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Innovative Religious Education Network:
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Learning from Diversity and Education in Pluralism: Challenges and Perspectives

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Abstract: Tolerance and understanding of the rights to freedom of expression and beliefs are all important aspects of religious education, especially in the global context of diversity and pluralism. Lifelong learning comes in support of above aspects, although such educational perspectives slightly differ in the local understanding of the confessional religious teaching. The outcomes of the comparative study conducted as part of the international project IRENE reveal that understanding and respecting *local and global cultural diversity* is quite a novel approach to local Bulgarian teaching traditions. Though the national identity is often viewed and interpreted via the prism of the dominant Orthodox Christian faith, the Bulgarian society has recently shown signs of transformation into greater community with stronger social presence, as confirmed by insiders. This paper summarizes the andragogical results and educational needs for teaching in diversity and pluralism, derived from the interviews conducted with Bulgarian teachers in religion and professionals in theology with extensive experience in conventional and advanced religious education.

Keywords: religious diversity, religious education, religions and beliefs, education in diversity, tolerance, human rights.

Introduction:

This article is developed under *Innovative Religious Education Network: educating to the religious diversity (IRENE) project* funded with the support of the ERASMUS+ programme of the European Union. The project was tailored to teachers in religion and professionals in religious pedagogy and dialogue education. One of the main project's objectives was to improve the methods of teaching religion that reflect on diversity, multiculturalism, and fight against social inclusion at local level.

The 2010 White Paper on intercultural dialogue „Living together as equals in diversity“ confirms that our common future is dependent on our ability to protect human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, and to encourage mutual understanding and respect (Prpic, 2018). The concept of EU citizens' unity also generates a positive attitude toward the protection of human and children's rights and recognizes the role of teachers, parents, media, and young people in the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue and education. Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights indicates that „everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice, and observance“. Article 14 of the Charter also guarantees parents the right to ensure that their children are educated and taught in line with their religious, philosophical, and pedagogical convictions in accordance with national laws (Prpic, 2018).



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However, over the last two decades, the current international human rights policies adopted by the Bulgarian legislation have had little impact on local policies or on the improvement of the religious education system. Although some international guidelines have been applied to both confessional (teaching/learning *for* religion) and comparative (teaching/learning *about* religion) teaching practices, experts still argue on whether regular confessional classes should focus more on non-theological training as a compromise with more options.

The purpose of this article is to provide better understanding of the religious education in Bulgaria and the role it could play in building tolerance, respect for human rights and diversity. It also examines the training needs of those who are professionally involved in teaching religion in Bulgaria to better cope with diversity in the classroom. The findings of the Comparative study conducted as part of the IRENE project in Bulgaria, Estonia, Romania, Greece, Finland, and Italy, as well as their correlation with Toledo's guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools, are essential for this article. The main goal of the Comparative study was to analyze and compare the situation of religious education and the teaching methods in the above mentioned countries, and to outline their training needs regarding the interreligious and intercultural education. The analysis is based on the outcomes of ten semi-structured interviews conducted with religious education teachers and professionals in theology over a three-month period in 2021. The research findings gave us a better understanding of the different approaches used at the local level to deal with religious diversity and cross-cultural communication and education. They also include information of the respondents' existing competencies and training needs, and outline practices in cross-cultural communication and teaching methodologies.

Religious context and identity

The Bulgarian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and conscience. Religious groups in the country can worship without registering, although registered groups enjoy public benefits. Eastern Orthodox Christianity is the country's traditional religion, which is represented by more than 80 % of the people (<https://www.nsi.bg>, 2001), followed by 10 % of the population being ethnic Turks, and declaring themselves as Muslims (<https://www.nsi.bg>, 2001). There are members of other religious confessions too (Protestants, Roman Catholics, Christians of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Sri Chinmoy etc.) although their number is relatively small in comparison with the two main religious groups. Ethnic Roma people who confess both Islam and Christianity accounts for about 4.4 % of the population. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) is exempt from registration under the law. Religious organizations can perform religious services, keep financial records, hold property, and provide medical, social, and educational services if they are registered. Unregistered religious groups are allowed to practice religion, but they do not enjoy the same rights as registered religious groups, such as access to government financing and the ability to own property, open bank accounts, and so on. The Constitution prohibits religious discrimination and mandates that the state shall assist in the promotion of tolerance and respect among believers of different confessions (Report on International Religious Freedom: Bulgaria, 2020).



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Despite the existing social and cultural diversity, Bulgarian national identity is often understood and interpreted through the lens of the dominant religion, which is, as it was mentioned earlier, the Orthodox Christianity, and all other denominations are forced to compete with the religion of the majority due to its historical state of dominance in the country. Some scholars believe that such attitudes pose serious challenges for a society that has only limited experience with diversity and democracy (Kalkandjieva, 2015). Moreover, Kalkandjieva assumes that Bulgarians have trouble distinguishing between secularity, secularism, and atheism. Simultaneously, *“they tend to label critical attitudes towards religion and religious institutions as communist remnants”*. Changes in religious affiliation are also met with skepticism in Bulgarian society, which might be seen as apostatic or incompatible with Bulgarian identity in some situations (Kalkandjieva, 2015). Media have often played a significant role in the formation of such attitudes. Even after the fall of communism, until 1996 for instance, mass media remained particularly hostile towards Turkish and Roma’s minorities. Furthermore, the Bulgarian Turks are viewed with distrust due to the past (e.g., the perceived threat of previous historical territorial claims), while the Roma minority had been trapped in a vicious circle of extreme poverty, which was both the source and the outcome of their current situation (Bulgaria: A model for multi-cultural society?, 2002).

Since 1989 Bulgaria has initiated various political reforms to protect the rights of the minorities and other religions in the country, such as the adoption of the Copenhagen Criteria on respect and protection of minorities rights in 1996. Furthermore, the Bulgarian’s peaceful transition in the years following 1989 was frequently associated with the concept of the so-called “Bulgarian ethnic model”¹, which has triggered many different scientific and political circles to associate it with Bulgarian traditions of ethnic and religious tolerance. This assumption has led some observers to refer to the Bulgarian ethnic model as “an ideology” that feeds on the widespread auto-stereotype of the absence of racism in Bulgaria (Rechel, 2007).

However, existing discrimination against some other confessions and minority groups, as some scholars believe, is not a political problem that can be rectified solely through law. It requires social transformation, cultural and generational shifts, improvements in education, and effective leadership to change public opinions. This ethno-psychological fact is particularly significant in the development of different approaches regarding religious education in Bulgaria.

Religious Education in Bulgaria: brief overview

Since the early 1990s, religious education in Bulgaria has progressed through several stages, gravitating between History of Religions, Ethics, Orthodox Christianity, and Islam. It was initially introduced in Bulgarian public schools in 1997, a few years after the communist party fell, as a facultative subject created primarily for Orthodox pupils in grades two through four and was then expanded to the first eight grades a year later. Islam courses were introduced in 1999. The Religious Denominations Act of 2002 provided a legal basis for religious schools to be established. (Report on

¹ Rechel distinguishes three connotations linked with the concept of the “Bulgarian ethnic model: “the first relates to the country’s peaceful transition in the years after 1989, which set apart from developments in the former Yugoslavia; the second refers to the successful political participation of the Turkish minority which has played a stabilizing role in post-communist Bulgaria; and the third is its association with traditions of ethnic and religious tolerance (Rechel, 2007).





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International Religious Freedom – Bulgaria, 2013). Students in all twelve grades have had access to facultative Orthodoxy and Islam courses since 2003. (Kalkandjieva, 2015).

In 2007 the Bulgarian government suggested a non-confessional, neutral religious education system. It resulted in an official response from the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which recommended a curriculum for confessional religious education that would encompass both the country's strong Christian majority and the country's largest Muslim minority (latter one well represented and subsidized by some political parties to organize optional religious classes). However, neither of the two proposals received funding, even though multiple textbook sets were published several years later.

Still dissatisfied with the situation, both the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Grand Mufti's Office made attempts to persuade the Ministry of Science and Education to introduce the subject of religion as mandatory for all students. Initiatives such as a national march organized by the Holy Synod in 2010 in support of religious education in schools joined such efforts. Clerics and residents from all the country's Orthodox dioceses participated in the march (Kalkandjieva, 2015).

Today, public schools at all levels offer an optional religious education course that covers Christianity and Islam from grades 1 to 12, with non-confessional teaching available for the remaining students. The course covers the historical, philosophical, and cultural aspects of religion, as well as the moral values of various religious groups. All officially registered religious groups can request their views to be included in the course's curriculum. Even so, religious education continues to attract a small percentage of students: just 1% of the student body enrolls in them. (Report on International Religious Freedom – Bulgaria, 2013).

Teaching diversity and tolerance

The Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2007) distinguish the positive value of teaching religion that emphasizes respect for everyone's right to freedom of religion and belief, and second, that teaching about religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotype. The *Principles* that were published in the year of the Bulgaria's accession in the European Union explore in detail the important role of the teacher and especially in regard to the teaching about religions and beliefs and that the curriculum should be based on a teacher's knowledge, attitudes, and competences (Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2007). The document suggests that teacher preparation should be based on democratic and human rights principles, and that all future religious educators should be committed to freedom of religion or belief, sensitivity to human rights issues, and education for mutual tolerance and understanding. It also emphasizes the significance of implementing pre-service and in-service teacher education and stresses the importance of including comprehensive and well-supported teacher's education programmes to ensure successful teacher's innovative education and long-term sustainability. The *Principles* differentiate between religious education's positive value, which promotes respect for everyone's right to freedom of religion and belief, and that teaching about religions and beliefs helps minimize harmful stereotypes and misunderstandings.



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Because of the assertion that children's and human's rights (general and religious) must be respected and correctly combined in all circumstances, it is vital for OSCE member-states to consider the Toledo Principles in their public schools. In the first key principle we read: *“Teaching about religions and beliefs must be provided in ways that are fair, accurate and based on sound scholarship. Students should learn about religions and beliefs in an environment respectful of human rights, fundamental freedoms, and civic values”* (Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2007, 16). The Greek textbooks, which are thoroughly acknowledged and altered so that their contents are non-discriminatory and friendly to a wide range of young and adult residents, are a good example of this Principle to be respected. Many textbooks are also available online and some of them accessible to disabled students in Greece, but also in Romania.

One of the primary outcomes of the Comparative study carried out in Bulgaria under IRENE project provides that the Orthodox believers hardly understand people belonging to other confessions. This finding is in contradiction with the Toledo ninth key principle stating that: *“Quality curricula in the area of teaching about religions and beliefs can only contribute effectively to the educational aims of the Toledo Guiding Principles if teachers are professionally trained to use the curricula and receive ongoing training to further develop their knowledge and competencies regarding this subject matter. Any basic teacher preparation should be framed and developed according to democratic and human rights principles and include insight into cultural and religious diversity in society”* (Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2007, 16). It is difficult to imagine how in such context one could teach religious tolerance without having knowledge of other traditions and religions, or even unwilling to meet or indirectly learn about other subcultures and educational systems.

Religious rights and freedoms are frequently addressed by the religious communities in Bulgaria both positively and negatively, which has led to different connotations in theological perspective. From the standpoint of human rights and freedoms, understanding and respecting *local and global cultural diversity* is quite a novel approach to local Bulgarian traditions of good neighborliness. Therefore, the respect for other's religious rights as a critical component of a multicultural dialogue is an important competency that teachers in religion must master to keep up with current educational practices. It is hard to expect them to effectively teach others if they do not have a thorough understanding of the diversity in a global context, as well as through the scope of their own education (Спирова, 2005; Маринова-Легкоступ, 2016).

Data from the IRENE's study results is encouraging in this regard as it shows that school subculture variety does matter in some circumstances. The Bulgarian teachers tend to consider in a positive way their students' religious and non-religious beliefs while selecting teaching materials and preparing for the class to avoid using inaccurate or biased material, especially if it promotes negative stereotypes.

Another interesting finding of IRENE's study is about the relation between teachers in religion and their adult students. In some cases, when teachers teach adult students, it appears difficult to establish a relationship of equity. In these situations, teachers-to-students or student-to-student dialogue can easily devolve from moral to traumatic and discriminative. One can look for an



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explanation in the church's unspoken etiquette rules, which are not articulated because faith is supposed to contain them. Observations reveal that some religious persons are naturally tempted to act superiorly and hierarchically due to the specific roles they play in the parish or in the monastic community or due to their own convictions, that they have better competences and superior knowledge than others.

Following the classic pedagogical philosophy of learning from the very learners and via good contacts established with the students, training involves the ability to not only respect, but also to offer voice to others, including for learners of any age. Rather than focusing on differences, we should concentrate on commonalities in different cultures, ethnicities, and worldviews, and to understand better how individuals across the world exercise their freedom of belief and religion.

Teachers' skills and qualifications

In Bulgaria, the required skills and expertise required to teach about religions or beliefs differ, depending on whether it is confessional teaching offered by a church parish or religious community, or comparative religious teaching in public schools. A degree (bachelor's, master's, doctoral, or university specialization) obtained by an accredited university is the basic prerequisite for a teacher to work in a public school in the country. IRENE's study results show that most of the teachers in religion (predominantly Orthodox Christians) are sincere believers (comparable to other Orthodox contexts too) but, nevertheless they prefer to teach about religion in public schools phenomenologically, without taking their faith into consideration. On the other hand, the findings from the study show that there is a shortage of qualified staff to teach religion in public schools because graduates from the theological Faculties in Bulgaria do not quite enjoy full employment rights. As a result, the subject is frequently taught by theologically qualified pedagogues or humanitarian specialists who are regular teachers in other subjects, and for this reason it is more likely that they teach religion in any manner, which in certain cases may contradicts with the Toledo's third key principle, stating that *“teaching about religions and beliefs is a major responsibility of schools, but the manner in which this teaching takes place should not undermine or ignore the role of families and religious or belief organizations in transmitting values to successive generations* (Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2007, 16).

One of the educational goals of IRENE project was to develop *balanced and detailed informational, communicational, and technical skills, also through creating of virtual space to communicate online and to exchange innovative practices in religion and dialogue teaching*. As our study shows, a major difficulty faced by the teachers is the lack of expertise in areas where their pupils are significantly more advanced, such as digital media, information technology, teenage subcultural lifestyles, church ethos, and so on.

It has become clear from the findings of the Comparative study that most of the teachers in religion would like to improve their digital competencies, partly because they did not distinguish well between the informational, communicational, and technological skills required in their daily life, teaching practices, or confession. For example, some of the interviewees admit they aren't confident enough in their abilities to find appropriate educational materials online and highlighted the need that new technology and media should be incorporated into their pedagogical or andragogical





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communication. Nonetheless, while a few responders have demonstrated excellent digital communication skills (particularly those who teach also in other disciplines) and have successfully relocated their parish courses and schooling online since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, others simply refused to communicate online, demonstrating a low level of social engagement in the new digital society.

Finally, those who demonstrated addiction to virtual communication insisted on catching the moment to establish an online religious education system to overcome practical barriers that have prevented the development of this digital field for decades.

Another important skill for a teacher in religions or believes is the social competence. Why should social competencies be prioritized? Because it is one of the most important components of the educational mediation between educators and students. The demands of the surroundings of schools, colleges, and church subcultures are so high that anyone teaching or learning religion in any way would hardly refer to ethical codes, behaviors, values, or virtues, being socially illiterate.

The acquisition of operating skills in protecting human and religious rights, intercultural, interconfessional and interreligious communication skills, respecting other religions and gaining understanding in the church notion of human dignity are among the top competences identified by IRENE's survey respondents. Why the development of such skills is so important in teaching religion? First, because they are more neutral in the realm of education and do not directly involve confessional choice. Second, teachers are those who must speak the subcultural and age languages of children and youth; they are taught and called to observe, know, assess, diagnose, alter, and manage the specific development features of learners to the best of their abilities. Finally, because teachers are personally accountable for establishing operational requirements and collaborating with their coworkers, students, and parents. Gaining such skills requires the development of a system that transforms knowledge into social skills (Гюрова, 2002, 304–305), social information into attitudes, and teachers' evaluation (Гюрова, 2002, 534–540) into pedagogical and andragogical communication skills, interrelation capacities, and cooperative social participation.

Another challenge faced by IRENE's study responders is their limited knowledge towards migrants and their religious, cultural traditions, values, and ethno-mentality. If we look back to the soviet era, when all existing denominations were socially segregated into private sphere, we can better understand the concerns of our interviewees. Knowledge of other religions, confessional and cultural replication were similarly limited, resulting in today's misinterpretation of religious heritage as only material, recreation, or tourist attraction. This is also why local discussions about the human rights and new traditions sometimes overlook their religious and theological foundations. In such situations, religious feelings, identities, lifestyles, and worldviews are negatively affected. Of course, the next logical step would be to emphasize the importance of developing knowledge and attitudes toward international religious and cultural traditions, values, ethno-mentality and so on by prioritizing the revitalization of fundamental confessional values although this may push aside the equally important pedagogical and andragogical goal of intercultural inquiry, information, and orientation in comparative and relative religions. Nonetheless, this step could turn into a useful instrument to help teachers to develop high social competency, an ability to sympathize with people of all faiths and



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backgrounds, and to genuinely inspire such cultural views. This entails not only the development of tolerance and sustaining traditional good neighborliness, but also the recognition of variety, cohabitation, and pluralism as existing societal virtues.

Thanks to the EU's Erasmus+ programme, which allowed many teachers and students to travel and learn about various cultures and religions across Europe, intercultural perspectives have become well represented and practiced in the field of education. Furthermore, Bulgarian classrooms have become more and more diverse over the last decade, and for this reason all the participants in our study were eager to learn more about others' cultural backgrounds and develop their intercultural communication skills. If one could witness these experiences, such openness would enable stronger civic identity and contextualization, including stronger religious identity, opposed to the natural or imposed acculturation. Indeed, some teachers face difficulties to develop tolerant attitudes and cultural awareness of diversity in different worldviews, lifestyles, expressions, and practices, partly due to the lack of adequate education, notably at the international level. Very often after being introduced to international human rights literature, they face difficulties in understanding it, because they need examples to enable them to compare their comprehension with certain specific cases from personal experience and to test their knowledge into practice. Therefore, such tolerance and cultural awareness can be also developed by encouraging teachers to participate in various educational mobilities and initiatives abroad, allowing them to interact with people from various cultural and religious backgrounds, or by enrolling in international programmes in diversity and dialogue education.

As a result of the *Comparative study of IRENE project*, we have concluded that the teachers' interest in lifelong learning is very high. Most of our responders were eager to participate in any free seminar, and mobility, even for a longer period, and to attend more demanding trainings. All the interviewees supported the idea to join a virtual space where they can share database, good teaching practices, and teaching materials etc.

Our project team is closer to the yet polite and optimistic conclusion that some of the Bulgarian teachers in religion is likely to be unaware of their cultural and educational demands, particularly in the areas of human rights and social competence. Theologians need first and foremost encouragement to reach their full potential and raise awareness of the importance of new skills' development. And one of the strategies to achieve that critical local goal is to ensure that they have equitable employment rights so that they could obtain a real field of practice in which to learn and exchange expertise, comparable to the international context of the same social realities.

Outcomes and Perspectives

In any country, area, church, or parish where teachers refuse to learn, adapt, and implement pedagogical and andragogical approaches that are in line with the contemporary socio-cultural demands, innovations to religious education in diversity pose a significant challenge. Education in religious pluralism is not an easy task for adults who are called upon to educate children, youths, other adults, and even the elderly in human rights. They must first become aware of their rights and freedoms, and then truly enjoy them until they feel capable of instilling universal human values in their students. Innovations need proactive teachers who are willing to involve optimally functional



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models of educational technologies also in the field of religion that could be of benefit for the local communities. That would mean at first to involve researchers reflecting on significant local practices and gathering sufficient data to produce systematic interdisciplinary didactic and methodological outcomes, testing them back into innovative practices and in a comprehensive manner, and finally presenting educational systems to pedagogues and andragogues who are truly willing to implement them.

Following such teacher-training technologies and working on the development of actual models and practices, through this paper we outlined the specific educational objectives of our responders that could result in the elaboration of educational materials with high quality and, collection of good practices, designed to contribute to the local improvement of teaching diversity and pluralism directly and transversally within the Bulgarian Christian Orthodox context.

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