

Freedom of Belief in Morocco

Teaching the History of Religions as a Possible
Entry Point!

POLICY PAPERS SERIES

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Executive Summary

This paper seeks to examine the possibility of laying the foundations for freedom of belief in Morocco through the inclusion of the study of religions in Moroccan curricula. This could contribute to spreading the values of tolerance and acceptance of difference that characterize modern societies based on pluralism and cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity. It should be noted that there are positive indicators from key institutional actors within the state that could contribute to establishing freedom of belief. On this basis, this paper seeks to answer a central question: Can teaching the history of religions within educational programs in Moroccan educational institutions constitute one of the building blocks for establishing freedom of belief in Morocco through the teaching of religions?

Keywords

Freedom of belief, Morocco, teaching religions, school, education.

Introduction

The school, alongside various other institutions of socialization, plays an important role in modernizing society and strengthening the values and culture of tolerance, openness, and peaceful coexistence. This importance stems from the fact that the school, by virtue of its institutional character, is able to guide younger generations toward value-based dimensions that are consistent with what has been established by international human rights instruments, foremost among them the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through Article 18,¹ and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in its preamble.²

One of the main entry points for instilling the values of pluralism and tolerance may be the adoption of teaching the history of religions in Moroccan schools, alongside Islamic education lessons that have been present in Moroccan educational programs since the earliest levels. This would help move beyond the debate over particularism/universalism, which limits the possibility of establishing an open society that accepts the other. This can only be achieved by introducing younger generations, in an objective way, to the history of other religions. Such an approach could make this teaching one of the most important pillars capable of laying the foundations for freedom of belief in Morocco, while reducing the fears of those who see this issue as a threat to their creed.

This proposal is supported by the transformations that Moroccan society has undergone.³ It is also supported by a number of initiatives undertaken by official institutions in Morocco. The royal institution, during its reception of the Pope of the Vatican on March 30, 2019, had previously stated that it is entrusted with guaranteeing the freedom of religious practice for non-Muslims of all faiths. It had also, at an earlier stage, directed recommendations to the government to review the curricula and programs for teaching religious education at different levels of education, whether in public schools, private education, or institutions of traditional education. This means that official institutions have provided advanced indicators on this matter. Freedom of belief had also previously been included in the 2011 draft constitution submitted to the King by the committee tasked with preparing the constitution, before it was later withdrawn.⁴ This means that the committee worked to lay the foundations for this freedom in a way that does not conflict with the particularity of the state, especially since it had been appointed by the highest authority in Morocco.

In this context, teaching the history of religions aims to enable learners to understand religion in its moderate, balanced dimension, far from extremist ideas and close to the values of tolerance and coexistence with other beliefs. This is done by believing in the freedom of difference in belief as a universal right that grants the individual the possibility of choice.⁵ Teaching other religions would therefore be carried out by reconciling, on the one hand, the protection of the state's religious reference framework, and, on the other, the fulfillment of international human rights obligations.⁶

The Test of Teaching Religions at the Heart of Moroccan Societal Debate

The results of a study conducted by Menassat Center for Research and Social Studies revealed that a segment of Moroccans wishes to see the history and principles of other religions taught to students within educational curricula. In this regard, 54.6% expressed a positive position toward teaching religions. By contrast, 24.2% completely rejected it, while 21.2% did not express a position.

The group in favor of teaching the history and principles of religions justifies its position by arguing that this would enable students to open up to other cultures, understand the origins of religions, accept pluralism and difference, and facilitate cultural dialogue. Conversely, those opposed justified their position by expressing fear that this would affect their religion and encourage individuals to change religion or fall into atheism, which, in their view, would create discord within society.

The same results show that those with a higher level of education represented the largest share of respondents who agreed with teaching students the history and principles of other religions in educational curricula, because such teaching opens horizons for them onto other cultures. This supports the idea that the educational entry point is one of the approaches that could help establish freedom of belief among future generations.

The issue of teaching the history and principles of religions in Morocco raises the problem of a societal conflict over the values deemed acceptable to teach. This is because there is a belief that the freedom to adopt a belief different from that of the group constitutes a danger and a social provocation, and may also be framed as a conspiracy and a threat to identity.

Here, the school can play an extremely important role in contributing to the socialization of generations around tolerance in a way that responds to societal developments.

The royal institution had previously ordered the review of the foundations of the Islamic education curriculum and its transformation into a subject of religious education, with the aim of building a citizenship-based state project grounded in policies of recognition, pluralism, and belief in universal rights. In this context, actors in the field of education and training are expected to take this societal debate into account by integrating educational policies and content that help learners accept religious differences, starting from the teaching of shared religious values and principles. This would be a factor of cultural enrichment for young people and for society as a whole, rather than a source of confrontation and conflict, especially with regard to issues related to understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of difference.⁷

In a Society That Accepts Coexistence, Freedom of Belief Can Be Established Through Teaching Religions

Based on the same study conducted by Menassat Center, 35.5% expressed a positive view of religious plurality within Moroccan society, while a significant share, estimated at 42%, refrained from expressing an opinion. Meanwhile, 22.5% held a negative position. In addition, 61.5% of the studied population believes that coexistence between people of different religions in one place is possible, while 21.8% of the sample said that the matter is acceptable depending on circumstances. Only 5% rejected this, and 11.7% refrained from giving an opinion. At the same time, 68.1% stated that they do not reject friendship with someone who is religiously different.

From the standpoint of the same question, namely coexistence between people of different religions, the study results, according to the variable of educational level, showed that the group with higher education was the most likely to accept such coexistence, at 83.72%, followed by the secondary education group at 74.30%. This may be interpreted to mean that the higher the level of education, the greater the openness to interreligious friendship. Education is therefore a very important factor in accepting religious friendship,

educating individuals in peace and religious tolerance, and considering the religious differences as an addition that gives this reality more beauty and richness.

It should be noted that Moroccan society is, to some extent, open to other religions. This is reflected in its acceptance of coexistence at multiple levels, such as the presence of Jews in various fields of Moroccan society,⁸ in addition to the royal reception given to the Pope of the Vatican in Morocco and the organization in the same context, of an exhibition by the Archives of Morocco Foundation, in partnership with the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad, under the title: “The Christian Presence in Morocco: Living Together.” This exhibition served as an occasion to shed light on the values of tolerance and coexistence that historically brought together Christians with other communities.

All these indicators can be used by actors in the field of education through the teaching of religions, which could reduce existing sensitivities toward religious diversity within society and create a positive attitude that encourages learning about the religious practices and beliefs of others. It may also help strengthen respect and mutual understanding, and overcome any strong intolerance related to religious beliefs and practices.

Drawing on Comparative Experiences as an Entry Point for Consolidating Freedom of Belief in Morocco

Despite the differences that can be noted between the Moroccan context and other contexts, Morocco can benefit from global experiences such as Germany and Austria. Religious education in German schools is compulsory in all federal states according to the German Constitution. However, there is an exception known as the “Bremen Clause,” which states the following: “Religious instruction is not compulsory; instead, students are taught subjects such as biblical history, ethics, ways of life, and the study of religions.” Berlin is considered the only German federal state where religious education is not the responsibility of the state, but rather of the Protestant and Catholic churches, and is offered on a voluntary basis.⁹ The German model, reflects the state’s will not to be bound by the teachings of one single religion and to open up to the values of tolerance and human coexistence within the educational systems of Germany’s federal states..

Regarding the Austrian experience, religious education is not limited to Christianity alone; it also includes Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. As for to the curricula, these religions are discussed in a participatory manner in the government on one hand, and the church and representatives of other religions on the other. Work using this approach began in 1997.¹⁰ The process of modernization in the Western world constituted a starting point for rethinking religious education as a practical means of promoting diversity, and establishing the foundations of freedom of belief.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, we can anticipate that teaching religions would help build a cohesive society that believes in freedom of belief, through teaching the major principles and shared values upon which all religions converge. These are noble values agreed upon by human civilizations and drawn upon in building the system of what we call today “universal values,” that concern every human being wherever they may be, regardless of color, homeland, creed, lineage, or ethnicity.

Accordingly, and in order to work toward this, our paper recommends:

- The need to review school curricula in full, and to remove anything that contradicts the lofty purposes of religions. This review should work to reject the spread of hatred and violence and the fueling of conflict among citizens, which prevents respect for the other who differs in belief, language, color, origin, or family lineage.
- The formulation of a reference framework for all religious values, based on agreed-upon standards resulting from a societal debate in which different actors and experts participate.
- Reconsidering curricula that exclude the teaching and introduction of different religions and consider this to be in conflict with the creed of society.
- Reconsidering laws that confiscate the right to express the freedom of belief, and practice religious rituals.
- Encouraging different actors, especially those belonging to the religious field, to respect other religions and rituals, and to call for this respect in sermons, books, and school curricula.

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¹ Article 18 states that: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”

² The preamble states: “The States Parties to the present Covenant, considering that, in accordance with the principles proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world; recognizing that these rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human person; recognizing that, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ideal of free human beings enjoying civil and political freedom and freedom from fear and want can only be achieved if conditions are created whereby everyone may enjoy his civil and political rights, as well as his economic, social and cultural rights; considering the obligation of States under the Charter of the United Nations to promote universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and freedoms...”

³ M’barek Bouassab, Transformations of the Value System and the Conflict of References in the Moroccan School, article published in Al-Riwaq magazine, issue 3, June 2016, p. 6.

⁴ Driss El Yazami, “The Constitution Provided for Freedom of Belief Before It Was Withdrawn...,” Zamane magazine, issue 48, October 2017, p. 19.

⁵ Mohamed El-Saeed Abdel Fattah, Criminal Protection of Freedom of Creed and Worship: A Foundational Analytical Study, National Center for Legal Publications, Cairo, no year of publication, p. 12.

⁶ Ahmed Bekkass, Freedom of Belief in Morocco: A Legal and Political Study in Light of the State’s Religious Policy After 2003, thesis for the Master’s Diploma in Public Law, Ibn Zohr University, Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences, Agadir, academic year 2019–2020, p. 91.

⁷ Directions, Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People, Council of Europe, p. 168.

⁸ Said El Haji, Aspects of Muslim-Jewish Coexistence: Morocco as a Model, article published on the website of the Mominoun Without Borders Center.

⁹ <https://www.dw.com/ar>

¹⁰ <https://www.dw.com/ar>, previous reference.



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