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RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND THE MACEDONIAN MODEL OF SECULARISM

By Aleksandar Spasenovski

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ABSTRACT

Geographical position of the Republic of Macedonia continues to shape its religious landscape as dramatically as in the times of Byzantium or communism. Taking into account the aforementioned, this paper will encompass the legal, political and sociological aspects of the Macedonian model of secularism. In this respect, the content of the constitutional provisions suggests that Republic of Macedonia most broadly defines the right to equality, guaranteeing the same rights, independently from the religious determination of its citizens, among other things. The state also guarantees the freedom of religion, allowing its citizens to freely practice their religion either alone or in community with others. The state allows specific religions to form religious schools, foundations and charitable organizations.

Taking into account the aforementioned, at the end can be concluded that the Republic of Macedonia continues to share the fate of the European countries in both a positive and negative sense. The need for further development of democracy and rule of law applies equally to the secularism and freedom of religion. The enduring tradition of understanding among members of different religions today is constant, as are constant the problems that are continually and successfully overcome.

The geographical position of the Republic of Macedonia largely defined its historic destiny in terms of its statehood, culture, ethnicity, and certainly in religious terms. Located in a region where there is always a surplus of historical disputes over local historical battles, local concerns, and achievements of each of the Balkan nations, Macedonia continues to give its contribution to the larger community. The region of Macedonia was a place where many
powerful armies of the West marched towards the East, and where the armies of the East marched towards the West. These battles of civilization brought their own cultural identities of opposing armies, each of which had a strong religious element. The Christian West played a crucial role in the overall societal processes of the Muslim East, just as the Muslim East gave a new value to the western Christian civilization. Through various historical eras, major armies of the Crusaders marched through these locations in their mission to restore Jerusalem to the Christian sphere. However, the Byzantine Orthodox elite from the East withdrew through this region toward the European West after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, following its conquest by the Muslim Ottoman armies. The armies of the Ottoman Empire, however, having subjected the heart of Orthodox Byzantium, settled for many centuries in the traditionally Christian countries of the Balkans. As a result of the Ottoman rule in regards to questions concerning the relationship of the state towards the religion, the Ottomans, among other things, produced the so-called “Millet System,”¹ which provided the necessary religious and cultural autonomy to the people of Orthodox, Catholic, Judaic, and other religious minorities in the empire.

Macedonia is located at the heart of the Balkans and through out the years the geography of the peninsula had been the cause for the nations to face other important processes that started on the continent of Europe. All the above-mentioned processes shaped the religious landscape of this region, and with it, the whole state and societal notions regarding the place of religion in relation to the state, and also created a demand for religious freedom. Opposed to the dark Middle Ages that also had its impact in the Balkans, the Protestant Reformation likewise determined the Macedonian religious trajectory. The secularist ideas of John Lock, Thomas Hobs, and Niccolo Machiavelli influenced the intellectual processes in the Balkans in a similar way the Byzantine thinkers did after the fall of the empire, bringing with it the forgotten

¹ See “The Ottoman Millet System,” Encyclopedia of Islam, (Brill, 2008).
teachings of the ancient philosophers that gave a fresh new energy to, by that time, apathetic western thought. Afterwards, the development of modern constitutionality, following the creation of the United Nations (descended from the League of Nations), as well as other regional and international organizations like the Council of Europe, gave a new institutional definition to secularism and to religious freedoms and rights, that now had a global outreach. In that sense, communism, that was based on the atheistic, anti-religious view of the world, among other things, shaped the Macedonian model of relations with religious organizations, keeping in mind the fact that the state of the Macedonian people was under the communist regime of Yugoslavia from 1944 until 1990. Finally, the fall of communism brought democracy that enabled the citizens and religious organizations to full-heartedly experience religious freedom. However, the trajectory of history does not stop here. The challenges that we face are constant reminders of our imperfect nature. Today, the winds of extreme secularism often clash with the established, conservative cultural values based in religion. The debates concerning questions regarding the definition of abortion, the nature of homosexuality, the teaching of religion in public schools, the ways that religious minorities publicly manifest their cultural values, and the lack of interest towards religion among young people, are all new subjects to which modern European nations, including the Republic of Macedonia, have to pay attention.

Parallel with the global historical processes, the Republic of Macedonia had been building its statehood. They key date in modern Macedonian history is September 8, 1991, when the citizens of this state voted in a referendum for secession from Yugoslavia, and for an independent and sovereign state. Latter, this served as the basics on which the Macedonian legal system was founded, following the first Macedonian democratic constitution of November 1991
that is still in power today.\textsuperscript{2} The Constitution defines Macedonia as a secular state; accordingly, the state holds only a general attitude towards religious organizations in terms of their rights and obligations. The content of the constitutional provisions suggests that the Republic of Macedonia most broadly defines the right to equality, guaranteeing the same rights, independently from the religious determination of its citizens, among other things. The state also guarantees the freedom of religion, allowing its citizens to freely practice their religion either alone or in community with others. The state allows specific religions to form religious schools, foundations, and charitable organizations.

The specific religions are classified in three groups. In the first group is the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric. In the second group are the Islamic religious community, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical-Methodist Church, and the Jewish community. In the third group, under the category of “other religious communities or religious groups,” are all other religious organizations. In either case, the grouping of the religious organizations does not mean, in any way, a different set of rules or different scope of rights and freedoms that they possess in Macedonia. This grouping has a mere symbolical meaning deriving from the historical context through the prism of the character of the Macedonian state, which to a large extent, is founded on the heritage of Orthodox Christianity whose exponent is the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric. The constitutional provisions are further elaborated by other legal acts, which can generally be divided into two groups. In the first group is legislation directly concerning the status of religious organizations, and in the second one is legislation that indirectly concerns the status of religious organizations. In the first group is the law for religious

\textsuperscript{2} Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia (sobranie.mk), October 2015.
communities and religious groups that had been voted on in 2007,\(^3\) by which the Macedonian model of secularism is most precisely defined. Specifically, this central legal act defines what are religious organizations and religious officers and what are the rights of religious organizations and citizens while practicing their religion. This law defines the relation of the state toward religious organizations and other questions concerning religious education, such as the founding of schools and the financial operations of religious organizations, as all other similar subjects. In the second group of laws are legal acts that concern subjects such as nondiscrimination, exercise of rights and liberties, education, economic rights and liberties, cultural and other area provisions that concern religious organizations as legal entities and the question of ways that freedom of religion can be exercised.

The established model of secularism, as in any other similar states, is composed of a network of institutions that according to their jurisdictions, have legal mechanisms for its whole realization. In this sense, responsible for the questions of the status of religious organizations and freedom of religion, are the Constitutional Court, the Standing Inquiry Committee for the Protection of the Freedoms and Rights of the Macedonian Parliament, the Ombudsman, the Commission for Prevention of Discrimination and Protection, but above all the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups. The responsibilities of this commission, among other things, are: to be an intermediate entity between the state and the religious organizations, to keep a record of all registered religious organizations in a registry, to communicate with religious organizations concerning questions related to founding of religious educational institutions, to give approval of religious organizations for hiring foreign nationals in

religious instruction organized by religious organizations in religious educational institutions, and so on.

Based on this legal framework, the reality in the Republic of Macedonia, Macedonian religious landscape is quite colorful. According to the census of 2002, Orthodox Christians in Macedonia dominate with not less than 60% of the total population. Following afterwards are Muslims with 30%, and then other Christian denominations like Catholics and Protestants. The Jews and atheists constitute around 1% of the population. Still, contrary to this statistical evidence, according to the registry of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups, up until October 2015, there are 25 other registered confessions in the Republic of Macedonia, aside from the above-mentioned constitutionally defined religious organizations (Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric, Islamic community, Catholic Church, Evangelical-Methodist Church, and the Jewish community). The Macedonian religious landscape is enriched with the Christian Adventist Church, Christian Baptist Church, New-apostolic Church or Evangelical Congregational Church that are part of the corpus of Christian Protestant denominations. Furthermore, in the Republic of Macedonia are actively functioning Jehovah's Witnesses and as of recently, the Mormon Church. The religious ideas of the East are embodied in the “Satya Sai” center, whereas different secondary varieties of Islam are represented through the “Islamic Erentel Community” by the religious group "Dzenet."

Concerning the question of secularism, the political parties in the Republic of Macedonia still do not have identical positions. In that respect, it is noticeable that the parties of the left advocate a more pronounced form of secularism, according to which the state should develop only a general treatment of all religious organizations. On the other side, the parties of the right seek to establish a less pronounced form of secularism, in which, along with the general attitude

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towards the established religious organizations, they seek to elevate the status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric. Finally, the parties of the ethnic communities within the defined concept of separation of state and religious organizations endeavor to emphasize its significance, primarily of the Islamic Religious Community, parallel to circumstances when such status is intended to be allowed for the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric.

Contrary to the public institutions, religious organizations and political parties, civil society organizations in the country are dealing with the topics that are within the scope of the interests of religious organizations or that are related to the issues of freedom of religion to a lesser extent. In light of the aforementioned, this sector is long dominated by topics that partly contrasted with the interests of religious organizations, and advocate further "atheisation" of the society and exclusion of religious organizations from public social life.

The Republic of Macedonia, in respect to the status of the religious organizations and religious freedom, is faced with two groups of challenges. In the first group are challenges that are shared with all West European countries. These challenges are widely discussed and well known. Our distinctiveness is defined by the second group of challenges that are characteristic only for the Republic of Macedonia. Generally, these challenges are not to a large extent because of the highly democratic level of functioning of Macedonian institutions over the years. In any case, the challenges that Macedonian secularism needs to gradually overcome are: overcoming the problem of illegal operation of a parallel Orthodox Christian religious organization in the state against the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric, overcoming the problems with the Bektashi order among Muslims, application of social response to the increased dynamic of religious landscape changes caused by migrations, disproportionate birth rates of some ethnic or religious groups, and problems arising from proselytizing.
Since the beginning of the world, to the present day and the future, God continues to be the center around which the entire human history develops. On the other hand, the geographical position of Macedonia continues to shape its religious landscape as dramatically as in the times of Byzantium or communism. Macedonia continues to share the fate of European countries in both a positive and negative sense. The need for further development of democracy and rule of law applies equally to secularism and freedom of religion. The enduring tradition of understanding among members of different religions today is constant, as are the problems that are being continually and successfully overcome.