

SECULARISATION

## Religious Education: America and Europe go different ways

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Religious education (or, in many Catholic circles, more traditionally called “catechism”) seem to be going in different directions in America and Europe. How so? Consider two developments in May.

**In the United States, the western state of Montana** adopted legislation indirectly helping religious education by guaranteeing all school students across the state one hour of “released time” per week.

**“Released time” is a mechanism common in many American states** (especially those with large Catholic populations) whereby public school students are released from their classrooms at some point in the school day (usually towards its end) to attend religious education instruction elsewhere, e.g., in their parish school. Students are responsible for learning what they missed during that period, but it is clear that this time is carved out for students whose parents want it to receive religious instruction. Such classes are almost always away from the public school, given a series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions in the late 1940s (which were partially responsible for the ascendance of a harsh “church/state separation” jurisprudence prevailing until recently) permitting “released time” as long as it was not on the public school premises (so as not to suggest the appearance of “state endorsement” of religion).

**Most states which allow “released time”** do so informally and/or by state authorization for local school districts to adopt the exemption, typically at their choice. Montana’s new law differs in two important respects:

--It ensures access to “released time” statewide. The hour off is guaranteed. It is not a matter of local school board discretion.

--It envisions the possibility (without overly specifying the criteria) whereby students could receive public school credit for learning acquired in religious education classes.

### **Why are these two Montana changes groundbreaking?**

First, in a world that is increasingly secularized, it recognizes that religious education also deserves dedicated time. The state is not acting like it can schedule a child’s life while ignoring religious instruction, parent and child having to find time for it once all the things society deems “important” are scheduled. No—it recognizes that while religious instruction is a choice, it is a choice the state should recognize and facilitate, not pretend it does not exist.

**As a long culturally Protestant country,** American Protestants often got their

religious education through “Sunday schools.” But with creeping secularization, even Protestant Sunday service attendance is down. Meanwhile, many secular activities for young people (e.g., sports competitions, sometimes long distance) get scheduled on Sundays or across weekends, again pushing religion out of that space (especially when society pretends it does not have to reckon with “religion” as a scheduling element in children’s lives).

**Second, by opening the door to academic credit,** the state acknowledges that religious education is both *important* and *education*. If a significant cross-section of children participate in this activity not as worship but to *learn* about what their faith teaches, that’s *important*. And by learning about it, that’s *education* (and not, as some anti-religionists might contend, “indoctrination”).

**Some states are experimenting with things like posting Ten Commandments** in schools (Louisiana) or including Biblical education elements in schooling. They justify doing it by insisting that Western culture is incomprehensible apart from those elements. Our legal system, like it or not, fundamentally is built around the Ten Commandments as a foundational source. Our culture, like it or not, has been influenced by the Bible. One cannot understand many allusions in that culture without a basic Bible literacy that was once commonplace.

**Montana’s new law continues these efforts** to stop pretending that Western society and culture emerged *ex nihilo*, independently of religious (and, specifically, Judaeo-Christian) sources. By providing an opening for religious education, it piggybacks the awareness that religion cannot be artificially eliminated from American culture or education. By guaranteeing time, it makes the important statement: this matters, too. You may not choose it for yourself, but this matters to many Americans – and we need to acknowledge that.

**Compare that to Poland,** which seems to be on the reverse trajectory. Religious education was restored to Polish public education in 1990, a year after the fall of official communism. Public school students could voluntarily elect to receive religious instruction or secular ethics within their school curriculum on school property.

**That decision has agitated the Polish Left** and its hangers-on (including the current Donald Tusk government) ever since. They try to coopt “democratic” language to claim allowing voluntary religious education in public schools makes Poland a “confessional state” (*państwo wyznaniowe*). To the observation that Poland is a majority Catholic country and many parents want classes for their children, the secularizers argue this

allegedly “proves” their point: not being actively hostile to the majority’s “promotion” of religion and “marginalization” of religious minorities is unfair (even though religious minorities can also conduct their own religious education classes).

**This mentality** – until recently also that of certain elite legal circles in America – understands “freedom of religion” as “freedom *from* religion.” It is profoundly anti-democratic because, as Richard John Neuhaus noted 40 years ago, it requires religious citizens – often the majority in a given society – to strip themselves of their religious convictions (including, at various times, of all the socio-cultural values they support) as the price of entering a value-free “naked public square.” The “naked public square” is an idea of public participation where everyone must pretend to be areligious (even if he is not) to be allowed participation in civic/public life and decision making.

**Polish secularizers** (who are not just coextensive with the ex-Communists but often involves leftist circles around the so-called “Civic Platform” in its various mutations) imagine this is what “democracy” entails. They are less willing publicly to admit that – as in Ireland – they likely espouse these views in order to eliminate Catholic influence and values from Polish public life. That is particularly the case when Poland remains one of the few European countries still somewhat protective of unborn human life and not legalizing different forms of euthanasia.

**The latest skirmish in this fight in Poland** has parallels to Montana’s credit recognition. Tusk’s Education Minister issued regulations that would have eliminated inclusion of religion grades from calculation of a student’s cumulative high school grade point average. Complainants in the Polish case noted that what you take into account in terms of studies – and what you don’t – *matters*. Excluding grades effectively signals “this isn’t so important,” a flag smart young people pick up on regarding where they put (or don’t put) effort. It’s precisely the opposite signal from what Montana is sending its students by saying: with proper academic safeguards, we want to recognize what you are learning as valuable.

**The Polish Constitutional Tribunal May 22** unanimously struck down the regulations as violating both the Constitution and Concordat. (The Tribunal many years ago had affirmed the validity of religious education as a voluntary component in the public school program and denied it could be eliminated).

**Beyond the historical roots** of the now 35-year old effort by Polish secularizers to eliminate religious education, the May 22 decision is also tied up with the Tusk government’s ongoing war against its predecessor. Because the former Law and Justice

government had appointed to the Tribunal judges Tusk's people deem wrongly seated, they want to refuse official promulgation of decisions. (In Poland, publication of Tribunal decisions falls to the executive branch). The current Warsaw government is waging a campaign to delegitimize the Tribunal as part of its larger effort to undo the last government's judicial reforms.

**Various European countries allow some form of religious education** on public school property. In Poland, it made sense: there were no independent religious schools. Those existing prior to World War II were all suppressed by the communists during their 45-year nightmare of rule. Without denying there was a sense of payback from Catholics after communist homogenization of schools, it also made little sense to relocate a majority of kids to an alternate venue – often less well equipped or capable of simultaneously handling logistical demands) -- when school space was available.

**As a final observation:** one need only look at Canadian history to see that a country need not necessarily pretend religion does not exist or that its presence in education (even public education) somehow contaminates its national democratic *bona fides*. In Canada, these questions have been regulated in various forms at the provincial level, but no one suggests Canada is any less democratic. There's also no denying that current secularization trends have tried to push religion out of Canadian schools, though it has been defended not just on religious but cultural identity (French Catholics) and parent's rights (West) grounds. (For those wanting a deeper dive, see James Farney's and Clark Banack's *Faith, Rights, and Choice: The Politics of Religious Schools in Canada*).