

*Attitudes of High School Teachers to Introduction of Religious
Education in the Republic of Macedonia*

Goce Velickovski

The revival of religion and the processes of revitalization have been very strong and present in the past 15-year transitional period after the fall of communism. The independence (1991) of the Republic of Macedonia and the building of plural society which is based on democratic principles raise a variety of questions one was not allowed to think about in the previous period of communist regime. One of those questions is whether it is necessary to introduce religious education in the educational system of the Republic of Macedonia. This question is very present in the society, through different debates, tribunes, seminars etc. It might be said that the public, experts from different fields, representatives from faith communities and religious groups are deeply divided around this question. The relationship between religion and public education is a complex one and continues to be characterized by confusion and anxiety.

In this paper I will try to present the attitudes of high school teachers towards the dilemma whether it is necessary to introduce of religious education in the educational system in public schools in the Republic of Macedonia. In the research I use interviews as a technique for gathering data as a qualitative methodological orientation. I have conducted 15 interviews with high school teachers who are teaching social science in four public schools in Skopje, the capital town of the Republic of Macedonia. In three schools most of the pupils are Macedonians, and one has pupils of Albanian nationality. The interview was semi-structured with 11 questions with open character to see their opinion on this subject. The questions and answers are as following:

1. Are you for introduction of religious education in educational system in public schools in Republic of Macedonia?

- Ten teachers hold that yes, it is positive to introduce religion education in public schools, but as a subject that is not obligatory, the pupils should be allowed to choose this subject, and they must have permission from their parents. They are unanimous that this subject should aim to introduce basics from all religions, and not to learn about one particular religion.
 - Two teachers would like this subject to be obligatory, and to learn about their own religious tradition. They consider it necessary for the human development. Religion is seen as philosophy per se, as a perspective of objective truth in gnoseological sense. Orthodox religion and its philosophy tends to answer all philosophical questions and must be present to the pupils as one of many interpretations and points of view in their search for truth. This will not be incompatible with science.
 - Three of the teachers are absolutely against any kind of religious education. They are categorical that this will be used for indoctrination and propaganda. It will influence the pupils and their development. The civil concept of society will be threatened. The place of religious education by definition is in religious institutions, not in public institutions.
2. If it is decided to introduce religious education in the educational system in R. Macedonia, who in your opinion should conduct the teaching process?
- Eleven teachers stated that teachers must hold a high degree diploma in social science (sociology, philosophy, psychology etc.) with additional pedagogical exam. They must be competent and have knowledge of a variety of religions and their basic religious beliefs. Some of them said that theologians could only be called for visiting lectures about some specific problem of religious nature.
 - Four said that only clerics, priests and theologians are competent to teach this subject.
3. What kind of content should the educational curriculum have for religious education?

- Among all prevails the opinion that the curriculum has to incorporate the basics of all monotheistic world religions. Their historical development and significance, influence on social processes and on changing the world. Comparative study of religions and their philosophy, and the most significant content of their ethical and values systems should be the basis of the subject. Also, learning about the most valuable theological philosophers, religious postulates and even some most significant ceremonies.
- Two teachers hold that after one semester of learning about basics of all religions, classes should be divided into groups to learn only about their own religion specifically. If the subject is taught in all four years, then in the first year the basics of all monotheistic religions should be taught, and in the other three only their own religious tradition.
- All of the teachers are unanimous that forming the curriculum for this subject must involve a variety of experts of social sciences, to prepare a curriculum that is consistent with science and with the duration and age level of the course.

4. Can the introduction of ethical and moral values from religious doctrine influence the better moral development of youth in society?

- Five answered yes to this question. Absolutely, faiths directly influence morality, and with that prejudice will decrease. The pupils will gain some universal moral values, which are recognized by all members of the society, not just by the believers.
- Two stated that it has no significance, and feared the promotion of specific religious beliefs that are not in correlation with modern life. It depends on how youth will understand and react.
- Eight were concerned that the value system of religion is at variance with that of society. The main factor for good morals is primary socialization, and parents must fulfill this key function. Also, there is erosion in the religious

institutions, much hypocrisy by their representatives. Pupils are pragmatic and they evaluate everything, so this could be a problem.

- All hold that the situation in which our society finds itself in this transitional period has a bad influence on the moral values and norms of the youth, so we must place more emphasis on this in educational process.

5. Should pupils be allowed to wear and emphasize religious symbols in schools?

- Thirteen are against this. This is regulated by law which forbids every use of religious symbols in public schools. We must sustain the civil concept of society. That can raise conflict and intolerance between pupils from different confessions and religious background and also can influence atheists.
- Two teachers are for allowing pupils to emphasize religious symbols, because the individual right is manifestation of freedom of belief. The law is restraining their freedom of choice. They also said that in practice there is some tolerance about traditional habits, like wearing a cross on necklace and other similar symbols.

6. Is it allowed to use religious music during lessons?

- Eleven teachers hold that religious music does not disturb the educational process, and like all other music, this too has aesthetic and musical values. If the teacher thinks that it helps in improving of the process of education and if the pupils are patient enough to listen, it is acceptable. The religious music should be an illustration connected with concrete material that is planned for the lecture.
- Four teachers are against this idea, because they think that the space for this kind of music is outside public schools. Any pupil that wants to hear that kind of music can do so in his free time outside school, for example at home, visiting appropriate religious institutions, concerts and etc. Actually, they

generally think that there is no interest among the youth to listen to that kind of music.

7. Should pupils be allowed leave during the religious holiday which they consider significant in their religious tradition?

- All participants in this questionnaire have same opinion, they all approve school leave for the reason described, since this kind of leave is already in practice, but they emphasize that this right should not be abused. Religious holidays are in the sphere of personal religious feelings which are individually respected and youth can be sensitive in that regard. Anyway, this absence must not be used for other purposes.

8. Will the introduction of religious education influence the understanding of diversity, tolerance between religions and their dialog?

- Thirteen teachers consider that there will be positive influence. Knowledge of different religions and their philosophical systems broadens the perspective of individuals. This improves mutual understanding and gives information about others' differences. It is important to learn the basic values of all religions, because in their postulates stands understanding of each other. According to their opinion, there is much mutual ignorance and there is a lot of prejudice. In this sense, the selection of teachers who will conduct religious education according to their views and attitudes towards variety of religions is of great importance, since it depends on them how the material will be presented and how it will affect the pupils.
- Two teachers think that this is insignificant.

9. Should extra-curricular activities be allowed on school premises for stimulating a healthy way of life (better socialization, education, learning of role model and etc.), organized by religious communities and school representatives?

- Seven teachers think that this can be acceptable, but only if there is some mechanism of control. Activities like this can be manageable by responsible persons from schools and participation of religion communities. This cooperation must have defined goals and curriculum with participation of experts of different fields. Also, it depends on whether the pupils are interested and their parents give permission.
- Eight of them think that this is problematic, it is liable to abuse. Extra-curricular activities are hard to control, and pupils can be manipulated.

10. Will introduction of religious education threaten the rights of the pupils who are non-believers, and also the secular nature of the state?

- Eleven reply in the negative to this question, because this subject will be a matter of choice, and does not infringe the rights of other pupils.
- Four others think that it is a direct treat to secular nature of the state. The place of religious education is outside of the educational system in the Republic of Macedonia.

11. Are you a believer?

- Eleven - yes.
- Four - no.

CONCLUSION:

First of all I must mention that this is a pilot research on this subject, just to sense attitudes toward this matter, and to collect some data which can be useful in future to do more complex and significant research using different methods and techniques. Attitudes are obviously divided, but there is some positive acceptance

if religious education is conducted in strictly defined conditions. Most significant is that this subject must be non-obligatory. The content of the subject must be complementary and present a variety of religions and their basic values. Also, there is an opinion that teachers of this subject should not be representatives from the religious communities. Religious symbols must stay outside of public schools. A well-prepared curriculum can be useful for mutual understanding, improvement of tolerance and the dialog between believers from different religious backgrounds. It is necessary to raise public debate on this question, and to summarize opinions from experts in social sciences.

Postgraduate student,

Goce Velickovski

Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje

Republic Macedonia