

## **Relations between Church and State in establishing RE at public schools in Bulgaria and Russia**

The issue of what the relations between church and state were and currently are has been widely discussed in the last several decades, and it seems that today we can say little that could further contribute to clarifying the topic. In fact, the relations between religions and state (governments) change all the time, and the reason for this is that societies constantly change as humanity further proceeds in its postmodern development. These relations change specifically in those societies which still seek more stable identity after former political and ideological systems have been oppressing people's consciousness and freedoms for decades. Particularly, this concerns the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Of them, below is the example of Bulgaria and Russia where we can see opposing relations between religions and state in the efforts to establish appropriate religious education (RE) at the public schools.

### **1. Inability of the state to properly deal with the issue of RE at the public schools (Bulgarian case)**

After the changes in 1989/1990, religion became free in Bulgaria and the church now could initiate wide discussion in the society concerning the introduction of RE at the public schools; the church itself organised a nationwide network of Sunday schools where she has been teaching and attracting children and adults to Christianity. The most urgent task for the church was regaining her property back and accumulating resources, and between 1990 and 1995 she was not able to propose anything positive for the state schools. The initiative came from the theologians who in 1995 developed RE curricula and syllabuses and proposed to the Ministry of education a good vision for introducing RE at school. The government, though claiming to be free from any communist heritage, never agreed.

This made the teaching staff at one of the university's theological faculties in the country introduce RE at the state schools on its own initiative, for two years RE teachers (who got their RE teaching qualification in the same theological school) successfully taught religion at some twenty schools. Being surprised by this initiative, in spring 1996 the minister of education came to see what has happened in these schools and found nothing wrong or unacceptable – he only found that the RE classes were useful and beneficial for the children. And since that time the government allowed RE to be taught at the public schools as an optional school subject, by the choice of children and their parents (legal guardians). New textbooks for the various school grades were created in 1998 and 1999 and the subject got a good start. The start was good only because of the apostolic efforts of the teachers who were well underpaid and had to work in several schools in order to get a normal monthly salary.

In 1999, the government decided that it is able to initiate the development of its own RE curricula and syllabuses, and appointed an RE Commission to the Ministry of education to work on this. The Commission however could only agree on textbooks written by representative of the three main religions in the country: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Between 2000 and 2007 neither the religions nor the state were able to bring anything positive in further developing the issue of introduction of RE at the public schools.

In 2007, a new Commission was appointed, and it developed a document which proposed basic principles of teaching RE at the state schools. The members of the Commission proposed the so called non-confessional type of RE where the facts of the three religions found their place in the syllabuses proposed for each school grade – from the first to the last, which is grade 12. Every child in the country was supposed to study the subject without any exception. Soon it became evident that the content of the proposed textbooks was compiled in such an unprofessional way that it could not be practically applied at school. Members of another Commission – that of the Bulgarian Orthodox church (BOC) – proposed to the government their own principles of RE teaching at the public schools

where the children were given choice between studying religion and ethics, according to their religious affiliation and their parents (legal guardians) wish. This approach to RE teaching was considered the only appropriate for the multicultural and still widely secular society of Bulgaria.

The two opposing groups wanted to prove their relevance to the Bulgarian schools and the society, and the government decided to organise public debate on the Bulgarian TV on the issue of introducing RE at the public schools. In early 2008 the debate took place and showed the Bulgarian society the inappropriate approach to RE teaching, as proposed by the governmental Commission, and the positive effect which the BOC's approach could have on the children at the state schools if RE were organised according to its vision. The minister of education was embarrassed and stopped any further discussions on introducing RE at the state schools. No matter how strongly the religions protested (especially in the spring of 2010), the government was overruling any plea and suggestion.

In this way, the government's inability to initiate appropriate processes to introduce RE at the public schools prevented Bulgaria from having RE at all. Currently RE is being taught as an optional subject to less than 1% of the children at the state schools, grades 2 to 8 (age 8 to 15), which practically means that there is no RE in the country. The state is unable to successfully develop any type of RE at the public schools, and the religions are capable of developing good approaches to RE teaching but the state opposes any initiative coming from them.

## **2. The state successfully taking the initiative of introduction of RE at the state schools (Russian case)**

In Russia, although the society is multicultural (where, however, the dominant religion is Orthodoxy, as in Bulgaria), quite different situation occurred in this country. Over the last several decades (excluding the years 1990-current), there were similar developments in the education system between Bulgaria and Russia but not in the religious landscape as found in the two societies: Russia has always been strongly religious and its governments have always exercised imperial authority over its people. Concerning RE at the state schools, the relations between religion and state (in fact, between church and state, as the Russian Orthodox church was the only religious body that was consistently pursuing introduction of RE at the public schools) developed in the following direction.

### *a) Relations between church and state since 1990 and up to 2006.*

Before the changes in 1989/1990, no RE was allowed in Russia. The 1993 Constitution defined the basic freedoms of the Russian people, including equality concerning gender, culture, religion, ethnic self-identification, etc. The main religious organisations in Russia struggled to increase their influence on the various social layers of the Russian people. Religious proselytism was widespread.

The chaotic religious situation made the state adopt in 1997 a new Law on the religious organisations present in the country where most of the "historically" meaningful religious bodies were recognised and got their legal status. Still, the most powerful and influential religious body, the Russian Orthodox church (ROC), continued to insist on its predominant and exceptional role in the Russian society, and consequently on its sole right to educate children in Orthodox Christianity – a thesis, which did not admit any other type of RE (by any other religious group) for the children of Russia.

A good number of textbooks under the general heading of "Orthodox culture" appeared, and many efforts were made as to introduce the subject in the state school system. Notwithstanding its title, everyone could see in the content of the textbooks that it was a purely Orthodox Christian instruction, by the example of the old faith-teaching subject "God's Law". Other religions, especially Islam and Judaism, created their own faith-based textbooks and tried to introduce confessional type of RE among their own children in some of the Russia's regions.

### *b) The current situation of RE as a result of the initiative undertaken by the Russian president and the government*

The “Foundations of the social principles of the Russian Orthodox church”, adopted in the year 2000, confirmed the leading role of the Orthodox church in the Russian society where RE was again seen as the exceptional right of ROC. Intensive dialogues between ROC’s clergy and governmental officials took place between 2000 and 2007 where ROC tried to convince the government that it is concerned about the spiritual well-being of every child in Russia. At the same time, various consultative bodies on the matter of religion were created to consult the President and the government. The government has been opposing introduction of RE at the state schools for almost two decades after the changes in 1989, and it tried to continue the dialogue with the four main religions in the country: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism, including the dialogue on introduction of RE at the secular schools.

The Russian President and the government came to the opinion that the issue of introduction of RE at the secular schools should be discussed by the four main religious organisations in Russia, and that these discussions should be of a coordinating value (i.e., the four religions should find common agreement on each issue concerning the introduction of RE). In 2006, a coordinating group (a workgroup) was created where representatives of ROC, the government and various academic structures met several times and discussed the issue. In end-2008, the leaders of the four religions issued an appeal to the President and the government concerning the introduction of RE at the state schools.

The election of the new ROC’s Patriarch Cyril in January 2009, and his enthronization in February 2009, brought considerable change in the relations between church and government, including the issue of RE at school. The Patriarch took into account the various opinions concerning the type of RE at secular schools and agreed to an open dialogue with the secular authorities. This enabled the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to issue on 2 August 2009 an instruction to the government which had to deal with the issue. On his side, the Premier Vladimir Putin instructed three ministers (of the Departments of Education, Finance and Economy) to properly deal with the issue and report to him on the results of their coordinated investigations as to the possibilities of introduction of RE at the state schools.

On 29 October 2009, the government issued an instruction where the subject “Foundations of religious culture and of secular ethics” was to be introduced since 1 April 2010 as an approbatory school subject for the children of grade 4 (10/11 years of age) in 18 Russia’s regions, and in the autumn of 2010 for the children of grade 5. On 1 April 2010, the new subject started in 19 Russia’s regions in full agreement between the four religions, the President, the government, the local educational authorities in the 19 regions, and the schools and the parents (in the autumn of the same year, two more Russia’s regions joined the approbation). If successful, the subject is going to become obligatory for all the school children in the primary and the secondary state schools (age 6/7 to 17) since autumn of 2012.

### *c) Specific features of the subject “RE/Ethics” in Russia*

The subject’s title is “Foundations of religious culture and of secular ethics”. It is divided into two broad halves: teaching religious culture and teaching secular ethics. Practically, six separate different school subjects were created, of which the children (their parents or legal guardians) must choose one. Five subjects deal with religious culture as found in the religions, more specifically in Christianity (Orthodoxy), Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and the world’s religions in general, and one subject deals with secular ethics. Thus, the main six school subjects are the following:

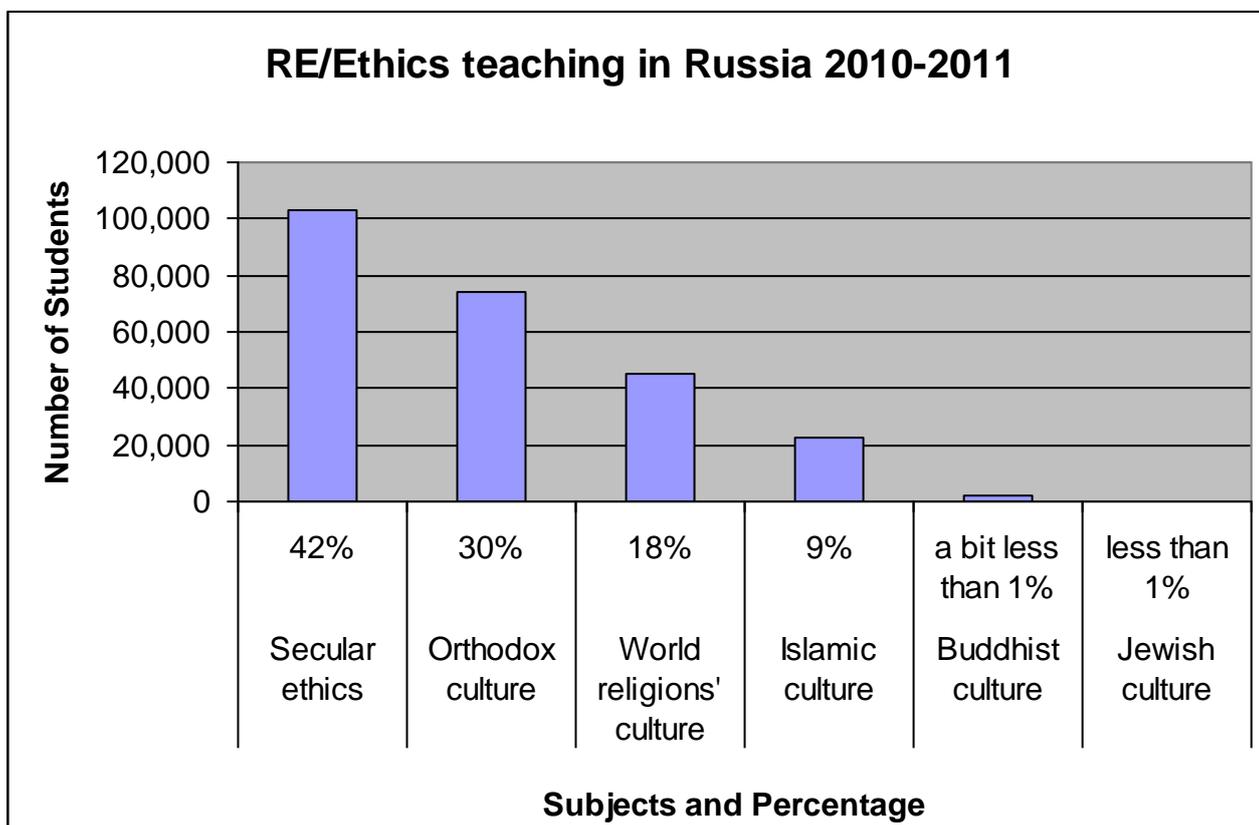
1. Foundations of Orthodox Christian culture
2. Foundations of Islamic culture
3. Foundations of Buddhist culture
4. Foundations of Jewish culture
5. Foundations of world religions’ culture
6. Secular ethics.

The type of RE/Ethics education is neither confessional nor non-confessional but cultural. It deals with the cultural expressions of religion in society, rather than its confessional content (although confessional elements are present to some extent in the textbooks' content). The subject is being taught only by secular teachers: clergy of any confession are not allowed to teach the subject.

“RE/Ethics” is not a summary of the six sub-subjects but a whole educational-moral teaching complex with common educational goals and objectives and coordinated pedagogical purpose in child’s upbringing. All the six sub-subjects follow the same educational structure, methodology, and pattern of content, the only difference is the facts within the textbooks’ content as presented by the various religions and the science of ethics. The subject’s content is also agreed with the content of other schools subjects, such as history, literature, art, music, social sciences, environmental sciences, etc. Its content in all the six sub-subjects is summarised around three basic Russian national values: 1) Fatherland, 2) Family, and 3) Cultural tradition. More than that: one third of the lessons (17 lessons a school term altogether) are carried out with the school class as a whole (i.e., the children not being divided into six groups according to the six sub-subjects) as six of the lessons have common titles, goals and objectives. On the last five lessons, all the children are expected to fulfil practical tasks to show what they have learned during the school term and what positive impact that learning has had on their education and life. Much focus within the content of the subject has been placed on patriotism, dialogue between various religions and cultural expressions, and the social peace and agreement within the Russian society.

*d) Statistics and expectations*

Although most of the religions in Russia expected a big number of children to choose their own religion to study, the results of the approbation showed that most of the children chose ethics and only then came Orthodoxy, Buddhism and Judaism. This fact again confirmed the fact that the Russian society still is very much aware of any ideological influence which parties and organisations have tried to exercise over the population in the last several decades; religious knowledge is still considered one of the ideological systems. This fact again confirmed the truth that the Russian society is not “Orthodox” (as some statistics might show, up to 85% of the Russian population) but mostly secular



and only then religiously and ideologically affiliated.

As in many other countries where RE is introduced as a new school subject, three are the main problematic issues which the Russian government and the religions need to solve:

- creating appropriate textbooks for the six sub-subjects
- preparation of RE teachers
- financial/economic support for the new subject.

Another challenge comes from the parents (society as a whole) who still are not convinced that the new subject contributes to better moral education of their children and to more stable peaceful situation within the society. The results of the approbatory teaching of RE in 2010/2011 however brings much hope that the Russian society has accepted the positive effect of teaching namely this type of RE/Ethics and that in 2012 it will become an obligatory school subject for all school children in the country. A sum-total report on the efficiency of the subject is expected to be issued in end-August 2011.

### *3. Religion and culture in Bulgaria and Russia in connection with RE teaching*

The relations between religions and state are to some extent evident for everyone, but not as evident are the relations between religion and culture in a society. The widely proclaimed thesis in Russia that its society's culture is Orthodox in character and nature now seems dubious. What is certain is the fact that in the past it might have been Orthodox but not today: everyone in the country now realise (no matter whether they consciously admit this or not) that the Russian society is multicultural and multireligious. In this way the relations between religion and culture are relations between the various social layers of the population. On the other hand, these religiously affiliated layers enter into certain relations with the state. And for Russia, it is the state that has the final word. This happened also in relation to the issue of introduction of RE at the public schools.

In Bulgaria, the church has never had any substantial influence on the Bulgarian society, and certainly not on the governments. Today the Bulgarian society seems more secular than religious and it perceives the Bulgarian culture as a mixture of popular, historical and religious traits: one of them would appeal to one social layer and other to another layer. This particular characteristic of the Bulgarian society allowed the government (the Ministry of education) to stifle and stop any protests, on the part of the religions while they were insisting on introduction of RE/Ethics at the public schools, and to put the Bulgarian teachers guilds in opposition to the church after the TV debates in early 2008. RE is not likely to be introduced in the country, unless well-recognised representatives of the three religions and the state (and the parliament) meet and find a common ground for discussions and possible agreements.

The issue of religion and culture is debated in other European countries, too. On the other hand, today's demands challenging religion and education in Europe seem to be discussed in Eastern Europe too, including Bulgaria and Russia. As a member of the European Union, Bulgaria tries to follow the educational initiatives of the Council of Europe. On its part, Russia is still seeking its proper place, concerning general education and RE – as being either “pro-European” or independent of any other samples and models.

Many are the researches (on various scientific level) arguing about the role and place of Russia in the European or the Asian civilizational models. Many of them would consider Russia being part of both continents' cultural modes. One should agree that ethno-culturally Russia belongs to Europe. Its political, social and economic characteristics define Russia as European, too.

The Russian education system resembles the general European one in many ways, both on the level of primary and secondary school and the university and academic qualification. At school, the Russian children study almost the same subjects which can be found in any other European education system. Christianity remains the main religion in the country.

Religion and education in Russia and Bulgaria today face almost the same demands and challenges which Europe faces. Education tends to satisfy the needs of labour market, and the religious life in both countries has settled. For Russia, this settling became very obvious in the last couple of years when we have seen “normal” relations between the various religions on the one hand, and the religions and the government on the other hand.

Through the education system, especially the school, the Russian government tries to educate and to prepare its future generation for adequate and efficient participation in its own and the world’s labour and intellectual market. Religion and morality are given special place in this (through the RE/Ethics teaching), and to what extent they would help Russian children to better “accommodate” to the European and democratic standards of contemporary development of life, is to be seen and evaluated in the near future.

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