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## Introduction of Religious Education in The Republic of Macedonia

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### Abstract

In the last decades we have been witnesses the way religions are reentering the public debates by introducing inclusion of new religions or significant changes in the existing ones. This religious revival and religious transformation has in great deal been influenced by the rapid pace of emigration and creation of new 'diaspora' communities which are globally considered to function as networks. Religion plays an important role in the construction of collective identities as well as shaping both the national and international cultural differences and limits. Each country has a unique approach and consequently various experiences in regards to the view on religious education but it is a fact that all have a type of religious education and they all face the growth in the pluralism in the beliefs, values and ways of life.

**Keywords:** religious education; multiethnicsociety; educational system; tolerance; integration policies.

### 1. Introduction

The idea of this paper have arisen due to a number of dilemmas and discussions concerning the need to implement religious education in the educational system in the Republic of Macedonia, its influence and consequences. Apart from the many European experiences, it needs to be taken into consideration that the Macedonian society (and country) is divided on all levels: multiethnic, multicultural, multiconfessional.

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This paper has analyzed contemporary topics related to current issues, introduction, realization, problems and contributions of the realization of religious education in the Republic of Macedonia. For a multiethnic and multireligious society as the Macedonian one there is still a vague image of what is to be expected with the introduction of this subject. In such environment, the society is fragile and vulnerable to be divided but at the same time directed towards acknowledging the other half in ourselves. Religious education can contribute to that but it can also result in strengthening the already present divisions. Thus the introduction of religious education in the system of public education in the Republic of Macedonia imposes attentiveness while constructing the concept of this school subject. Undoubtedly the initial grounding of this concept should be the needs and attitudes of its citizenship since it is meant to serve exactly them. Due attention should be paid that the syllabus remains within the frame of the state's constitution. This paper aims to present the basic features, conditions and experiences with the religious education in the Republic of Macedonia, its main aims and its influence in multiethnic societies and it will give a detailed image of its roots, development, application of religious education in a multireligious society where every individual has the right to choose its own religion and enjoy a religious freedom.

There are many assumptions towards the influence of religious education, which have still not been proved, (and will be subject of interest in many future inquiries concerning the religious education in the Republic of Macedonia) such as, strengthening the value system and the tolerance towards variety, which will be applicable in strengthening the assumptions of mutual life in a society such as the Macedonian one, especially among pupils.

## **2. Materials and methods**

This paper uses the historical method with a purpose to learn about the beginnings and development of religious education, its peculiarities and learning about the determinants which play a crucial role for its development. It also applies analysis and synthesis of the current conditions, issues and dilemmas concerning its implementation.

## **3. Implementation of religious education in Republic of Macedonia**

The Republic of Macedonia is a country located on the Balkan Peninsula. It has proclaimed independence in 1991. Macedonian is a sovereign, independent, democratic and social state. According to the census of 2002 the total recorded population in the Republic of Macedonia is 2.071.210 citizens among which: Macedonians - 1.297.981 or 64,18%, Albanians - 509.083 or 25,17%, Turks - 77.959 or 3,85 %, Roma - 53.879 or 2,66%, Serbs - 35.939 or 1,78 %, Bosnians - 17.018 or 0,84%, Vlavs - 9.695 or 0,48 %, others -20.993 or 1,04% [1]. It is a matter of multiethnic, multicultural, multiconfessional state.

The issue of implementation of religious education in the educational system in the Republic of Macedonia became relevant after the fall of communism, the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia as well as the proclamation of Macedonia as an independent state. Up until then the religious education has been considered a taboo and been limited only within the religious communities and completely separated from the public education. Even within

the curriculums of the correlated subjects such as history, sociology, Marxism the phenomena of religion and its functions in the contemporary society have not been discussed. After the fall of communism one of the characteristics of the south-eastern societies is the revitalization of religion and it had influenced all domains of public life. The immense social changes occurring in the Republic of Macedonia have resulted with the feeling of uncertainty, unemployment and poverty. The crisis in the domain of education and family life, as the basic cell in the society, has been accompanied with crisis in the moral norms and values of the youth population. This was further followed by immigration and effluence of intellectuals in Western Europe, North America, Australia and other developed countries. These processes of revitalization of religion and crisis of secularization are considered to be the prerequisites of promoting the issue of introduction of religious education in the educational system. This issue has been put forward by the religious elite, especially by representatives of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, supported by the Islamic religious community, the Catholic Church and other religious communities in Macedonia including all religious communities. Religious education has been implemented in the public schools in the school year 2001/02. The subject was named catechism. It was not a compulsory subject and it did not include evaluation (grading) of the students. The syllabus was directly related to the basic theological categories both from the Orthodox Church and the Islam, the two leading confessions in Macedonia and the teachers were from the two biggest religious organizations in the state: priests from the Macedonian Orthodox Church and hocas from the Islamic religious community. The pupils were taught their own religion, the Macedonians the orthodox and the Albanians the Islam. None of them were instructed about the basic principles of other world religions (catholic, protestant Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.) The content of the syllabus was a strictly dogmatic theology. The target groups were primary education and third and fourth year of secondary year i.e. (nine to ten) and (13 to 14-year-olds) [2].

Apart from the great insistence of certain structures of the Macedonian society to implement a religious education in a confessional form in the schools was received with great resistance especially by the intellectual elite claiming that such implementation is absolutely unacceptable in a multicultural country such as Macedonia striving to accept the conditions, values and laws of the new democracies, and was considered illogical to retain religious traditions, identity and values with this school subject.

#### **4. Error analysis (from social, pedagogical and cultural aspect) of the initial implementation of religious education in the Republic of Macedonia**

The implementation of religious education in the Republic of Macedonia as a confessional model produced in a number of shortcomings and errors which resulted in its cancelation from the educational system as anti-constitutional and inappropriate for the students. From the many errors and shortcomings I shall focus on the following ones:

- There was no alteration of the Laws on primary and secondary education which in articles 13 and 7, respectively, forbid all political and religious organizations activities in the schools. No alterations were made in the Law on religious communities and religious groups, which in article 24 states that religious education can only be conducted outside the schools and in the premises where religious rituals are performed (i.e. churches and mosques). For those reasons the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia on 05 November 2003

brought a decision to cancel the realization of the new subject of religious education.

- The was no public debate and consultations prior the implementation of the subject which would have enabled all parties concerned with social problems occurrences such as scientists, teachers, students, parents, politicians and members of the religious organizations to contribute with their attitudes concerning what to be implemented.
- As possibly the most important of all was that the students were separating based on their national and religious identification. This did not lead to improvements of the multiethnic and multireligious tolerance. For that reason, this manner of implementation of the subject was disapproved by the members of the international community (conclusion based on interviews of representatives of the international community presented to the media).
- Not a relevant study, concerning the target age for this education, was conducted.
- Most sectors of the contemporary Macedonian society did not approve of the introduction of the religious representatives in the public school.

Due to these problems, the issue of religious education was postponed for a certain period of time. It has been actualized recently. The initial prerequisite for this change was to make and maintain a close relation between the religious and the political elite. The relation was formed in 2004 and is about the dispute between the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church. It was then, since the independence of Macedonia that a political consensus was reached concerning this issue. All political parties, even those with pro-Serbian orientation, have given support to the Macedonian Orthodox Church. That period marked continuous daily communication between the church and the state concerning the issue of religious tolerance, a condition for the Macedonian accession into the European community and NATO. It finally resulted in negotiations among the state's president, prime minister, the archbishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the leader of the Islamic religious community. The talks raised issues such as denationalization of religious properties and conducting religious education in the public schools. The religious elite were still expected to provide a strong argument to persuade the Macedonian public about the need to implement religious education. The persuasion was based on the fall of moral values among the Macedonian youths. Following the fall of communism the states selected the, so called, citizen moral. Topics as Marxism and Marxist ethics were substituted subjects such as civil society education and modern sociology. All arguments from sociological research have led to a conclusion that social-related problems were in a constant increase. These social problems, together with the revitalization of religion have caused affirmation in the religious norms of the society. The Ten Commandments, Christ's speeches and the law of Mohamed have again become relevant in the contemporary society. The individual, psychological and especially ethnic function of religion is again relevant. To a certain extent the religious norms substituted the legal norms, in circumstances when the state falls into a deep crisis. The ethnic function of religion, precisely, had the crucial role in the implementation of religious education in the educational system [2: 141-143].

All religious representatives shared this pronouncement: Religious education can benefit towards improving the moral condition of the Macedonian society. That was expected to fill the moral vacuum which was made in the, so called, transition period and is due to the rejection of the socialist moral values. This pronouncement was supported by the intellectual and scientific elite and it all finally resulted in 'political agreement' among the

religious representatives and representatives from the state. The issue of religious education is already on a different level, not dealing with whether, but what form, who with and when should it be implemented.

## **5. Overcoming the errors**

The Ministry of Education and Science, after witnessing the results from the previous experience, initiated a wide public debate concerning this issue, even though there were no available documents at the time being. A study was about the introduction of religious education in the public schools was conducted [3]. The study presented the current state and opinions and the level of readiness of the society to accept and realize a subject related to religion. The conducted study showed that: no matter whether the participants in the survey were for or against the implementation of religious education in the public schools in Macedonia, they all recognized the need for education about religion (of any type of program) in the primary and secondary schools. Prior to this study, the Ministry of Education and science had already made a decision to implement certain religious content in the mandatory curriculums in the state public education. The representatives of the main religious communities in the country, the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic religious community, agreed that the religious education is an imperative of our times. This further pointed out that the religious organizations are the main leading forces for the introduction of this subject. The politicians, on the other hand, are very concerned regarding this issue because they insist on putting the religious education in a state frame. It is of significance to point out the fact that all the participants in the survey believe that the catechism should remain in the churches and mosques while the religious education in the state schools should be introduced as a separate subject running parallel with the catechism. All priests that were included confirmed that there is a need to develop new curriculums for this subject in the schools. Some of the Macedonian politicians consider that the uncontrolled the religious education, especially in the mosques, can bring about serious consequences for the state. From the vaguely given statements we can make out a conclusion that they refer to various forms of fundamentalism and they point out the possibility that the teachers may be members of foreign, anti-state organizations. Their arguments regarding the institutionalization of this activity are very alike to those of the politicians towards legalization and regulation of prostitution. For the religious leaders the main motive is the implementation of the subject is the public moral while the one for the politicians is the state control. The intellectuals go even further into the issue. As analysts of social issues they strive to find the reasons for the social crisis. When a transitioned society as the Macedonian one falls into economic, political and moral crisis accompanied with social problems and side-tracking one of the remedies that appear on the surface in education is religion itself. The religious education with its ethnic and social integrative function is not considered to be the only, but one of the few manners to improve the morale behavior. Since we discuss here two completely different subjects – church catechism and its Muslim counterpart, mekteb teaching, on one hand and the religious education in state schools on the other; it is only reasonable that they would employ a completely different curriculums.

There is one unique view crystalized concerning the appropriate age to start this topic – the answer most often received was from 10 to 12.

Various reasons were given concerning the implementation of the religious education in the public schools:

- Ethnic aspects of the religious education which will fill the moral vacuum and improve the moral behavior of the youth.
- Social integrative aspects, where children learn from one another and are integrated in the social system.
- Individual psychological aspects such as moral improvements [2:157].

According to the citizens the religious education should be introduced primarily for the continuation of the religious inheritance and the customs and the maintaining the religious communities but also for strengthening the mutual tolerance and respect of the human and civil rights and freedoms. The curriculum should be in a form of 'learning about the religion' and cover teaching about the main domestic religions. The process of teaching should be conducted by theologians from the respective religious communities. The religious education should be a separate and compulsory school subject which should be implemented in the higher grades of the primary education.

The previous syllabus of the subject Religious education was with mainly theological character; the accent was on teaching religion i.e. religious morale; the performers of the teaching process were religious ministers and the students were divided according to their religion. Such design of the syllabus was in accordance with the essence of the subject Religious education which meant an understanding of the religious truths and that in a way they delegate religious beliefs [4]. Precisely for that it was assessed by the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia as religious acting within state institutions and as such it was against the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religious beliefs from the article 16 paragraph 1, the freedom of religion from article 19 paragraphs 1 and 2, as well as the principle of separating the state from the religious communities and religious groups from the amendment seven from the Constitution, but also with article 13 from the Law on primary education which explicitly forbids any kind of religious acting in the state primary schools [5]. Previously the teaching process of the subject Religious education was implemented in the system of public education with a decree from Minister to introduce a program. But, according to the Law on primary education in no article does it allow introduction of a new teaching program brought with a decree. This oversight by the authorized organs was used as another argument by the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia to abolish the decree and the subject itself, the subject of Religious education. Namely, with the further analyses of the denied act from the aspect of the minister's authorizations for its ruling and the form that it was introduced with, the Court concluded that introduction of a program and bringing a decree are completely different in terms of the authorizations, according to article 55 paragraph 1 from the Law on Organisation and Operation of the State Administrative Bodies. So for further reference, the implementation of the subject Religious education should be introduced with minister's decree – Program, in accordance with article 25 paragraph 1 from the Law on primary education and article 56 paragraph 4 from the Law on Organization and Operation of the State Administrative Bodies [4:11].

The most raging reactions following the abolishment of the religious education by the Constitutional Court was by the religious communities which even requested constitutional alterations to bring the religious education back into the schools. The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia confirmed that with the article 26 from the Law on primary education concerning, the organization of religious education in the schools as an

elective subject, was unconstitutional. According to the Constitutional Court the religious education cannot be organized in the state's educational institutions. After the cancellation of the religious education by the Constitutional Court, the Bureau of Education Development did not resign from the idea to introduce the religious education in the schools, but this time named as Ethics in Religion. Namely, the Bureau opened a competition to form a team of experts that would work on creating a curriculum for the subject Ethics in Religion that would teach about the ethnic values of religions.

Today, according to the Law on primary education of the Republic of Macedonia article 25 (paragraph 2) in the state schools, the teaching process is organized and realized according to the teaching plan and program proposed by the Bureau of Education Development and confirmed by the Minister of Education and Science (paragraph 3). The teaching plan of the primary schools consists of compulsory and elective subjects and additional teaching. According to article 26 of the Law on primary education, the religious education can be conducted as an elective subject [6]. Thus commencing 1st September 2010 the religious education in the Republic of Macedonia together with the remaining two subjects are introduced in the 5th grade as elective subjects in the primary education. The religious education in the Republic of Macedonia is realized through the elective subject Ethics in Religion. It is an elective subject available in the primary public schools along with two more elective subjects (Introduction to Religions and Classical Culture in European Civilization) in the 5th grade for the pupils in eight year primary education or in 6th or 7th grade for the pupils in nine year primary education.

Basically the teaching plan and program proposed by the Bureau of Education Development and confirmed by the Minister of Education and Science consists of compulsory and elective subjects. In the presented period the pupils are allowed to choose among the three subjects: Introduction to Religions, Classical Culture in European Civilization and Ethics in Religion.

Based on article 55 paragraph 1 from the Law on Organization and Operation of the State Administrative Bodies (Official Gazette of RM no 55/00 and 44/02) and article 24 and 26 from the Law on primary education, the Minister of Education and Science brought a program for the elective subject for 5th grade in the eight year primary education, i.e. 6th and 7th grade in the nine-year concept of primary education [7] .

The Bureau of Education Development has prepared books and course books for these subjects. An analysis conducted by the Bureau of Education Development in 2011 there is an increase in the number of students which choose to learn about the values of Christianity, Catholicism, Evangelistic-Methodism and the Islamic belief. According to the data from the Bureau of Education Development, 46% from the parents have declared that their children will take the subject Ethics in Religion. The statistics from the last year show that 33% of the pupils in 6th grade were interested to take this exam. It has been noticed a gradual decrease in the uncertainty of the parents towards the subject Ethics in Religion. After the initial positive effects of the implementation of the subject the interest began to raise. The other two elective subjects for the 6th grade of the nine-year concept of primary education where 32% of the students will learn Introduction to Religions and another 20% will take Classical Culture in European Civilization. The statistics also shows that the number of students that take this subject in Macedonian are – 422 pupils in Prilep, 330 pupils in Radovis, and in the municipality Centar 328

pupils. Among the pupils that take this subject in Albanian are mostly in Bogovinje with 356 pupils, Aracinovo 229 and Cair 155 pupils.

On the contrary, in the municipality of Karpos not even one student elected the subject Ethics in Religion, in Ohrid the teaching process of this subject will be followed by only 13 pupils and in Strumica 18. Since it is an elective subject, they are given lists with elective subjects to be taken at home to make decisions with the parents. The choice is made by the parents due to the young age of the children.

Some teachers point out that after the realization of these subjects there are positive feelings concerning tolerance among students from various religious beliefs, but their influence is yet to be seen concerning tolerance and the entire society, and will again be a subject of interest in researches after the first few generations leave school where they attended Ethics in Religion and Introduction to Religions.

There are other experts that believe that in order to increase tolerance in the Macedonian society, these subjects should be present more, with a larger number of lessons and contents and commencing from first grade.

## **6. Discussion**

The realization of the religious education in the Republic of Macedonia did not have an initial success, marked as unconstitutional or as a Balkan segregated confessional model in 2001. Following the changes, the social conditions and the needs of the population, mostly the ones of pupils learning in complex multiethnic communities it was that reentered as a revised model of elective subject nonconfessional religious education and even as an alternative choice, and for those who have no religious beliefs there was the subject Classical Culture in European Civilization. Based on the knowledge from the already existing models, their advantages and shortcomings, as well as its own mistakes, it might be that Macedonia according to the standards and conditions, chose one of the better models for religious education in the time when the Macedonian society is divided ethnically, culturally, confessionally etc. Namely, apart from the great insistence of certain structures of the Macedonian society to implement a religious education in a confessional form in the schools was received with great resistance especially by the intellectual elite claiming that such implementation is absolutely unacceptable in a multicultural country such as Macedonia striving to accept the conditions, values and laws of the new democracies, and was considered illogical to retain religious traditions, identity and values with this confessional subject.

## **7. Conclusion**

According to the research and the analysis, there is no perfect educational system with no alterations ever made. All educational systems are subjected to changes and reforms which are delegated by the contemporary conditions of life, the conditions in the social displays, mainly in religion. These are conditioned by the traditional historical characteristics but they follow the needs or adapt to the contemporary conditions and contexts of life, especially in the multiethnic and multiconfessional societies.

Taken from the aspect of a pluralistic situation in the Republic of Macedonia, i.e. its multiethnic,



multiconfessional and multicultural context, the religious education is required to include several interconfessional and interreligious beliefs, i.e. to possess a multiconfessional character which will further raise the quality of education as well as maintaining and improving the peace and tolerance in the state.

When it comes to the religious education in the Republic of Macedonia, it is essential that it is based on criteria which are in accordance with the criteria and the quality of education itself. It should be an answer to the needs and in accordance with the public. The purpose of the religious education should be directed towards the development and teaching the youths how to build multicultural condition in Macedonia. This purpose is realized through the role and the responsibilities of the schools, the mutual history and identity and the religious dimension of a multicultural society. A religious dimension means reaching harmony and a state of coexistence with the neighbors and the various ethnic groups by leaning and knowing more about their religion and culture and building a sense of respect and understanding. The school systems are the ones that should insist on strengthening the harmonic relations among various communities, respect towards other religious traditions and a number of religions functioning together. The contributions from the realization of the religious education is yet to be seen and will remain to be a subject of interest in further thorough sociological research.

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