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*Thematic Article*



## Europe's Importance for World Education

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### Abstract

Educational thinking has deep roots in the intellectual history of Europe. It is tightly connected with religious traditions and also with the liberation from religious constraints. We cannot but help children and youth to feel safe and secure in the world. This is the base to cope with experiences which show us that very often the world is unsafe and insecure. We must dig for basic ideas, narratives, pictures, impressions which can convey the feeling that the world is good, beautiful and true. We should not neglect or deny this when we explain scientific phenomena of nature and of history.

**Keywords:** Europe, educational values, philosophy of education, critical thinking

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We live in Europe. We are Europeans. Most of us make their payments in the Euro-currency. Yet, no one can say, what and where Europe is, exactly. Europe exists, for sure, but we don't know where it begins and where it ends. Today, for most people in this area and perhaps around the world the term conjures up something positive. This was not the case throughout history. Although it was a pretty maid whom Zeus as the king of gods robbed and raped on the island of Crete, as Greek mythology knew, her name "Europe" did not have a positive sound in old Greece and so furthermore for centuries. Later, the term was opposed to Byzantium, that meant: somewhere outside. During the European middle ages it was used to confine imperial hegemony. Regional sovereigns spoke of "European" when they wanted to say: It is not a matter of the Empire. From the 17th century on, few philosophers interlinked the term with a great idea of peace (Abbe de Saint-Pierre, Comenius, Holderlin). It took until the 19th century that the term gained a positive meaning and even a political and sociological status. Today, we have come to believe in the value of the coin "Europe".

### **I. Four intellectual sources of European education**

People easily identify the term "Europe" with the political fact of the European Union. Yet, this must not be identified with Europe – and doesn't like to be so. Obviously it is unwise to draw geographical borders for Europe. Europe depends on the will of the nations to belong to Europe. All the more is it reasonable to ask for the intellectual substance of Europe. Europe is not anything real in terms of state borders like a nation state, yet it is real and operates on an intellectual level.

The intellectual history of Europe is in great parts a history of religion. Centrally it has to do with the rise of Christianity. A renowned German historian of religions and Christian beliefs in the world phrased: "Europe' is the only region in world history the rise of which from the historically identifiable beginnings until present age has been molded by fights and quarrels of religions and by the neighbourhood of religions. These occurrences were of higher density and intensity than in any other area."

As Christendom in general repelled syncretism it was on the other hand prone to schisms. The deepest one was that between the Western Latin Church and the Eastern orthodox Byzantine church. In the beginnings of Christianity after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans the Christian church felt urged to be present at the two most influential places in the Roman Empire: Athens and Rome. They addressed their message to the Latin speaking population and as well the Greek speaking population. Both, the Greek writing and the Latin writing church fathers, formed the catholic church in the formative centuries of the Christian "West". The Latin Christianity became the strongest stratum of modern Europe. Yet, only in the nineteenth century the term "Europe" replaced the term "Christianity".

The modern political European process started after World War II in Western countries with a strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church. Some years later the European process moved North and South. By this it bridged another schism that had occurred in the

history of the Christian churches, the break-away of Lutheran and Reformed churches from the Roman church in the 16th century. Of similar importance was the splitting up of the Anglican Church in the sixteenth century. The turn of the modern European process to the Northern countries brought a thread of Protestantism into the fabric of Europe. The so-called iron curtain prevented some countries from joining the European process early, although geographically and historically they are parts of Europe. Today they are sometimes named central-east European countries. Some of these, especially Poland, fortified the Roman Catholic fundament of the modern Europe.

The Byzantine-Orthodox Church definitely split from the Roman Church in 1054. This event proved to be a seemingly irreparable schism in Christendom. The Eastern Orthodoxy can be regarded as the second intellectual stratum of Europe. It is a dominant feature not only in Greece which joined the European Union in 1981, but also in Bulgaria where the Patriarch of Constantinople already in the year 927 had acknowledged a new orthodox church which was neither built on the Greek language nor on the Latin language but for the first time on a Slavonic language: the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Two venerated erudite monks, Cyril and Methodius, well educated at Byzantium and as travelling missionaries also polyglot, had created an alphabet for Slavonic languages. The Bulgars originally did not speak a Slavonic language instead a Turk language, better to say an Oghuric language. By adopting the orthodox liturgy on a Slavonic linguistic base they became a model for several surrounding peoples with respect to their religious affiliation. The Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church were to follow in a remarkably short time. Bulgaria entered the European Union in 2007. In European states orthodox churches not seldom are connected with the Roman-Catholic church although the rite is different (uniting churches). Even after the fall of communism they tolerate more state control than Western churches do.

Both Christian religions, the Western one in competing variants and the Eastern one, generated strong legacies for today's European intellectual cultures. The most important intellectual legacy of the Byzantine Empire was the conservation and transmission of the Greek language, which started when the Eastern Roman Empire turned its back on the Western Empire. The Byzantines desired to preserve the written testimonies of the Hellenistic period, although Greek in their centuries was no longer a uniform language. Beyond Greek more languages were spoken in the Eastern Empire such as Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Slavic, Persian, and Arabic.

Saving the heritage of the Greek antiquity was not only the merit of the East Roman Empire and the Byzantine-Orthodox church but also the Muslim Arabs contributed much, and not minor were the efforts of Western scholars who searched for written sources from Greek antiquity in the Byzantine Empire and collected and copied many of them. The translation into Latin was mainly achieved by scholars from the Latin West. Arab scholars often built on translations into the old Syrian language, called Syriac, performed by scholarly Christians in the antique Syria.

The Byzantine Empire carried the main burden of the Christian encounter with the rising Islam, yet also the Latin West fought quarrels with Muslims in Spain – besides few periods of fruitful neighbourhood in multireligious towns. Islam must not be overlooked when we look for further stratum in the mountain of the intellectual Europe. Obviously Islam is a third layer of the European intellect besides the two Christian religions, albeit less immersive than these. After 1453 the Selçuk sultans owned large parts of the land of the former Byzantine Empire, and they were followed by the Osmans, who also were from a Turk origin. By enlarging the Osman Empire, Turks occupied more and more areas in Europe, above all on the Balkan and further north even the main part of the modern country of Romania. In those centuries it was for the kingdom of Hungary to function as a barrier for the West drift of the Osman Empire and to defend the Western Christianity. Turkish occupation lasted in some areas for centuries and by this also influenced the religious and intellectual life in these areas. However, there was no continuous presence of Islam in the states which in our times belong to the European Union; nevertheless Islam was brought in again in the wake of migrations after World War II. Islam in the European Union is not a religion which roots in long-standing settled populations but is a migrants' religion.

A fourth layer in European religions and culture is to be mentioned which is not bound to a political entity or to a territory. It is Judaism. It used to be spread over all countries in Europe and still is despite the persecutions which took innumerable lives. The Jewish emancipation movement which took place in some European countries in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries encouraged not few Jewish youth to attend the rising Jewish schools which acquired high educational quality, and during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also municipal or state schools where they earned the highest school degrees. Although these people were often attributed "assimilated", they in general did not deny their religious upbringing and education. Among the four religious streams in European history Jewish religion and culture was most brutally beaten during World War II. Survivors of the Holocaust tried to start from new in their home countries and fought different difficulties in different countries.

The four churches or religions which were mentioned here built large education systems during history and by this formed the base of education in Europe. This is true with respect to the institutional fundamentals and the intellectual foundations as well. The Western idea of education is centered around the notion of the "person" or "personality" which not only connotes morality but also emotions and an active approach to life. The orthodox pedagogy is more aimed at the ideal of the "saint" who embodies the antique notion of "apatheia" which means to be free of passions. The orthodoxy's peculiarity is due to the role and the long-lasting importance of monasteries in the Eastern Orthodoxy which lasts until now. The Western monasteries also were pillars in the edifice of the church; additionally they had a broad civilising impact by their educational efforts not only for monks and nuns but also for the surrounding population and by their role as economic centers. The Jewish ideas of education probably are the most manifold among

all the religions. Jewish education is even more bound to studying texts, mostly old ones, than education in the other three religions although all of them are book based religions. The strong emphasis on understanding texts in Jewish education results from the preoccupation with the question of Jewish identity which stimulates all studies. The Islamic notion of education underpins stronger than the others the value of human models which the younger people have to live up to. Obedience is expected from the young Muslims and also from adult Muslims in many respects. The model behind all models is God himself.

## **II. Educational sovereignty of the state**

Only about two hundred years ago in some countries the states gradually started to take over control of the education institutions and above all to finance education. This effort is still underway. It does no longer lead to serious conflicts between the states and the Christian churches but new conflicts with Islamic communities in Europe can arise when the states try to implement their regulations. Sometimes the French model of the strictly secular state school is within the European Union seen as the European model. The constitutional bodies of the European Union, especially the European Parliament, obviously are in favour of this principle. In the aftermath of the French Revolution French policy brought about the idea of separation of state and church. The law to establish this came in 1905. Yet, in Europe and even in France this idea is not purely put into practice – in contrast e.g. to the United States of America. The centralised states in France and in other European countries do not allow church schools to run their affairs in full independence as long as they equalise compulsory school attendance. States force the church schools to adopt most of the regulations and the curricula of the equivalent state school and in compensation for this grant the church led schools finances from the state – mostly the state pays the teachers' salaries.

Nevertheless, there are differences among European countries with respect to the state control over religious education. Two countries with a large majority of Roman Catholic population differ remarkably. France does not allow religious education in state schools but keeps one day in the week (mostly Wednesday) free from schooling in order to enable students' participation in church exercises outside schools. Poland in contrast compels every school from kindergarten up to higher secondary school to provide for two hours per week of religious instruction which is under control of churches who approve the teachers for religious instruction. Christian instruction lessons often begin with a prayer. Students who refuse to take part in this school subject alternatively may opt for so-called ethical instruction. During the inter-war period in Poland participation in religious instruction in schools had been compulsory, during the communist period it had been abolished. In France approximately 20% of all schools are run by non-state organisations, mainly the Roman Catholic Church, who objects to secular schools. In Poland, non-state schools only were visible after 1990 and up to the year 2006 remained a small minority

with approximately 2 000 schools including many vocational schools. In Hungary talks between the government and churches have begun to find a similar solution.

The subject of ethics might be seen as a kind of non-confessional inter-religious instruction which is more in accordance with modern secular tendencies than confessional instruction. The secularity of the public school in this way would assert itself by the decisions of the students respectively their parents who opt for the non-confessional variant. The Christian churches may be afraid of this silent mechanism. They remain privileged partners of the state yet can no longer fulfil their role because they lose footholds within the population and even within their fellowships. This concern is existent especially among protestant churches and in some countries also in the Catholic Church. The orthodox churches e.g. in Greece and Russia are better prepared to defend themselves against decisions of individual consciences because of their traditionally close relationship to the state under which they act. They are privileged by the constitutions of their states and by specific educational laws which don't leave chances for opting out of the religious instruction of the church to which an individual belongs. Confessional religious instruction is secured by the state. The state doesn't do this selflessly, at least where also Islamic instruction is in the game. The generosity of the state is combined with the aim to attract more youngsters into public schools, especially when many Muslim youngsters attend the so-called madrasahs upon which the state has nearly no influence. Where religious instruction is provided by the state, the control over the teachers for this subject falls to the state.

In Northeast Greece – in the former Turkish territory – the Muslims enjoy minority status and have the right to get schooling in their language and also in their religion. The Greek state guarantees Islamic religious instruction for the Muslim population and is prepared to pay for the muftis who teach the religious subject. Yet, it reserves its right to approve the muftis as teachers. The committee which delivers such approvals was disclaimed by the Muslim population because not all its members are Muslims. The Greek government wanted to maintain a sign of secularisation but the Muslim population saw their model in the state of Turkey.

Jewish education in Europe today mostly exists in day schools i.e. in voluntary schools offered by Jewish parishes. So it is with Islamic schools. Both religions lay stress on early confrontation with the basic texts of their religion. Jewish children begin to read in very early age. Muslim children come to know the Arabic texts only by hearing; they have to learn them by heart. Regular state schools would not reach the intensity of studying religious texts which religious schools are able to. Due to early training in the language of the venerated books, Jewish students also in the state school systems regularly perform well. Today e.g. Germany profits from Jewish emigration from Russia and Ukraine because Jewish children in general are excellent students.

When we ask for lasting effects that religions had on education in Europe we observe above all that most European states learned to share power in educational matters. The

states shared power with churches or other religious organisations and this is true until now, although the churches and religious organisations became weaker in the recent two hundred years. At least in the Western parts of Europe the states never accomplished to bring churches under their control. Most states gave up attempts of this kind after they had felt the strength of resistance, even after decades of confrontation. Each state had to find constitutional or statutory ways of settling the interests of both sides in the educational field. These processes have not yet been completed. In Bulgaria e.g. monastery schools across five hundred years have maintained the Bulgarian language against Ottoman rule, yet after communism took over these schools were forbidden and even since then – in the post-Communist period – church schools could not be re-established.

Partition of power includes sharing power with local and regional authorities and also with the management of individual schools. It also applies to the sector of private schools, which exists in a majority of European states. Private schools are not only those which are run by churches, but also schools which are special by their educational theories. In most states such schools enjoy more autonomy from the state than regular state schools do, and often rely on financial support from parents and independent organisations which comes in addition to the limited financial means which the state grants. Autonomy of the school does not necessarily mean autonomy of the individual teacher, but it means the autonomy that the maintaining organisation enjoys.

**Wolfgang Mitter** made use of the term “educational sovereignty” (*Bildungssouveränität*). He gave us several examples of how to combine historical research with international research. From thorough historical analysis he concluded that the state in most European countries never was the unchallenged sovereign in matters of education which the theories of state sovereignty in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had postulated. For a long while it were the rivals inside the state which at all times enforced concessions, whereas in our days additionally international and supranational institutions and movements restrict the independence of states in the field of educational policy.

### **III. The contribution of the European Union to world education**

The gradually growing rise of the EU – that means their main organs: European Parliament, European Council, European Commission and also the Euro-Group – makes some people think that the European Union became an obstacle for Education in Europe because its regulations seem to neglect national traditions in education. The European Union however does not want to change the contents of educational traditions and educational policies in the individual member states but to have an impact on procedures and means of educational policies in order to foster its aim of mobility. Mobility within the EU and in interaction with economic areas outside the EU should help to bring people in the EU closer together, e.g. by international exchange programmes on the level of students and teachers, and also to arouse competition which might raise economic outcomes. The EU intends to make the procedures within education systems more

effective and also more democratic. This more indirect than direct manner of political action is in accordance with the specific supra-national character of the EU which is not a super-state but a common structure of 28 states based on binding treaties. The EU is more than a confederation of states and less than a federal state.

Only within defined boundaries the EU exposes itself as maintainer of educational institutions such as schools. The EU maintains 14 European Schools placed only in European towns which host a European institution such as e.g. the European Central Bank in Frankfurt. These multinational and multilingual schools which mainly address the children of EU employees who work at this EU-institute combine curricula from a couple of European nations and therefore convey a broad political and linguistic education to their students. E.g. the actual German Defence Minister, Ursula von der Leyen, is an alumni of the Brussels European School because her father Ernst Albrecht who later became the Prime Minister of the State of Lower Saxony, for several years worked with the EU respectively with its forerunner institution at Brussels. The European school is a modern and demanding school model which could be attractive for many more parents who do not have the privilege to work for a European institution. Some of the parents who are not affiliated with an EU-institution indeed manage to help their children with an enrolment in one of these schools. When an internationally linked business firm contracts with such a school the firm can offer such a privilege to their employees. Yet the number of placements is rather restricted. It is one of the constitutional limitations that the status of the EU imposes that the Union is not in the position to offer this school model in each member state although this type of school fulfils the aims of the EU in an ideal manner: mobility of persons in the EU across borders and also enhancement of competition and achievements, especially language competencies. The EU as a provider of education institutions of its own in different member states – this without question would stimulate the competition about ideas and conceptions in national education systems and by this augment the striving for quality. On the level of tertiary education the EU only runs one institution, this is the European University Institute at Florence which is limited to a short list of academic subjects and only provides doctoral programmes.

When in the nineteenth century the notion of Europe became a political and also philosophical reality Europe for some thinkers appeared as an enlightened continent that paved the way to the unity of mankind. Only some decades later Europe unveiled itself as the abyss of the worst evils: colonialism, nationalism, racism, fascism, totalitarianism. Yet, then, part of Europe could respire: All this could be left behind when Europe became a follower of the United States of America, especially of its model of democracy, and when we grasped the idea that the future of Europe is already there: in the shape of the United States of America. Needed the other half of Europe after the iron curtain fell only be pulled into this direction? Was this the solution for all Europe? After twenty five years of this belief – that means one generation later – this prospect has faded. Many people in Europe are in doubts as for Europe's future. They become aware of the smallness of Europe in the global scale and want to avoid another self-overestimation. Nevertheless others ask us



about our contribution to world education. After all I said so far, an answer can only be: States or regions need not have a unified education system, even if a unified political system seems to be advantageous and a coordinated economic system seems to be favourable. Educational thinking has deep roots in the intellectual history and this is tightly connected with religious traditions and also with the liberation from religious constraints. It can be doubted that enlightenment really helped us to replace the good that religion can provide– despite much bad that it also brought about. As educators we cannot but help children and youth to feel safe and secure in the world because this is the base to cope with experiences which show us that very often the world is unsafe and insecure. We must dig for basic ideas, narratives, pictures, impressions which can convey the feeling that the world is good and – next – that it is beautiful and – the ultimate – that it is true. We should not neglect or deny this when we explain scientific phenomena of nature and of history. Criticism is not an element men can survive on.

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