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## THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE PEDAGOGICAL SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

After the fall of communism and creation of new democratic relations within the newly formed societies, certain societal phenomena surfaced, which, in the previous period, were considered to be taboo. One of the most significant issues today considered was the question of religious education. Before the fall of communism, the religious education in the Republic of Macedonia took place strictly in religious assemblies. The dogmas of Christianity were taught to children in churches, whereas with reference to Islamic religion, the education was disseminated in mosques. The distinguishing characteristic of this period was that there were more such lectures present for children with Islamic religious background than for children of Christian faith. This is due to at least two reasons. The first reason is the higher level of religiousness among the members of Albanian ethnic community in Macedonia, whereas the second reason is the better organization of the Islamic religious community. As regards the members of Christian religious community, the basis of religiousness was taught in the framework of a family, which represented a fundamental socializing factor. However, it should be noted that parents defined the role of the Macedonian Orthodox Church more as important with regards to preserving the national identity and origins, during the five-century long Turkish rule in the region, rather than expostulating on the principal creeds and dogmas of the Christian religion.

Regardless of past events, the period after the end of World War Two until the beginning of the nineties in the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the full partition of the Church from the State with regard to education. It may be stated that the process of secularization in Macedonia followed its own set of laws and rules. What marks this period as relevant is the complete separation of the political and religious elite in the State. Except for rare formal meetings, on some occasion, almost no meetings between the political and religious leaders took place. They rarely consulted each other on

issues of vital national and state interests. Consequently, the issue of inclusion of religious education in state schools was not mentioned or put on the agenda.

The fundamental changes on this issue happened after the proclamation of independence of the Republic of Macedonia in 1991 (Macedonia separated from the Yugoslav Federation and formed its own state). At that moment, the religion was welcomed back with great approval, and the people were in position to declare their own religious affiliation without fear of any retaliation from the former atheistic elite. The people started to congregate in churches and mosques especially during the great Christian and Islamic religious holidays. Still, this did not represent a return to essential religious values, but rather return to traditional religious customs. We could finally infer that especially Orthodox believers are traditional believers. The traditional religious and customary norms merged into one although encumbered with a large number of pagan practices, characteristic for the Slavic world.

What happened was expected for some, whereas for others totally unanticipated: the rush of nationalistic emotions stood for a surge of religious feelings. The Macedonian nation united in Orthodox identity. The religion and nation represent two powerful forms of belonging and association. Once again we saw confirmation of the fact that although religion and nation do not have any logical connection, they do make an unbreakable psychological link and a secret alliance. Since then until the present, the process of approximation of the political and religious elite in Republic of Macedonia, turning into a well-built link, has started. The process of secularization has since fallen into serious crisis. This fact, however, is not associated solely with Macedonia, but it is a ubiquitous event. The religious and political prominent figures have begun, even more, to consult each other on issues assessed as high national interests.

Yet, the essential relations of these two types of elites were established during the period 1998-2002. At the foreground of the political hierarchy then was the right-wing nationalist oriented coalition VMRO-DPA. Among other thing, during this reign, the issue of establishment of religious education in state schools was raised. At that moment, Macedonian Orthodox Church contemplated the following question: which “card” to choose in order to convince the Macedonian public of the importance of religious education. The solution was simple. The winning card was and still is the ethical function of religion. Now, what were the actual events regarding ethical issues in Macedonia? After World War Two, until the fall of communism, in force was the so-

called socialistic morality. Its values and norms were taught in all levels of education (preschool, elementary, secondary and higher education). The idea of the socialistic morality was simple. The realization of the highest moral norms and values was achievable, regardless of whether they were founded on a religious basis or not. Furthermore, it was also claimed that the “atheistic” morality consists of the highest values whereas religion was blamed to be “an opium for the people” by Marxist ideologists. The socialistic morality proclaimed philanthropy, solidarity, altruism, equity among people as well as entire range of humanistic values which were to be unconditionally acquired in the framework of the family, and particularly in the framework of education. That is why a supplement was added to socialist upbringing: teaching. It is safe to say that the role of the socialistic education was to teach children about these relevant categories of right and true moral behavior.

However, 16 years ago, the fall of communism occurred. With it, the socialistic morality with all its ideology took a plunge. Macedonia, as well as the rest of the real-socialistic countries, entered into a period of creation of a modern civil society. Accordingly, the successor of the socialistic morality was to be the so-called civil morality that was based on civil humanistic rights and freedoms. The welfare society, which was founded on the maxim “freedom, liberty and brotherhood among people” was to establish the moral norms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century people. These moral norms should have provided a code of conduct for these people, thus they would be equal before God and before the Law.

But, the establishment of civil morality in a young democratic society proved to be quite difficult. The reasons for this situation are several. The principal reason for that, however, was the fact that Macedonia did not possess a democratic tradition. As a consequence, there was a vacuum of moral values, which had terrible consequences for the Macedonian people and Macedonian society in general. Simply put, in a situation where the socialistic moral values were abandoned and the civil moral values were still not created, the people started to feel lost and disoriented regarding their moral norms. Then, certain norms and values, more characteristic of the evil rather than the good, were put in place. The Machiavellian thesis of “the goal justifies the means” was reincarnated again. In order for one to be successful and launch a political or business career, one was allowed to perjure and steal and even eliminate anyone that stood in one’s way. Like mushrooms after rain, the newly established businessmen and political leaders appeared, making a career in a very short time, and in a secretive and immoral way.

Other deviant occurrences in the society, not characteristic for the previous period, took place. There was an enormous increase in the number of alcoholics and drug addicts who, having escaped from the new, cruel reality, have become narcotics' addicts. Also, as direct consequence of the destruction of moral values, prostitution started to spread. Many girls have entered the vicious circle of prostitution and trafficking. Moreover, juvenile felony and crime (especially organized crime) intensified. In the newspapers (in pages referring to criminal events) we can read about cases of murders and suicides every day. On the top of it, the percentage of divorces in Macedonia has significantly increased. The basic reason for that is, of course, adultery. The Macedonian society began to enter into debauchery and immorality. Hedonism, as a philosophy of enjoyment, was a way of life for more and more people, especially those from high and middle standard of living. It was a time of parties, accompanied with drinking indulgence and love affairs outside marriage and family. The children were left on their own, without any moral socialization within the framework of the family or school.

This represented an ideal chance for promotion of the idea of return to religious morality, which, with help of its moral norms, based on the Old and New Testament, should be able to save the moral deterioration of the Macedonian society. And, of course, the best way of establishment of moral values – love, faith and hope – was religious education. It ought to remind children about the forgotten 10 Commandments from the Old Testament as well as Jesus Christ's messages for introduction of a new moral code, founded in the Scriptures in the New Testament. Of course, here we can mention the Letters of Apostle Paul who introduced Christianity in Macedonia in the first century A.D. In mass media there was a declaration of prominent public and scientific figures that support the idea that the religious morality has to save the future generation from the moral fall. The idea was: religious education can in no way hurt the children. On the contrary, it can only assist them in finding themselves in the transition period through which Macedonian society is passing.

The Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Macedonia, having decided the moment was right for it, reached a Decision to introduce religious education in elementary schools in 1999. The Ministry at the time, decided that religious education would be taught to students from third and fourth grade. The subject had a purely theological and facultative character. The teachers were religious officials from the Christian and Islamic faiths, and the students were taught the Christian or Islamic faith, according to the faith they belonged to. As a rule, they were only to be taught if they had permission from their parents. Thus, it was the parents' decision whether or not

their children would attend religious education in elementary schools. However, due to organizational error, the religious education lasted only briefly and it was terminated by the Constitutional Court's decision in 2000. The reasons for that were numerous. However, most significant were:

- No appropriate amendment was made to the Law on Elementary Education and Law on Religious Communities and Religious Group in Republic of Macedonia. Thus, this Decision was not supported by the Constitutional Court;
- No serious investigations were undertaken in order to establish which age groups are most suitable for religious education. The experience has proven that 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students (at age of 10/11) are too young and in this way an intrusion in their minds and psychological structure is being made;
- A division among children was instigated. First, children were divided in those attending and those not attending religious education. The children rightfully asked the following questions: Why is it that my friend is learning something that I am not allowed to? The second detachment was even more dramatic. Bearing in mind that Republic of Macedonia is multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious community, in children's mind the insoluble dilemma was reflected: why should I attend classes with the Orthodox priest whereas my friend attends classes with the Islamic counterpart? Why could not we be together?
- The religious officials who were responsible for religious education did not receive remuneration by the State, which provoked a certain revolt on their behalf.

This created resistance from a large number of parents, regarding religious education in elementary schools. As a result, the experiment failed and it was devastating at the same time: the religious education in state schools was abolished. During that period it seemed that this issue was closed, however, it continued to be raised by many. In the meantime, we witnessed a change of the political constellation and the left-oriented parties SDSM and DUI came into power in 2002. At first glance, it seems that this Social-Democratic Alliance, which was "a propos" against introduction of religious education, would put an end to this question for a longer period. However, the predictions failed to realize. What happened was an unexpected outcome. It all started with the dispute between the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) in 2004. The religious elite of SOC, led by Metropolitan

Amfilohije, refused to recognize MOC's independence and did not recognize its' autonomy, stemming from the fact that MOC is the successor of the Ohrid Arch-Episcopacy. What came next was the Nis Agreement and ended with a dissension in the MOC's structure. As a result, in Macedonia, a rebellious Church under the name of MOA appeared, led by the dissenting Bishop Jovan (who strongly supported the SOC's interests). This new Church became SOC's satellite in Republic of Macedonia.

The dispute was especially intensified when the representatives from the political and intellectual arena from Serbia and Montenegro as well as Macedonia started to be interested in offering solutions. A miracle occurred: for the first time since the independence an entire political consensus on this issue was reached. Literally all parties stood behind MOC's interests (even pro-Serbian oriented parties). Then, the cross and sword united in unbreakable unity. The Church proclaimed an anathema on Bishop Jovan and excommunicated him from MOC. The State brought down his, unlawfully built, religious facilities and took him to court. The result was clear – and for many unbelievable – the reunion of the religion and politics in Macedonia. Finally, the official meeting between the President of the State (Mr. Branko Crvenkovski) and the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia (Reverend Reverend Stefan) took place. At the meeting, final agreement was reached on close cooperation between the Church and State. Of course, the Church has two requests: introduction of religious learning in state schools and de-nationalization of Church properties. With regard to the former, the MOC is supported by the officials from the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) in Macedonia.

Thus, the dilemma whether or not there will be religious education in the educational system has been removed. The answer was concise and clear: Certainly! The only and key issue put in front of the scientific and intellectual public was the following: What form should religious education have? Having in mind the previous experience, it is not wise to make haste with final decisions; on the contrary, an open discussion has to take place. Several seminars on this theme were organized as well as TV coverage wherein interested parties debated the successful solution of this problem. As sociologist on religion, the author of these lines was invited to participate at these meetings. His reflections and stances were taken into consideration with all due respect and professional accountability. I propose the following actions:

1. Realization of a serious sociological survey accompanied by the necessary methodological theses on the form and contents of the religious education;
2. The religious education has to be introduced for the age groups proven to be most appropriate by the surveys;

3. The subject has to be facultative which guarantees that children are granted the principle of choice;
4. The experience of introduction of religious education in other countries should be taken under consideration so long as the foreign models are not copied outright. This is because of the uniqueness and specifics of Republic of Macedonia. Of course, of advantage will be the comparison for the purpose of implementation of the religious education in the region and beyond.
5. Regarding the contents which are to be learned I propose the following: the children are to learn, at the same time, about all relevant disciplines associated with religion: theology, sociology of religion, philosophy of religion and history of religion.
6. Since Macedonia is a multi-religious area, we should not allow children to be segregated on ethnic or religious grounds, which in turn means that the children would have to learn, simultaneously, about the creeds of Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant) and Islam (Sunni and Shiite) as well as principles of Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc.
7. The lecturers will consist of only people with an extraordinarily wide range of knowledge of the phenomena of religions (theologize sociologists, historians, philosophers, etc.).

At the end, let me finish with a conclusion that the religious, and particularly the political elite possess a keen “sense” regarding the requirement for a serious survey which will show all the elements of the religious learning in Macedonia (what form it would take, for whom it would be intended and who would provide the curriculum).