouring or hindering any of them. It does not seem to be easy to manage this situation in the future, especially in sensitive ethical issues where there are very opposing approaches (Santiago and Corpas 2012, p. 141).

The option of confessional education is a commitment to promote the foundations of social cohesion by socialising shared historical and religious roots and strengthening collective identities. But there are some difficulties to be faced in achieving the desired social cohesion. On the one hand, the development of religious fundamentalism could have dangerous consequences for this model, although it could also be an antidote, insofar as, according to recent studies, religious fundamentalism grows with a lack of religious training (Löffler 2020, p. 125). On the other hand, the model assumes a vision of society characterised by a certain cultural and religious homogeneity that increasingly fails to correspond to reality; whether this model is capable of developing a positive appreciation of other religious traditions, the encounter with them and the construction of a common field of encounter is not self-evident. In this sense, it must be taken into account that religious traditions are often governed by authorities and by the assumption of dogmas, which can be an obstacle to the construction of common ground (Essomba 2012, p. 207). In contrast, authors defend this possibility (González-Varas 2019, p. 60; Löffler 2020). in the same perspective, Watson argues that "a measure of confessionalism is part of all upbringing and all education, not just regarding religion" (Watson 2007, p. 9). At the same time, she offers a proposal, based on this model, that builds common ground and respects legitimate differences.

5.5. General Comments

From the point of view of argumentation, each of the models of situating the teaching of the religious phenomenon in public schools accepts the European secular framework and seeks to promote the great ideals that guide the secularity of open and plural societies (Rawls 1978; Sen 2010; Taylor 2011). This plurality of models is probably not unrelated

to the reality of a secularity that has several formulas for realising the ideals it proclaims (Martínez de Codes 2013, pp. 177–78, 197).

Some authors (Pajer 2012, p. 96; 2019, p. 32) argue that these are reconcilable and complementary models, but for the moment it does not seem easy to reach a synthesis. What can be observed at the moment is the fact that the European secular framework does not have a clear and unequivocal answer when it seeks to situate the religious phenomenon within the school framework and, rather, is in a process of searching (Pajer 2012, pp. 97–98).

Reaching a synthesis is probably not only a matter of will (although it is a conditio sine qua non). Europe is in the midst of far-reaching social and cultural transformations brought about by multiple factors that affect this search for synthesis (Jackson 2014b, p. 15; Pajer 2019, pp. 14–19). Among other factors, the different historical and cultural contexts of each state (Löffler 2020, pp. 122–23), growing pluralism and its management (Pajer 2012, p. 97; Berger 2014, pp. 153–76), globalisation (Jackson 2014b, p. 15), the processes of individualisation of religious beliefs and the proliferation of eclectic formulas of believing (Rodríguez et al. 2020, pp. 10–20; 2021, pp. 17–19). In this context, it might be worth paying special attention to the emerging and growing phenomenon of religious fundamentalism. The fact that we are living in times of profound sociocultural changes and uncertainty creates a climate conducive to the expansion of this religious tendency, which is increasingly present in all traditions (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997, p. 233; Antoun 2008, p. 73; Berger 2014, pp. 31–32; Duch 2015, p. 475). The willingness to seek paths of dialogue and synthesis will be strongly conditioned by the evolution of religious fundamentalism and the way it is dealt with within the framework of secularity. As Löffler points out (Löffler 2020, p. 121):

In some of their more problematic, deteriorated forms, however, religious mindsets can be destructive, antagonistic powers running afoul of the values standing behind democracy and the civic virtues characterizing the democratic citizen. Uninformed religiosity, or the combination of devoted religiosity and illiteracy, appears especially susceptible to such tendencies.

It is notable that while the general orientation of European institutions and much of the academic world is oriented towards the search for intercultural and interreligious paths, the majority models continue to be confessional (learning into religion) and cultural (learning about religion). At this point, it is important to take into account local histories and traditions, which to a large extent condition the policies pursued in each country (Jackson 2014b, p. 15). Perhaps this is another sign of the difficulty of finding a satisfactory synthesis (Schweitzer 2016, p. 15).

6. Conclusions

It is commonly accepted that Europe as a whole is a secularised society made up of states that embrace the principle of secularism. However, Europe is a good example where different conceptions of secularity and laicism are reflected. This plurality of meanings is not only a matter of social or political theory, but has far-reaching implications for social life and its organisation, as we see when (secular) states try to place (or refuse) the teaching of the religious phenomenon in the educational system.

In the official documents produced by the various European institutions, especially since the turn of the millennium, it is clear that the secularity developing in Europe (in all its diversity) tends to promote religious education. While respecting the value of freedom of conscience and the neutrality of the state, the teaching of religious and non-religious worldviews is seen as a necessary learning process for living in an increasingly pluralistic society and for enabling growth in social cohesion. From this perspective, the general recommendation of European institutions is in the direction of intercultural and interreligious education.

The growing pluralism of comprehensive doctrines of the good and their public management is probably one of the greatest challenges for European societies. Taking this into account, it seems that the general tenor of European recommendations is to create spaces for interreligious and intercultural dialogue and encounter. However, this

orientation comes up against some significant difficulties. In the first place, the majority tendency is towards confessional teaching of religious education. Its counterpoint, the absence of such teaching, although a minority, is very strongly rooted in a country as significant for the construction of Europe as France. Thirdly, the theological tradition of each religion has been more apologetic than in dialogue with other religious beliefs; furthermore, this demand of inter-religious dialogue is today strongly strained by the challenging and growing religious fundamentalism.

We are, therefore, in the scenario of secular states that place the teaching of religion in the school system in different ways; this indicates that secularity and laicism are far from imposing a single model for dealing with the religious phenomenon; European secularity is flexible and tolerant of different formulas. As we have presented in this article, each of the formulas or models of religious education practised in Europe entails different ways of articulating the great values pursued by secularity: liberty, equality, fraternity. In this perspective, each of the models has its merits and its limitations. To a large extent, they could be understood as complementary, but, for the moment, no synthesis formula has been reached. In this respect, it is very interesting to remark once again that the general orientation of European institutions is in the direction of interreligious dialogue and the teaching of religion within the perspective of interculturality and interreligiosity; however, the majority practice in European countries is not in this perspective. There seems to be a certain mismatch between theory and practice. This observation leads us to think that we are not at a point of arrival in the secular vision of the religious phenomenon, but rather at the beginning of a long road to be travelled, where new data and proposals are appearing and where we need to develop more research.

It seems that on the subject of teaching the religious phenomenon in the school system European secularity, conditioned by many factors, is open to experimentation and learning based on some very basic principles formulated in the general recommendations of European institutions and implemented in quite different ways by each of the states.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, L.U. and L.R.; methodology, L.U. and L.R.; software, L.U. and L.R.; validation, L.U. and L.R.; formal analysis, L.U. and L.R.; investigation, L.U. and L.R.; resources, L.U. and L.R.; data curation, L.U. and L.R.; writing—original draft preparation, L.U. and L.R.; writing—review and editing, L.U. and L.R.; visualization, L.U. and L.R.; supervision, L.U. and L.R.; project administration, L.U. and L.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Romania, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Finland, Portugal, Czech Republic, Hungary (Solymár 2016, pp. 154–56) and Luxembourg. In some, the subject is optional with an ethics alternative; in others it is compulsory. The Czech case presents the peculiarity that the subject is optional, but has no alternative (Muchová 2016, p. 104).

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