

European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics

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The relationship between church and education in Europe

Contribution by Keith Porteous Wood

(This is the full speech, but due to timing constraints an abridged version was delivered. Keith Porteous Wood is Executive Director of the UK's [National Secular Society](http://www.nationalsecularsociety.org). He can be contacted via admin@secularism.org.uk

Good afternoon Chair, other MEPs and esteemed colleagues

Religious demographics of UK, and how Christian adherence is declining rapidly, especially among young people

The UK is an overwhelmingly Christian country, but only if one relies on the published figures from the last census in 2001. 72% of the population ticked the “Christian” box¹. Academics accept that, partly because of the way the question was asked, the answer gives the proportion of cultural Christians. This is borne out by polls asking which religion respondents “belong” to, which puts Christians at less than 50%. Even this percentage drops considerably when the question becomes “do you go to church”, and still further when the exaggeration is stripped out and actual church attendance is examined. In essence the population, if not the political arrangements, are overwhelmingly secular.

Just 30 years ago in 1980, 11% of the population attended church on a normal Sunday. In 2010 it was only 6% of the population, one in 16. And even this low figure is predicted by Christian Research, a reputable Christian statistics organisation, to drop to 1% by 2050. The largest single factor in this dramatic reduction is the abandonment of the church by young people, which is very relevant to our discussion today.

While in 1980 the average age of those at church was 37, in 2010 it was 51, and the same researchers predicted that the average age of the (much smaller) congregation in 2050 will be 67.

Faced with such dramatic reductions, both historic and responsibly predicted for the future, one would expect religion to be playing a minor and reducing part in education. Yet the opposite is the case; in England, the established church (the Church of England) runs 22% of publicly funded schools, often the only schools in many rural localities. The next largest religious denomination is Catholic, with 10% of schools. Ironically it is these two denominations (Anglican and Catholic) whose percentage share of the rapidly diminishing church attendance is predicted to drop the most dramatically. The normal Sunday church attendance of both two denominations combined was 3.3 million as recently as 1990. This dropped to 1.8 million in 2010 and is

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/03/census_2001/html/religion.stm

projected to drop to less than 0.2 million by 2050. 200,000 very elderly congregants each Sunday are not remotely enough to sustain two nationwide religious institutions.

The equivalent figures for those less than 20 years old are even more dramatic: 1.7 million in 1990, 0.5 million in 2010 and 14,300 in 2050.

Northern Ireland

There are major national and regional variations within the United Kingdom. The most notable of these is the much higher degree of religious belief and adherence in Northern Ireland, perhaps itself a problem in that the high level of religious belief and sense of identity probably contributes to the continuing sectarian problems. While armed hostilities are now much less common, the so-called peace walls in Belfast remain by common consent, and indeed still seem necessary. In such a climate, the need for non-sectarian education is too obvious to state. It has been acknowledged, and there is an integrated schools movement; essentially their schools are religious schools, but nondenominational. Yet only 5% of pupils attend such schools, which we suspect are generally not in the areas where they are most needed.

Scotland

Scotland is less religious than Northern Ireland but more religious than England and Wales. The local authority run schools are called “non-denominational schools”, but despite the title are probably the nearest to secular schools that the United Kingdom gets. There are legal provisions for religious observance, but much less prescriptive than the almost-obsessive daily worship requirement imposed by law on all publicly funded English schools. Such daily worship would not be unlawful in Scotland, but the less prescriptive legislation is presumably born out of dissenting views in the absence of a powerful established church with its bishops in Parliament. (The Church of Scotland is generally regarded as the national Church. It does not have bishops. All 26 bishops entitled to sit in the UK Parliament are from the Church of England, and of course all male.)

England

As England is by far the largest jurisdiction, I will concentrate my remaining remarks on England.

Despite the dramatic reduction in churchgoing by young people (71% between 1990 and 2010), the proportion of publicly funded religious schools is actually growing, because the Government is kindly disposed to religious schools.

Given these figures, it would be reasonable to assume that the religious schools would be almost devoid of pupils, but the opposite is the case. Religious schools are popular, and many are oversubscribed - but why? The answer is that, unlike community schools (those run by the local authority without a specifically religious ethos), many of the religious schools are permitted to select pupils. Official statistics and academic studies show that this results in them cherry-picking the most promising pupils, or at least avoiding disruptive and difficult-to-teach pupils. On average therefore, unsurprisingly, the examination results of religious schools tend to be better than community schools. This is because aspirant parents - the biggest predictor of their child's academic success - are keen, even if they are not religious, for their children to attend such schools.

This illusory cycle of advantage has a victim: community schools. They take the children not selected by the religious schools; and it is surprising that the disparity in results compared with religious schools is not much larger.

What the vast majority of parents want is good schools, not religious schools. Such is the pressure on places in religious schools, they are often able to make unreasonable demands on parents as a condition of admitting their child to school. We are even aware of a school that requires parents to attend the school's church 48 times per year. It has become an accepted part of middle-class life for parents to attend church when they would not otherwise do so, simply to secure admission for their child to the local church school. When doing so they often make ostentatious donations and volunteer to perform unpaid work for the church. Given this, it is remarkable that the church attendance figures continue their dramatic decline.

The many families that are not religious, and not prepared to pretend that they are, are seriously disadvantaged in the education system. In rural areas in particular, the only school within practical travelling distance will often be local church school. Even where a family lives close to the school, parents may have

difficulty in having their child admitted, because preference is given to religious families (of those who pretend to be religious) from further away. For parents not prepared to pretend to be religious, there are likely to be far fewer good schools in the locality to which they have a reasonable chance of having their child admitted. In contrast, those who are, or pretend to be, religious have preferential access to religious schools, and no corresponding disadvantage in admission to the non-religious schools (not that I'm advocating that this should be a disadvantage).

Therefore, overall, the non-religious and non-concerned (certainly the majority of the population) are at a considerable disadvantage relative to the religious.

In the United Kingdom we have just emerged from a marathon of an Education Bill which took almost all of 2011 to pass through Parliament. I say "marathon" because we were very active in opposing much in the Bill, and I will pick two areas on which we debated most relevant to our discussions today:

1. **Mandatory Worship in Schools** In England and Wales all schools, even those unconnected with the churches, are required by law to conduct a *daily* worship in publicly funded schools. We proposed this be discontinued during the passage of the Education Bill. One of our parliamentarians engaged in the debate suggested the reason that this completely inappropriate practice still remained in England and Wales alone in Europe was because the UK is the only country, with the possible exception of Iran, to give clerics - 26 bishops – the right to sit in its legislature.
2. **Discrimination Against Non-Religious Teachers** We also opposed discrimination against non-religious teachers being permitted by statute. Despite a number of legal opinions that this is in breach of the EU Employment Directive, the Government - clearly still frightened of the established church - refuses to remove the discriminatory provisions. We have therefore lodged a formal complaint with the European Commission. The Commission is responsible for making sure that EU directives are complied with. The Employment Directive includes, among other grounds, sexual orientation, and religion or belief. Importantly, "belief" in this context means non-belief. Most of the problems to do with discrimination in employment in education relate in some way to religion and belief or sexuality. Others, for example the dismissal of unmarried staff for becoming pregnant, may need to be tackled as a breach of human rights, which may require an expensive court case.

Conclusion on the UK

You can see then that, despite low and declining Christian adherence in Britain, the involvement and power of religion in education remains very high indeed. No political party leader in recent decades has ever dared to take on the religious establishment, even though it is becoming more and more out of touch with its own congregants, far less in touch with the population as a whole. This is the very antithesis of secularism. In British schools, the non-religious and religiously unconcerned (combined, a majority) are second class citizens.

What remedies do we have in the EU?

The Platform's chair, Sophie in 't Veld, has also asked us to consider "how can the EU ensure, without prejudice to the national competences in matters of education, that the principles of equality and non discrimination are upheld?"

The overall suggestion I have is to make full use of the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights, its Directives and its institutions, and perhaps also those of the Council of Europe, and if necessary the United Nations. In the short time remaining I will make a few practical suggestions most likely to be relevant to our concerns in education.

The Commission has sections concerned with discrimination and fundamental rights. If you have evidence of significant breaches of EU law, it is worthwhile logging your complaints with the Commission.

I have followed my own advice over Directive enforcement and have separate complaints outstanding in respect of England and Scotland. They relate to what we believe, after taking legal advice, to be the failure of

the UK Government to correctly transpose the Employment Directive into UK law. The specific area of our complaints relates to insufficient protection from discrimination for non-religious teachers.

For more strategic concerns, I believe we should be making greater use of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency. They emerged out of an organisation concerned principally with racism and migrants, but now have a much broader remit. Anyone can approach them with concerns.

I suggest the following subject areas likely to be of specific concern:

- Equality between men and women
- Inadequate or poor sex education, often because of religious influences
- Creationism being taught as a scientific “fact”
- Homophobia, or simply failure to recognise and respect any sexual orientations that are not heterosexual.

In the appendix which follows, I summarise material, mostly from the EU, that will I hope be a helpful resource in combating these problems.

EU conclusion

What my colleagues have said in their contributions about education in the Flemish part of Belgium and particularly in Hungary, have been shocking. Some of the outrages they catalogue are ones that also apply to the UK. Listening also to the contributions from the floor, I realise that the situation is intolerable in many Member States, but overlooked because of the churches’ overbearing influence.

Education is the place where the lack of secularism impinges most harshly on the ordinary citizen. They need our help. This issue therefore needs to be tackled on a Europe wide basis. I hope we can find a way of doing so.

APPENDIX

Equality between men and women

Equality between women and men is one of the fundamental principles of Community law. The European Union's (EU) objectives on gender equality are to ensure equal opportunities and equal treatment for men and women and to combat any form of discrimination on the grounds of gender. The EU has adopted a two-pronged approach to this issue, combining specific measures with gender mainstreaming. The issue also has a strong international dimension with regard to the fight against poverty, access to education and health services, taking part in the economy and in the decision-making process, women's rights and human rights.

GENERAL FRAMEWORK

Gender mainstreaming

- Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015
- Strengthening the commitment to equality between women and men: a women's charter
- Roadmap for equality between women and men (2006-2010) Archives
- Fifth Community Action Programme on Equal Opportunities (2001-2006) Archives
- Incorporation of equal opportunities into Community policies Archives

Financial aspects

- Community programme for employment and solidarity - PROGRESS (2007-2013)
- European Progress Microfinance Facility (EPMF)
- "EQUAL"
- Gender mainstreaming within the Structural Funds Archives
- Promotion of organisations active in the field of equality between men and women (2004-2006) Archives

Reports

- Reports on equality between women and men – by year

Institutional aspects

- European Institute for Gender Equality
- Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women
- Gender balance within the committees and expert groups set up by the Commission

PRINCIPLE OF NON-DISCRIMINATION BASED ON SEX

- The principle of equal treatment for men and women outside the labour market
- Burden of proof in cases of discrimination based on sex

FEMALE EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Employment

- Tackling the pay gap between men and women
- Gender equality in the labour market
- Equal treatment as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion
- Self-employed workers: equal treatment between men and women
- Equal treatment of self-employed workers (until 2012)
- Equal pay
- Balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process
- The integration of women in research

Social dimension

- Parental leave
- Promoting solidarity between the generations
- Balanced participation of women and men in family and working life
- Protection of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding
- Childcare
- Social security
- Parental leave and leave for family reasons
- Occupational pension schemes

COMBATING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Combating sexual harassment

- Protection of the dignity of women and men at work
- Code of practice to clamp down on sexual harassment at work
- Preventing sexual harassment at work

Combating violence, sexual exploitation and trafficking in women

- New measures to combat trafficking in women
- Trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation

INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION OF EQUALITY BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

- Strategy for gender equality in development policy
- Fourth United Nations Conference on Women

http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/employment_and_social_policy/equality_between_men_and_women/index_en.htm

Sex Education

Here are some resources which should help in bringing pressure to bear over inadequate sex education.

The Charter of EU fundamental rights, which the FRA works to support, includes both discrimination provisions and Article 24 - The Rights of the Child. Article 24.1 reads "Children shall have the right to such

protection and care as is necessary for their well-being. They may express their views freely. Such views shall be taken into consideration on matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity.”

[Article 17](#) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child calls on States to ensure that children have access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources aimed at the promotion of their social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

The Safe Guide: This invaluable guide was **financially supported by the European Commission** Directorate General for Health and Consumer Protection, as part of 'The SAFE Project: A European partnership to promote the sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people.'

The project is a partnership between IPPF European Network, WHO Regional Office for Europe and Lund University. It aims to build on existing research in the field, to provide an overall picture of the patterns and trends across the region, to develop new and innovative ways to reach young people with SRHR information and services, and to inform, support and advance policy development. The guide provides information about sexuality education in 26 European countries, and reflects the reality that policies and practices related to young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights - including sexuality education - vary from country to country. Young people need accurate information, skills and access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services if they are to make healthy, informed choices. Comprehensive sexuality education is one of the most important tools we have to ensure that young people have the information they need. <http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/BIB/SexEd/SexEd.html>

This is a summary

Sexuality Education must help young people to:

- **Acquire accurate information**

On sexual and reproductive rights; information to dispel myths; references to resources and services

- **Develop life skills**

Such as critical thinking, communication and negotiation skills, self-development skills, decision making skills; sense of self; confidence; assertiveness; ability to take responsibility; ability to ask questions and seek help; empathy

- **Nurture positive attitudes and values**

Open-mindedness; respect for self and others; positive self-worth/esteem; comfort; non-judgmental attitude; sense of responsibility; positive attitude toward their sexual and reproductive health

Sexuality education covers a broad range of issues relating to both the physical and biological aspects of sexuality, and the emotional and social aspects. It recognizes and accepts all people as sexual beings and is concerned with more than just the prevention of disease or pregnancy. CSE programmes should be adapted to the age and stage of development of the target group.

Which factors hinder and enhance provision and how can they be addressed?

Cross-national comparisons reveal common factors influencing the relative ease of implementation of sexuality education. To varying degrees, the subject is controversial virtually everywhere. Thus, there is considerable scope for sharing lessons learned from one European country with another, particularly with regard to the following factors.

- **Reconciling political and religious views**

Very few countries exhibit complete acceptance of sexuality education across all groups, and political context exerts a strong influence on implementation. In countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark, sexuality education is widely accepted and supported, while in other countries there is still strong opposition and a lack of support. Even in the Netherlands, anti-choice groups and individuals are vocal in their opposition. In predominantly Catholic countries such as Ireland, objections are forcefully made and extend to the provision

of sexual health services as well as education. The collapse of communism in some Central and Eastern European countries, such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, created conditions for the revival of Catholic interest. While in Germany, persistent Roman Catholic-inspired anti-choice opposition creates a difficult climate in which to implement sexuality education curricula. And in several countries, there is evidence that Muslim faith groups oppose sexuality education as it is currently provided. Much has been achieved in actively involving religious organizations in sexuality education in partnership. In Portugal, for example, NGOs involved include the Pro-Life Movement; in Ireland, a Catholic marriage support agency is used to deliver aspects of the Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE)/ Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme; in Greece, the church is involved in implementing sexuality education, as well as curriculum implementation (including enlisting support from appropriate authorities).

Creationism

Resolution 1580 (2007)

Assembly debate on 4 October 2007 (35th Sitting) (see Doc. [11375](#), report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, rapporteur: Mrs Brasseur). Text adopted by the Assembly on 4 October 2007 (35th Sitting).

<http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta07/eres1580.htm>

The dangers of creationism in education

1. The aim of this resolution is not to question or to fight a belief – the right to freedom of belief does not permit that. The aim is to warn against certain tendencies to pass off a belief as science. It is necessary to separate belief from science. It is not a matter of antagonism. Science and belief must be able to coexist. It is not a matter of opposing belief and science, but it is necessary to prevent belief from opposing science.
2. For some people the Creation, as a matter of religious belief, gives a meaning to life. Nevertheless, the Parliamentary Assembly is worried about the possible ill-effects of the spread of creationist ideas within our education systems and about the consequences for our democracies. If we are not careful, creationism could become a threat to human rights, which are a key concern of the Council of Europe.
3. Creationism, born of the denial of the evolution of species through natural selection, was for a long time an almost exclusively American phenomenon. Today creationist ideas are tending to find their way into Europe and their spread is affecting quite a few Council of Europe member states.
4. The prime target of present-day creationists, most of whom are of the Christian or Muslim faith, is education. Creationists are bent on ensuring that their ideas are included in the school science syllabuses. Creationism cannot, however, lay claim to being a scientific discipline.
5. Creationists question the scientific character of certain areas of knowledge and argue that the theory of evolution is only one interpretation among others. They accuse scientists of not providing enough evidence to establish the theory of evolution as scientifically valid. On the contrary, creationists defend their own statements as scientific. None of this stands up to objective analysis.
6. We are witnessing a growth of modes of thought which challenge established knowledge about nature, evolution, our origins and our place in the universe.
7. There is a real risk of serious confusion being introduced into our children's minds between what has to do with convictions, beliefs, ideals of all sorts and what has to do with science. An "all things are equal" attitude may seem appealing and tolerant, but is in fact dangerous.
8. Creationism has many contradictory aspects. The "intelligent design" idea, which is the latest, more refined version of creationism, does not deny a certain degree of evolution. However, intelligent design, presented in a more subtle way, seeks to portray its approach as scientific, and therein lies the danger.
9. The Assembly has constantly insisted that science is of fundamental importance. Science has made possible considerable improvements in living and working conditions and is a rather significant factor in economic,

technological and social development. The theory of evolution has nothing to do with divine revelation but is built on facts.

10. Creationism claims to be based on scientific rigour. In reality the methods employed by creationists are of three types: purely dogmatic assertions; distorted use of scientific quotations, sometimes illustrated with magnificent photographs; and backing from more or less well-known scientists, most of whom are not specialists in these matters. By these means creationists seek to appeal to non-specialists and spread doubt and confusion in their minds.

11. Evolution is not simply a matter of the evolution of humans and of populations. Denying it could have serious consequences for the development of our societies. Advances in medical research, aiming at combating infectious diseases such as Aids, are impossible if every principle of evolution is denied. One cannot be fully aware of the risks involved in the significant decline in biodiversity and climate change if the mechanisms of evolution are not understood.

12. Our modern world is based on a long history, of which the development of science and technology forms an important part. However, the scientific approach is still not well understood and this is liable to encourage the development of all manner of fundamentalism and extremism. The total rejection of science is definitely one of the most serious threats to human and civic rights.

13. The war on the theory of evolution and on its proponents most often originates in forms of religious extremism closely linked to extreme right-wing political movements. The creationist movements possess real political power. The fact of the matter, and this has been exposed on several occasions, is that some advocates of strict creationism are out to replace democracy by theocracy.

14. All leading representatives of the main monotheistic religions have adopted a much more moderate attitude. Pope Benedict XVI, for example, as his predecessor Pope John-Paul II, today praises the role of science in the evolution of humanity and recognises that the theory of evolution is “more than a hypothesis”.

15. The teaching of all phenomena concerning evolution as a fundamental scientific theory is therefore crucial to the future of our societies and our democracies. For that reason it must occupy a central position in the curriculums, and especially in the science syllabuses, as long as, like any other theory, it is able to stand up to thorough scientific scrutiny. Evolution is present everywhere, from medical overprescription of antibiotics that encourages the emergence of resistant bacteria to agricultural overuse of pesticides that causes insect mutations on which pesticides no longer have any effect.

16. The Council of Europe has highlighted the importance of teaching about culture and religion. In the name of freedom of expression and individual belief, creationist ideas, as any other theological position, could possibly be presented as an addition to cultural and religious education, but they cannot claim scientific respectability.

17. Science provides irreplaceable training in intellectual rigour. It seeks not to explain “why things are” but to understand how they work.

18. Investigation of the creationists’ growing influence shows that the arguments between creationism and evolution go well beyond intellectual debate. If we are not careful, the values that are the very essence of the Council of Europe will be under direct threat from creationist fundamentalists. It is part of the role of the Council of Europe’s parliamentarians to react before it is too late.

19. The Parliamentary Assembly therefore urges the member states, and especially their education authorities to:

19.1. defend and promote scientific knowledge;

19.2. strengthen the teaching of the foundations of science, its history, its epistemology and its methods alongside the teaching of objective scientific knowledge;

19.3. make science more comprehensible, more attractive and closer to the realities of the contemporary world;

19.4. firmly oppose the teaching of creationism as a scientific discipline on an equal footing with the theory of evolution and in general the presentation of creationist ideas in any discipline other than religion;

19.5. promote the teaching of evolution as a fundamental scientific theory in the school curriculums.

20. The Assembly welcomes the fact that 27 academies of science of Council of Europe member states signed, in June 2006, a declaration on the teaching of evolution and calls on academies of science that have not yet done so to sign the declaration.

Homophobia In Schools

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P6-TA-2006-0018&language=EN>

European Parliament resolution on homophobia in Europe Wednesday, 18 January 2006 – Strasbourg

(EXTRACT)

The European Parliament:

Urges Member States and the Commission to step up the fight against homophobia through education, such as campaigns against homophobia in schools, in universities and in the media, as well as through administrative, judicial and legislative means;

FRA Summary Report: Homophobia and Discrimination on Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the EU Member States Part II: The Social Situation

http://www.elpais.com/elpaismedia/ultimahora/media/200903/31/sociedad/20090331elpepusoc_1_Pes_PD_F.pdf

(page 12)

Incidents of bullying and harassment of LGBT persons are reported in educational settings across the EU. Verbal expressions of homophobia and transphobia are commonplace, and the word 'gay' is commonly used in a derogatory way.

Bullying and harassment have significant consequences for LGBT youth, affecting school performance and well-being. Such experiences can lead to social marginalisation, poor health or dropping out of school. Existing research and interviews with LGBT NGOs demonstrate that school authorities across the EU pay little attention to homophobia and LGBT bullying. Research also shows that teachers lack the awareness, incentives, skills and tools to recognise and tackle such problems.

The lack of recognition, representation and positive LGBT images in education in the majority of EU Member States is another concern raised by NGOs, as it contributes to a lack of awareness, sensitivity and understanding conducive to the social isolation of LGBT students. Teachers are rarely trained, prepared or inclined to discuss the issue of sexual identity and orientation.

What can be done

The FRA believes that a number of measures at both EU and national level could enhance the visibility, combat discrimination and improve the situation of LGBT persons in education.

The European Commission should consider applying the Open Method of Coordination to facilitate the exchange of good practices regarding strategies and policies tackling school drop-out rates and the social marginalisation of LGBT young people related to bullying, discrimination and exclusion.

The European Commission should also consider applying the Open Method of Coordination to facilitate an exchange of practices and policies developed by Member States which have adopted LGBT specific policies in the field of education, such as Ireland, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Member States should ensure that schools provide a climate of safety, support and affirmation for LGBT youth, combating stigmatisation and marginalisation of homosexuality and different gender identities. In this respect, school authorities should put in place concrete anti-bullying policies stating clearly that homophobic

name-calling, bullying and harassment will not be tolerated. School authorities should also provide access to support mechanisms and information for young people identifying themselves as LGB.

Member States should ensure that school curricula do not ignore issues of sexual orientation, and that LGBT persons are represented with respect and dignity in accordance with the European Union's fundamental values of equal treatment, non-discrimination and respect for diversity. In this respect, school authorities should further develop their formal and informal human rights education components, guided by the Council of Europe's human rights education manual 'COMPASS'.

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