

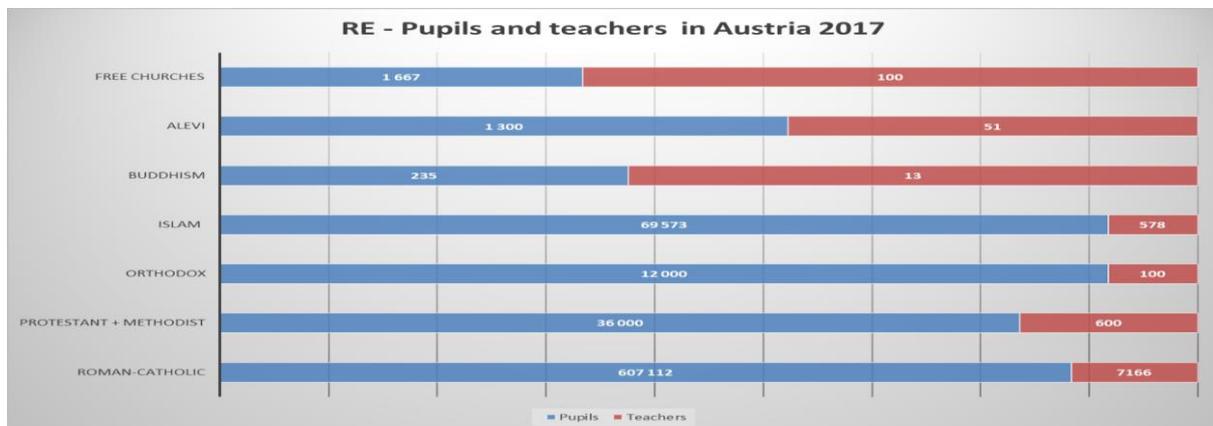
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RE is a compulsory and confessional subject in all public schools except most of the trade schools, where it is optional. The number of lessons is two per class with a minimum of ten attendants (fewer pupils lead to a reduction to one lesson). Parents (pupils) can opt out within the first five days of a school year on 'grounds of conscience', but in practice it is evident that there are other reasons for not attending: inconvenient time-tables, lack of interest etc.

The number of pupils attending RE lessons has dropped in the last few years whereas that of children without affiliation has significantly increased. These pupils can enrol for the RE of a Christian denomination in the form of an optional subject.

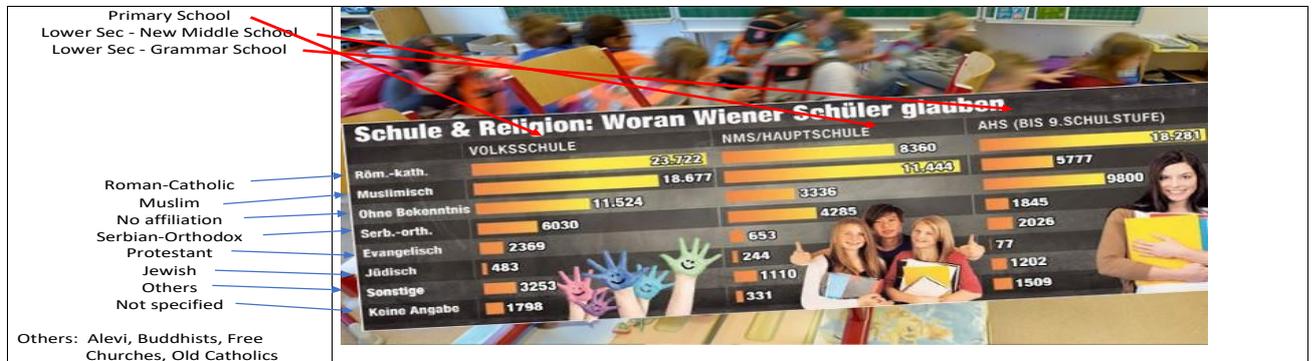
RE is performed separately for Catholic, Protestant, Old Catholic, Free Churches, Orthodox, Muslim, Alevi, Buddhist and Jewish attendants, with special and different syllabi. Islamic, Alevi, Free Churches, Orthodox, Jewish and Buddhist RE lessons take place in schools with a significant number of respective pupils.

In 2017, the distribution of pupils in Austria among religious education classes and the number of teachers was as follows:



The following data—which show that Muslim students are on the verge of overtaking Catholics in elementary schools—reflect an established trend and provide empirical evidence of a massive demographic and religious shift underway in Austria, traditionally a Roman Catholic country:

Religious affiliation of Viennese pupils in compulsory schools (2017/18)



Source: Vienna School Board

The content of the subject focuses on the respective religious tradition and value education linked to it. Nonetheless, learning about other religious traditions is also part of the curriculum. Schools increasingly offer interreligious school services at the beginning and/or end of a term and pupils from all faiths have the right to take time off to celebrate their religious high feasts.

Over 20 years ago, some schools established the pilot project subject *Ethics* to offer an alternative so that pupils can decide whether to attend RE or Ethics. In that case those not attending any RE or are officially seen as not affiliated have to choose Ethics. However, Ethics is not yet offered in many schools and still runs as a school pilot project.

A new approach called *dialogical confessional RE* (dk:RU) is being developed and tested in selected schools in Austria: RE as a subject in joint responsibility of the Christian churches, where a teacher from one of the main Christian denominations teaches the complete group of Christian pupils in a class.

The multi-cultural and multi-faith situation in an increasing number of schools brings up questions like

- how to organise school life that attends to the respective needs
- how to celebrate religious feasts during a school year – together or separate?
- should there be no religious symbols in the classrooms or one for each group present?

Due to the shrinking number of Catholic and Protestant pupils in major cities (particularly Vienna) there are fewer lessons per class resulting in merging pupils from multiple classes/levels in one religious group. The rising numbers of Orthodox and Muslim pupils resp. members of Free Churches will mean a bundle of one-lesson groups per school, which makes the organisation of a convenient timetable difficult. Will this lead to the end of pure denominational classes and RE teachers or more specifically mean a shift from learning *from* religion to learning *about* religion?

Similarly, what should happen to students without denominational affiliation or those who have withdrawn? While one group has their religious education, these students have a free period, come later or leave earlier. For that and some other developments, more and more people currently call for the introduction of compulsory Ethics lessons.

Key documents

The Austrian Federal Chancellery (2011): Austria's Religious Landscape: <http://www.austria.org/religion/>
Religious Denominations in Vienna & Austria: Baseline study for 2016 – Scenarios until 2046:
https://www.oeaw.ac.at/fileadmin/subsites/Institute/VID/IMG/Publications/Working_Papers/WP2017_09.pdf
Religious Education Act:
<https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=10009217>

Selected references

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- Klutz, P. (2016): Religious Education Faces the Challenge of Religious Plurality. A Qualitative-Empirical Study in Vienna, Waxmann, Münster-New York
- Rothgangel, M. – Jäggle, M. – Schlag, T. (eds.) in cooperation with Philipp Klutz and Mónica Solymár (2016): Religious Education at Schools in Europe. Part 1: Central Europe, V&R unipress, Göttingen (Wiener Forum für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft 10,1); dt.: Jäggle, M. – Krobath, T. / Schlag, T. (Hg.) (2013): Religiöse Bildung an Schulen in Europa. Teil 1: Mitteleuropa, Göttingen (Wiener Forum für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft 5.1)



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