Problems of Teaching Religion in Public Schools in Bulgaria Today: Retrospective and Prospective

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PROBLEMS OF TEACHING RELIGION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
IN BULGARIA TODAY: RETROSPECTIVE AND PROSPECTIVE

By Nonka Bogomilova


1. Introduction

The topics related to religious diversity and religious pluralism are increasingly gaining ground in the Bulgarian media, in academic debate, and scholarly publications no less than in Europe. The cause of this is the increasing confessional variegation in the public sphere, a trend which, in the opinion of analysts and as evidenced by mass attitudes, has an ambivalent potential: for positive and fruitful development of multiculturalism on one hand, or for conflict-generating processes on the other.¹

In the present study the various layers of the problem of religious education in the Bulgarian public schools are addressed: the legal framework; the objectives and forms of teaching religion in public schools as discussed in present-day Bulgaria; a comparison to the main European trends in the field, to the various solutions to this problem, which are heatedly debated in many European countries.² The aim is to give a more detailed


description of the dynamics in the standpoints and solutions of various public factors with respect of this problem; the source of information here are the findings of sociological surveys, statements in the media, Internet forums, etc. Those issues are examined not in terms of its static state of finality, but as a problem undergoing dynamic changes and transformations.

1. The Relevant Legal Framework

The new Bulgarian democratic Constitution, adopted on July 13, 1991, recognized the equality under law of all citizens: “All citizen shall be equal before the law. There shall be no privileges or restriction of rights on the grounds of race, national or social origin, ethnic self-identity, sex, religion, education, opinion, political affiliation, personal or social status or property status.”\(^4\) (art. 6, paragraph 2). The new Religious Denominations Act passed by the Parliament on December 20, 2002 provided a legal framework for this article of the Constitution.\(^5\) The democratic evolution to the new Act was slow and difficult as in other post-communist countries.\(^7\)

The new Religious Denominations Act,\(^8\) published in the official State Gazette, No. 120 of December 29, 2002, asserts “the right of each person to freedom of conscience and religion, as well as equality before the law, regardless of religious

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\(^4\) http://www.parliament.bg/en/const

\(^5\) Държавен вестник, бр. 120 (София: 29 декември, 2002) [State Gazette, N 120] (Sofia: December 29, 2002).


affiliation and conviction,” and supports “mutual understanding, tolerance and respect with regards to freedom of conscience and religion.” /Preamble/.

Compared with the Law on Religious Confessions of 1949\textsuperscript{9}, the new Act emphasizes much more strongly the religious rights and liberties of citizens and the equality under law of the separate confessions. \textsuperscript{10}

Article 30 (1) stipulates that “Religious denominations registered under this Act may establish medical, social, and education institutions”, while art. 33(1) states that “Upon permission by the Minister of Education and Science registered religious denominations may establish ecclesiastical schools for their own religious needs in compliance with the National Education Act.” Paragraphs 3 and 6 of this article permit for registered confessions to open secondary and higher schools in observing the respective legal regulations.

Regardless of its positive aspects, compared to the law of 1949 and the fact that it has taken into consideration the basic European standards in this sphere, the new Religious Denominations Act was quite critically judged by certain organizations for the protection of rights, by representatives of the new religious movements, and by the largest opposition party. The National Education Act stresses the secular type of the education in the primary and secondary schools (art. 5).\textsuperscript{11}

3. The Religious Education in the Bulgarian Public Schools: History and Present Situation

Religion was a subject included in the Bulgarian school curriculum from the Liberation (1878) until 1919. It was taken off the curriculum in the period between the world wars, allegedly due to “decline of Bulgarian religiousness.” In 1938 the school subject “Religion and History of the Bulgarian Church” was introduced. After Bulgaria


\textsuperscript{10} For more detailed picture see N. Bogomilova, \textit{Religion, Law and Politics in the Balkans in the End of the 20\textsuperscript{th} and the Beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century} (Sofia: 2005), pp.216-225.

\textsuperscript{11} http://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2132585473
became part of the socialist bloc (after 1944) and atheism became the new official ideology, this subject was taken off the school curriculums.\textsuperscript{12}

In the period 1997-1998, “Religion” was introduced into Bulgarian school curriculum as an optional confession-based subject (with textbooks and classes in Christianity and Islam); the hope was it would be motivating towards greater tolerance and pluralism regarding religious matters. Later a likewise optional subject, “philosophy”, was introduced for 12\textsuperscript{th}-graders. It included 5 modules, one of which, “world religions”, and provided knowledge on religions in a comparative perspective. Here, as for other subjects, the Ministry of Education was responsible for approving the respective textbooks.

“Religion” was introduced as an optional subject in the school year 1997/1998 for children from 2\textsuperscript{nd} to 4\textsuperscript{th} grade; it was taught one class hour per week. Since 2003 it has been taught in 1\textsuperscript{st} to 12\textsuperscript{th} grade as an optional or obligatory subject. Parents and students may choose between “religion – Christianity” and “religion – Islam”. The daily newspaper \textit{Sega} reports the following data on the interest shown in the subject: in the school year 2006-2007, 16,667 students signed up for classes in religion and, of them, 13,009 chose “Christianity”, and 3,658, “Islam”. Out of the total of students studying religion, the share of schoolchildren from 1\textsuperscript{st} to 4\textsuperscript{th} grade was highest: 12,925, while among high school students it was only 994. There were 290 teachers giving classes in “religion”. Of this total, 126 were diplomaed theologians: 100 were teachers of Christianity, and 26 of Islam. The rest had taken short courses on the subject of religion. The Christianity teachers were 258 in all, while the Islam teachers, 32. The teaching was done using teaching handbooks, because suitable textbooks had not yet been prepared.\textsuperscript{13} According to information supplied by the (ex)Minister of Education Daniel Valchev, during the school year 2006-2007 the subject of religion was included in the programs of


289 Bulgarian schools; it was chosen as an obligatory subject by 4,751 students and as an optional subject by 11,952 students.\textsuperscript{14}

The past years did not evidence a growing interest in these disciplines: in many schools teaching did not even begin. Some of the causes for this are related to the inadequate preliminary preparation for introducing the changes and to the lack of preliminary transparency and competent public debate on the issue.\textsuperscript{15}

The need of society for a rethinking and a clear, rational regulation – in the legal, cultural, and spiritual aspects – of the issue of teaching religion in public schools, has become evident in the increasingly active public debate in recent years. A number of articles and informative materials, published mostly in the dailies \textit{Sega, Kultura, Duma, Standart}, and in the \textit{Ecclesiastic Gazette}, in the internet pages of “Pravoslavie.bg”, etc., examine different aspects of the issue from a variety of perspectives. These articles were precisely the ones forum readers debate most intensely and passionately. A number of large conferences were conducted on the problems and the perspectives of resolving them, one in Blagoevgrad (December 2, 2005), one in Varna (September 3-5, 2006), and several in Sofia (an international one in May 2005 and two national ones in March 2007, those of the Institute of Philosophical Investigations and of the Partnership and Dialogue Foundation).

I will discuss in greater detail precisely this stage of the debate (2004-2010), because it was the beginning of a rethinking and of a future consistent integral solution of the problem.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{A. The Standpoint of the Institutions}

At these forums there became clear the different aspects and viewpoints on the issue as to whether the idea should be supported, what forms and ways of teaching should

\textsuperscript{14} http://pravoslavie.bg/content/view/6121/202, Агенция Фокус [Focus Agency], 1.02.2007.
be applied to the subject of religion in public schools, who should be entitled to teach the subject, should it be an obligatory or an optional discipline, etc. One mark of the public’s assessment that this is an important problem was the creation of the Public Council of Scholars and Experts, set up by the Parliamentary Commission on Human Rights and Religious Confessions with the task of solving the issue. According to the standpoint of this Public Council, as announced by its chairman, it will be proposed to the Minister of Education and Science that children from 1st to 4th grade study religion as an obligatory subject one hour per week. The new subject was expected to become part of the teaching program for first-graders in the school year 2008/2009. In that year the subject would have been studied by between 60,000 and 70,000 children. The proposal was that teaching should amount to 30 class hours a year and should be included in the two hours per week set apart for obligatory optional subjects.

As envisaged by the Public Council, and stated by the Council chairman, the teaching would be secular and the subject would be taught in an easily accessible way, through games, tales, and parables: “The aim is for children to learn about the history and the basic moral messages of Christianity as a whole, of Islam and Judaism, as well as to become briefly acquainted with Buddhism.”17 The legal regulation necessary for introducing the subject in the school curriculum may be effectuated by an amendment to the national education law, but it remains unclear whether the amendment will be inscribed in the draft for a new law that the Ministry is currently preparing. The new law was expected to also regulate the question as to the secular character of education and the prohibition on wearing visible religious symbols. The Public Council was expected to discuss the motives and concept for the study of religion as a school subject and to propose a view as to the contents of the subject. The Council’s proposal was that religion be studied after 5th grade as a mandatory freely chosen subject or an optional chosen subject, which might be entitled “Religion and Ethics.”18

Several months previous to this, at a session of the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Religious Confessions, the importance of the study of a religion for understanding the culture of a country had been indicated, and the need for students to

17 В. Стоянова, op.cit.
18 Ibid.
study the main religions in Bulgaria as well as some other world religions. (ex) Minister Valchev, for his part, indicated some problems involved: the excessive subject load of the school curriculum, the lack of conditions in schools for dividing classes (where more than one religion would be taught), etc. The chairman of the Committee on Education, L. Mestan, accepted the idea of mandatory teaching of religion in public schools only in case it was of a secular kind, presenting religions in a comparative aspect. He reminded the committee that a right cannot be transformed into an obligation. 19 The standpoint of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church on the issue was that only one religion should be studied as a mandatory subject up to the 4th grade, and from 4th to 12th grades religions should be studied in a comparative aspect.

B. The Standpoint of the Public Committee on Orthodox Values

The opinion on the problem expressed by specialized institutions has been provoked by pressure coming from certain Orthodox circles. Especially active in this respect were the steps taken on Internet sites by the Public Committee on Orthodox Values, and its chairman protohierarch Stoyan Mahleliev. Jointly with the Mitropolitia of Varna and Veliki Preslav and Varna Municipality, the Public Committee on Orthodox Values organized a conference (September 3-5, 2006) under the slogan “Let us rear our children in the faith and virtues of Orthodoxy”; the conference concluded with a memorandum addressed to the National Assembly, the Holy Synod, and the Ministry of Education and Science. According to the adopted conception of the subject “religion-ethics”, it should have been introduced in primary schools in the school year 2007-2008 and taught by teachers with a completed higher education in theology or higher pedagogical education. 20

In expressing his standpoint on the Internet site “http://pravoslavie.bg”, the chairman of the Public Committee on Orthodox Values characterizes as discriminative the neglect shown by the education system for the “primordial Orthodox values.” 21 In a brief article from November 27, 2006, the same author claimed that juvenile crime in our

country was a consequence of the lack of faith and spirituality of our nation. He saw the way out of this “spiritual labyrinth” as lying in the school subject religion. Three months previously, the same site announced that the Public Committee had been gathering signatures for a petition regarding the introduction of religion as a school subject. On October 21, 2006 R. Tsvetkova of Bulgarian National Radio broadcast the opinion of S. Mahleliev that students attending classes in religion should be taught about the essence of Orthodox Christianity, the history of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and the role of religion for the development of our state. This should be done through parables and stories on the topic of “Christian relations between people”. Experts from the Ministry of Education and Science should write the textbooks and, as concerns Islam, by the Chief Mufti’s Office. According to Mahleliev’s view, as conveyed on radio, the subject should be mandatory for all students in secondary schools.

In the ideas presented above, we see some rather contradictory views regarding the objectives and contents of the subject of religion. On one hand, it is considered that the subject will supply information on the essence and role of Orthodox Christianity in the culture and history of the country, but on the other hand it is proposed that the subject be taught in the form of parables and, moreover, starting from the earliest school age; but these methods do not relate to the goal of providing information and education; they are rather connected with inducing belief and rearing in the spirit of the respective religion.

4. Two Models: Advantages and Shortcomings

According to the ideas of the Public Committee, this should be an educational subject, not a confessional one, and it should inform students about the history and moral norms mostly of Christianity, but also of Islam and Judaism, and very broadly of Buddhism. The idea regarding the secular, informative and educational character of the subject meets with the support of the Ministry of Education and Science, voiced on

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22 Ibid., November 27, 2006.
23 Ibid., August 31, 2006.
multiple occasions in the media. This model strongly resembles the non-confessional form of teaching religion adopted in some Western-European countries. Its positive aspects are: 1) that it does not clash with the secular character of the education system; 2) it does not give preference to any one religion, which would be in contradiction with the constitutional principle of the equality of citizens regardless of their religion; 3) it avoids creating conditions for the division of students according to their religious affiliation; 4) it avoids complications regarding the rights and demands of smaller religious communities to have their religions presented in the school curriculum; 5) it also avoids complications along the line of division between believers and atheists; 6) it is in keeping with the recommendations of the European Union for a form of teaching religion in public schools that shows promise for success.

The problems that such a form of teaching has to deal with, and the risks it involves, are: 1) the lack of sufficiently well-trained teachers familiar with the religious systems being taught and skillful in presenting this knowledge in a form suited to the age and minds of the children; 2) the lack of textbooks on which such teaching would be based; 3) the risk of burdening the children with too many facts and superfluous information; 4) the mandatory engagement of children in early school age with a subject for which there are not enough trained teachers and textbooks might involve the risk of concealed indoctrination of one religion at the expense of others, to a misbalance and intolerance, all of which are dangers involving serious consequences for people whose personalities are not yet formed, and who will imbibe irreparably the “authoritative” views of parents and teachers; 5) the discontent of the more influential religious communities, of parents, etc., that children in school are not getting a rearing in the spirit

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of the respective religion. Such concerns are shared by many experts on these issues in different European countries. 28

Secondly, a radically different model of teaching religion in public schools is being expressed in the ideas, as presented above, of the Public Committee on Orthodox Values, ideas close to the official position of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church referred to above. The model involves mandatory confession-based teaching of religion, specifically of “Orthodox Christianity” or “Islam” – which is to be an optionally chosen subject. The Chief Mufti’s Office likewise usually declares support of the idea of confession-based teaching of religion; these officials did so, for instance, at the conference on “Teaching Religion in Bulgarian Schools”, held in Sofia on March 30, 2007.

What are the problems involved and shortcomings in such a model: 1) the introduction of a mandatory “teaching of the faith” for a concrete religion, meaning not only to inform but also induce belief in it and to rear students in its values, is in contradiction with the secular character of the Bulgarian school, stipulated in the respective laws; 2) this model clashes likewise with the constitutionally guaranteed freedom and equality of all Bulgarian citizens regardless of their religious affiliation, for it would put the adherents of other confessions in an unequal position; 3) the mandatory teaching of religion would violate the rights of non-religious persons (parents), for it would force their children to be reared in values they do not share: the freedom of convictions is also guaranteed by the Bulgarian constitution and by the international legal instruments adopted by Bulgaria (the Declaration of Human Rights, etc.); 4) the dividing of children according to their religious affiliation would focus attention on this religious difference at an early age, when enduring stereotypes and attitudes take shape; 5) at a number of relevant forums, this model has been judged to be outdated, “ghetto-forming”, and risky for social peace and the sustained development of society; it is not coincidental

that Balkan countries with strong nationalistic traditions, such as Greece, Serbia, Croatia, are oriented to it.\(^{29}\)

5. What about Public Attitudes on this Issue?

According to survey data provided by the agency Alfa Research (in connection with the session of the Public Council in April 2007) and publicized in the media, 70% of parents and students approve the idea of religion being taught in schools as a secular subject. 72% of those who define themselves as Christians and 83% of Muslims support the study of religion. Of the respondents, 20% are strongly against. The teaching of religion is looked upon by respondents as a way of dealing and counteracting against problems of youths, such as drug abuse, aggression, participation in sects. The preference of those interviewed goes to non-confession-based teaching of ‘religious culture’ rather than to the teaching of a specific confession. The public attitude on the issue is relatively consistent as shown in a sociological survey conducted 10 years before the Alfa Research survey (in March 1996). According to the answers of the respondents, the school subject “religion” should: “provide knowledge on religious culture” according to 46.5%, “form spiritual values” – 17.4%, “form moral values” – 15.5%. In addition to this, 46.7% of respondents believe religious rearing and education should be carried out by the family; 38.1% feel it should be done by the school; 10.6%, by a religious institution; and 80.5% of respondents indicate it should be an optional subject.

The position of the Holy Synod is consistent too: after a period of silence on the issue, the media informed about a round table, organized by the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and conducted on May 18, 2010, on the topic of “Religious

Education for the Good of Bulgarian Society”. The view that Orthodoxy should be a mandatory subject in Bulgarian public schools was affirmed.30

The debates in the recent few years have been primarily theoretical and no new options and new ways of solving the problem have been elaborated. 31

**Conclusion**

The debates and solutions in Bulgaria and in the Balkans identify similarities and differences both within the countries of this cultural zone and cross-country trends in Western Europe ("same challenges, different solutions").32 The prevailing trend in most of these countries–introduction of confessional teaching of religion–is estimated as being a sort of post-communist syndrome. Nevertheless there is a similarity in the general processes and trends going on in this sphere in the “two Europes”. The prevalent conviction is that the state is the basic agent of these processes, while the purposes of the latter are related to education in the spirit of multiculturalism and citizenship, which have become priorities for European public policy. That is why the prevailing trends are for non-confessional teaching of religion, viewed as a “cultural fact”.33

The conclusion is that the European solution to this problem is yet to be achieved in Bulgaria, but in order for it to come about, wide public discussions are necessary, familiarity with the trends, and preliminary provision of educational conditions for effectuating the European solution.

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