

**Forum:** United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

**Issue #2:** Addressing the balance between secular education and religious/cultural values

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## Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, education systems face the challenge of fostering inclusivity while upholding core societal values. This raises the question of balancing secular education with different religious and cultural beliefs in a diverse population.

On the one hand, secular education maintains neutrality in public education, enabling all students to feel respected regardless of their belief systems. Thus, preventing any risk of indoctrination (Moulin 548). For example, in countries like India and Indonesia, many schools have been able to incorporate both religious perspectives while maintaining a national curriculum that promotes unity (Hefner 22; Mukherjee 211). However, there are also extreme cases. In France, there is a system called *laïcité* that limits religious expression in public institutions such as schools. This policy, intended to preserve secularism, has led to controversial bans on religious attire such as the hijab. While supporters of this policy claim it treats everyone equally and keeps society united, others argue that it unfairly targets minorities and limits their freedom to express their beliefs (Hunter 3).

On the other hand, religious education helps students develop a strong moral compass. This is especially relevant in countries where a specific religion or culture dominates the population. People in these communities tend to view religious education as a means to protect their identity and values. In Saudi Arabia, Islamic studies are a key part of the school curriculum, and many parents expect schools to teach religious values alongside academic subjects (Prothero 95). In contrast, in diverse countries with people from many different backgrounds, this can cause problems. People may disagree about what should be taught in schools, whether students can pray, which holidays should be celebrated, or what students are allowed to wear. These disagreements can lead to arguments, new laws, or even protests (Fraser 134).

These issues are also seen in international human rights rules. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that everyone has the right to follow their religion. Additionally, Article 26 says that parents have the right to choose the kind of education their children receive. This creates a challenge for governments since they have to enforce laws that respect both religious freedom and the idea that schools should stay neutral and fair for everyone.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Secular Education:** A form of education that is free from religious teachings or affiliations, typically practiced in public schooling systems to maintain neutrality and inclusivity in diverse societies (Kodelja 2016).

**Religious Education:** The inclusion of faith-based teachings, values, and perspectives in educational curricula. This can be part of formal schooling or community-based instruction and is often practiced in religious schools (Jackson 2014).

**Cultural Values:** The shared principles, norms, and beliefs that guide behavior within a specific group or society. In education, these can shape curriculum choices, student-teacher interactions, and broader school policies (UNESCO 2022).

**Freedom of Religion:** A fundamental human right protected under various international legal instruments, including Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It ensures individuals can practice, change, or abstain from religion without coercion (United Nations 1948).

**Pluralism:** A societal framework in which multiple cultural, religious, or ideological groups coexist with mutual respect and equal legal standing, especially within public institutions like schools (Modood 2013).

**Indoctrination:** The process of instilling specific ideologies or beliefs in individuals, often without encouraging critical thinking or exposing them to alternative viewpoints. Secular education systems aim to avoid this by fostering open inquiry (Hand 2003).

**Curriculum Neutrality:** The practice of designing curricula that neither promote nor discriminate against any religious or cultural belief, ensuring fair representation in multicultural classrooms (Kodelja 2016).

**Multicultural Education:** An educational approach that recognizes and values students' diverse cultural backgrounds, often incorporating multiple worldviews and histories into

the curriculum (Banks 2006).

## General Overview

### **Marginalization of Minority Beliefs in Secular Systems**

Secular education is often seen as neutral, but in practice, it can lead to the erasure of minority religious and cultural identities. In France, for example, the 2004 law banning "conspicuous religious symbols" in public schools disproportionately affected Muslim girls who wear the hijab (Bowen). While intended to protect secularism, the policy has been criticized for forcing students to choose between education and faith. This reveals a deeper issue: secular policies, when rigidly applied, may overlook the lived realities of diverse populations. This marginalization has sparked public backlash, including protests and legal challenges, and has contributed to a growing sense of alienation among marginalized communities, particularly Muslim youth. In trying to prevent religious influence, schools may end up excluding the very students they claim to serve. UNESCO emphasizes that inclusive education must respect diversity, not suppress it, and that secularism should not mean the denial of cultural expression (UNESCO).

### **Religious Indoctrination and Curriculum Bias**

On the opposite side of the spectrum, overly religious systems can lead to indoctrination and limit exposure to alternative worldviews. In countries like Iran and Pakistan, state curricula are heavily influenced by dominant religious ideologies, often sidelining scientific inquiry or critical thinking skills (HRW). For example, Pakistan's education system has been criticized for promoting religious intolerance by depicting minorities negatively and prioritizing Islamic content over universal knowledge and awareness (International Crisis Group). These practices not only violate children's rights to a balanced education but also contribute to increasing sectarianism and societal polarization. Populations raised under heavily biased curricula are more likely to adopt rigid worldviews, making political discourse more extreme and less open to compromise. This risks violating children's rights to a balanced education and limits their ability to participate in a growing globalized society. UNESCO argues that education systems should not be used as tools for ideological control, but rather as a space that encourages inquiry, empathy, and global understanding/citizenship (UNESCO).

## **Conflicts Between National Law and Religious Autonomy**

Another ongoing tension is the conflict between state policies and religious schooling. In democracies like India and the United States, religious private schools operate with significant autonomy, often resisting government on gender equality or LGBTQ+ inclusion (NYT; Scroll in). While religious institutions argue for the right to uphold their beliefs, critics point out that this can reinforce severe discrimination and continue to instill it into growing generations. For instance, in parts of India, some madrassas (Islamic religious schools that often focus on teaching the Quran and Islamic theology, sometimes alongside or instead of standard academic subjects) have been accused of failing to meet educational standards, while simultaneously being shielded by religious protections (Scroll in). Governments struggle to regulate these institutions without being seen as infringing on religious freedom. This tension reflects the broader challenge of balancing individual rights with communal beliefs, a core part of this issue.

## **Lack of Intercultural Understanding in Classrooms**

Even when education systems try to integrate both secular and religious perspectives, a lack of intercultural competence often prevents genuine understanding. In multicultural societies like the UK or Canada, students may learn about different religions, but this is often superficial, limited to holidays, dress, or rituals, rather than deeper ethical or philosophical ideas (Jackson). When education treats religion as part of state requirements instead of a lived identity, it reinforces stereotypes rather than dismantling them. According to UNESCO, intercultural education must move beyond tolerance to mutual understanding, allowing students to reflect critically on their own identities and those of others (UNESCO). Without this, classrooms risk becoming spaces of polite ignorance instead of true inclusivity.

## **Major Parties Involved and Their Views**

### **France**

France is a leading example of a secular education system. The country follows a policy called *laïcité*, which is written into its 1905 Law on the Separation of Churches and State. This law prohibits religious symbols in public institutions, including schools. In 2004, a law was passed banning students from wearing "conspicuous religious symbols," such

as the hijab, kippah, or large crosses, in public schools. Supporters argue it promotes equality and neutrality, but critics say it unfairly discriminates against students who practice religion and limits freedom of expression (Hunter 3).

### **United States**

The United States (US) is based on the principle of separating religion from government, which includes public schools. Public schools cannot promote or favor any religion, although students are allowed to express their beliefs privately. Religion can be studied from a historical or cultural perspective, but teachers cannot teach it as truth. Some parents and religious groups want more religious content in schools, while others strongly support keeping religion and education separate. These debates often appear in school board meetings, court cases, and election campaigns (Fraser 134).

### **India**

India is a multicultural and multi-religious country, home to large populations of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and others. Although its constitution promotes secularism, religion often plays a role in education across different states. In many schools, religious content or prayers are included in daily activities, especially in states where one religion is more dominant. The central government often faces pressure to revise textbooks or policies to better represent all religions fairly. While the government tries to balance secular education with respect for traditions, disagreements over curriculum and holiday observances are common (Mukherjee 211).

### **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia's education system is deeply rooted in Islamic teachings. The Ministry of Education requires Islamic studies to be part of every student's curriculum from primary through secondary school. The Basic Law of Governance (Article 9) states that education aims to instill Islamic faith and loyalty to the monarchy. Religious content is not optional, and there is little exposure to other worldviews. Critics, including international watchdogs, argue that this limits religious tolerance and critical thinking (Prothero 95).

## China

China's education system is strictly secular under Article 36 of its Constitution and the 2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs. While citizens have the right to believe in any religion, religious teaching and practices are banned in public schools, and minors are discouraged from participating in religious activities. The government claims this promotes unity and scientific thinking. However, in regions like Xinjiang, these policies are used to suppress religious identity, especially among Uyghur Muslims, with reports of bans on fasting, praying, and learning religious texts in school settings (Cook 5; Pew Research Center). In contrast, Hui Muslims, who are also Muslim but ethnically Han or closer to Han culture, generally enjoy greater religious freedom, with fewer restrictions on their schools, mosques, and practices. (Freedom House; Leibold).

## Timeline of Events, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

Date	Description of Event
1905	France enacts the Law on the Separation of Churches and State. The <i>laïcité</i> system was implemented, removing religion from public institutions and laying the foundation for France's secular education policy (Hunter 3).
1948	UN issues the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 guarantees freedom of religion, and Article 26 affirms parents' rights to choose their children's education. These principles guide global education and religious freedom policies (United Nations).
1950	India ratified the Indian Constitution. Articles 28-30 promote secularism in education by banning religious instruction in fully state-funded schools while protecting minority-run institutions. These protections are vital in India's diverse demographic (Mukherjee 211).
1960	UNESCO introduces the Convention Against Discrimination in Education. This was the first global treaty that focused on educational rights. It prohibits religious exclusion and urges member states to accommodate cultural and religious diversity in schools.
1962	The United States Supreme Court passed <i>Engel v. Vitale</i> . The Court rules that school-led prayer violates the First Amendment. This landmark case



	reinforces the separation of church and state in public education (Fraser 134).
1985	Saudi Arabia formalizes nationwide Islamic education policy. Islamic education becomes mandatory across all public schools, with a focus on Quranic studies and Sharia principles. The system reflects the kingdom's role as the guardian of Islamic values (Prothero 95).
1989	UN finalizes the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 14 protects children's right to freedom of religion, and Article 29 encourages respect for different beliefs in education. The CRC is widely ratified and shapes national education reforms (United Nations).
2003	Indonesia passed the National Education Law. Schools must provide religious instruction based on each student's faith. This model aims to balance unity with respect for religious diversity, though concerns about segregation remain (Hefner 22).
2004	France enforces a ban on conspicuous religious symbols in public schools. The law bans students from wearing items like hijabs, kippahs, and large crosses. It sparks debate globally about secularism, freedom of religion, and minority rights (Hunter 3).
2007	UN Human Rights Council appoints Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The Rapporteur investigates global violations, including school-based restrictions on religion. Their reports guide policy for UN member states (UNHRC).
2017	China updates its Regulations on Religious Affairs. The new rules state that citizens have the right to enjoy religious freedom, and "Religious citizens and non-religious citizens shall respect each other and co-exist in harmony, and so shall citizens who believe in different religions" (CPPCC). However, religious activities are strictly banned in schools (Cook 5).
2020s	There is a global surge in school-based religious controversies. Protests, lawsuits, and policy shifts arise in France, India, the U.S., and others over prayer in schools, dress codes, and curriculum content. These reflect growing struggles to balance secular governance with cultural identity.
Present	UN conducts Universal Periodic Review (UPR) evaluations. Countries are



regularly examined for their human rights records, including how they manage religious freedom in schools. The UPR has led to recommendations for China, India, and France to revise education policies (OHCHR).

## United Nations Involvement

### The Big Picture

The United Nations, particularly through UNESCO and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), has played a critical role in promoting inclusive education that respects both secular principles and cultural or religious diversity. The UN has recognized the importance of intercultural understanding within education systems, emphasizing the need to prevent discrimination based on belief or identity. UNESCO has played a leading role in guiding global education policy to balance secular state education with respect for cultural and religious diversity. Over the years, various declarations, conventions, and guidelines have been established to protect the rights of individuals to maintain their religious and cultural identities within national education frameworks. These efforts aim to ensure that education remains a tool for inclusion and peacebuilding, rather than division or marginalization.

### Convention Against Discrimination in Education, 1960

This landmark convention laid the groundwork for protecting the right to education without discrimination of any kind, including based on religion or belief (UNESCO). While it upholds secularism in public systems, the convention also affirms the rights of groups to establish educational institutions that reflect their cultural or religious identities. This dual recognition reinforces the idea that neutrality in public education does not require the erasure of diversity.

### Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001

Adopted in the growing wake of globalization, this declaration affirmed that cultural diversity is as essential to humanity as biodiversity is to nature (UNESCO). Article 5 asserts that education systems must safeguard the cultural identities of all learners and promote understanding between groups. It encourages Member States to create

curricula that reflect multiple perspectives and histories, rather than privileging a single dominant narrative.

### **Guidelines on Intercultural Education, 2006**

Recognizing the growing cultural complexity of classrooms, these guidelines provide a foundation and framework for integrating intercultural learning into national education systems (UNESCO). They recommend pedagogical approaches that enable students to engage critically with different beliefs, reduce stereotypes, and foster shared civic values. Importantly, the guidelines highlight that secular education must be inclusive, not indifferent, to the religious and cultural experiences of its students.

### **Education 2030 Agenda and Global Citizenship Education (GCED)**

As part of Sustainable Development Goal 4, UNESCO promotes GCED to build peaceful, inclusive societies through education. GCED emphasizes mutual respect, empathy, and the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the classroom (UNESCO). It challenges both dogmatic religious instruction and overly rigid secularism by encouraging students to understand, not avoid, differing worldviews.

## **Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue**

### **Countries' Attempts**

Several countries have implemented policies to address the tension between religious and secular education. France's 2004 ban on conspicuous religious symbols in public schools was intended to protect secularism and ensure neutrality in education. While it has maintained a uniform standard across public institutions, critics argue that it disproportionately affects Muslim students and has deepened social divisions rather than promoting integration (Hunter 3). In contrast, Indonesia's approach—requiring schools to provide religious instruction based on each student's registered faith—has been praised for accommodating diversity, but some scholars warn it risks reinforcing religious segregation in classrooms (Hefner 22).

### **United Nations' Multiple Attempts**

Internationally, the United Nations and UNESCO have introduced frameworks promoting

both religious freedom and educational inclusivity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child encourage respect for cultural identity while upholding the right to education without discrimination (United Nations). However, enforcement mechanisms remain weak, as these declarations are not legally binding, and compliance often depends on national governments' political will. While the UN's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process offers a platform for evaluating state practices, recommendations are often non-binding and inconsistently implemented. As a result, global efforts have raised awareness but have struggled to produce uniform or enforceable solutions across diverse political and cultural systems.

## Possible Solutions

### Integration of Education Programs

One of the most viable approaches to balancing secular education with cultural and religious values could be the integration of intercultural education programs into national school systems. These programs, supported by UNESCO's *Guidelines on Intercultural Education* (2006), aim to foster environments where students from diverse backgrounds engage with one another's belief systems not through passive tolerance but through active understanding.

### Establishing International Guidelines

Furthermore, international guidelines could help countries design curricula that remain neutral yet inclusive, representing different cultural and religious identities fairly. These guidelines would support adaptation to local contexts while upholding shared principles of respect and diversity.

### Training Educators

Finally, training teachers to handle cultural and religious topics sensitively is crucial. Equipping educators with intercultural skills turns classrooms into spaces for empathy and critical thinking, rather than conflict or exclusion, and fosters the necessary balance between secular education and religious/cultural values.

## Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

### SDG 4, Quality Education

This issue is closely linked to UN Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education, which aims to ensure inclusive, equitable, and meaningful learning opportunities for all. Quality education goes beyond academic instruction—it promotes respect for human rights, cultural diversity, and global citizenship. Balancing secular education with religious and cultural values is key to achieving this goal, as it ensures that students from all backgrounds feel represented and respected in the classroom. When education systems fail to accommodate diversity or restrict religious expression, they risk violating the principles of equity and inclusion outlined in SDG 4, especially Targets 4.5 (eliminating discrimination) and 4.7 (promoting sustainable, tolerant societies).

## Appendix

The Appendix contains a selection of key sources curated by the chairs to support and guide delegates in their research. Delegates are encouraged to review the materials provided below.

<https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/content/blogs/the-value-of-religious-education-are-we-listening/>

**Source A:** This article discusses the positive role religious education can play in developing students' moral reasoning and cultural empathy. It emphasizes the importance of including religious voices in educational discussions and cautions against equating secularism with neutrality when it excludes lived faith experiences.

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000147878>

**Source B:** The guidelines previously mentioned in this Issue Bulletin are established by the UN and provide a practical pathway for implementing education that respects cultural and religious diversity. The source can be used to properly understand actions so far involving the issue.

<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691138398/why-the-french-dont-like-headscarves?srsId=AfmBOoppNLd5OOgoHATXuNvJWkqWMUiS9mg1mvvChl2SZ9wgQ>

[Q19P7ds](#)

**Source C:** This work provided critical context on the tensions between secularism, religious expression, and the role of the state in regulating public space in France. It was especially relevant for understanding how national identity and public policy intersect with visible religious symbols like the hijab.

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