

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE FUNCTION OF MULTICULTURALISM FROM MACEDONIAN PERSPECTIVE

Snezana MIRASCIEVA¹

Daniela KOCEVA²

Abstract:

This paper is focused on the question of effects of the introduction of religious education in Macedonian primary schools. Namely, the reforms in the Macedonian educational system, in the part that relates to the curriculum for primary education, among other issues, deal with the enrichment of the curriculum with religious content. The aim of this reform is to encourage multiculturalism and intercultural communication for confessional tolerance, democratic dialogue, mutual respect, common life and progress of community. A few years ago, a subject with religious content was introduced to elementary school students, entitled Ethics in religion, which has the status of an elective subject. At first parents and teachers rather adversely embraced this reform. However, several years of experience have shown positive results that will be presented in this paper in full. But here we feel the need to mention a few of them: increased interest in the contents of this subject; each year the greater number of students who choose this subject, and also increasing interest among parents. With the introduction of standards for student achievement, students' average performance on this subject (in comparison with other items) was significantly higher in comparison with the external assessment of student achievement, almost the highest at around 4 (the data refer to academic 2013/14 year).

Keywords: multiculturalism, religious education, primary school.

Introduction

Young people have a perfect right to good education. They deserve committed educators, safe schools, powerful learning opportunities, but, most of all, a clear sense of direction that offers them insight in the values, norms and beliefs of the global community. In Europe, there is a long tradition of public moral and religious education, in close cooperation with churches and faith communities. Because religions are more and more often behind the forging and assertion of multiple identities, the authorities have a duty to take the utmost account of them when establishing democratic rules and arrangements for "living together". Local authorities are ideally placed to lead this work, which requires creativity, imagination, a willingness to engage in dialogue and the opening of meeting places. Such an approach needs to go hand-in-hand with an analysis of this new state of affairs. It also calls for the sharing of experience. It is for this reason that the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe has chosen this avenue and launched a debate, in which local political figures and university researchers have been closely involved. The fact that it is sizing up the issues thrown up by intercultural and interfaith dialogue and opting for an approach based on mutual knowledge means that it has chosen from the outset to break new ground. This is the key objective of this European contribution to democratic debate and to action by the authorities in the context of religious pluralism. For many years the Intereuropean Commission on Church and School has sought to help professional educators and others find out more about the situation of Religious Education in European countries. This has been achieved through publications containing information about this school subject and by increasing the exchange among experts and developing comparative work.

Religious education in the function of multiculturalism in education

In global society, the number of discussions and dialogues about the questions of how and to what extent studying religion in education has formed the notion of self and others in an individual has been constantly increasing. The most frequently asked question is how education contributes to social tolerance or intolerance, stereotypes and prejudice. As an illustration, the Council of Europe and the government of Norway have promoted the model of inter-governmental exchange for education and the role of religion. In some countries there are still sharp discussions and disagreements in opinions among advocates of the attitude in favor of inclusion of religion in schools (often lead by religious institutions) and their opponents who are inclined to "keep religion out of school. Increased pluralism in the society and the demands for the rights of ethnic communities question the educational policy that "ignores" or in some other manner discriminates religious traditions and values of ethnic communities. The comparative analysis of certain written sources says that religious education as a separate subject in multiple educational systems has a status of either a compulsory or an optional subject. But, there are systems where there this is not a separate subject but certain religious contents

¹ Faculty of Educational Sciences, University "Goce Delchev" - Stip
snezana.mirascieva@ugd.edu.mk

² Faculty of Educational Sciences, University "Goce Delchev" - Stip
daniela.jakimova@ugd.edu.mk

are covered within specific topics in other teaching subjects such as history, philosophy, sociology, language, and literature. It is true that today it is hard to find a country in which the policy of separation of church from state or national policy of secular education reached a full shutdown of religion from educational policy and school practice. The discussion of religion is often impulsive with no understanding and with political and emotional charge. Firm stance and opinions commonly heard and on which policy and practice are based are contained in the assertions that: religion and church have no place in public schools, and that religious education is indoctrination. In that sense, a number of issues have been initiated: is the separation of state and religious institutions necessary for an open society, which are the interests of religious institutions for democracy, social changes and the system of education, are there educational objectives and forms of religious education that should be studied in an open society, etc. Due to the fact that the society today is facing a moral crisis of young people, does religious education have to be part of the curriculum, and whether in young people see the solution of their problems in it. And even if it is so, what is it that needs to be included in the programs? In this interest is the Convention on Human Rights, which, together with International Education Standards directs the national policy towards the inclusion of religion into the educational sphere. Parents and religious institutions are responsible for the personal religious and spiritual development of children, not schools – this is an often emphasized assertion. But it raises the following question: can the factors influencing development, such as parents, peers, and other external influences, be practically singled out? Learning about different religions in schools is necessary in order to increase tolerance and social cohesion. But the dilemma that arises is whether religion really has the power to develop the skills of tolerance and respect for diversity, and, if it does, how these competences will be developed. Is it possible to study religion as part of culture in the analytical model of these two phenomena, with a certain dose of contents from these two? The fact is also that religion as part of culture has a strong influence in the formation of the religious identity of each individual, and that in turn this is reflected in the recognition of the characteristics of a multicultural environment and intercultural communication.

Religious education from Macedonian perspective

A full-blown definition of religiosity will not be attempted here. However, it is important to distinguish between two separate, though complementary, aspects. As a rule, religious systems include both practices (usually institutionalized in the form of a Church) and a collection of ideas and beliefs. Both dimensions have been mapped by constructing two corresponding indexes. The first one relates to affiliation/identification with the institutional side of religious practice, i.e. a church, and will be referred to henceforth as ‘religious belonging’. The second one is connected more to the ideational/beliefs side of religion and shall be termed ‘religious believing’. While religious systems normally integrate both the institutional and the ideational sides, a distinction is necessary as both belonging without believing and especially believing without belonging are possible. Why we need religious education? There are a lot of question especially in education environment as “What can I learn from you if we cannot be different from each other? Why would I learn at all when it does not make a difference where you come from, who you are, and what you stand for?” Educational meeting places originate where differences in interpretation occur. ‘You are different from me, your way of acting is strange to me, but I want to know you, you intrigue me. This is where I stand, where do you stand?’ These questions can open up the context of ‘diversity’ in the classroom and reshape it into a ‘learning in difference’ experience, wrote Roebben. There is a religious aspect to many of the problems that contemporary society faces, such as intolerant fundamentalist movements and terrorist acts, racism and xenophobia, and ethnic conflicts; and considerations should also be given to inequality between sexes in religion. Religions are a trouble maker. So Religion often reinforces, or is used to reinforce, international, social and national minority conflicts. The question of tolerance has to be further developed. But we must say that there are more comprehensive perceptions of religion such as: Religion as a strictly personal matter, Religious communities, Religions as (at least) »cultural facts«, the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue as a part of multiculturalism, etc. There are considerable overlaps between the Council of Europe’s agenda and the concerns of religious communities: human rights, democratic citizenship, and promotion of values, peace, dialogue, education and solidarity. The purposes of religion are: to guarantee freedom of conscience and religious expression, to promote education about religions, to promote better relations with and between religions and to promote the cultural and social expression of religions. In this sense, experts speak of a few concepts on studying religion in schools, as follows: Learning *about* religion, Learning *in/through* religion and Learning *from* religion. These concepts are in accordance with the four principles, four pillars of education of The international Commission on Education for the twenty-first century (Learning: The Treasure Within, 1996):

- *learning to know* (acquiring the instruments of understanding)

- *learning to do* (to be able to act creatively on one's environment)
- *learning to live together*, learning to live with others (so as to participate and co-operate with other people in all human activities)
- *learning to be* (the aim of development is the complete fulfillment of man in all the richness of his personality).

These principles can be seen as elements of a holistic approach to education, an integrative understanding of education, where *body-mind-spirit* are not fragmented and isolated but integrated. So, education must simultaneously provide maps of a complex world in constant turmoil and the compass that will enable people to find their way in it. For these reasons, today the concept *Learning about religion* is being promoted. This concept is the answer to the question about what kind of education and religious education we need to provide a sustainable future together. The main idea of this concept is: multi-religious learning, knowing the other, information through documentation, heuristic competence and the teacher provides information as an *expert*. *Education about religion* is a concept whereby religions are taught outside of themselves, beyond religions in a historical - descriptive way. Religious beliefs and values are studied in order to understand their impact on the individual and the community. Holy books, the Bible and the Qur'an are read not as sacred texts but as historical-literary works. This concept promotes religious studies or comparative religious systems. The concept of *Education from religion* is also interesting. With this approach students have the opportunity to seek answers from different religions on certain religious and moral matters of faith and morals, religion and ethics. We use contents that already exist in the religions as answers to questions. With this concept the focus is placed on students' experiences. In fact, learning *from* religion is a concept with a few crucial elements such as: inter-religious learning, respecting the other, interpretation through communication, social competence, etc. In this concept the teacher manages the communication as a *moderator*.

In the last four school years, the subject Ethics in Religions was introduced in the Republic of Macedonia in the sixth grade with the status of an elective subject. Its introduction is the result of a survey conducted on citizens according to which religious education or scriptures should be introduced, primarily due to the continuation of religious heritage and traditions and the preservation of religious communities, as well as to strengthen mutual tolerance and respect for human and civil rights and freedoms. The curriculum should be in the form of "teaching about religion" and it should include the study of major domestic religions, with the representation of one lesson a week. It should be conducted by theologians delegated by religious communities whose religion is taught. Also, the teaching subject should provide testing and evaluation of knowledge and skills, clearly defined at the level of standards with a range of indicators. Finally, during lessons, students should not be divided on religious or gender grounds, but the choice of these should be left to the students. Our study includes students from the sixth grade of five elementary schools, during a period of four school years, from 2010/11 to 2013/14 year. Starting from the 2010/11 school year onwards we analyzed student achievement in the subject Ethics in religion expressed in the school assessment. The analysis of the pedagogical documentation and records showed that the number of students choosing this subject is increasing (from 30% in 2010/11 school year to 65% in 2013/14 school year). The analysis of school achievement found that it is relatively high. The average grade of students who attend Ethics in religion is relatively high (4.32), which corresponds to the average school performance (4.20).

Conclusion

Over recent years, the question of the place of religion in public life has re-emerged in Europe, in societies which, though ever more secular, are increasingly multicultural and in search of meaning. The debates over the new European constitution, concerning the cultural and religious identity of Europe, clearly demonstrated the currency of the issue and the extreme sensitivity surrounding it in an enlarged Europe. As a mirror of society, school is directly concerned with the question of the place of religion in public life. There is by no means unanimity on the subject, as is evident from the growing controversy, not only over the presence and wearing of religious symbols in school, but also over the status to be given to teaching about religions. Some would say that such issues are marginal when considered alongside the major challenges of equity and efficiency confronting state education systems that are faced with significant budgetary restrictions. The issues take on a whole new meaning when seen in the larger perspective of educating citizens who will be living and working in ever more multicultural societies and when religion is seen as a cultural fact and a field of knowledge that cannot be ignored. Teaching about religions and other convictions, together with the broader objective of intercultural and citizenship education for young people should play a very important role in reversing this trend. However, approaches to religious education adopted in state schools in Europe still have some way to go to take up this challenge. Such approaches are very varied and remain deeply rooted in the history and circumstances of each state. Teaching can be confessional or non-confessional, obligatory or optional, with or without an alternative subject. It can also take the form of teaching about religious facts and be integrated into existing subjects. It can

be provided by the different confessions, by the state or through cooperation between church and state. Circumstances are not set in stone, however, and over the last 20 years there have been interesting developments that may augur more important changes in the future. While confessional teaching may remain the most widespread approach in Europe (with occasional gestures towards religious diversity), non-confessional, neutral and plural-religious teaching, as well as teaching about religious facts (*fait religieux*) appear to be gaining ground. In that context the question of religious education in the Republic of Macedonia has great relevance and is subject to numerous expert analysis, discussions and expertise. The fact is that the upward trend of interest in teaching the subject of Ethics in religion is also present today, which imposes questions to think about: should it get the status of a compulsory teaching subject, how many years should it be studied in the educational system (at present it is being studied in only one grade), can and should it also be studied in secondary education, and let us not exclude the possibility of introducing it in higher education (although at teachers' faculties there are elective courses that partially or fully comprise religious contents, such as: Multicultural education, Religious systems, Religious communities). The answer to these questions will be an incentive for some subsequent research.

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