

RE promotes religiosity but not morality, German study finds

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Religious education promotes religiosity but not broadly shared moral and political values, research suggests.

Researchers at the University of Munich's Institute for Economic Research have found German states' decisions to replace compulsory religious education (RE) in the 1970s with optional ethics classes significantly reduced pupils' religiosity in adulthood.

The researchers' findings were published in a recent study, [Can schools change religious attitudes?](#) which found students with the option to attend non-denominational ethics classes rather than RE were less likely to describe themselves as 'religious' (49% versus 52%) or 'very religious' (9% versus 11%) as adults.

The paper found similar reductions across three measures of religious activity: prayer, church attendance, and religious affiliation through church taxation.

The staggered timing and different political contexts in which RE reforms were introduced allowed researchers to separate this factor from others driving the broader decline in religiosity in Germany.

The post-war German constitution maintained the requirement for locally determined RE, with the curriculum heavily influenced by the major churches. This is similar to [RE provision in the UK's education systems](#).

But serious concerns were raised over the suitability of such curricula in light of rapid social liberalisation and diversification. German states responded by introducing an optional non-denominational alternative to RE, usually called ethics. In contrast, UK governments have supported the adoption of a more multifaith approach to RE.

The paper's analysis also shows how the option of non-denominational ethics education, similar to that being [introduced in Wales](#), had a moderating effect on denominational RE. Researchers found the non-denominational ethics option led to RE classes becoming more pluralistic, with more coverage of other religions and less emphasis on faith formation, in favour of individual belief exploration.

The paper also found the non-denominational ethics option led to a decrease in conservative gender and family attitudes, particularly around beliefs that men are more suited for certain jobs, and a decrease in prejudice towards unmarried couples.

It also found no significant impact on pupils' "ethical-value outcomes including reciprocity, trust, risk preference, volunteering, and life satisfaction" or "political-value outcomes such as political interest, satisfaction with democracy, or left-right voting patterns".

The National Secular Society's head of education Alastair Lichten said: "The historical parallels and differences in RE reform in Germany and the UK provide important insights.

"These findings show that a move towards non-denominational ethics has positive educational outcomes and more effectively promotes tolerance.

"They also shatter the myth that RE is necessary for children's moral education. But they do show how RE can be used by religious groups to bolster their numbers.

"Since moving away from direct confessionalism in most schools, RE has often felt like a subject without an agreed purpose. It generally serves to promote a broadly positive view of religion, rather than rigorous analysis of beliefs, and is often lumbered with a diverse and inconsistent range of expectations. A new subject freed from such historical baggage could revitalise this area of learning."

See also: [Framing religion as intrinsically positive harms education, study warns](#)

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