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Religious education in Bulgaria—Traditions and Contemporary Challenges in a national and European context

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Religious education and the teaching of the school subject of "Religion" in Bulgaria are subject to the general normative principles and legal bases of the country's educational system, which is based on legal foundations of Bulgarian Constitution, European international acts and conventions, legislation related to religious communities and other normative regulations of the state. The Constitution stipulates that religions in the Republic of Bulgaria are separate from the state (Article 13, Paragraph 2), and in a similar way this principle is adopted and carried out in the Law on Religions (Article 4, Paragraph 1). The Education Act of 1991 stipulates in relation to this topic that Bulgarian education within the public general education system is "secular" in nature (Article 5) and no form of discrimination or inequality is allowed in terms of religion and creed. All the legal and normative definitions mentioned so far do not prevent the teaching of religion and the various forms of religious education in Bulgarian general education schools, and since the democratic changes in the countries of Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, the topic of religious education is relevant and continues to be the subject of various discussions. This was the time when faith, religion and denominations were freed from the tutelage of the state and communist ideological violence, and the subject Religion began to be taught as an elective in Bulgaria from 1997 in state and municipal schools. Discussions on the traditions, current problems and new European perspectives of modern religious education in the Bulgarian general education school continue, and in this text only some of the more important highlights on this topic will be presented. The exhibition uses conclusions and results of a study prepared together with Dr. Valentin Kojukharov on the topic of religious education in Bulgaria in a modern pan-European context, which is to be published in a specialized edition of the Institute for Religious Pedagogy at the Faculty of Evangelical Theology of the Vienna university.















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1. Traditions of religious education in Bulgaria

The Bulgarian education and spiritual-educational activities of the Church have centuries-old traditions and in many respects they continue to be alive and up-to-date, and the school system tries to follow them in their present-day European context. At the same time, the new living conditions of young people, families and the people as a whole require many changes and innovations, which require adaptation of the educational policy and school system to the new social realities. Since the time of the political changes in Bulgaria and the countries of Eastern Europe, the legislative and regulatory framework of education has been changing and continues to be developed even at the present time. The system of general education and the overall educational policy of the state is changing and renewing and to a certain extent it is commensurate with that of the developed European democratic countries. In the field of education and educational policy, national priorities are in force, but nowadays this system is open to educational exchange and is comparable to the common European education system.

In Bulgaria, education policy is based on the principles of the country's Constitution and is built in sync with all state legislation. According to constitutional principles, religion and denominations are separated from the state and education in state and municipal schools is secular in nature, but this does not contradict the teaching of religious knowledge in them as part of the general cultural development and training of young people.

Religion and religious values have an important spiritual and moral importance for the growth and development of the personality of young people, who can study the truths and values of their religion, or receive knowledge about world religions, in accordance with the will of their parents. For example, according to the rules for implementing the law on education in Bulgarian schools, it is not allowed to impose ideological and religious doctrines on students (Article 4, Paragraph 1), and religions in secular schools are studied in historical, philosophical and cultural terms through the curriculum content of different subjects. Although individual religious topics can be found in the curriculum and programs of other school subjects, the state allows religious communities to organize the teaching of religion in public schools on the basis of existing legislation and by-laws. Currently,

















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the construction of a completely new model for teaching religious knowledge in the general education school is underway, and the new curricula for religious education are being prepared.

The Bulgarian education policy is based not only on the constitution and laws, but also on a number of normative acts of the state power, which also determine the direction of the development of Bulgarian education, including acts of the Ministry of Education, rules and regulations for the budget and organization of the finances of the relevant school, the needs of vocational education and preparation of young people for their future professional realization or for the needs of the economy and the development of the country, the standards for healthy development of children and young people and physical education and sports, culture and the prevention of destructive influences on their consciousness. Religious education is an important component of society and the state's concern for the overall development of young people in a modern European social and cultural context. In this way, the educational policy of a country is bound in many lines and different directions with the overall social development of the country and with the latest trends of European school education. On the other hand, the education itself and the organization of the learning process in the modern school is based on specific state educational requirements for individual academic disciplines, and all educational institutions are obliged to fulfill these legal and regulatory requirements.

The main feature of Bulgaria's educational policy is the provision of highly qualified teachers for the individual subjects studied in schools. This policy has been consistently pursued for more than a century and it continues to characterize the entire education system of the country. As for all other subjects, it is required to be taught by a qualified teacher, so in the subject of religion, the state requires only qualified teachers to teach it. And this is fully respected by those who organize its study in individual schools. The Christian Theological Faculties and the Higher Islamic Institute train teachers in the subject and, if necessary, courses for the additional qualification "Teacher of Religion" are also organized for teachers of other humanitarian disciplines, especially primary teachers.

Bulgarian education policy is also aimed at closer integration of Bulgarian education with that of other European Union countries. This closer relationship requires updating the curricula, especially in the humanitarian disciplines and civic education, with those of the Union, and also introducing into

















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the Bulgarian education system subjects and knowledge necessary for the modern young person. So, for example, such educational initiatives as civic, environmental, intercultural education, entrepreneurship, financial management, programming and other innovative programs are new to our country. The Ministry of Education also reflects on the issues of health and sexuality education, in the last year we have seen heated debates about the so-called. gender education.

2. Socio-cultural and religious situation in the country and current trends in the field of religious education.

Like most countries in Europe, Bulgaria is a country where they live alongside the majority of Orthodox Christians and representatives of other religious and ethnic communities - Muslim Bulgarians, Turks, Roma, Armenians, Russians, Greeks, Jews, and recently refugees and migrants from Syria, Iraq and other countries near and far. According to the data of the Bulgarian official statistics, collected and published by the National Statistical Institute in recent decades, in the census conducted in 2011, it is stated that the Bulgarian ethnic community in the country covers 84.8% of the Bulgarian citizens, the Turkish ethnic community constitutes 8.8% of the population, the Roma community 4.9% and, respectively, other religious and ethnic communities professing Catholicism, Protestantism and other religious denominations. According to "religion", the population in Bulgaria is distributed as 76% belonging to Eastern Orthodoxy, 10% to Islam (9.8% Sunnis and 0.2% Shiites), 0.8% belong to Roman Catholicism, 1.1% belong to various Protestant communities; about 4.7% indicated that they did not belong to any religion, and 7.1% did not define themselves according to religion. It should be pointed out here that these percentage ratios are not absolutely representative of the entire country, since a certain percentage of citizens did not answer all the questions, as not all of them indicated the ethnicity or the mother tongue or the attitude to religion. (1)

As for the relations between the religious communities in Bulgaria, it should be emphasized that they exist and function as independent institutions and groups that show tolerance and respect for others who are different from them. At the beginning of the transition period to democracy, especially in the first few years after the political changes in Eastern Europe of the 1990s, there were tensions between believers, primarily because the huge influx of missionaries from other countries

















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(primarily from the USA), who unceremoniously interfered in the religious affairs of the state and its people, but for more than twenty years the religious communities in our country have lived in an atmosphere of understanding and tolerance. This is one of the prerequisites for the subject of religion to be taught in different forms, such as "religion-Orthodoxy" or "religion-Islam," for example. We have expectations that in the future the religious communities will affirm a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect for the rights and freedoms of all Bulgarian citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, mother tongue, religious affiliation, education, gender, and other characteristics.

3. Contemporary problems of religious education in Bulgaria

Since 2012, a new legislative framework for the general education system has been developed, and in connection with this legislative initiative, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has consistently advocated its view on turning the subject of Religion into a compulsory or compulsory optional subject. In connection with the declared goals for reform in the educational system, the Church has proposed numerous opinions, concepts and addresses to the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers. The cultural and educational department of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church considers that the regulation of the subject of religion only through instructions and regulations of the Ministry of Education does not give the necessary status to religious education, that is why the Church proposes to develop a special state educational standard for religious education in the comprehensive school. Another possibility is to include religious education in the educational standard for civic, intercultural and environmental education. This proposal aims to give greater sustainability and stability to this subject in the curriculum, while the experts of the Ministry of Education and Culture intend for the secondary legislation to be made up of an ordinance and an instruction

From August 2016, a new law on pre-school and school education came into force, which aims to modernize and modernize the education system of the country. In the general philosophy of the law, the spiritual as well as moral education of students and adolescents is emphasized as the goal of general education and the educational system of the country. In Art. 5 (1) item 1 of the current law states: "The main goals of preschool and school education are intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual-

















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moral and physical development and support of each child and each student in accordance with age, needs, his abilities and interests".

With the entry into force of the law on preschool and school education, it is necessary in connection with Art. 76, para. 4 and 5 and Art. 22, para. 2, item 8, to develop new regulations or a special state educational standard for religious education. The analysis of the normative requirements of the law on pre-school and school education, which entered into force on 08/01/2016, and of the older instruction No. 2 of 06/23/2003 on the conduct of education in the subject of religion, shows contradictions in the statute, the provision and the practical application of the subject religion. The status of this subject under the new law corresponds to the status of civics, health, environmental and intercultural education, but it has not yet been foreseen the development and adoption of a state educational standard.

The regulatory framework for religious education in state and municipal secondary schools, which is required to be adopted under the new law, is still being developed. At the beginning of 2017, most of the state educational standards were adopted, which regulate training in the various fields of general education, but the issues of religious training were again left aside from the attention of the administration of the Ministry of Education. In the official body of the Republic of Bulgaria, "State Gazette", no. 80 / 11.10.2016 Ordinance No. 13 of 21.09.2016 of the Ministry of Education was published, which defines the state educational standard for civic, health, environmental and intercultural education. Religious education is not included in this normative document, and for the development of the new legal framework and regulations, a special expert commission was created under the Minister of Education, which should propose a new regulation, a new concept and instruction for religious education. These normative documents have not yet been drafted, and this makes it difficult to form groups and conduct religious education in public secondary schools, because the old regulations and instructions have already been canceled and the new ones have not yet been drafted.

Now, a large-scale reform is being carried out in the education system of the country, which is related to the practical implementation in the general education school of the new Law on preschool

















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and school education. In this law for specified the main guidelines of the educational policy and the role of religious education for the general preparation and comprehensive upbringing of children and adolescents. Religious education is not included as a separate educational area of general education, but we can consider it to belong to the area of intercultural education. In Art. 22, para. 2 of the law on preschool and school education states that the state educational standards in the system of preschool and school education (in the field of humanitarian disciplines) refer to civic, health, environmental and intercultural education. Religious education is not included in this text of the law, which the representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church insist on.

It should be emphasized that over the years the topic of religious education in the Bulgarian school caused many discussions and lively debates, and the change of governments and the arrival of new ministers in the ministry not only slowed down the process of dialogue between the religious communities and the ministry, but also finally interrupted it and ultimately the various concepts of this training were not considered and implemented by the ministry officials. This stalemate in the relationship between religious organizations and the state power, which lasted for years, has changed since 2016 with the new initiatives to regulate the subject of religion and the final development of a new concept for its presence in the general education system. These efforts, which were resumed, continue now, and the new programs for religious education in the three main directions - religion-Christianity, religion-Islam and non-denominational teaching of religion - are yet to be finally adopted.

4. Prospects for the development of religious education in the Bulgarian educational system

With the adoption of the new Law on Preschool and School Education, opportunities are formally provided for the organization of religious education at the preschool and school level of education. But the lack of clearly written normative documents, the lack of a new concept, program and instruction for the organization and conduct of this training create ambiguities and obstacles to its peaceful organization and widespread distribution. For new textbooks and teaching aids to be produced and adopted, it is necessary to have the new curricula for the subject of religion approved

















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by the minister. In Art. 76, para. 7 of this law stipulates those religious curricula be approved by the Minister of Education and Science, and the adopted policy to do this without the adoption of a state educational standard on "Religion", but only on the basis of concept and instruction, creates prerequisites for underestimation of the subject and to limit its realization.

Religion programs must be approved by the Minister of Education as part of the extended training (which includes religious training, Art. 89, para. 2), which builds on the general education training. At the same time, the subject of religion is once again not included as part of the general education subjects, which does not create clarity and makes it difficult to prepare the curricula. This shows a certain neglect of this subject by the educational authorities and creates prerequisites for nonfulfillment of the statutory requirements for its practical implementation.

Many experts and the representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church are advocating for the adoption of a special state educational standard for education in the subject of religion, in order to have approved textbooks and teaching aids based on it, to be subsidized by the state.

At the end of 2016, the cultural and educational department proposed to the Holy Synod of the BOC-BP to advocate before the Ministry of Education and Science for better staffing of the control, organization and teaching of religion in Bulgarian general education schools and kindergartens. In accordance with this need, the following proposals have been formulated:

- 1. An expert should be appointed to the Ministry of Education and Culture, whose main function should be related to the organization, control and development of religious education in the Bulgarian general education school.
- 2. In the Regional Directorates of Education of the Ministry of Education, 7 experts on Religion should be appointed, so that they can be responsible for an average of 4 areas.
- 3. MES together with St. Synod of the BOC-BP and representatives of the Theological Faculties to organize joint qualifications of kindergarten, elementary, junior high and high school teachers with respective goals:
- acquisition of legal capacity to conduct classes on Orthodoxy in kindergartens (3rd and 4th group);















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- acquisition of legal capacity to teach Religion in general education schools (1st to 12th grade).

All these proposals are aimed at keeping the Religion teachers motivated and providing periodical seminars and qualification courses, as well as providing the BOC's support for the cause of religious education in municipal and state schools. Based on the proposals made, the Holy Synod accepted a proposal to the Ministry of Education and Culture for the joint organization in 2017 of qualification courses for teachers of Religion, and in 2018 the new approved curricula for the three modules of religious education in public schools.

5. European standards and perspectives for the development of religious education in Bulgaria

The modern living conditions of the European countries in their cultural diversity inevitably requires consideration of the educational system and their religious diversity. The religious diversity of Bulgaria is also the object of attention of the state and other public institutions and structures, which guarantee equal rights and freedoms to all citizens of the country, regardless of their cultural and religious or non-religious differences.

It is precisely this principle that allows religious institutions, organizations and schools to function in the country, which equally work for the good of the whole society, and not only of their religious communities or specific members. At the same time, this principle allows each individual religious community or religious educational institution to determine its own program and specifics, respecting the principle of autonomy without interference from the government, which is another implementation of the principle of separation of religion from the state. In this regard, various Christian schools and institutions function in Bulgaria - Orthodox, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Muslim, which work in accordance with the requirements of Bulgarian legislation, including the norms and provisions of the Law on Religions.

Religious diversity is also considered in the teaching of the subject of religion in public schools, where in the textbooks of a given religious organization, information is also given about the religious understandings of other religions, not just one's own. This contributes to a more successful

















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integration of individual believers and individual members of different social groups into the entire Bulgarian society as a single nation. It is this diversity that also implies compliance with relevant legal and regulatory requirements for the teaching of the subject of religion.

It should be emphasized that the teachers, the directors of the educational institutions, the municipal bodies of the local government, the regional inspectorates and the Ministry of Education are responsible for compliance with the legal and regulatory requirements when conducting religious education. Since 2005, religious education experts have been appointed to some of the district regional inspectorates of education, but of the six such specialists initially working in the administration, only one remains now. Practice shows that where at the district level there is the necessary care and support for teachers and religious groups, this training is preserved over the years, because school principals and teachers receive the necessary expert and methodological support. However, where at the regional and municipal level, the appropriate efforts are not made to maintain this education, to support the teachers and the process of forming groups of students to study religion in an optional or compulsory form of education, gradually the religious groups and teachers diminish, and then disappear altogether. Statistical data show that, for example, in the Ruse region, where the only expert on religion remains now, there are the largest number of groups of students and the subject of religion is studied in the largest number of schools. And in other regional administrations, which lack experts in religion, the groups of students studying religion are constantly decreasing and disappearing altogether.

In 2018, the talks between the members of the expert commission on religion at the Ministry of Education and its employees continue, and in the end they must once again confirm the Bulgarian position of taking into account the religious diversity of the country and at the same time emphasize the specificity of the subject of religion for each individual religious group, group, so that it receives the relevant legislative and normative basis for Bulgarian education, in order to become a mandatory, well-functioning and useful humanitarian subject for students and for the whole society.

In 2016, information campaigns were undertaken to promote and support the subject of religion at the local level in some municipalities, which yielded good results. So, for example, in the

















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municipality of Petrich, during the 2016-2017 school year, a total of 900 children are already studying religion, and in the municipality of Elin Pelin, 150 children have enrolled. For years we have seen a similar good practice in the municipality of Kyustendil, where all children study religion - in kindergartens and in the basic level of education at school. This informed consent of parents and students should be encouraged and this type of free grouping of schools funded by the municipal budget should become more widespread. We could also point out that for the sustainable establishment of the subject of religion in Bulgarian schools, the exchange of experience from other European countries would also help, which would show us how, in the face of contemporary challenges to the countries of the European Union, other countries continue to maintain a high level of religious education in their public schools. The organization of a seminar with the participation of representatives of the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and members of the commission on religion, on the one hand, and representatives of educational structures from other countries that organize religious education in their schools, on the other hand. Such an exchange of experience would tell us not only what the nature of the religion subject could be for the Bulgarian conditions, but also what educational content would best complement the currently existing educational content of the other general education disciplines.

Regardless of the efforts that are being made to introduce the subject of religion as compulsory for students in Bulgarian schools, if the Ministry of Education does not look favorably on this initiative and does not make relevant changes in the normative acts regulating Bulgarian education, the subject cannot and will not be established in public schools as a compulsory and useful subject for students and for the whole society. Religion could have been introduced in Bulgarian schools a long time ago, if the education officials had the desire for it. With the renewal of talks between the Commission on Religion and the Ministry of Education since 2016, there is hope that this reluctance will be overcome and that the state administration, together with the representatives of the religious communities in Bulgaria, will reach an agreement on the most appropriate approach to introducing the subject in Bulgarian state schools. and municipal schools.















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We believe that it should be part of the compulsory training of students and thus it should take its proper place among other general education subjects, as it is established in most European countries. Only after the subject of religion is established as a regular subject in the curriculum of the Bulgarian school in accordance with the relevant legal and normative basis, we will be able to talk about serious studies, statistical data and specific empirical studies about the nature and dynamics of religious education in Bulgaria. We hope that this establishment will not be postponed any longer and that in the near future we will be able to have a more stable position and place for the subject itself in the Bulgarian school and a successful realization of its goals and benefits that it brings to the children of Bulgaria, for Bulgarian education and for the entire modern Bulgarian society.

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