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The Prevention Of Radicalization In Formal Education In Spain Through The Teaching Of The History Of Religions And The Promotion Of Values. An Unequal Reach Among Students

Abstract

In recent years, major international organizations to which Spain is a member, such as the European Union, the United Nations, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, have published and/or approved documents, resolutions, and manuals aimed at proposing measures to prevent (jihadist) radicalism. Among these measures, the educational field emerges as an option to raise awareness among younger populations through the implementation of knowledge on the history of religions and the promotion of values such as tolerance and respect for human rights. Accordingly, this article analyzes the state of (jihadist) radicalization prevention in Spanish classrooms, focusing on the subject of “Religion” and its alternatives, as well as the “Protocol of Action for the Promotion of Values of Freedom, Peace, and Democracy for the Prevention of Terrorism and the Memory of Terrorism Victims” of 2018. The findings indicate that, for now, the prevention of (jihadist) radicalization in Spain is carried out unevenly among students.

Keywords: prevention, radicalization, education, history of religions, values

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1. Introduction

An initial step toward addressing the prevention of radicalization within Spain's formal education system involves acknowledging the complexity of the term "radicalization". Indeed, scholars such as Isabelle Lacroix highlight the scarcity of scientific studies examining the brief development of radicalization, largely due to two fundamental challenges: epistemological and methodological.

In her 2018 article in *Revue de littérature* titled *Radicalisations et jeunesses*, Lacroix explores the ongoing debate surrounding the definition of "radicalization" and other associated terms that are often used interchangeably – such as "radicality", "radicalism", "extremism", "violence", and "terrorism". She also discusses the difficulties in quantifying the phenomenon, sourcing reliable data, and gaining access to relevant fieldwork (Lacroix, 2018: 9–16).

With this in mind, a review of how the term "radicalization" is used in documents issued by major international organizations – such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – reveals that education is consistently proposed as a key preventive tool. For instance, UNESCO's webpage titled Preventing Violent Extremism asserts that "dismantling the process of radicalization must begin with dialogue and respect for human rights and the rule of law. Education is a powerful tool for increasing learners' resilience to violent extremism and mitigating the drivers behind this phenomenon" (UNESCO, n.d.).

Similarly, the European Parliament's 2015 document on Preventing Radicalisation and Recruitment of European Citizens by Terrorist Organisations (2015/2063(INI)) underscores:

"The importance of schools and education in preventing radicalisation; it recalls the vital role of this medium as a means of promoting social integration and developing critical thinking, as well as promoting non-discrimination; it calls on Member States to encourage educational institutions to include courses and academic programs that reinforce understanding and tolerance, especially concerning different religions, the history of religions, philosophies, and ideologies [...]" (European Parliament, 2015: 39).

An example from the OSCE is found in its manual Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security, which states:

"Across the OSCE region, the threat posed by violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism has highlighted the link between freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, and the need to ensure security" (OSCE, 2020: 5).

It further recommends "[...] adopting active measures such as awareness-raising, education, and the promotion of interfaith and interreligious dialogue [...]" (OSCE, 2020: 38).

These examples not only demonstrate the international community's endorsement of education as a means to prevent radicalization, but also reveal multiple thematic areas of intervention – such as engagement with religions and their histories, promotion of dialogue and tolerance, development of critical thinking, and human rights education.

Since Spain is a member of all three of these organizations, this article analyzes how radicalization is prevented in its educational context through two avenues: first, through the teaching of the history of religions in the subject “Religion” and its secular alternative; and second, through the promotion of civic values, in this case via the Protocol of Action for the Promotion of Values of Freedom, Peace, and Democracy in the Prevention of Terrorism and in Memory of the Victims of Terrorism (Moncloa, 2018). Based on these two axes of analysis, the article aims to demonstrate the unequal impact these educational approaches may have on students and, consequently, their varying effectiveness in preventing radicalization through education.

2. The History of Religions

One of the most prominent figures to address the “history of religions” in Spain since the early 20th century is Professor Francisco Díez de Velasco. In a 1999 article published in the *Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones* titled *Teaching Religions from a Non-Confessional Perspective: Reflections On (and Beyond) an Alternative to “Religion” in School*, he asserts:

“The history of religions in our educational system, at all levels, can serve as a lever to mitigate conflicts – or at least not exacerbate them – through fostering understanding of what is ‘other’; this may be one of its main educational values” (Díez de Velasco, 1999: 98).

In addition to conflict mitigation and understanding of difference, Díez de Velasco identifies other key objectives of religious studies, such as fostering tolerance, reducing xenophobic and ethnocentric attitudes, encouraging adaptation to an increasingly diverse and tolerant world, and providing tools for critical understanding and judgment – particularly in response to the proselytizing tactics of violent or destructive religious groups (Díez de Velasco, 1999: 83–101). Other objectives include the promotion of peace (Mayor Zaragoza, Carrascosa Salas, Ortega Carrillo, 2006: 647–660; UN General Assembly, 2021: 1–5) and ensuring security (OSCE, 2020: 5).

These very aims have been echoed by international organizations to which Spain belongs, as noted earlier. The OSCE, for example, published a manual titled *Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security*, which states:

“Participating States should ensure that school programs provide impartial and accurate information across the spectrum of religious and belief diversity. This should serve to educate students on the importance of tolerance and respect for human rights. The educational process should also create opportunities for students from different religious or belief backgrounds to interact, allowing them to experience diversity in a natural and fruitful way” (OSCE, 2020: 51).

While this document does not propose the creation of a dedicated subject¹, it advocates for an educational approach that incorporates religious diversity and fosters meaningful interaction. In the Spanish context, however, the subject “Religion” (confessional) was introduced after the transition to democracy, as discussed in the next section.

2.1 Spain as a Secular State: The History of Religions in the Curriculum

The analysis of how the history of religions is addressed in Spain focuses on the subject “Religion” and its secular alternative. The aim is not an exhaustive examination but rather an outline of certain elements that reveal unequal knowledge acquisition among students. First, however, it is important to consider the legal origins of these subjects, which trace back to several articles of the 1978 Constitution.

Article 16.3 states that “No religion shall have a state character. Public authorities shall take into account the religious beliefs of Spanish society and shall maintain appropriate cooperation relations with the Catholic Church and other confessions” (Government of Spain, 1978). According to Manuel de Puelles Benítez, a comprehensive interpretation of this article suggests that Spain is a secular state (De Puelles, 2006: 528).

Additionally, Article 27.3 affirms that “Public authorities guarantee the right of parents to ensure their children receive religious and moral instruction in accordance with their own convictions” (Government of Spain, 1978).

In order to implement these constitutional guarantees, several agreements were signed: one in 1979 with the Catholic Church titled Instrument of Ratification of the Agreement between the Spanish State and the Holy See on Education and Cultural Affairs (Government of Spain, 1979); and three in 1992 with the federations representing Evangelical, Islamic, and Jewish communities. These agreements stipulate that:

¹ The history of religions is a discipline for which there is no consensus in its naming, with terms such as comparative religion or comparative religions, science of religion, religious studies, religious anthropology, among others (Diez de Velasco, 2002: 9–14).

“In order to give effect to Article 27.3 of the Constitution, as well as to Organic Law 8/1985 on the Right to Education and Organic Law 1/1990 on the General Organization of the Education System, students – and their parents and school governing bodies – are guaranteed the right to receive Evangelical, Islamic, or Jewish religious education² in public and state-funded private schools, provided that such instruction does not conflict with the school’s character. This applies at the preschool, primary, and secondary levels” (Government of Spain, 1979; 1992).

Thus, the school curriculum came to include confessional “Religion” courses^{3 4} (Catholic, Islamic, and Evangelical), while an alternative subject was offered to those who opted out. The content of the alternative varied depending on each government’s education law.

2.1.2 Elements of the “Religion” Curriculum and Its Alternative

According to the 1992 agreement, each religious denomination defines its own curriculum and textbooks, adapted to primary, secondary, and high school levels. A review of the approved curricula shows that all three religions include historical content, references to other religions, and ethical and moral values relating to coexistence and peace, each taught from their own confessional perspective.

Particularly noteworthy is the 2016 resolution by the Directorate-General for Evaluation and Territorial Cooperation, which approved the Islamic Religion curriculum for secondary and high school education. This curriculum includes content for reflection and education on radicalization, extremism, and terrorism, even referencing the National Strategic Plan to Combat Violent Radicalization. One example reads:

“[...] and most importantly, that young people of both sexes care and show rejection of fundamentalist extremism stemming from fanatical revivalism and emotional conversion – where radicalization and violent extremism emerge – because the knowledge acquired in the classroom alone will not be sufficient to effectively prevent the consequences of violent radicalism” (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, 2016: 20540).

2 Author’s italics. In the text of each law, only the corresponding religion is mentioned. In this case, all three are included as the texts are identical.

3 For its part, the Jewish religion would be taught in private schools. It would not have a curriculum designed for public education since, according to Jacobo Israel Garzón in his article “Religious Education from the Perspective of Jewish Communities” (2007), religions should only be taught in private, charter, or denominational schools of each faith (Israel, 2007: 638).

4 Before the agreements signed in 1992, more religions were taught, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

On the other hand, the alternative subject – always accompanied by controversy and change – has a long history. Therefore, only some examples will be presented here, along with their curricular objectives, to continue illustrating the contrasting educational approaches regarding the topic under analysis.

In the mid-1990s, the subject “Society, Culture, and Religion” emerged following the Order of August 3, 1995, which regulated alternative study activities to religious education as established by Royal Decree 2438/1994 of December 16. The text explains its objective as follows:

If Article 3.2 of Royal Decree 2438/1994 establishes that these study activities must contribute to the objectives assigned to different educational levels by Organic Law 1/1990, it is essential to emphasize that activities relating to religious culture should especially promote a spirit of tolerance and reflection on what the various religions have meant for thought, culture, and society (Ministry of Education and Science, 1995: 26813).

Subsequently, the Organic Law on the Quality of Education (2002) included “Society, Culture, and Religion” with both a confessional and a non-confessional option. The latter addressed that “The historical and cultural dimension, which situates the knowledge of religions within their specific historical context” (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, 2003: 26060).

In 2006, the Organic Law of Education once again changed the subject’s name to “History and Culture of Religions”, with the following purpose:

“[...] to show students the ideological and religious pluralism that exists in the world in which they live, [...] while emphasizing freedom of conscience and religious freedom as essential elements of a system of coexistence. It also seeks to develop attitudes of tolerance [...]” (Ministry of Education and Science, 2006: 161).

The next law, the Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE, 2013), introduced the subject “Ethical Values”, aimed at educating students about:

“Human rights as a universal reference to overcome conflicts, defend equality, political pluralism, and social justice”, among other aims (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, 2015: 534).

Currently, the Organic Law amending the Organic Law of Education⁵ (LOMLOE, 2020) is in effect. It proposes the option of “adequate educational attention” for students who do not choose “Religion”. This alternative must not include any religious content, and its purpose is to strengthen the student’s self-esteem, autonomy, reflection, and responsibility (Ministry of Education, 2022: 41590).

Continuing with the explanatory line, once the existence of the two options is established, the percentage of students choosing each option helps reinforce the hypothesis. The following table provides that information:

Subject Year	Catholic	Evangelical	Islamic ⁶	Jewish	No religion
2015-2016 ⁷	38.6%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	60.7%
2016-2017	43.9%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	55.8%
2017-2018	46.9%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	52.8%
2018-2019	47.7%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	51.9%
2019-2020	45.8%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	53.8%
2020-2021	43.7%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	55.9%

TABLE 1. Evolution of the percentage of students enrolled in religious or alternative subjects. Public sector. Secondary education.

SOURCE: Own elaboration based on data from the Observatory of Religious Pluralism in Spain

From this data, it can be affirmed that students are distributed across five options. Although no data is available for the Jewish religion, the highest number of students are in the non-confessional option, followed by Catholic, Evangelical, and Islamic religious education.

3. The 2018 “Protocol of Action for the Promotion of the Values of Freedom, Peace, and Democracy in the Prevention of Terrorism and in the Remembrance of Victims of Terrorism”

International organizations’ documents not only refer to the role of religious history in education to prevent radicalization but also emphasize the importance of knowledge about human rights, tolerance, the rule of law, and dialogue. For this reason, it is appropriate to mention the agreement signed on November 20, 2018 between the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Education and

5 The LOMLOE includes “Education in Ethical and Civic Values”, common to all students and taught in one of the four years of the stage.

6 Although the table shows 0.0% for students of Islamic religion, the demographic study of the Muslim population dated 12/31/2022 by the Andalusian Observatory reports 374,779 students and 144 teachers, noting in its conclusions that 90% of Muslim students lack religious education classes (Observatorio Andalusi, 2022: 11).

7 In the 2015–2016 data, “History and Culture of Religions” appears at 0.4%.

Vocational Training (Senado, 2021). As its title suggests, the protocol aims to promote values such as freedom, peace, and democracy⁸.

Following this agreement, a set of teaching units was created⁹ to be incorporated into several subjects of the Compulsory Secondary Education and Baccalaureate curriculum. These were developed in collaboration with the Directorate General for Support to Victims of Terrorism (Ministry of the Interior), the Directorate General for Territorial Evaluation and Cooperation (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training), the Memorial Center for Victims of Terrorism, and the Victims of Terrorism Foundation. This project, titled “Memory and Prevention of Terrorism”, addresses not only the aforementioned values but also includes specific references to radicalization in some units.

Thus, a brief overview of the growing need to include values in the curriculum, followed by an analysis of the topics covered in the project’s teaching units, offers yet another example of the heterogeneous ways in which students are educated on values and radicalization prevention in the formal educational system.

3.1 Values in the Curriculum

The need to include values in the school curriculum, according to Pedro Ortega Ruiz and Ramón Mínguez Vallejos, stems largely from the extensive pedagogical research conducted in recent decades and from societal concern regarding phenomena such as violence, xenophobia, or intolerance, as explained in their 2001 book *Los valores en la educación* (Values in Education). The cross-curricular curriculum is therefore expected to play a key role (Ortega Ruiz & Mínguez Vallejos, 2001:15–16).

Accordingly, in 1993 the Ministry of Education and Science published a monograph titled “Cross-Curricular Themes¹⁰ and Curriculum Development”. Chapter II, dedicated to education in values, describes their role as follows:

“Cross-curricular themes must indeed play a fundamental role in the training of critical citizens who actively participate in the construction of a more supportive, more tolerant, healthier world, more respectful of the environment, and more combative against all forms of discrimination... In short, one more aligned with values such as justice,

8 The creation of teaching units has also been included in the 2019 National Strategy against Terrorism, as follows: “Victims of terrorism, their memory and testimony, play an active role in the prevention of terrorism. Firstly, the promotion of values of freedom, peace, and democracy is advocated for the prevention of terrorism and the remembrance of victims, through the creation and dissemination of teaching units for young students,” Order PCI/179/2019, of February 22, publishing the 2019 National Strategy against Terrorism, approved by the National Security Council.

9 These units are available in the official languages of the Spanish state (Spanish, Catalan, Galician, Basque, and in English) on the Ministry of the Interior’s website, Citizen Services, under “Teaching Units of the Educational Project ‘Memory and Prevention of Terrorism’”.

10 Royal Decree 1105/2014, of December 26, establishing the basic curriculum for Compulsory Secondary Education and the Baccalaureate, aims—through transversal themes—for educational administrations to promote [...] the learning of conflict prevention and peaceful resolution in all areas of personal, family, and social life, as well as the values that underpin freedom, justice, equality, political pluralism, peace, democracy, respect for human rights and the rejection of terrorist violence, plurality, respect for the rule of law, respect and consideration for the victims of terrorism, and the prevention of terrorism and all forms of violence (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, 2014: 174).

solidarity, equality, or freedom – recognized today as guiding principles for the most just and respectable forms of human coexistence” (Ministry of Education and Science, 1993: 26).

Therefore, it can be stated that with LOGSE (1990), education underwent significant changes, as it “Ceased to be entirely disciplinary and academicist, giving way to an education also centered on values and attitudes that promote the comprehensive development of the individual” (Santamaría Conde & Corbí Santamaría, 2020: 334).

In this regard, José Manuel Touriñán López, in his article “Education in Values and Axiological Experience: The Patrimonial Meaning of Education”, states:

“Today, the clash of civilizations – provoked by opposing fundamentalisms – can be transformed through a personal and institutional commitment oriented toward a ‘civilizational alliance’, to live together in peace in a better world. In this, education becomes an increasingly effective tool for the transformation and adaptation of human beings as global yet localized citizens, capable of resolving real conflicts without turning them into religious and/or identity wars” (Touriñán, 2006: 232).

This evolution of values education has made it possible to design teaching units that address radicalization within the framework of the “Memory and Prevention of Terrorism” project. As explained by Raúl López Romo in his article “How to Teach About ETA and Terrorism in Secondary School” (2023), published in *The Conversation*, educating about terrorism allows “The promotion of values such as respect, pluralism, and empathy for those who have suffered unjustly” (López, 2023: 2).

However, following the main argument of this analysis, such education reaches students in a heterogeneous way, as will be shown in the next section.

3. 2 Subjects Covered by the Protocol (Core and Elective) and Themes of the Teaching Units

One of the first points to consider is that this protocol, signed in 2018, began implementation during the transition between two educational laws: LOMCE 8/2013 and LOMLOE 3/2020¹¹. The teaching unit titled “Terrorism in Spain” was published in 2020. However, this analysis is limited to two criteria: whether the subject in which the unit on terrorism is included is a core or elective subject, and the topic addressed by the unit (values, radicalization).

11 The changes introduced in the curriculum, organization, and objectives were to be implemented in 1st and 3rd years of ESO and 1st year of Baccalaureate in 2022 and 2023; in 2nd and 4th years of ESO and 2nd year of Baccalaureate in 2023 and 2024. For more information, see: Educagob, LOMLOE Implementation Calendar.

It is also worth recalling (as explained in section 2.1) that the subject “Ethical Values” was elective under LOMCE and became a core subject under LOMLOE (renamed “Civic and Ethical Values Education”), taught in only one academic year—either in 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th year of secondary education¹².

Based on these clarifications, the teaching units are now presented¹³ according to the criteria mentioned. The teaching unit included in “Ethical Values” for 1st year of secondary school (ESO) is titled “The Invisible Skin Against Terrorism”, which explores the concept of human dignity, human rights, and their significance, aiming to encourage rejection of unjust violence and promote independent reflection, among other goals.

Also within “Ethical Values”, but for 4th year of ESO, another unit is titled “Victims of Terrorism and Human Rights”, with a focus – as the title suggests – on human rights.

Still in 4th year of ESO, a unit within “Geography and History”, a core subject, is titled “Terrorism in Spain”. It covers topics such as: What is terrorism? Terrorism during the Franco regime, the transition period, and democracy, among others.

In the 2nd year of Baccalaureate, the unit aligns with the curriculum for “History of Spain”, a core subject. Titled “Terrorism in Spain”, it follows a structure similar to that of the 4th ESO unit, including some references to radicalization. For example: “According to the public prosecutor, individuals involved in these preparations were linked to Al Qaeda, the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, the Armed Islamic Group from Algeria, and radicalized common criminals” (Dirección General de Apoyo a Víctimas del Terrorismo et al., 2020: 31).

Also in the 2nd year of Baccalaureate, in the elective subject “Psychology”¹⁴, which is autonomously offered by regional governments, a teaching unit titled “Violent Radicalization” is proposed. This unit covers the nature of radicalization, its core components, the psychology of terrorist groups, and societal resilience to violent extremism – offering a comprehensive examination of radicalization.

Lastly, in the 1st year of Baccalaureate, proposals are made for two subjects. In the core subject “Philosophy”, the unit titled “Argumentation as a Response to Terrorism” addresses terrorism through concepts such as ethical argumentation, moral universalism, and the distinction between evil and injustice. The second unit, titled “Global Terrorism in the Contemporary World”, is proposed for “Contemporary World History”, an elective subject within the Humanities and Social Sciences track,

12 This explains why there is a unit for “Ethical Values” for 1st year of ESO and another for 4th year of ESO.

13 The content is developed to be taught over a number of sessions ranging from one to six, depending on the year; Unit 1 includes versions for students, teachers, and a reduced version, and Unit 2 includes formats for students and teachers.

14 On the last page of the unit, it is stated: “The reference evaluation criteria are included in block 6 (Social and Organizational Psychology) of the subject’s curriculum (Royal Decree 1105/2014, of December 26)”.

chosen from a list of specific courses. Topics include the four waves of terrorism, the emergence of global terrorism, and jihadism after the Arab Spring, with explicit references to jihadist radicalization. For instance:

“The large mobilization of sympathizers of jihadist groups raised serious security concerns for European governments. Initially, efforts were made to prevent residents in Europe from traveling to fight in the Middle East. All governments launched measures to prevent jihadist radicalization” (Dirección General de Apoyo a Víctimas del Terrorismo et al., 2020: 25).

In summary, among the teaching units proposed in the “Memory and Prevention of Terrorism” project, some focus on values such as human rights (“The Invisible Skin” or “Victims of Terrorism and Human Rights”), others refer to radicalization to varying degrees (“Terrorism in Spain”, “Global Terrorism in the Contemporary World”), while one is dedicated entirely to violent radicalization (“Violent Radicalization”).

4. Conclusions

Based on the results obtained, it can be concluded that since 1992, Spanish students have been able to choose among religious education subjects (Catholic, Evangelical, or Islamic) or their alternatives (“Society, Culture and Religion”, “History and Culture of Religions”, “Ethical Values”, etc.). As a result, each student acquires different knowledge about the history of religions and values, depending on whether the choice is confessional (and which confession), non-confessional, and the educational law under which they are studying.

Furthermore, when considering the teaching units stemming from the protocol signed between the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, differences among students persist. First, the protocol only includes secondary and Baccalaureate levels, excluding students over 16 who pursue other paths, such as vocational training (FP).

In addition, the units on “Terrorism in Spain” were included in an elective subject (“Ethical Values” in 1st and 4th ESO), which was removed under LOMLOE and replaced by “Civic and Ethical Values Education”, limited to just one academic year. The unit was also included in a core subject (“Geography and History” in 4th ESO), which would require curricular adaptation for use under the new subject structure.

In Baccalaureate, units are proposed for two mandatory subjects (“History of Spain” in 2nd year and “Philosophy” in 1st year), meaning that students have common access to these contents. However, the choice of electives again results in differing educational experiences, since the material is included in an optional subject dependent on regional authorities (“Psychology” in 2nd year, which

is the only unit fully dedicated to radicalization), and another elective within Humanities and Social Sciences (“Contemporary World History” in 1st year).

Therefore, the initial hypothesis is confirmed: secondary and Baccalaureate students receive different training on the history of religion and values based on numerous factors – whether they choose a confessional or non-confessional path, the specific religion chosen, the educational law in force, the autonomous community where they study, and whether they pursue Baccalaureate. To this, one must add the optional use of the teaching materials by educators.

Beyond the conclusions, several additional issues arise. For example, the continual renaming and restructuring of non-confessional subjects with each educational law undermines consistency and the effectiveness of radicalization prevention in education (as evidenced by the now-defunct “Ethical Values” subject, for which materials were developed under LOMCE). One might also consider the role of Spain’s officially non-confessional state, which – until the LOMLOE – has influenced the uneven implementation of educational programs focused on the history of religions or values.

Future research could include comparative studies with other secular EU countries to see how they manage radicalization prevention through the teaching of religious history or values or conduct statistical studies on how frequently educators actually use the units developed in the “Memory and Prevention of Terrorism” project.

In conclusion, although the prevention of radicalization in Spain still requires deep reflection and scientific work to examine the education–radicalization relationship, the positive takeaway from this article is that progress is being made, and there are initiatives finding their place in the classroom with the ultimate goal of, as Touriñán puts it, “resolving real conflicts without turning them into religious or identity wars”.

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