

# Religion and Education in New Millennium Macedonia

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## Yeni Binyıl Makedonyası'nda Din ve Eđitim

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**Abstract:** Religious education is one of hotly debated discussion topics of our time in many ways. In the context of the Republic of Macedonia the main issue related to religious education appears to be the incorporation of this subject into the public school system. Several futile attempts for introducing religious classes in the schools have been made during the last decades. The Constitutional Court has even abrogated the course twice from the curricula on the grounds of protecting state's secularism. However, it didn't bring an end to the discussion on the place of religious education in the curricula. Based on the assumption that religious education is one of the main tools of effective socialization, this paper deals with the issue through three interrelated aspects, i. e. comparative, institutional and local. Firstly, an analysis on different experiences in Europe, particularly in the Balkans, in religious education will be provided. After introducing the situation in various European states the paper will focus on the peculiarities of religious education in Macedonia. In the last chapter of the paper the results of the survey, conducted with 400 respondents from Tetovo and

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Gostivar, will be presented. By doing so, it is aimed to show the attitude of students, teachers and parents on the matter from a local perspective.

**Key Words:** secularism, education, religious education, religious culture, Republic of Macedonia.



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**Öz :** Günümüzün birçok açıdan en hararetli tartışma konularından biri olan din eğitimi üzerine Makedonya Cumhuriyeti'nde yaşanan temel sorun; dersin devlet okul sisteminde yer alması noktasında belirginleşmektedir. Öyle ki geçtiğimiz on yıllarda din derslerinin okullarda verilmesi amacıyla pek çok başarısız girişimde bulunulmuş; ancak Anayasa Mahkemesi tarafından devletin sekülerist yapısını korumak adına söz konusu ders iki defa ders programlarından çıkartılmıştır. Fakat bahsedilen mahkeme kararı da din eğitiminin ders programlarındaki yeri hakkındaki tartışmalara son vermemiştir. Çalışmada, din eğitiminin sosyalleşme sürecinde etkin rol oynayan araçlardan bir tanesi olduğu kabulünden yola çıkılmış ve konu birbiriyle bağlantılı olarak karşılaştırmalı, kurumsal ve yerel bakış açıları şeklinde nitelenebilecek üç açıdan ele alınmıştır. Bu bağlamda öncelikle Avrupa'da ve özellikle de Balkanlarda din eğitime ilişkin yaşanan farklı tecrübelerle dair yapılan analizin ardından Makedonya'nın din eğitimi konusundaki yaklaşımı ele alınmıştır. Çalışmanın son bölümünde ise Tetova ve Gostivar bölgelerinde 400 kişi ile gerçekleştirilen araştırmanın sonuçları sunulmuştur. Böylelikle öğrenciler, öğretmenler ve ailelerden oluşan bir yerel örneklemeden hareketle halkın konu hakkındaki düşüncelerine yer vermeye çalışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sekülerizm, eğitim, din eğitimi, din kültürü, Makedonya Cumhuriyeti.

## Introduction

The religious revivalism that has overwhelmed many countries throughout the world is also present under our sky. As a part of this revivalism come the demands of a great part of the population (of all age groups) for the incorporation of the religion course in the public education system.

The greatest part of EU members have since long included this course in their education systems. After the dissolution of Yugoslavian Federation, some "new political societies" (Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia) immediately started to care about

incorporating religious education in their public schools, aiming to liberalize education and at the same time to show their parting from the monistic ideology that for a long time had excluded religion from state institutions.

This study analyses the experience of various European states regarding religious education and the way it has been implemented in their public schools. It also treats religious education in our country, in the context of Republic of Macedonia where the main obstacle to the incorporation of this subject appear to be the atheistic-agnostic elites and the Constitutional Court which has abrogated the course twice from the public education system on the grounds of protecting state's secularism.

The most important part of the study is the empirical study, the survey conducted with 400 respondents of hollow of Polog, through which we have tried to have a look at the attitude of students, teachers and parents on the matter.

### **Religious Education: The European and Balkan experience**

Spirituality and religion have accompanied man from the first human being to this day. Schopenhauer says that man is a metaphysical being, while Hans Freyer asserts that since the most primitive societies man has lived on religious norms just like he has lived within social groups. Anti-religious worldviews and those secularist ones lately have either sprained or marginalized it, making the human being into something else, alienating him from his dualistic nature (soul-matter), producing serious social crisis which most famous theoreticians try to deal with by putting forth solution thesis. "Nomad soul" (I. Kroppek), chaos and social anarchy put forth the inevitability of finding a core that would bring the human being back to the rails of normality and naturalness, of ethics and morals that are closely connected to religion. As it is known, one of the tools of effective socialization, besides family and other factors, is also religious education.

West Europe countries have started dealing with the matter of

religious education or catechism<sup>1</sup> immediately after the WW II, implementing it in various ways. Religious education has been implemented in public schools since 1944. Germany has made religious education part of curricula in public schools with the 1949 constitution. In 1959 a course was legitimized in Belgium, that was a combination of ethics, civil culture and introduction to religion.

In European states three main models of the implementation of religious education can be seen:<sup>2</sup>

The *first model* is the confessional one applied in Nordic states. Finland is taken as an example, where 97% of pupils attend the courses whose curriculum is planned by the Lutheran church, whether their parents belong to that church or not. But there are alternative courses if non-religious parents demand it. Although the aim of religious education is confessional, students *may also* acquire basic knowledge about other religions in order to gain tolerance and respect towards the adherents of other religions. The *second model*, that of bi-confessionalism, is represented in Germany, where Lutheran catechism and Catholic catechism are offered equally. The *third model* is that of "two monopolistic practices of south Europe". As example serve Italy with Catholic religious education and Greece with Orthodox one.

We also observe two other examples of the attitude regarding religious education in Europe: Netherlands with its pluralistic system, where students are prepared for a multi-cultural society and France with its secular system, where religious education is totally outside the education system.

In 1990 was founded the organization of European Association of World Religions in Education which organizes annual

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<sup>1</sup> The term catechism, gr. κατηχισμός, deriving from *kata* "down" and *echein* "make sound", "whisper" or indoctrinate, means "analysis of the dogma of the Christian religion by answers and questions."

<sup>2</sup> Zorica Kuburić and Sladjana Zuković, *Verska nastava u školi*, Novi Sad, 2010, p. 114-115.

meetings with a key purpose to help teachers for achieving as efficient as possible teaching on religion.<sup>3</sup>

After the independence of Slovenia from Yugoslavia, with the changing of laws on primary and secondary education the inclusion or not of religious education in public schools was discussed at length. In 1993, a committee consisting of representatives of the Catholic Church and government was formed. The proposal of the Catholic Church was introducing the confessional religious education in public education under its authority. According to analysts, the lack of religious education as a fundamental part of national education would make the Slovenian state schools to produce students with "heads full and hearts empty".<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, state representatives and some experts stood for a secular school system similar to the French and American one.

In Slovenian school system, the religious education class does not embrace confessional approach, but rather is seen as ethics and knowledge of the world's largest religions, or religion and ethics (*verstva in etika*). This course is elective and the church has no access in its composition which is determined by the state and its institutions.

Religious education in the public school system of the Republic of Croatia has started since 1991/1992 and has a confessional character. This elective course<sup>5</sup> is taught in primary and secondary schools and its incorporation has been done gradually in order to provide teachers and a certain number of students interested in this subject.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>4</sup> See: Zorica Kuburic and Christian Moe, *Religion and Pluralism in Education: Comparative approaches in the Western Balkans*, Novi Sad, 2006, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Plan i program vjerskog odgoja i obrazovanja*, Glasnik Ministarstva prosvjete i kulture Republike Hrvatske, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> The religious class should be attended by at least seven students to be conducted.

In Croatia, the religious class intends to develop students' human and religious feelings. It is also implemented for non-majority religious communities (Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews, Adventists, Church of Jesus Christ, etc.). The Law on Primary and Secondary Education says that "The contemporary pluralistic and multicultural society, as the whole Croatian society is, requires a pluralistic and intercultural approach regarding the contents of the educational system. This *inter alia* means that the new education system in Croatia should enable everyone to know and develop their culture, but at the same time to know and respect the other's too."<sup>7</sup>

By the decision of the Ministry of Education and Sports, the relationship between school and religion and the curriculum of history class changed in the academic year 1995. In secondary schools the subject of ethics was introduced for all those who do not elect the religious education course. It is estimated that with these steps, Croatian education accepts the practice, which prevails in many European countries.<sup>8</sup>

The subject of ethics that is taught during the four years of high school contains many topics dealing with religion. For example, in the first grade, the curriculum of ethics course presents the theme "man as religious being" associated with sub-topics: the concept of religion, religion, art and culture; religion, tradition and nation, etc. Similar themes can be found in the textbooks used for other grades of secondary education.

Bosnia and Herzegovina functions as a federal state composed of three entities, namely Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serb Republic (Republika Srpska) and Brčko District. The practice of religious education varies considerably in these entities. While religious class is offered only to Muslim students (as elective subject) in the Canton Sarajevo, only Orthodox students enjoy the right of religious class, which is compulsory in the Serb Republic.

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<sup>7</sup> *Plan i program vjerskog odgoja i obrazovanja*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Владо Тимовски, *Образованието и религијата*, Feniks, Skopje, 2005, p. 112.

The first steps for the introduction of religious education in state schools were taken in 1990, during the first multiparty elections, while in the academic year 1991/1992 this subject was implemented in some schools of Sarajevo. Since 1994, the Ministry of Education, after receiving approval from the parents, decides the introduction of religious education (as elective course) in primary and secondary schools. This decision foresaw five separate confessional teaching curricula: Islamic, Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish and Adventist.<sup>9</sup>

The content of religious education course is confessional, therefore the purpose of this course is to cultivate at students religious feelings about a certain religion, or teaching them the religion they follow by developing positive feelings about it.

The main responsibility for the organization of religious education in public schools belongs to religious communities, but also to the state and its institutions. Besides religious education, there is also a non-confessional course called *Religious culture*, which teaches about beliefs, values and practices of various world religions. It has been introduced as an experimental subject in the Serb Republic, while the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina applies it only in some schools.<sup>10</sup> The course embraces a non-confessional approach and its purpose is to teach students about the teachings and practices of all religions living in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was discussed upon since 2000, in the Conference of Education Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and it has been implemented since 2004 in the form of a pilot project. In the Conference it was concluded that “education must serve for connection (between communities), which should live in peace and tolerance among themselves”.<sup>11</sup>

Since 2000 Serbia has launched a wide debate on religious education, a debate which included intellectuals, government repre-

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<sup>9</sup> Group of authors, *Religija i školovanje u otvorenom društvu*, Fond Otvoreno Društvo Bosna i Hecegovina, Sarajevo, 2009, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Religija i školovanje u otvorenom društvu*, Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

sentatives, religious leaders, political figures, theologians, teachers and university professors, sociologists, psychologists, human rights activists, non-governmental organizations, etc.

In 2001 the decision was made for confessional religious education, which would include the seven traditional or historic religious communities in the Serbian state. This elective course will be offered in the first grades of elementary and secondary schools, but students who don't choose this subject are given the option of choosing the subject of *Civic culture* or none of these two.<sup>12</sup>

The issue of religious education has been resolved through a Regulation on primary and secondary education in 2001. It also regulated state-church relations, before it passed to the parliament to be adopted as law. In 2002 came the Law on Primary and Secondary Education (Sections 3, 4, 6, 10 and 11), which defines the powers of those who will decide on the curriculum of religious class and the assigning of teachers. According to these articles, the right to design the course of religious education belongs to the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the traditional religious communities in the country.<sup>13</sup>

By the 1991 constitution, Bulgaria recognized the equality of all citizens, "privileging nobody on racial, national, ethnic, gender, religious, educational, civil status, political opinion and affiliation ground" (article 6, paragraph 2).<sup>14</sup> With the changing of the state system (1989/90), the democratization of the country, the church began to organize "Saturday schools", offering Christian children catechism lessons. Dealing more with issues of returning confiscated properties between years 1990-1995 the church failed to propose anything positive to state schools. In 1995 the theologians had prepared a curriculum for religious education offering the Ministry of Education a vision to include the subject in public

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<sup>12</sup> Kuburić, Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>14</sup> Ayla Goksel, "Religion and schooling in open society", folk.uio.no/leirvik/OsloCoalition/AnnexCJulyVersion.doc (20.10.2011).



schools, something which the state, although it claimed that it is detached from the communist legacy, has never agreed.

Seeing the negligence of the government to solve the problem of religious education in public schools the teaching staff of one of Bulgaria's theological faculties launched their own initiative to incorporate this subject at some state schools. Within two years of the implementation of religious education in these schools, the initiative gave its results and this case panned out.<sup>15</sup>

In 1996, Education Minister would visit schools where religious education was implemented and saw a great interest in the subject among the students. Since then the government would implement the subject in all state schools (as facultative course).<sup>16</sup> The Ministry of Education is responsible for the textbooks. The purpose of including this subject in public education network has been the assumption that it would motivate students to build tolerance in a pluralist society.

From 2000 onwards, the state has taken several initiatives to resolve this issue, setting up commissions to deal with the compilation of textbooks, but all these initiatives have failed. Currently, religious education covers less than 1% of students and it can be said that there is no religious education in Bulgaria's public schools.<sup>17</sup>

Albania is one of the few Balkan countries that have not incorporated religious education in its public schools. Even more puzzling is the fact that it lacks even the subjects that can be taken as a substitute for religious education (such as ethics or history of religions) and which can be found everywhere in the European public schools where confessional religious education is not implemented. However in April (2012) Education Minister of Albania has welcomed the proposal of five religious communities for the

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<sup>15</sup> Valentin Kozhuharov, "Relations between Church and state in establishing RE at public schools in Bulgaria and Rusia", [www.iccsweb.org/english/praha\\_2011\\_downloads/roundtable\\_valentin](http://www.iccsweb.org/english/praha_2011_downloads/roundtable_valentin) (29.11.2011).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

introduction of a religious subject in primary and high schools: "It is important, I think, that students obtain knowledge about religion. We also have teachers studying Philosophy and Education. The experience of many other countries is such that such a subject is among elective courses". On the other hand, the opposing reasoning holds that religious education would lead to "spiritual parceling" that its implementation is "against the constitution, against history" (P. Xhufi), that "education has a secular character and that means there cannot be religious lessons schools" (E. Ruka).<sup>18</sup>

In Kosovo, a parliamentary debate was opened recently on the issue of permitting the headscarf (Islamic dress for women) and the incorporation of religious material in public schools. The initiative for introducing religious education and allowing headscarves to be worn in Kosovar public and private schools was taken by the AKR (New Kosovo Alliance) led by Bexhet Pacolli. As the time between the amendment and voting for the law was too short, the quarrel between supporters and opponents of this amendment had become too harsh and unconstructive.

While the former insisted that religious education in public schools is in accordance with European standards, the latter said that such action is inconsistent with the Constitution of Kosovo, which defines it as a secular state and neutral in matters of religious beliefs.<sup>19</sup>

By majority vote, lawmakers rejected the proposal put forth by the parliamentary group of the New Kosovo and supported by the Serbian Independent Liberal Party as well as the group of deputies of other minority parties.

Kosovo Islamic Community (BIK) has been very unequivocal on the necessity of incorporating religious education in the educational system of Kosovo. On the other hand, Episcopate of Kosovo

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<sup>18</sup> Jonida Tashi, "Lëndë fetare në shkolla, Tafaj pranon kërkesën e klerikëve", *MAPO*, 27.04.2012.

<sup>19</sup> "Parlamenti i Kosovës: Jo futjes së edukatës fetare në shkolla" <http://www.voanews.com/albanian/news/Alb-Kosove-edukata-fetare-parlamenti-2011-08-29-128592048.html>

(Skopje-Prizren Diocese) has declared itself as against the incorporation of religious material and this is probably the only case in the world where priests join the nonreligious groups in a religious initiative.

### **Religion and education in Macedonia of transition**

Religion as a social phenomenon has accompanied man throughout his history. At different periods, its effect has been greatly reduced but has never entirely disappeared. In communist countries, on the grounds of Marxist principles, a severe struggle was carried out against religion, which was advertised as the “opium of people”.<sup>20</sup> It was thought that by accusing religion as an obstacle to the development of society, its reputation would gradually decline, losing so its influence in society. This ideology was also present in Yugoslavia, part of which was the Republic of Macedonia. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia seven new states<sup>21</sup> would be born and each of these states would replace the old monistic system with the democratic multiparty one.

With the destruction of the ideology that promises the paradise in this world, the value of the phenomenon called religion, which had been the target of repeated offences during the time of the “red plague”, immediately began to increase. Since then, ranging from ordinary citizens through to elite, from the individual members to the institutions, all began to identify themselves with religion and the religious.<sup>22</sup>

This ideology would prove powerless to eradicate the phenomenon ‘religion’ from the conscience of the faithful. Since the system of that time proved powerless to remove religion from the consciousness of people through propaganda, it would also pro-

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<sup>20</sup> Pajaziti, *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> In the first decade of this century, from the ruins of former Yugoslavia two new countries would be born: Montenegro, which split from the federation of Serbia and Montenegro after a referendum held in 2006 and Kosovo which unilaterally declared independence in 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Ali Pajaziti, *Kultura dhe cilësia e jetesës: Rasti Maqedoni*, Logos-A, Skopje, 2011. p. 56.

hibit religious education by law, which it had previously allowed in religious schools and mosques.

Lately it appeared that they were not aware of the fact that religious education was preserved in the consciousness and practice of believers in their families. Despite various measures and pressures, it was carried out in various ways. It was maintained by families which carried religious education and rituals generation after generation in the course of socialism.<sup>23</sup>

The process of returning to the sacred started in the time of transition of governing systems In Macedonia's post-communist period too. This statement is confirmed by a study done in 1991, according to which 74% of young people of age 15-17 said they believe in God.<sup>24</sup> With the democratization of state, religious institutions were also given a larger space of action. Religious entities would engage themselves in many directions: economic, social, political, religious; by building religious object for the needs of "new believers", their activity would be noticed in the publication of books with religious themes, religious clergy's participation in debates, but also in the daily press.

As everywhere else in the world, the issue of educating children from the religious aspect has been implemented in various forms in different periods in Macedonia too. Even during the monist system, religious instruction outside the educational system has been carried out without interruption. The places where these lessons were conducted were religious buildings, such as mosques and churches, homes, other buildings and even fields.<sup>25</sup> Within mosques the *mekteb*, religious schools, and these facilities have

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<sup>23</sup> Avzi Mustafa, "Arsimi fetar në sistemin shkollor", <http://www.forumishqiptar.com/showpost.php?p=2062754&postcount=36> (04.04.2010).

<sup>24</sup> Ali Pajaziti, "Arsimi fetar në Maqedoni: Mes kërkesës shoqërore dhe sfidave ligjore", *Dituria*, vol. III, No. 5, 2010, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Very interesting is the case of Rafiz Efendi from Rashche village (Skopje) who, in order to avoid repercussions by the communist regime, ordered his students to prepare themselves with hoes as if they came to his field to help him plowing the corn.

served especially to realization of religious education.<sup>26</sup> Religious communities have even earlier dealt with the issue of organizing this activity. The Macedonian Orthodox Church has been more passive in the sphere of religious education, organizing it only in a few churches in the country. Islamic Community of Macedonia (BIM or BFI), has traditionally been more organized and more active in the area of religious instruction. According to a survey made by S. Kostovski and E. Simovska in 1987, there were 1511 followers of religious classes in Skopje, 2300 in Tetovo, and 740 in Gostivar.<sup>27</sup>

In recent years, religious communities in Macedonia have increased their activities in terms of organizing religious education activities. The thesis that learning should take place in public schools, and religious facilities should be used for prayer has been put forth since long. One of the claims is the fact that the interest of young people to classical form (in religious buildings) of religious education has declined.<sup>28</sup>

The first initiative for the awareness of public opinion about the incorporation of religious education into the school system was taken by the religious elites, especially by Macedonian Orthodox Church and supported by Islamic Community of Macedonia. In 1996 a meeting took place between the clergy and some political representatives specifically for this issue. The first concrete step for introducing religious subjects in schools dates back to 1999/2000, when the Minister of Education of that time opened the first class in schools with the presence of clerics (Muslim and Christian), saying that mistakes of the past were being corrected and that education was taking a pro-Western course.<sup>29</sup>

Voices for the incorporation of religious class in the education system will be heard since 1998, when the ruling coalition VMRO-

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<sup>26</sup> Recently, various NGOs and student clubs organize courses of religious education, usually during weekends or summer holidays.

<sup>27</sup> ТИМОВСКИ, p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> ТИМОВСКИ, p. 126.

<sup>29</sup> Pajaziti, "Arsimi fetar në Maqedoni", p. 32.

DPMNE<sup>30</sup> and PDSH<sup>31</sup> was in power. During the ruling period (1998-2002) of this coalition government, will open many the issues affecting religious institutions in the RM and its believers in general, such as the return of properties to religious communities and religious education.

So, during this period, the Macedonian Orthodox Church, supported by the ruling party which had a nationalistic and religious orientation, will consider which “card” to use in order to convince the public about the importance and necessity of religious education in public schools. The solution was simple: the ethical function of religion.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the political goodwill at that time numerous procedural and organizational obstacles postponed the introduction of this subject in public education network until 2002, when it began to be taught in primary schools. In April 2002 changes were adopted in the laws on primary and secondary education, by deleting article 13 which prohibited religious education in primary schools. It was emphasized that the subject is optional and it enables students to take voluntary religious education.<sup>33</sup> The course was proposed by lawmaker Mihajlo Georgievski, while Minister of Education Novkovski immediately accepted it on the reasoning that “it is better for the state to control religious education than the subject is carried out under the auspices of religious institutions and students fall under the influence of various types of religious fundamentalism”.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Macedonian: Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство, ВМРО-ДПМНЕ).

<sup>31</sup> Albanian Democratic Party (Albanian: Partia Demokratike Shqiptare).

<sup>32</sup> Zoran Matevski, *The religious education in the pedagogical system in the Republic of Macedonia, kotor-network.info/papers/2005/Macedonia.Matevski.htm/29.05.2012*

<sup>33</sup> Pajaziti, *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> “Господ пет години тропа во школските порти”, <http://star.dnevnik.com.mk/default.aspx?proj=2805&stID=58526/14.01.2012>

This decision by the government was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court which was issued by the end of 2003 a ruling on the prohibition of the subject in question.<sup>35</sup> The decision drew much reaction from various circles. Religious communities would say that with this decision it was denied that the parents have a right to educate their children religiously.

With the amendments, these courses have been applied to the fifth grades of primary schools and would have had the status of elective subject from September 2008. Before the completion of the school year, the Constitutional Court abolished article 26 of the law on primary education dated 19.08.2008 which determined that: "In elementary school religious education can also be implemented as elective subject." The reasoning by the Constitutional Court was based on the principle of secularism or secular state as defined in article 19, paragraph 3, which states: "The Macedonian Orthodox Church, and the Islamic Community of Macedonia, the Catholic Church and the Evangelical-Methodist Church, the Jewish community and other religious communities and groups are separate from the state and equal before the law". So the conclusion was drawn that the introduction of religious education in primary schools violated secularism.<sup>36</sup>

Although the Constitutional Court for the second time in 2009 prevented the implementation of religious education, the government did not renounce from its project for *ethicizing the schools*. Government's justification for continuing the search for solutions to the religious class, even after the ban by the Constitutional Court, is best explained by the Minister of Education of the time Stojanovski, according to which the Constitutional Court abolished the form of religious education but not the need for its implementation: "No doubt that we as a ministry, will again consult with relevant factors and professional services and will come up with concrete solutions." That the government will continue in its inten-

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<sup>35</sup> Shih: Хелсиншки Комитет за Човекови Права на Република Македонија, годишен извештај, 2009, p. 39-46, [www.mhc.org.mk](http://www.mhc.org.mk)

<sup>36</sup> Jeton Shasivari, "Vendim joevropian", *Zaman*, May 2009, No. 41, p. 17.

tions to find a trail on the issue of religious education in public schools is also confirmed by the visit of the President of Commission for Religious Affairs and Religious Groups, V. Bozhinovska, who during the meeting with President of Islamic Scholars (*rais al-'ulama'*) said the key subject of the talk had been the reincorporation of religious education in public schools.<sup>37</sup>

Since 2010, in the network of public education, in fifth grade, has been taught the subject titled "Ethics of religions" as an elective course. This course, from the moment that the student chooses it, becomes mandatory and is equal to all other educational subjects. The fund of the course is 2 hours per week or 72 hours for the entire school year.<sup>38</sup> It should be emphasized that the prepared textbook indicates that it is an improvisation course, an implicit and pedagogically loud religious education.

### **Empirical research: People's perceptions on religious education**

The empirical part of this paper is based on the study conducted with 200 high school students, 100 parents and 100 teachers of primary and secondary schools from the hollow of Polog (Tetovo and Gostivar). About 450 questionnaires were distributed while 400 of them were received for evaluation after avoiding incomplete questionnaires.

Among the questions raised first is the definition and perception of religion. Respondents were given three alternatives to express their position on religion: (1) "religion is a divine law-system for this and next world", (2) "a necessary thing, that the sphere of it is not this world but the next," (3) "a fruit of the human mind that will disappear with the development of science". The answers give us this statistical picture:

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<sup>37</sup> See: Pajaziti, "Arsimi fetar në Maqedoni", p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> See: Naser Ramadani, *Trajnimi i arsimitarëve në lëndën 'Etika e religjioneve'*, pre-  
zantim, Byroja për Zhvillimin e Arsimit, Shkup, 06.12.2010.



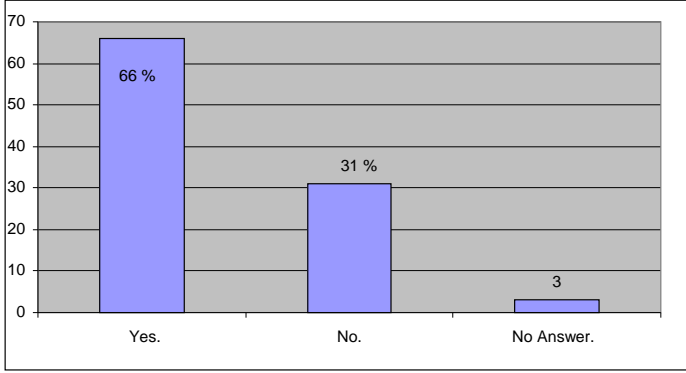
**Table 1. Perception of religion**

A divine law-system for this and next world	A necessity, the sphere of it is not this world but the next	A fruit of the human mind that will disappear with the development of science	No answer	total
328	60	7	5	400
82 %	15 %	2%	1 %	100

The greatest part of the respondents expresses the classical theological or religiocentrist opinion, defining religion as a subject, law-system determining issues of this and the next world. The secular outlook is supported by only 15%, while the progressive-evolutionary view is supported by only 2%. It is interesting that the scientist-positivist position is very weak compared to a survey conducted 15 years before (15.7%, Pajaziti, 2003: 102).

To parents and teachers we have addressed the question whether they have sent their children to religious schools, Islamic centers, and mosques to be endowed with religious code, with basic knowledge of Islamic religion. Of 200 respondents, 131 persons (66%) have appeared active in this direction, showing concerns about the religious feelings of their children, this being the reason that has led them to send their children to a religious facility to equip them with knowledge of religion, which usually means learning to read the holy book the Qur'an, and the basics of religion-Islam. On the other hand, 63 persons (31%) have indicated that for various reasons they have not sent their offspring to religious schools.

**Illustration 1. Have you sent your children to *mekteb* or mosque in order to give him religious knowledge?**



There is a clear difference between parents and teachers in this matter: 73% of parents and 58% of the teaching-intellectual staff have sent their children to receive informal religious education.

Of 180 students who were part of the process of religious education (*mekteb*, mosques, private at home, etc.) 80% claimed that they have learned many useful things, 8% think they have not learned anything, and 10 % says that they have learned but not as much as they expected. These figures tell us that religious schools and mosques provide useful things for the younger generations who are the builders of the future.

Recently a fierce debate is going on about whether religious education should be implemented in our public schools or not, and opinions *pro* and *contra* have been expressed in this regard. Through question 8 we have aimed to measure the pulse of the citizens of Tetovo and Gostivar on the incorporation of religious education in public schools of RM. Results obtained indicate that 86% of respondents consider religious education necessary. When we look closer to the three categories of respondents, parents, teachers and students, we get the following results: 90% of parents, 78% of primary school teachers and professors and 88% of students see religious education as a formation necessary for everyone. The

highest percentage of those who see this subject as unnecessary are teachers (5%, 1% of parents and 2% of students), who also lead the category of undecided (17%, against 9% of parents and 10% of students).

**Table 2. Religion as a constructive moral-ethic factor.**

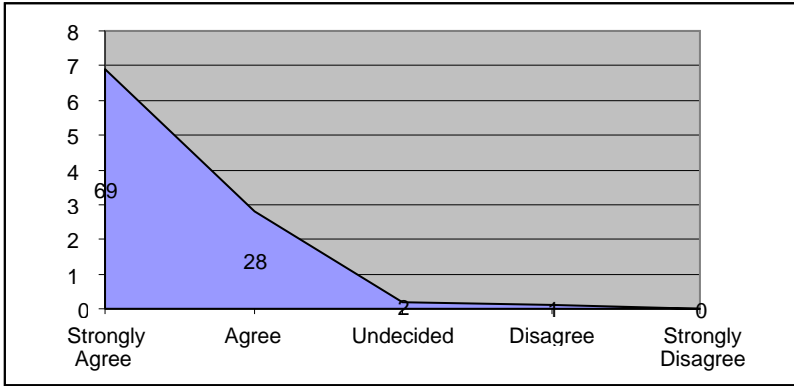
Religious education helps society in the moral-ethical formation of the youth.						
	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
N	287	95	13	5	0	400
%	72	24	3	1	0	100

One of the dimensions of religion is ethics, and some have even claimed that morality is another aggregate state of religion and nothing else. Empirical data of our research shows that respondents are almost united in their attitude towards religion's constructiveness in the moral aspect. Only 5 people out of 400 respondents have not accepted the sentence proposed by us that presupposes a positive correlation between religious education and morality, always in favor of youth as a category that is the guarantee of future for any social group from family to nation. Teachers appear to be more doubtful in the relation between religious education and the ethical formation of the youth, as compared to parents and students ("completely agree", teachers 60%, 78% of parents and students 75%). This is also confirmed by answers to the proposition "Religious education might indoctrinate the young population (students)". 56% have agreed to this proposition, 16% have said they "do not know", while 30% have claimed that religious education could indoctrinate neither children nor the young.

Social values and beliefs represent certain qualities and opinions that are common to a culture or group of people. They may be religious, economic, political, etc. By using the Likert scale we have tried to derive results concerning the following question: "The school, besides educating students, should also form them spiritu-

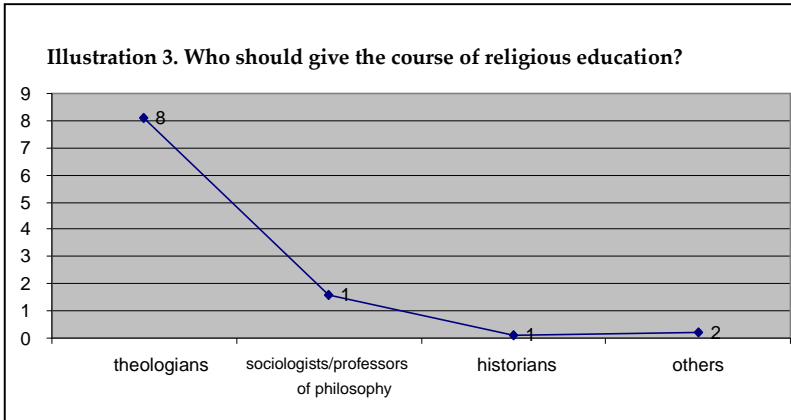
ally and educate generations with genuine values” (question 10). So we assumed that education is not only a mechanism of transmission of data, information from one instance to another, from teacher/professor to student, but a much more complex process that also implies the cultivation of man, equipping him with a set of values that make him a human being and not just winner of a diploma or professional on a certain field. This is one aspect where education is lacking today because the school is perceived as an “education factory”, where children entering as such come out as students of various profiles (according to their orientation), which causes multiple upsets in their future lives as well as in their relations them with other members of society at the micro, as well as macro plan, because today's problems have not just local but universal, global nature.

**Illustration 2. Education and values: School, besides educating students, should also form them spiritually and enrich generations with genuine values.**



One of the important questions in our survey is about when the religious education should begin to be offered to children, an issue that has to do with the psychological and pedagogical spectrum. According to the most fundamentalist circles, religious education should start in kindergarten or lower grades (1-4), while proponents of the moderate view assert that catechism is more suitable for primary school but in higher grades, from 5 to 9. The

third claim is that religious education should not be given to children in primary school because it creates confusion, by proposing them abstract concepts, but to high school students, who already have the clearer things in their mind. We have also given two alternatives as “at all stages” and “at none”. The survey results indicate that almost half of respondents (45%, almost the same percentage for grades 1-4 and 5-9) think that religious education should be provided in elementary schools, 15% have seen kindergarten or preschool education as the most appropriate stage to adopt religious views. Only 5% have said that the most appropriate stage for religious education is high school, indicating that secondary education is seen as more professional knowledge. 34% said that catechism should be provided at all stages of education from kindergarten to high school. Only 1% have supported the position that religious education should not be on the agenda or public school curricula. 37% of the teachers would have implemented religious education in grades 5-9 (18% of students and 15% of parents say “Yes” to catechism in grades 5-8). It is interesting that every second student supports religious education at every stage of education.

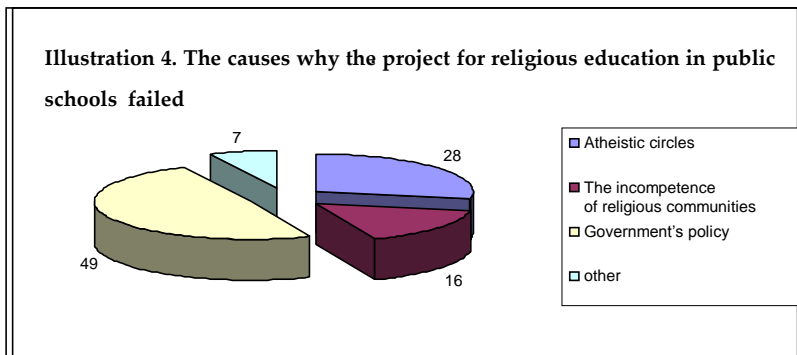


One of the important issues of school and pedagogy in general is the teacher, as the lecturers are always represented as the helmsman of the educational process, the one that manages learn-

ing and who is responsible for the progress and success achieved in this direction, but also the responsible one for failures and the *status quo* as well. For a long time in Macedonia the discussion which has been going on regarding the religious education as a subject, its nature and character, whether it should be included in the curricula as a confessional education, education on religions, history of religions, ethics, religious ethics, etc., has always gone along with the issues about who should be the teacher, what should his/her profile be, with a theological or a more secular background like in other fields such as philosophy, sociology or history. Opinions in this direction come from the criticism that if the lecturer would be from the clergy this would bring about the indoctrination of students, and also that they lack the required methodical-didactic and pedagogical formation. Giving priority to the later, the subject should be taught primarily by sociologists and less historians, since religion is not only a historical category, but is dynamic one. On the other hand, religious communities such as Macedonian Orthodox Church and Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia argue for that the subject must be taught by theologians because they are the most competent ones for the subject, while defending its own framework with the purpose of employment of graduates in theological faculties. Results from Question 12 show that the vast majority (81%) of respondents think that religious education should be taught by theologians, 17% insists that philosophers and sociologists must appear in front of students in catechism classes, while only 1% speaks in favor of historians. Students and parents on the one hand have similar attitudes about who should teach catechism, theologians (83% -86%) whereas with teachers, as expected, this figure appears lower (72%). As to the sociologists/professors of philosophy-religious education relation, the least affirmative approach belongs to the parents (5%), more affirmative are students (14%), whereas the highest percentage is with teachers, more than a quarter (28%).

Next question ("The presence of clergy in schools is a) normal, b) great absurdity and c) an innovation that will be accepted as

normal over time”) gives interesting results: 64% have marked “a”, 6% “b” and 30% “c”. Although most of the respondents accept theologians at the schools without any problem, they see nothing wrong with this “innovation” and consider it as a very natural in the framework of education. The rest, although entertaining a certain animosity or dilemma, says that we are passing through the phase when this innovation will be accepted by the school environment. Analyzing comparatively we note that mainly intellectuals have suspicious on the inclusion of Muslim clergy in the public education network (8% versus 4% of parents).



Since the school year 2010-2011, in public schools of RM has offered the class of “Religious ethics” as a substitute for confessional and conventional religious education which was abolished by the Constitutional Court. Respondents are of the opinion that the main cause why the project for religious education failed is government policy (49%), another part of respondents sees atheist circles as the cause (28%), while another smaller part blames religious communities for their sluggishness.

Parents attribute the failure of the project to implement religious education in schools mostly to the politicians (42%) and to the atheist-agnostic circles (38%). It is similar to the students (52% - 30%), while teachers in the first place also put state policy (49%), but as the second guilty they refers to the religious communities, their incompetence to provide an appropriate framework and cur-

riculum that would coincide with the needs of time and school (26%). Religious communities are less guilty for parents (8%).

To the question whether the active "Ethics of religions" course in schools should be replaced with "religious education", 61% answered "no", that it cannot directly and by merit substitute religious education, 27% claimed that it "partially substitutes", while only 12% claimed that it substitutes properly. Thus, we conclude that citizens have major dilemmas regarding the class with a strange title that is currently available. From a mini-search that we conducted in the virtual space the terms "Ethics and religion", "Ethics in religion" or "Religion and ethics" appear more acceptable. Teachers express themselves as more flexible towards the new subject (36% think that the ethics of religions does not substitute the traditional catechism, while with the students this percentage is 50%).

It is very significant that respondents are not very concerned by the modification or transformation of "Religious education" to "Religious ethics" or by the cancellation of religious education class. Only 20% claimed that is a violation of their rights, 45% said their rights were not violated, and 35% are indolent regarding this issue. Parents are most worried by the abolition of religious education (88% of them saying their rights of conscience have been violated). More than a third of students (36%) are in confusion on this matter, they "don't know" if their rights have been violated.

### **Conclusions and recommendation**

The discussion on the issue of implementation of religious education, catechism, or education on religion in the framework of formal primary education system has been going on for a long time in our society, in different circles, ranging from politicians, journalists, intellectuals to the ordinary citizens. Claims regarding this issue set forth by the secularist, antitheist perspective, which is categorically against religious education (or religious class), are on the ground that "it would further propagate ethnic and religious



division", "it would politicize the right of faith" and "it would indoctrinate the most vital part of society", etc. On the other hand according to the religiocentrist or pragmatist-functionalist spectrum no society can survive without a healthy youth and the way to the "completion" of a healthy individuality passes through enrichment with spiritual, transcendent values, with religious paradigms.

In Republic of Macedonia the first voices for the incorporation of religious class in the educational system would be heard in 1998, the year in which VMRO-DPMNE came to power in coalition with the Albanian Democratic Party. In the school year 2002/2003 experimental religious education became part of the third grade curriculum. Before the end of the academic year, the Constitutional Court abolished this decision of the government. The second attempt was made in the school year 2008/2009, when religious education took place as an elective course for the fifth grades. As in the first case, the Constitutional Court reacted again by abolishing section 26 of the Law on Primary Education under the pretext of protecting the secular character of the state. Since school year 2010/2011 government has come up with a proposal for a class that would substitute classical religious education, the "Ethics of religions", which represents a synthesis between catechism and ethics.

Through this theoretical and empirical study we aimed to present a picture of religious education in continental and regional level, focusing mostly on our reality, RM, namely the region of Polog, in Tetovo and Gostivar. From the field research we have reached these concrete conclusions:

- The vast majority (82%) perceive religion as a divine law and an active part of life, whereas a minority sees it as a human product and issue of the Hereafter.

- Macedonia's Albanian citizens have the concern of providing religious education to the new generations (61% claimed to have sent their children to religious courses in maktabas and mosques, in

course organized by NGOs, etc.)

- 86% of respondents see religious education as a necessary formation for everybody. Parents and students have more positive opinions on catechism than teachers and professors.

- 96% of respondents have backed the position that religious education helps society with the moral-ethical education of the youth category.

- Students, parents and schoolteachers do not see the school as just an "education factory", but as a seeder of values and virtues (97%).

- According to the respondents, the most appropriate phase for providing religious education is primary school (45%). A minority believes that religious education should start from kindergarten (15%), while much smaller is the percentage of those who would offer this course in high school (5%). Only 1% claimed that the course should not be offered in any cycle of education.

- Theologian is the preferred profile for teaching religious education courses (81%). 17% prefer sociologists/philosophers, and only 1% prefer historians as teachers of this course.

- As causes for the failure of religious education class, respondents see government policy (49%), atheist circles (28%) and poor organization of religious communities (16%).

- 88% of respondents claimed that the Constitutional Court's intervention to remove religious education from public schools violated their rights of conscience.

- Empirical evidence, in total indicates interest and persistence of various circles for the introduction of religious education in public schools, for the implementation of this subject into school curricula; particularly strong support by parents, but also by students and a considerable part of teachers.

Finally, we recommend:

- Following of the line and example of most democratic European countries that operate according to the demand of the demos, of *vox populi* (voice of the people).

- A more professional approach by religious institutions on this important issue for youth, future generations and society in general.

- Development of religious education textbooks by professionals with pedagogical-didactic formation, also paying attention to the visual-art aspect.

- The modification of the actual "Ethics of religions" class in terms of form (title) and content.

- The opening of educational departments within theological faculties that would train qualitative staff for performing the whole process of religious enculturation of the school youth.

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