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Dilemmas of Religious Education, Freedom of Religion and Education in Cyprus

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Abstract: The boundaries between secularism, democracy, pluralism, and religious diversity cannot easily be demarcated. Bringing democratic and secular values together with religious pluralism, accommodating different religious communities, and acknowledging individual rights is a great challenge for many societies. In parallel, religious education (RE) in state schools has been a controversial and unresolved issue. On both sides of Cyprus, RE is organized in a mono-confessional way: while the Christian Orthodox content of RE is linked with Greek national identity in the Greek Cypriot South, Sunni Islamic RE is linked with the Turkish national identity in the Turkish Cypriot North. On both sides of the island, the compulsory and mono-confessional characters of RE, as well as the national curricula and textbooks that are used, are a source of conflict. Within this context, this article explores the way RE (Orthodox Christian, Sunni Islamic) is organized in Cyprus and to what extent this may lead to an infringement of the freedom of religion and freedom of education.

Keywords: religious education; Cyprus; religious diversity; secularism; freedom of religion and education



Citation: Latif, Dilek. 2022. Dilemmas of Religious Education, Freedom of Religion and Education in Cyprus. *Religions* 13: 96. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020096>

Academic Editors: Leni Franken and Sivane Hirsch

Received: 29 September 2021

Accepted: 17 January 2022

Published: 20 January 2022

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1. Introduction

Many democratic and liberal societies that have adopted secularism restricted the role of religion in the public sphere. However, the modern discourses on religious pluralism and diversity, and the challenge of how to integrate and accommodate different communities, resulted in a controversy over the religious education, and freedom of religion and education. There is a complex relationship between the state, religious communities, and schools (Franken 2017). Blending democratic and secular values with religious pluralism, integrating different religious communities, and at the same time recognizing individual rights, is a great challenge for many contemporary societies (Bader 1999). In this regard, a worldwide debate endures on the position of religious education in school curriculums. Recurring issues of debate are the mandatory character of religious education, content and learning models, and the responsibility for designing curricula and teaching RE (Diez de Velasco 2007; Moulin 2015). Similar to other conflict-troubled societies, religious education is a contentious issue in Cyprus (Zembylas 2014).

The Republic of Cyprus is a secular state, based on a bi-communal structure, which is composed of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Constitution. Article 18 of the Constitution states that “all religions are equal before the law and every person has the right to believe, worship, teach, practice or observe and change religion or belief.” There is no official state religion. However, the Constitution recognizes five main religions—the Orthodox Christian, the Islamic, the Maronite, the Armenian, and the Roman Catholic (Emilianides 2005). Religious discrimination is prohibited. Article 18 also states that legislative, executive, and administrative acts should not discriminate against any religious institution or religion (Constitution Appendix D: Part 2). All children have the right to study in public schools, regardless of their legal status, nationality, or origin. Public education at primary and secondary schools is mandatory and free of charge for all children. Although high school is not compulsory between the ages of

15 and 18, education is provided free of charge in the public schools including technical and vocational education and training. With regard to religious education, Article 20(1) asserts that “[e]very person has the right to receive, and every person or institution has the right to give, instruction or education (...) including the right of parents to secure for their children such education as is in conformity with their religious convictions”.

Due to the strong bi-communal characteristic of the state, many of the rights, freedoms, and obligations of the citizens are derived from membership of one of the two main communities. The separate communal chambers were given legislative powers with regard to all religious, educational, and cultural matters (Constitution Part IV, Articles 61–85 and 86–111). The separate education systems and autonomy of communal religious institutions since the Ottoman period have been maintained and strengthened by the 1960 Constitution (Dietzel and Makrides 2009). Article 20(4) clarifies that “education shall be made available by the Greek and the Turkish Communal Chambers”.

However, the Constitutional rule collapsed as a result of the violent clashes in 1963 and the Turkish Cypriot community withdrew from the government. The eventual partition of the two communities and the physical division of the island took place after the Turkish military intervention in 1974. This led to the de facto division of the island into the Turkish Cypriot North (the unrecognized TRNC: ‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’) and the Greek Cypriot South (Republic of Cyprus), separated by a demilitarized zone (Latif 2021). In 1983, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) was proclaimed, but this republic is not recognized by any state other than Turkey. The first article of the self-declared TRNC’s Constitution emphasizes the secular form and characteristics of the state and guarantees freedom of faith and conscience. Similar to the Republic of Cyprus, there is no official state religion. Article 23(5) specifies that “religion or religious feelings shall not be exploited for the purpose of basing, the basic social, economic, political or legal order of the State on religious precepts, or for the purpose of securing political or personal advantage or influence”. Thereby, the mixing of religion with politics is prohibited. Beyond that, religious education is explicitly mentioned in the Constitution. Article 23(4) states that “education and instruction in religion shall be conducted under state supervision and control”. This article implies that only the state provides religious education, and hence, there can be no after school or extracurricular religious instruction such as Qur’an courses (Hendrich 2015; Latif 2014).

On both sides of Cyprus, ‘religious education’ is organized in a mono-confessional way, with Orthodox Christian religious education in the South and Sunni Islam religious education in the North. Christian Orthodox religious education is compulsory in the pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools of the centralized education system of the Greek South that adopts the same national curriculum and official textbooks in all schools. Religious education in North Cyprus is mandatory in primary and lower secondary schools but not in high (upper secondary) schools. The place and content of RE in state schools is a source of conflict both in the Turkish Cypriot North and the Greek Cypriot South (Zembylas and Loukaidis 2018; Latif 2019). Against this background, this article examines how religious education is organized in Cypriot state schools, and to what extent this may lead to an infringement of the freedom of religion and freedom of education. The main objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to provide a detailed description of the nature and purpose of religious education in public schools, (2) to demonstrate how obligatory and mono-confessional religious education violates religious freedom in education (Russo 2015), and (3) to reflect on policy discourses on the subject of religious education.

2. Education System in Cyprus

After the division of the island, the two education systems of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, which have been separate since the Ottoman period, became more entrenched. Two separate administrations maintained autonomy over their respective education systems. The national legal context and international conventions establish the basis of the education system in the Republic of Cyprus. The Constitution ensures the

right to education. Article 20(2) states that free primary education shall be offered to all students in their respective communal primary schools. After the constitutional order of the Republic of Cyprus broke up in 1963, the Ministry of Education and Culture assumed the educational functions of the Greek Communal Chamber. The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for the administration of state schools, educational institutions, and for the supervision of private institutions. All schools use the same syllabi, curricula, and textbooks that are supervised by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The language of education in public schools is Greek. In the present education system, pre-primary, primary, and lower secondary education are mandatory. Public education is provided free of charge, which means education is organized and funded by the state. Although the upper secondary education is not compulsory (between the ages of 15 and 18), it is provided free of charge in the public schools.

The education system of the Turkish Cypriot community comprises an optional pre-school (ages 4–5), a compulsory five-year primary (ages 6–11) and three-year lower secondary school (ages 12–15), and an optional four-year upper secondary school (ages 15–18) education. The new education system is divided into three main periods as basic education, secondary education, and higher education. Basic education includes pre-school, primary, and secondary school periods. Secondary education (upper secondary) consists of 10th–13th grades and higher education is the period after the secondary education. Article 59(5) of the Constitution affirms that the state should provide education in accordance with the principles and reforms of Kemal Atatürk (the founder of the Turkish Republic), within the framework infused with national culture and moral values. The language of instruction in public schools is Turkish. Public education in North Cyprus is provided free of charge, it is centrally organized and funded by the state. The Ministry of Education and Culture supervises both public and private education and all public schools follow the same curricula and textbooks.

3. Religious Education (RE) in Greek and Turkish Cypriot Schools

Since religion and education have been under the authority of the Greek and Turkish Communal Chambers, the connection between education and religion has been maintained in the early years of the Republic. Therefore, Greek Cypriot education is connected to the Orthodox Christian religion and Turkish Cypriot education is linked to the Sunni Islamic religion. Both religions have become integral parts of their respective education systems and curricula.

3.1. RE in Greek Cypriot Schools

Due to the primary role of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus in providing education during the Ottoman and British periods, education has been an important instrument for the maintenance of the Greek Orthodox character of the island under foreign rule (Persianis 1978). Religious education is one of the major subjects of the centralized education system that employs the same national curricula, official textbooks, and teacher handbooks in all schools at the same level (Tapakis 2003, p. 13). RE is a compulsory pre-primary, primary, and secondary school subject that is taught two hours per week. Religious lessons have a primary place in the syllabuses of the pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools and attendance is compulsory for Orthodox students. The compulsory religious education occupies a prominent position throughout the lower secondary (gymnasium) and the upper secondary (lyceum) levels. In secondary schools, it is taught by teachers who specialize in religious education, but pre-primary and primary teachers provide religious education without being specialists in theology (Krasia 2004). Atheists and parents who practice another religion are entitled to ask their children to be exempted from the mandatory Orthodox religious education. According to the International Religious Freedom Cyprus Report 2020:

The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction and attendance at religious services before major Greek Orthodox religious holidays in public

primary and secondary schools. The Ministry of Education (MOE) may excuse primary school students of other religious groups from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their guardians, but Greek Orthodox children in primary school may not opt out. The MOE may excuse secondary school students from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience and may excuse them from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their guardians or at their own request if over the age of 16 (Cyprus 2020).

The religious education curriculum in public schools is predominantly based on Orthodox Christianity, Orthodox Christian worship, and Hellenism. With the exception of Maronites and Turkish Cypriots, students belonging to other religions cannot receive religious education in public schools. Religious education for Maronite children attending public schools is taught by Maronite priests. Turkish Cypriot students are entitled to have religious education in their mother language and in their own religion (Emilianides 2011). However, the Republic of Cyprus provides support only to the recognized religious minority groups—namely the Maronite, Armenian, and Latins—for operating their own schools (private schools) in order to sustain their identity, culture, and religion. Pupils belonging to these communities have the right to attend private schools of their choice and in such a case the state finances all their school fees and expenditures, including religious education. The main challenge of religious education in Greek Cypriot public schools has been the dominant Hellenic-Christian Orthodox-centric curriculum which fails to respond to the needs of the students of other religions to learn about their religion and freely practice it at school (Savvides et al. 2013, p. 9). Moreover, there is no possibility for pupils and teachers to take a day off for religious holidays (Emilianides 2011). Nonetheless, religious education outside of school is not restricted by law. Therefore, pupils who adhere to other religious faiths can receive religious instruction offered by their communities.

The Christian Orthodox RE curriculum lacks sufficient knowledge about other religions. The national curriculum of 1994 placed religious education under the heading of the ‘Christian Orthodox Education’. The catechistic-denominational context of religious instruction connects Orthodox Christianity (Christian theology) with Greek national identity (Papastephanou 2005). The updated national curriculum of 2010 abandoned catechism, though its confessional character was preserved. The name of the lesson was changed from ‘Christian Orthodox Education’ to ‘Religious Education’. While the 2010 curriculum tried to consider religious diversity in Cyprus due to the existence of migrants and refugees from Africa, East Asia, and the Middle East, and referred to the need for promoting tolerance and mutual understanding, such references continued to be framed within the religious practices and beliefs of the dominant religion (Zembylas and Loukaidis 2018, pp. 7–9). Although the content of religious education is revised, the theological orientation has remained conventional as it neglected to include sufficient space for learning about other beliefs and religions.

Overall, the education system of the Greek Cypriot community has been criticized for not adequately incorporating interreligious and intercultural elements. Therefore, the Ministry of Education and Culture’s ongoing educational reform aims to introduce comprehensive changes at all levels of the education system in order to create a democratic and student-centered education system that includes all students, irrespective of social, racial, ethnic, or religious background, and gender (Universal Periodic Review 2019).

3.2. RE in Turkish Cypriot Schools

Affected by the British colonial policies, such as the annulment of Ottoman institutions, and the modernization of the education system due to the Kemalist reforms in Cyprus since the 1930s, the Turkish Cypriot administration and its education system became very secular. In this vein, the first article of the TRNC’s Constitution underlines the secular form and characteristics of the state. Annual education programs emphasize that the essence of the Turkish Cypriot education system is the teaching of secular, democratic, national, and contemporary values to the new generations (Makriyianni et al. 2011, pp. 120–22). Religious

classes are scheduled for one hour per week for each level. There are no religious education lessons during the first three years of primary schools, high schools, and at university.

While religious education has always been compulsory in primary schools, the place of religious education in the lower secondary school curriculum has been altered as political power changed hands since 2005. Between 2005 and 2009, the Republican Turkish Party government removed mandatory religious education in secondary schools. By then, the religious education course entitled ‘Religious Culture and Morality Knowledge’ was either excluded or made optional. When the conservative National Unity Party came to power in 2009, religious education in lower secondary schools once again altered from elective to mandatory in 2010. The four-party coalition government—consisting of the Republican Turkish Party, the People’s Party, the Communal Democracy Party, and the Democratic Party—that assumed power in 2018, redesigned the Religious Culture and Morality course as an elective course in the secondary school curriculum in the 2018 fall semester, based on the argument that an increasing number of foreign students attend public schools (Latif 2020, pp. 13–14). After the collapse of the four-party coalition government, the ruling coalition of the National Unity Party and the People’s Party, which was established in May 2019, made religious education compulsory again. Under the current coalition government of the National Unity Party, the Democrat Party (DP), and the Rebirth Party (YDP), formed in December 2020, religious education in lower secondary schools is still mandatory. At present, religious education is scheduled for one hour a week in public schools. However, parents can appeal to the school administration for their children to be exempted from the compulsory RE classes.

Until 2016, the same official Turkish Ministry of Education textbooks that have been employed in Turkey, entitled ‘Religious Culture and Morality Knowledge’, were used in the Turkish Cypriot public schools. These textbooks were published by the Turkish Ministry of Education in Ankara and accepted as official textbooks. The content analysis of the textbooks demonstrates that their context is dominated by Sunni Islamic doctrines, religious practices, and the Qur’an. The textbooks have an exclusive focus on Sunni Islamic culture, values, traditions, and Turkish-Sunni Muslim identity (Meral 2015). There is insufficient information about other world religions or other Islamic sects. At present, almost all textbooks for the public schools are written under the authority of the Educational Planning and Program Department and published by the Turkish Cypriot Ministry of Education. The first religious education textbooks were developed by the Basic Education Program Development Project in the period of 2016–2018. The Education Program of 2016 and the curriculum for religious education, which are still in use, underline that the basic philosophy and aim of religious education is to raise secular and democratic individuals (Latif 2021, pp. 75–76). Although the revised curriculum of 2018 (Education Program 2018) stressed the importance of learning about different religious and non-religious traditions, the newly developed textbooks’ subject content remained the same. For instance, in the new Grade 4 Religious Culture and Morality Knowledge textbook, only 12 of the 128 pages mention other religions. The new Grade 5 Religious Culture and Morality Knowledge textbook includes among other religions only Christianity: basic information about the main principles of Christian faith, life of the Prophet Jesus, sacred texts, places of worship, and clerics. The new primary school religious education textbooks remained Sunni Muslim-centric, with very little information about other world religions. Likewise, the current lower secondary school Religious Culture and Morality Knowledge textbooks for Grades 6–8 have very limited space for teaching and learning about other world religions or about other Islamic traditions (Latif 2021, p. 74).

4. Entanglements of Freedom of Religion and Education

The amended 1960 Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus, which is still applicable in the South, provides freedom of religion and prohibits religious discrimination. Due to the former bi-communal nature of the republic, provisions were made for both the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and the institution of waqf and the Laws and Principles

of awqaf (Ahkamül Evkaf). The Constitution specified that the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and the Evkaf, the Muslim institution that regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots, have exclusive rights to regulate and administer their internal affairs and property in accordance with their laws and principles (Nevzat and Mete 2009). The other constitutionally recognized religious groups, Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and Latins (Roman Catholics) are afforded the same rights regarding religious matters as they had before the 1960 Constitution came into force. With respect to education and cultural matters, the Constitution guarantees that these smaller religious groups will not be disadvantaged in the allocation of public funds.

Historically, the role of religion, religious institutions, and religious leaders among the Turkish and Greek Cypriots were very different. The Ottoman millet system allocated a leadership position to the archbishops and the Orthodox Church, whereas no Islamic religious figure held any political power. The leader of the Greek Cypriot struggle for independence against British colonialism in the 1950s was the head of the Greek Orthodox Church, Archbishop Makarios III. After Cyprus achieved independence, Makarios became the first president from 1960 until his death in 1977, which displayed the association between the Church and the Republic of Cyprus.

Hence, there has been a strong link between Orthodox Christianity and Greek national identity in the Greek Cypriot education system. When the Republic of Cyprus applied for EU membership, the harmonization process created pressure for an inclusive education policy and multiculturalism. Nevertheless, the right-wing government in the 1990s continued with an education policy which aligned the Greek identity and the Orthodox Christian tradition (Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus 1996, p. 17). When Cyprus joined the EU in 2004, the Republic of Cyprus Committee for Educational Reform was established with a mandate from the Greek Cypriot Minister for Education and Culture to analyze the Greek Cypriot education system. According to the committee's report, the Greek Cypriot education system was "Helleno-ethnocentric and religious in character" and culturally monolithic (Makriyianni et al. 2011). The committee suggested that narrow ethnocentric monocultural elements of education should be discarded and that a European dimension, as well as the principles of "inclusive democracy", should be incorporated (Philippou and Makriyianni 2004). In 2006, the Ministry of Education proposed reducing the number of hours of religious education in public schools from two to one per week. Due to the strong objection of the Church and other religious organizations to the proposal, however, the Ministry postponed its implementation (Latif 2014). There have been no fruitful attempts thus far to reform the education system.

Throughout the Greek Cypriot education system, there is a strong connection between Orthodox Christianity and Greek national identity. The way in which other religions are presented contributes to the sense of "us" and "them". On the other hand, RE has serious "objections from the powerful Greek Orthodox Church to include more knowledge about other religions (especially Islam) and non-religious positions into the curricula" (Zembylas and Loukaidis 2018, p. 178). Accordingly, the Ministry of Education and Culture has been trying to incorporate a more multicultural curriculum and to provide optional seminars for teachers on topics related to managing diversity and fighting discrimination in schools. For instance, non-Orthodox Christian children can be exempted from compulsory RE. Nonetheless, their parents have to make an official application and disclose their religious affiliation, which may lead to social exclusion.

Likewise, the TRNC's Constitution, approved by the Turkish Cypriot community in 1983, guarantees freedom of religion and conscience. After the establishment of the TRNC, the main historical Muslim institutions since the Ottoman times, namely the Evkaf and Mufti, were reconfigured. Under Ottoman rule, a number of Islamic pious endowments known as Evkaf, were created for the religious, social, and cultural needs of the Muslim community (Bouleti 2015, p. 76). The Evkaf was reconstructed as the Religious Affairs Office and the Mufti, once the spiritual head of the Turkish Cypriot community, became the Director of Religious Affairs (DRA) under control of the Religious Affairs Office (Dayioğlu

and Mete 2020, p. 186). In contrast to the secular nature of the TRNC, there has been mandatory religious education in the Turkish Cypriot primary and lower secondary schools. Furthermore, the religious education curriculum concentrates on the Sunni Islamic tradition: beliefs, practices, teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, the Holy Qur'an, Islamic culture, behavior, traditions and moral values, and the Turkish-Sunni Muslim identity. The RE context is similar to the officially sanctioned Sunni Islam in Turkey and the textbooks promote a particular religion (Meral 2015). All in all, there is very little attention for teaching and learning about other world religions or about other Islamic traditions in the religious education program. Only the learning units of Grade 8's Religious Culture and Morality Knowledge textbook include the relationship between religion, rights and freedoms, different interpretations of Islamic thought, and interreligious dialogue. The last unit of the textbook comprises Islam's view of other religions, common principles in different religious traditions, the contribution of interfaith peace to world peace, and the principles of Islamic religion for interreligious dialogue (Latif 2021, p. 75).

All the textbooks and curricula used in the Turkish Cypriot primary and secondary schools as of 2018–2019 were developed within the scope of the Basic Education Program Development Project (TEPGEP). The Education Program underlines that the basic philosophy and aim of RE is to raise secular and democratic individuals. In that vein, it emphasizes the significance of providing a religious education that comprises all world religions and faiths. Nevertheless, due to a lack of local experts, the RE curriculum and textbooks were prepared in collaboration with Turkey and resulted in a Sunni-centric perspective. Therefore, the basic aim and philosophy of the 2016 education program contradicted the RE syllabus and textbooks as their content could not be changed as envisaged.

The goal of state-controlled religious education in North Cyprus has been to prevent the misuse of religion through an incorrect interpretation that could lead to social polarization. Children cannot participate in any religious classes that are not authorized by the government. Hitherto, the parents approve of the government's approach to religious education. On the other hand, the increasing influence of Turkey's AKP government in North Cyprus and the related policy concerning religious education led to controversies and societal polarization among the Turkish Cypriot community. The controversies were based on the imposition of formal religious instruction, the opening of the Hala Sultan Divinity College, the institutionalization of Qur'an courses, the establishment of the Faculty of Theology, and the re-implementation of the mandatory religious education for the lower secondary state schools (Latif 2020, p. 3). The obligatory status of RE has been a contentious issue. After the last Turkish Cypriot parliamentary elections in January 2018, the previous four-party coalition government announced that it would lift the requirement for obligatory RE (Fehime 2018). Notwithstanding these intentions, the government could not change the obligatory status of RE in the lower secondary school curriculum.

The compulsory religious education policy drew reactions from the secular circles within the Turkish Cypriot community such as the teachers' unions, a number of NGOs, and the Alevi associations. For instance, the Alevi communities in North Cyprus, which are represented by the Hacı Bektaşî Veli Derneği (Hacı Bektaşî Veli Association) and Pir Sultan Abdal Derneği (Pir Sultan Abdal Association), complained several times that Alevi children cannot learn anything about Alevi Islam or Alevism within the official school curriculum and called for legal regulation of the Directorate of Religious Affairs concerning the position of Alevis. Alevism is related to Shi'a Islam and has quite liberal views. One of the pro-active Alevi associations, Pir Sultan Abdal Derneği, criticized the obligatory religious courses and the co-chairs of the Association stated that, "as citizens, we perceive our children to take the religion courses elective as a right and freedom. We request the TRNC government to make the necessary regulations" (Ruh and Köprülü 2021, pp. 10–11). In 2016, the Association made a public statement that implementing compulsory religious education violates the freedom of religion and belief by referring to the Article 23 of the TRNC Constitution. Alevi associations in North Cyprus organize rituals, cultural activities, and gatherings in addition to teaching the religious musical instrument—'saz'—to children. The Alevi families also

reported complaints that they have unmet demands for their children to be taught to play the saz at school.

Beyond the problems experienced by the Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities regarding the obligatory mono-confessional religious education, the three main religious minorities (Armenians, Maronites, and Latins) face systematic disadvantages and discrimination. Although there is a legal and institutional framework for the rights and protection of these religious groups, they tackle with problems of political representation and native language education as those are being grounded merely on religious group membership. All of the three religious groups have their own distinct churches and associations, but only the Armenians have public primary schools providing education in the Armenian language. The Armenian public schools adopt the same official Greek Cypriot school curriculum and offer additional instruction in Armenian, as well as extracurricular programs in Armenian history, geography, and traditional dance (EPASI 2008, p. 4). The academic curricula of the Armenian public schools over time responded to the needs of the community's changing population and the government's requirements. The education is tri-lingual (Armenian, Greek, English) and the curriculum is comparable with the curriculum in Greek Cypriot public schools, enhanced with lessons on Armenian language, history, and geography (Hadjilyra 2016, p. 22). Moreover, it includes activities which support Armenology and the Armenian culture. The only Armenian secondary school ("Gymnasium") is located in Nicosia and has a three-year curriculum, which is equivalent to the first three years of the Greek Cypriot public secondary schools. After these three years, students can continue their education in Greek Cypriot secondary schools.

There is no public school that provides education in Maronite Arabic, which makes it very problematic for the Maronite community to preserve their ancestral language. Maronite parents can send their children to the "Saint Maron" kindergarten and the "Saint Maron" Elementary School. Both schools have the same status as the rest of the public schools in the Republic of Cyprus and they follow the same curriculum of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The "Saint Maron" elementary school offers Maronite students traditional Maronite music and Cypriot Maronite Arabic lessons (Frangeskou and Hadjilyra 2013, p. 23). The school is supervised by the Maronites School Committee, which is appointed by the Council of Ministers upon the suggestion of the Minister of Education and Culture. Maronites also attend the Terra Santa and Saint Mary's, Roman Catholic schools, which are considered to be traditional schools for Cypriot Maronites and Latins. Both of them operate as private non-profit schools. Latins, the smallest of the three abovementioned minorities, do not have native language education either, and their children attend Greek Cypriot or Roman Catholic schools.

5. Conclusions

Many multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multifaith societies face difficulties in responding to the claims of religious freedom in education. A major challenge is guaranteeing the educational and religious rights of all children (Russo 2015). Although many liberal and democratic regimes guarantee individual rights and freedoms and employ mechanisms to accommodate diversity, the continuing claims of diverse religious communities cause a dichotomy. Liberal and democratic principles may overlap with individual rights and freedoms in multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multifaith societies that experience a great challenge to reconcile multiple cultural, moral, and religious positions. Similarly, the subject of religious education has been a heated debate on both sides of Cyprus.

The religious education policy of the Republic of Cyprus contradicts with the general aims of a democratic education and obstructs the development of a tolerant attitude to diversity of religions and non-religious convictions. The Orthodox Christian-centric religious education and the strong connection between Orthodoxy and the Greek national identity alienate minorities and followers of other religions. This complicates a dialogue between people from different cultural, religious, and non-religious backgrounds. According to the Council of Europe's perspective on teaching about religions and beliefs, intercultural

education will be in vain if there is no genuine dialogue between different culturally or religiously based positions and no flexibility to accommodate difference within a democratic framework (Jackson 2014, p. 137).

On the other hand, the controversies over religious education demonstrate the need for a societal consensus concerning the nature of religious and ethics education in North Cyprus. The educational programs and curriculums developed in recent years tried to consider religious and cultural diversity on both sides of Cyprus. The Ministries of Education and Culture and their Educational Planning and Program Departments, both in North and South Cyprus, referred to the need for promoting tolerance and mutual understanding to accommodate diversity at schools, but these attempts have yet to yield a positive result (Zembylas and Loukaidis 2018, pp. 7–9). All in all, compulsory religious instruction based on teaching Christian Orthodox and Sunni Islamic perspectives, which are linked to Greek and Turkish national identities, also contradicts with the Toledo guiding principles, which aim to promote the study and knowledge about religions and beliefs in schools as a tool to enhance religious freedom (Santoro 2008, p. 83). The main Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs refer: “first, that there is positive value in teaching respect for everyone’s right to freedom of religion and belief, and second, that teaching about religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes” (ODIHR 2007). Religious education in Cyprus clashes with the Toledo principles, which advocate an educational approach for the promotion of freedom of religion and belief and a culture of mutual understanding of the world’s increasing diversity.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the Greek Cypriot national curriculum is currently under revision. At the same time, the questions regarding the nature of religious instruction among the Turkish Cypriots remain unanswered. These conditions could provide an opportunity to restructure religious education in the direction of a more inclusive society within and across the borders. In line with the principles of intercultural and interfaith education, religious education should be redesigned as an instrument for promoting respect for religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. The need for tolerance and for the endorsement of differences should be highlighted. In this context, the religious education curriculum needs to support the development of critical thinking and the capacity for impartiality, which are both crucial for a tolerant and respectful co-existence of the diverse and pluralistic communities of Cyprus. Accommodating religious and ethnic diversity at schools, providing an inclusive education, and endorsing freedom of religion and education as a human rights issue and as an educational priority can resolve inequalities and promote social cohesion in the schools as well as in society at large.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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