RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN FINLAND

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I. GENERAL BACKGROUND

Demography

Finland has 5,351,427 inhabitants (2009), of which about 888,323, nearly 17 per cent (16.6%), are under the age of 14.[1]

Population			5, 351,427
Religious Adherence	Lutheran	79.7%	4.449,516
	The Greek Orthodox	1.1%	58,445
	The Finnish Free Church		14,233
	Roman Catholics		9,672
	Adventist Churches		3,751
	Baptist congregations		2,382
	Methodist Churches		1,279
	Anglican Church in Finland		100

There are 22 different Islamic communities in Finland and they have an estimated 30,000 followers of Islam. Jehovah's Witness have 19,200 members, while the number of Mormons in Finland is 3,300. Jewish people constitute a community with 1200 members. In addition, some 13 % of Finnish population (N = 700,000) is not affiliated to religious groups.[2]

1.1. Education – Facts and Figures

In Finland, the basic right to education and culture *is recorded in the Constitution of Finland.*[3] Public authorities must secure equal opportunities for every resident in Finland (not just Finnish citizens) to obtain education including following compulsory education and to develop themselves, irrespective of domicile, sex, economic situation or linguistic and cultural background.[4] *Legislation provides for compulsory education and the right to free pre-*

1 http://www.stat.fi/til/vaerak/2009/vaerak_2009_2010-03-19_tau_003_fi.html

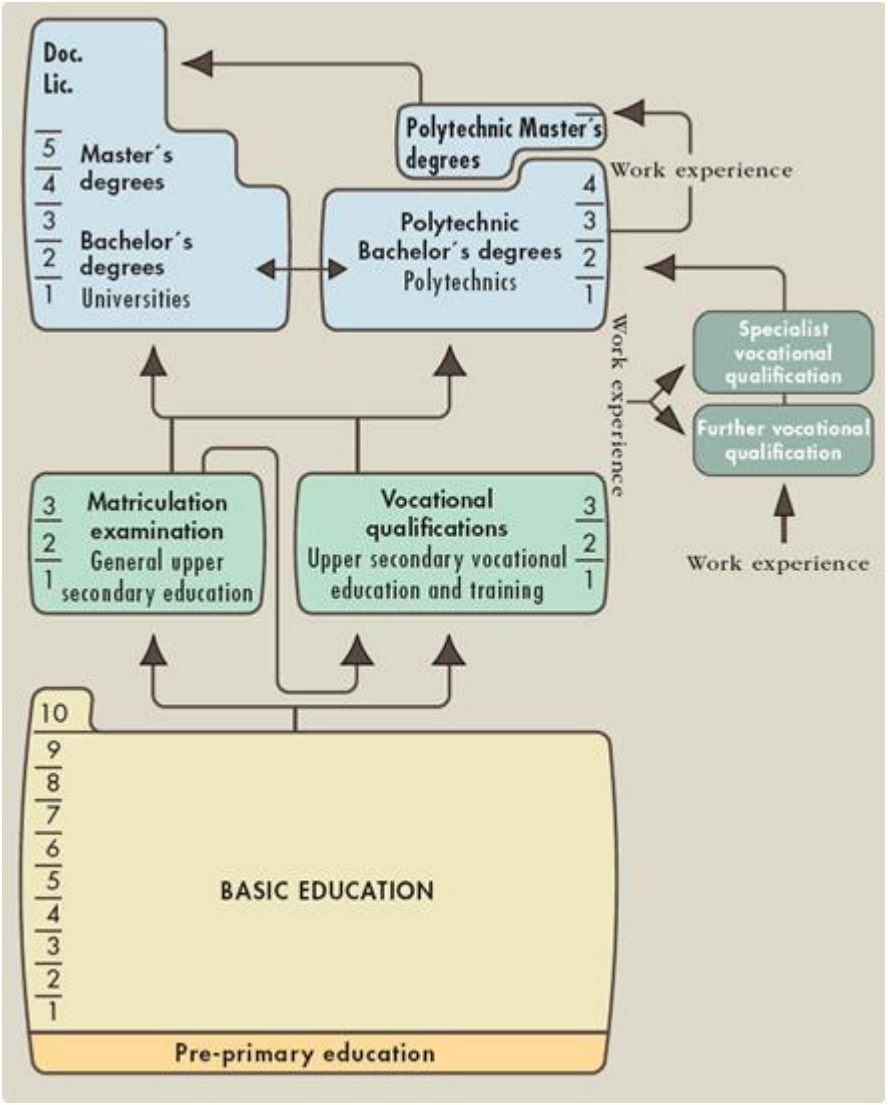
2 Kääriäinen/Niemelä/Ketola 2005.

3 The Constitution of Finland, § 16 and § 17. See: http://www.eduskunta.fi. => In English/The Constitution of Finland.

4 In addition, the public authorities are obliged to provide for the educational needs of the Finnish and Swedish-speaking population according to the same criteria. Approximately 5.5 per cent of the population have Swedish as their mother tongue. Both language groups have the right to education in their own mother tongue. Regulations on the language of instruction are stipulated in legislation concerning different levels of education. The entirely Swedish-speaking Province of Åland has its own educational legislation. Http://www.oph.fi/english/education/overview_of_the_education_system.

primary and basic education. Secondly, public authorities are also obliged to guarantee everyone an equal opportunity to obtain other education besides basic education according to their abilities and special needs, and to develop themselves without being prevented by economic hardship. Most other forms of qualifying education are also free of charge for the students, including postgraduate education at universities.

Education structure



(Source: http://www.oph.fi/english/education/overview_of_the_education_system)

Pre-primary education (Pre-school education) is provided in schools and day care centres. Pre-school education starts a year before children go to comprehensive school. The aim of pre-school education is to improve children's capacity and skills for school and learning. Participation in pre-school education is the child's right.

In 2009, pre-primary education [ISCED 0] was given to 12,580 children in conjunction with schools and 44,405 children in day care centres (total 56,989). This accounts for 99.4 % of the entire age group.

Participation in pre-primary education in 2005-2009[5]

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Pre-primary education in conjunction with schools	12,276	12,970	12,250	12,434	12,580
Pre-primary education in conjunction with day-care	42,943	43,090	44,061	43,499	44,405
Total	55,219	56,060	56,111	55,933	56,985
Participation in pre-primary education as percentage of 6 year-olds	95.2	97.9	99.8	99.5	99.4

In addition to local authority and state-owned educational institutions, pre-primary education may also be offered by private basic education providers.

Religious and ethical teaching is a statutory part of day care. In order to enable the participation of as many children as possible, religious education is broadly Christian in scope. As the variety of children's nationalities and cultures increases, there are more and more children in day care whose religious and cultural background differs from the Finnish tradition. This creates further challenges for religious education in day care.

Basic education *encompasses nine years* and caters for all those between 7 and 16 years. Schools do not select their students but every student can go to the school of his or her own school district. Students are neither channelled to different schools nor streamed. Children start compulsory school at the age of 7. It is also possible to start school one year earlier or later based on medical psychologist or physician’s statement.

After complementing basic education, a young person can continue studying or enter working life. If those who have completed basic education feel that their skills are not quite up to the standard required by further education, they can supplement their knowledge and improve on the school-leaving certificate marks by enrolling in **additional voluntary education in the so-called 10th grade**.

The government contributes to the financing of all schools. Nine years of basic education can be continued in two major ways either in **Upper secondary vocational education** and training or in **Upper secondary education**. Both vocational and upper secondary studies make it possible to continue one’s studies in the polytechnic school or at the University.

In the Finnish educational system, religious education is given at two levels: in the basic education (grades 1–9) and in upper secondary school (years I–III), which follows basic

[5] Sources: WERA Information Services, Finnish National Board of Education.

education.[6] In the upper secondary school there are three obligatory courses in religious education. A pupil can choose more courses if he or she so wishes. There are at least two extra courses available: world religions and religion in Finland. Upper secondary school leads to matriculation. Alternatively the basic education can be followed at vocational school. However, *there is no Religious education in vocational schools.*

There are only a few private schools in Finland. Compared with the total number of schools, the proportion of licensed private schools is small. Usually these schools are not based on religion or supported by religion. Licences have also been granted for a few comprehensive schools which are based on religious confessions. The English school in Helsinki is a Catholic foundation. There are fewer than fifteen Christian schools and two other faith-related schools. For Children attending these schools the teaching and educational equipment are free of charge. There are no statistics of the number of religious pre-schools.

A major objective of Finnish education policy is to achieve as high a level of education and competence as possible for the whole population. The Finnish National Board of Education has expressed as its objective in the following way: "One of the basic principles behind the Finnish education policy has been to offer post-compulsory education to full age groups. In international terms, a high percentage of each age group goes on to upper secondary education when they leave comprehensive school: more than 90 per cent of those completing basic education continue their studies in general upper secondary schools or vocational upper secondary education and training. Issues of educational equality are among the key topics in the new Development Plan for Education and Research for 2007–2012. Its objectives include raising the level of [the] education of the population. The aim is that 92.5 per cent of the age group 25-34 –years-olds will by 2015 pass an examination at upper secondary or tertiary level."[7]

1.2. Religion as a Subject of Instruction and Its Substitutes

Religious education in the school system

Religious education has a very long tradition in the Finnish education system.[8] *At the moment Religious education is a compulsory school subject* both in Finnish comprehensive schools (7–16 years) and in senior/upper secondary schools (16–18/19 years).[9] In the literature, the current Religious education solution in Finland has been considered "weak confessional". *Pupils study Religious education according to his/her own religious tradition*. Because of this Religious education includes contents based on the respective traditions and but does not include the elements of religious practice.[10]

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6 Jakku-Sihvonen/Niemi 2006.

7 http://www.oph.fi/english/education/overview_of_the_education_system/historical_overview

8 About Historical Overview of the Finnish education system see closer http://www.oph.fi/english/education/overview_of_the_education_system/historical_overview

9 According to the Basic Education Act (628/1998), all children permanently residing in Finland are subject to compulsory education. Compulsory education starts in the year when a child becomes seven years of age and ends when the syllabus of basic education has been completed or 10 years after the beginning of compulsory education.

10 Ubani 2007, 21; Räsänen & Ubani 2009, 58.

In a nutshell the purpose of Religious education is described as follows:

> "The main purpose of religious education is to offer stimuli for the construction and development of students' own religious view on life by teaching them about their own religion, life and thinking of various religions, and by giving students the readiness to understand different world views. Therefore Religious education as a subject gives an opportunity to study and discuss major questions in religion and life. And students in all Religious education at school are respected as independent and truth-seeking individuals."[11]

As quoted above, in RE the religious dimension of life comes under examination from the standpoint of the pupil's own growth as a broader social phenomenon. Religion is understood as a cultural factor in Finnish culture. Instruction in religion emphasizes the religious knowledge and readiness to encounter new religions and worldviews. In primary education the objectives of the instruction are to: 1) familiarize the pupil with his or her own religion, 2) familiarize the pupil with the Finnish spiritual tradition, 3) introduce the pupil to other religions, 4) help the pupil to understand the cultural and human significance of religions and 5) educate the pupil in ethical living and help him or her understand the ethical dimension of religion.[12]

Religious education is delivered in the religion of the majority. Because the majority of Finns are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, in practice the instruction in Religious education is given mostly according to the Lutheran majority. Religious education of other religious denominations will be organised if three conditions are met. Firstly, the denomination must be a registered religious community in Finland. Secondly, the denomination must have a curriculum (so-called National Framework Curricula) approved by the National Board of Education. The system is not automatic, since some Christian minority groups are participating in Lutheran religious education lessons. And, thirdly, instruction is implemented if there is a minimum of three pupils in one municipality, who belong to the community and who will take part in this instruction. If religious education for their own religion or denomination is available, the pupil has no right to opt out of it. The status of Orthodox instruction differs from other religious minorities. If there is a minimum of three Orthodox children in municipality schools instruction is automatically provided and a parental request is not needed.

At the moment, National Framework Curricula are written for Lutheran, Orthodox, Catholic, Islamic, Adventist, Buddhism, Good's people (Protestant society), Free Church, Krishna-Society (IS-CON), Anthropological Society and Bahai's instruction. All of them are labelled Religious education but the official prefix expresses which curriculum is in use. Because Religious education is related to one's own religion every version of religious education has its own name, for example Catholic Religious education. *Pupils who do not belong to any religious community are taught Ethics. There is an alternative subject called "Life Questions and Ethics".* The National Board of Education has established its own general aims and principles for that subject. In Finland, the concept "exempted from Religious education" is no longer in use.

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11 http://www.suol.fi.

12 Luodeslampi 2007, 67.

Over the past 30 years the interpretation of the term "confessional" has been problematic in Finland since its meaning changes when connected to religion. The previous law established freedom *from* religion. In contrast, the current law creates a positive right: freedom *for* religion. Within the Religious education curriculum the confessional and denominational concepts were ambiguous and caused problems under the old legislation. The new legislation helped to clarify good practice.[13]

The concept of "according to one's religion" is new, a product of the new Act of Religious Freedom 2003. Religious education was defined as denominational. However, during the last two decades the Finnish Lutheran denominational Religious education has been understood as non-confessional in a spiritual or religious sense. The term confessional underlines the content of education.

The introduction of a new law on religious freedom in Finland in 2003 meant above all the removal of certain restrictions, which has to-date ensured that no cases of infringement of the First Supplementary Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights (§ 2),[14] with respect to education in accordance with one's religion and convictions, have yet been brought before the Supreme Court. The new law differs in many respects from its predecessor, passed in 1922.[15] The new law, and the consequent changes to the compulsory education law and the law on upper secondary schools,[16] mean a considerable strengthening of the position of the teaching of religion in schools and a clarification of its nature and purposes. This is very clearly reflected not only in the laws themselves but also in the statement issued by the Parliamentary Education Committee and the report of the Constitutional Committee. It may be concluded from these and from the discussions held in Parliament that a very large majority of representatives were extremely favourably disposed towards pupils receiving teaching in their own religion.[17]

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13 Seppo 2003; Luodeslampi 2007, 66.

14 Article 2 provides for the right not to be denied an education and the right for parents to have their children educated in accordance with their religious and other views.

15 It is very similar in structure, however, being divided into four main sections, the first containing provisions of a general nature, mostly connected with the individual's freedom of religion and the use to be made of it, the second dealing with registered religious communities, their purpose, foundation procedures and forms and conditions of activity, the third containing regulations for application of the law on public assembly to the practice of religion and setting out sanctions for infringements of the law on requiring communication of data on the membership of religious communities to the authorities, and the fourth containing details of when and how the law should come into force and transition regulations.

16 § 13 of the law on compulsory education and § 9 of the law on upper secondary schools contain both old and new provisions on the rights of individuals and certain groups to receive instruction in their own religion or philosophy of life. As heretofore, the institution responsible for arranging compulsory education is obliged to ensure that those belonging to the majority religious group receive appropriate instruction. A new feature, however, is the provision that pupils or students who do not belong to any religious community shall attend classes in the majority religion only if they so desire, as indicated by their parents in the case of compulsory schooling or the students themselves at the upper secondary school.

Teaching in their own religion shall also be guaranteed to minority groups of at least three pupils belonging to either the Evangelical Lutheran Church or the Orthodox Church, while corresponding teaching shall be arranged for groups of at least three pupils belonging to some other religious group only on application from a parent or guardian or from the students themselves at the upper secondary school. The upper secondary school legislation grants students entering that level of schooling the right to choose between religious instruction or teaching in the philosophy of life. Seppo 2003, 183.

17 Seppo 2003, 182–183.

In the first place the right to instruction in religion or the philosophy of life had been clearly defined in the Constitution, so that the receiving of such instruction could be seen to be in agreement with the Constitution. Secondly, a distinction was made between instruction in one's own religion and religious observance as referred to in the Constitution. Those who emphasized the nature of religious instruction as a form of religious observance during the preparation of the new law were of the opinion that teaching of this kind should be made optional, with the alternative of teaching in the philosophy of life, or even that it should be replaced by a form of teaching on the world's religions that would be common to everyone. The minimum requirement was the right to opt out if the teaching contained events or rituals of a kind that could be regarded as religious observances.[18]

Parliament nevertheless established firmly that *religious instruction should not be equated with religious observance* and quashed all interpretations to that effect. This also brought years of wrangling on the subject to an end and removed the uncertainty experienced on this point in schools. It is important that no one among those obliged to attend classes in religious instruction should be able to demand exemption on the grounds of it taking on the nature of religious observance.[19]

Parliament also laid down that all syllabuses should be examined upon the new law coming into force to ensure that they met the requirement for instruction in the pupils' own religion in an impartial manner, and also to ensure that the religion and philosophy of life syllabuses for the upper secondary school contained "the foundations of the major religions of the world to the extent required for a good general education". This latter aim has now clearly been taken into account, at least as far as instruction in the majority religion is concerned.[20]

The new law is also clearer than its predecessor from a material point of view, in that it transfers the regulations applying to individual detailed issues from the law on religious freedom to the relevant points in the general legislation.

II. Religiously Motivated Behaviour in Public Schools

Working Conditions, Religious Symbols, Religious Garments

In Finland, there are no religious aspects to working conditions for teachers or other staff in public schools. The question of benediction of public school buildings has never been discussed. Nor is there currently any discussion in Finland concerning religious symbols (e.g. crucifixes), praying or religious services in public schools. The only public debate concerning crucifixes was briefly discussed by the Finnish media in November 2009, when The European Court of Human Rights ruled against the use of crucifixes in classrooms in Italy. The ruling marked the end of an eight-year battle by a Finnish-born mother, Soile Lautsi. She took her case to court after failing to get crucifixes removed from the school at which her two children were being taught at a town in north-east Italy. Lautsi appealed to Strasbourg in 2006 when her case was thrown out by Italy's constitutional court.

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18 Seppo 2003, 183.
19 Seppo 2003, 183.
20 Seppo 2003, 183.

The question of religious garments has not been discussed by the Finnish National Board of Education. The Board has not given official instructions for schools. In Finland there is no law or regulation, which forbids wearing religious garments (e.g. a scarf). Nor is there any legislation which gives permission to wear a scarf. Until now there has been no case at the local or upper courts concerning wearing of scarves or burqa (i.e. a black, all-covering garment with head-scarf) in the basic education or in the upper secondary schools.

In Finland citizens are free to wear religious symbols (e.g. crucifixes or scarves) in public places. There are two exceptions to this rule. The first comes from safety regulations. The labour law obliges employers and employees to follow safety instructions. It is possible for instance, that it is not allowed to wear a scarf, if a person is working with machinery and this may be injurious to health. The second exception considers hurting one's religious feelings. The current penal provisions no longer protect God's honour, but rather religious convictions and feelings and religious peace. Religious peace means religious order, related to the general category "law and order". This means for instance that a person is not allowed to be dressed in an insulting way, which openly affronts the religious conviction of another.

Teachers

Teacher training in Finland is provided in universities. Religious education is given by two types of teachers: classroom teachers and subject teachers. The classroom teachers have completed a five-year M.Ed degree. The training includes the minimum of 2 credits in religious education. The classroom teachers are qualified to teach all subjects at grades 1–6 in basic education, including religious education. The age of their students ranges from 7 to 13 years.

The subject teachers are qualified to teach basic education in grades 7–9 and in upper secondary school (years I–III). The age of their students varies between 13–18 years. In principle, the requirement for a Religious education subject teacher is a master's degree in Theology. The subject teachers major in Systematic Theology, Church History, Bible Studies, Practical Theology, or in Comparative Religion. The Religious education teachers are of exactly the same status as the teachers of other school subjects. In other words, they are not employees of the Church or of an equivalent institution but are employed and qualified by the state. The majority of Religious education teachers are not ordained priests.[21]

The teacher training for subject teachers is 60 credits and lasts for one year. In contrast to many European systems, the training is given by a Department of Applied Sciences of Education and not by the Faculty of Theology. It includes studies such as Educational Philosophy, Psychology of Learning, Special Education, Didactics in Religious education and three teacher practices. The teacher training is popular among theology students. For instance, at the University of Helsinki only 1/3 of the participants in the teacher training entrance examination are accepted onto this course.[22]

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21 Excellent national data on Religious education in the Finnish education system is available in Räsänen & Ubani 2009. This analyses Finnish data concerning empirical results on educational goals, pedagogical methods used and on orientation to religion, values, politics and institutions. See especially ibid, 61–67.

22 Räsänen & Ubani 2009, 59.

III. Opting out of School Obligations for Religious Reasons, Current developments and challenges

There are, in Finland, no general provisions that give a pupil the right to be off school on religious holidays. The working year of the schools is normally divided into an autumn and a spring semester, allowing holidays for Christmas and New Year. Within the semesters, the Finnish National Board of Education decides on holidays, normally including Easter holidays. On the other hand, the parents of a pupil have the facility in the primary and secondary school of taking the child out of school for some days per year. The permission for exemption is granted by the school's head teacher.

The current Finnish Religious education situation is recently established. In the 2000's Finnish teacher training has been reformed. As a result, research-based teacher training has been accepted as the guiding principle in Finland. Research-based teacher training consists of gaining a profound knowledge of a subject of study and the promoting the internalization of a research-oriented attitude towards teaching.[23] In practice this means that there is no possibility for opting out of Biology (e.g. Due to Believing in Creationism).

Also new national curricula (covering 11 different religions) were published in 2004 and schools have made their syllabus on the basis of these. Parliament has made a clear decision about Religious education. There was a political idea to unite all forms of Religious education into a single subject. Parliament voted on the matter and the result was 75% against a single Religious education model and in favour of 'one's own religion' model. The new Act on Religious Freedom (2003) is made in positive terms. It creates the situation where everyone has the right to religion and not only to opt out. [24]

In the future the development of multicultural Religious education could be remarkable in Finland. Now there are multi-faith schools in the largest cities, especially in areas of the capital, Helsinki. If this leads to more religions that have their own Religious education curricula then the cost providing Religious education will rise. As educationalist *Juha Luodeslampi* has emphasized, this might increase the pressure for integrated Religious education, but at the moment Parliament's opinion is clear. The right to 'one's own religion' has been affirmed in the recent debate and the cost implications are not the major consideration in determining that approach.[25] In a way, the system and its specific features will be subject to discussion. Changing ideas on education and religious pluralism as well as state intervention will all have an impact on the future education system of Finland.

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23 See closer Jakku-Sihvonen/Niemi 2006.

24 See above notes 16–20 (Seppo 2003, 182–183); Luodeslampi 2007, 66.

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