# Faith and Spiritual Renewal in Secular North Macedonia: The Pastoral Role of the Macedonian Orthodox Church - The Archbishopric of Ohrid in a Pluralistic Society

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# FAITH AND SPIRITUAL RENEWAL IN SECULAR NORTH MACEDONIA: THE PASTORAL ROLE OF THE MACEDONIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH–ARCHBISHOPRIC OF OHRID IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

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**Abstract**
This article explores the relationship between faith and social dynamics in secular North Macedonia, with a focus on the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Archbishopric of Ohrid's role in shaping spiritual values, social ethics, and individual transformation. Although the Republic of North Macedonia is a secular state, the Church remains a vital institution, an essential spiritual presence, offering spiritual guidance and fostering ethical frameworks that transcend cultural or national affiliations. It highlights how religious beliefs intersect with the country's diverse cultural landscape, with an emphasis on the Church's pastoral mission–directed not toward national or cultural constructs, but toward the transfiguration of individual person. This ongoing spiritual influence continues to shape personal and social values in a secular context.
**Keywords:** Macedonian Orthodox Church- Archbishopric of Ohrid, Church of transformation, oikonomia, social cohesion.

The Macedonian Orthodox Church-Archbishopric of Ohrid (MOC-AO) plays a vital role in the formation of the collective identity of the Republic of North Macedonia, particularly in the midst of the diversity of tapestry of its secular and multicultural environment. Historically, the idea of restoring the MOC-AO was central to the period marked by national awakening of the Macedonian people and resistance to foreign rule.[1] The struggles for ecclesiastical autocephaly were parallel to the growing desires of national self-determination of the Macedonians, creating a nexus between religious and national identity. As his Beatitude, the late Archbishop Dositej, emphasized: *Should it be said that the Archbishopric of Ohrid and then the memory of it for centuries was the only source of Macedonian national consciousness.*[2] Finally, as Čedo Dimoski pointed out, with the Archbishopric of Ohrid ceasing to exist under the Ottoman rule, Macedonians lost their last place where they could have a certain level of

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[1] For more, see Jovan Jonovski, Archbishopric of Ohrid and Macedonian Nation Building, paper presented at the *Harmony in Diversity 2024 Conference*, Sofia, Bulgaria, December 2024, 144. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386985590_Archbishopric_of_Ohrid_and_Macedonian_Nation_Building. Accessed 02. 02. 2025.
[2] Ibid.

independence.[3] Thus, the importance of the Archbishopric of Ohrid decreased during the Ottoman rule, specifically in the year 1767, when it was abolished and its eparchies were incorporated into the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.[4]

In any case, the restoration of the independence of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, viz. the proclamation of autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church ( July 18, 1967),[5] marked a significant milestone in the affirmation of a distinct Macedonian identity. The Macedonian Orthodox Church played an important role in the development of national identity and the cultural values of the region, tracking its roots back to the establishment of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, after the fall of the Kingdom of Samuel, by the emperor Basil II, who regulated its status and jurisdiction with three sigils *(chrysobulls)* issued between 1019 and 1025.[6] The proclamation of autocephaly not only galvanized national sentiment, but also provided a platform for the articulation of the culture and inheritance of Macedonia, contributing to the nation's narrative. Within this structure, the Church became a repository for the values, traditions, and historical memories of the Macedonian people.

The twentieth century presented many complexities. After the Two Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913 and the establishment of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenians in 1918 – later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – the Orthodox Church in this territory was put under the authority of the Serbian Orthodox Church.[7] The affirmation of Serbian ecclesiastical authority over the Orthodox Church not only reduced its autonomy, but also politicized religious affiliation, leading to significant tensions and divisions among the population. The realities of World War II and its consequences brought additional fragmentation with the establishment of the new Yugoslav state, which was ideologically secular, but dependent on various ethnic legalities for social cohesion.

With the collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the dispute between the Macedonian Orthodox Church and Serbian Orthodox Church continued even after Macedonia became independent in 1991.[8] However, the independence of the Macedonian state in 1991 marked a

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[3] For more, see Čedo Dimoski, *Macedonian Identity throughout History: Church, Language, Nation,* M. Div (Prague, 2009), 42.

[4] Ѓоко Ѓорѓевски, Виктор Недески, "Општествено-политичките процеси и улогата на Охридската архиепископија низ вековите," in *Contributions to the History of Macedonia and Macedonian Culture*, ed. Катица Ќулавкова (Скопје: МАНУ, 2021), 435.

[5] Љупчо С. Ристески, "Признавањето автокефалност на Македонската православна црква (МПЦ) како прашање на Македонскиот национален идентитет," *EthnoAnthropoZoom,* no. 6 (Skopje, 2009), 156.

[6] For the above, as well as for the connection of the Archbishopric of Ohrid with the ancient Church of Justiniana Prima as its successor, see Ѓоко Ѓорѓевски, Виктор Недески, *op. cit.,* 46.

[7] Čedo Dimoski, *op. cit.,* 46.

[8] Ibid.

significant moment of national rebirth for the Macedonian people, viz. a historical rebirth of national identity. Within the framework of the Macedonian state, the MOC-AO remained focused on its primary spiritual and pastoral mission, seeking to guide individuals toward a deeper relationship with God and each other, in other words, toward a life bound with the Orthodox faith and the life of the Church. While it has been present in the cultural and social life of the country, its role transcends national boundaries, emphasizing that it does not engage in politics nor seek to restore itself to the position of political leadership and state authority, but has the right and duty to proclaim the will of God and to keep both the people and their leaders vigilant. In any case, the Church's efforts, particularly during periods of national transition, have been directed toward fostering inner peace and unity. Through this enduring mission in the world, the Church continues to serve as a source of hope and transformation, rooted in Christ's teaching.

In contemporary Macedonia, the MOC-AO continues to navigate in a secular landscape, where various identities coexist, shaped by various religious, ethnic, and cultural intersections. The influence of the Macedonian Church persists in the promotion of social cohesion, particularly in a society characterized by its ethnic mosaic consisting of Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Roma, Serbs, Vlachs, and others.[9] In this framework, the MOC-AO promotes dialogue and mutual respect while simultaneously defending the right to the identity of its believers. By promoting cultural traditions through observances, the Church has the ability to imbue community values and instill a sense of belonging among its faithful. Conscious of its existence in a multi-ethnic community, as sociologist Zoran Matevski remarked, the MOC-AO has always shown certain levels of practical tolerance.[10]

The MOC-AO strives to maintain itself as an inclusive institution, primarily as a living body of Christ and as Church of transfiguration and evangelization,[11] with the duty to help its church members understand that only as good Christians can they be good citizens and living members of the social body, without at the same time seeking do deny them freedom in their political and social lives.[12] Of course, the MOC-AO, remaining faithful to the tradition of the

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[9] Gjoko Gjorgjevski, "Nurturing the Culture of Dialogue: A Macedonian Experience, " *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, *6* (2), 386. https://doi.org/10.30965/23642807-00602008.

[10] Zoran Matevski, "Religious Dialogue and Tolerance–Theoretical and Practical Experiences of Differences and Similarities," *PRJ* (Belgrade, 2007), 54.

[11] Γεώργιου Ἰ. Μαντζαρίδη, Ὀρθόδοξη θεολογία καὶ κοινωνικὴ ζωὴ (Thessaloniki: P. Pournara, 1996²), 98.

[12] For more, see Ἐπισκόπου Διονυσίου Λ. Ψαριανοῦ, Ἐπὶ Πτερύγων Ἀνέμων (Kozani: no publication, 1988), 16.

Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, is aware that the sanctification of a person is far superior to any social work.[13]

The sociopolitical challenges, including increased ethnic tensions and socioeconomic disparities, accentuate the role of the Church as a stabilizing force. Given these challenges, MOC-AO's commitments in charity and community building efforts highlight their role in promoting social welfare and solidarity between various groups. In fact, the Church's active involvement on social issues by educating for humanitarian assistance, reflects adaptive theology that is involved with the needs of contemporary society and echoing historical imperatives.

In addition, the MOC-AO increasingly adopted a position of ecclesiastical *oikonomia,*[14] recognizing and dialoguing with other religious communities within the context of Macedonia. This engagement highlights the Church's commitment to promote a pluralistic society, in which respect for cultural diversity is fundamental. This aspect of the contemporary role of MOC-AO emphasizes its potential as a vehicle to promote dialogue and interethnic cooperation, offering a bridge to overcome the predominant tensions that could otherwise undermine the multicultural tissue of the nation.

The role of the Church in the promotion of social cohesion within the various communities of Macedonia has historically been significant, justifying its influence on collective identity and the integration of different ethnic and religious groups. In particular in the complex socio-political landscape of Macedonia, characterized by a myriad of ethnic groups such as Macedonians, Albanians, Turks and Serbs, the Church has become a focal point for solidarity and cultural fusion.

Traditionally, the MOC-AO has played a significant role in nurturing the spiritual life of the Macedonian people, guiding them in their faith while also preserving cultural traditions and values that resonate across diverse communities. In contemporary Macedonia, the role of the Orthodox Church extends beyond simple cultural preservation to act actively in dialogues that promote social cohesion among the multifaceted communities of the country. The Church engages in the cooperation with various ethnic communities, fostering a spirit of mutual understanding and shared values. By respecting different religious customs, the Church encouraged communication and interconfessional cooperation, which is essential to promote

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[13] Γεώργιου Ἰ. Μαντζαρίδη, *Ὀρθόδοξη θεολογία καὶ κοινωνικὴ ζωὴ…*, 99.
[14] In the context of the Church, besides the concept of Divine *oikonomia,* viz., the presence of the triune God in creation and history and the plan for salvation of humanity, the term *oikonomia* can also refer to the Church's flexibility and pastoral adaptation to specific circumstances, such as those the Church has already faced throughout its history. For more, see Βλάσιου Ἰω. Φειδᾶ, *Ἐκκλησιαστική Ἱστορία,* Vol. 1 (Athens: no publisher, 1994²), 265.

peaceful coexistence. For example, the initiatives taken by church leaders to celebrate cultural festivities of various religious horizons illustrate an increasingly pragmatic approach to improve social unity.

The Church's involvement in various social services and community support programs has further solidified its role as a bridge between disparate groups. Thanks to awareness-raising initiatives, such as educational programs, charitable work and municipal gatherings, the Church has positioned itself as a vital player to resolve societal issues, including poverty and social inequalities. These secular oriented efforts contribute significantly to the integration of marginalized groups in the broader social framework of Macedonia, promoting a feeling of belonging and a common objective.

The MOC-AO, primarily dedicated to nurturing the spiritual well-being of its faithful, seeks to create an open and inclusive environment where all individuals, including minorities, can fully express their faith in a manner that is respectful of their cultural identities. The Church's pastoral mission extends beyond the boundaries of ethnicity or nationality, offering spiritual guidance that fosters unity, understanding, and mutual respect. For example, the Church has facilitated dialogue between different religious communities, creating spaces for meaningful discourse and collaboration.

In addition, the rise of secularism and multiculturalism in Macedonia presents both challenges and opportunities for the MOC-AO. While the nation is struggling with its multifaceted identity in a globalized context, the Church is confronted with a difficult situation in its attempts to preserve its relevance among the young generations, which can prioritize secular values in relation to traditional religious beliefs. Although the Church can always serve as a source of moral guidance and community support, its ability to adapt to a rapid societal landscape can influence its ability to unify various groups.

Orthodoxy, whose tradition the MOC-AO follows, offers a benchmark for moral lessons which continue to inform the understanding of individuals about good, evil, and forgiveness, even in the midst of the decreasing influence of manifest religious practice. Concepts such as honesty, charity, and respect for elders--hallmarks of Orthodox Christian education--resonate through various societal interactions and contribute to the establishment of ethical standards in public and private life. These moral imperatives are not simply relics of religious conviction but are rather suitable for negotiating the dynamics of an increasingly diverse and secular population. Consequently, the Church serves as a vehicle for social cohesion, supervising ethical dialogue around integrity and responsibility, which are crucial to maintain a unified societal fabric in the midst of cultural plurality.

In addition, Church involvement in community strengthening activities fills gaps between different cultural and ethnic groups in Macedonia. In a time characterized by increased multiculturalism, the Church played an active role in promoting inter-ethnic dialogue, often taking advantage of its authority to convene discussions that promote mutual respect and understanding between the various members of the community. Church initiatives, such as charitable events and educational programs anchored in ethical lessons, have provided valuable platforms to strengthen social ties and promote collaborative engagement between various ethnic groups. Thanks to these actions, the Church arises not only as a religious institution, but as a moral arbiter which guides municipal efforts towards greater social responsibility and sharing of ethical standards.

In addition, the integration of religious teachings in the policies of the secular state illustrates the way in which the moral framework of the Church influences broader societal standards. For example, public discussions on issues such as corruption, social justice, and community well-being often evoke the ethical accounts of the Church, stressing the importance of integrity and responsibility in governance. The approval of ethical behavior by the religious authorities lends credibility to initiatives aimed at combating societal issues, encouraging citizens to align their actions with civic duties and moral imperatives highlighted by the Church. In this perspective, the double role of the Church as a spiritual guide and social commentator underlines its lasting resonance in the development of Macedonian values in the midst of an evolving cultural landscape.

In summary, the role of the Church in the formation of moral and ethical values within the secular multicultural Macedonia is multifaceted, characterized by a dynamic interaction of historical tradition and contemporary societal needs. Through its teachings and practices, the Church continues to strengthen integrity and social responsibility throughout the societal spectrum, while engaging simultaneously with the challenges and opportunities posed by an increasingly secularized landscape. Globalization and its accompanying tendencies to secularism have significantly remodeled the dynamics within which the Church operates, which drives its relevance and commitment, particularly among young people. The globalization processes have facilitated the influx of various cultural influences and lifestyles in Macedonia, which often compete with traditional social values, including those promulgated by the Church. This exposure to alternative worldviews has generated increasing ambivalence among younger generations towards religious institutions, which potentially undermines authority and social relevance of the Church.

The impact of secularization is prominently observed in the decrease in rates of religious participation among young people in Macedonia. A significant portion of young people, influenced by global cultural trends, considers that religion is less crucial for identity formation. This change has led MOC-AO to reassess its strategies to maintain influence within this demographic group. In an effort to connect with the youngest population, the Church has begun to adapt its message, while preserving its evangelical essence. Participation initiatives, including youth programs, social media dissemination and community service projects, demonstrate recognition of the need to align church activities with the interests and values of contemporary youth culture, without simultaneously compromising its mission, which, as Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos) rightly pointed out, whether internal or external, is, in its very nature, "ecclesiastic"[15] and transformative.

In addition, globalization has encouraged an increase in alternative spiritualities and non-traditional belief systems, which attract many young people seeking meaning outside the institutional frameworks historically anchored by MOC-AO. The proliferation of digital platforms has allowed these alternative movements to flourish, presenting a formidable challenge to the Church, which must now deal with a diverse variety of competing ideologies that are often more attractive to young people.

In addition, with the intensification of secular trends, public discussions surrounding moral and ethical problems often leave aside the teachings of the Church. As social norms continue to evolve, MOC-AO faces critical questions about its role in the configuration of social values in a context that increasingly prioritizes individual rights and pluralistic perspectives. The alignment or misalignment of the church's teachings with these evolving values can directly affect their commitment to the community, particularly with the younger populations that are at the intersection of traditional beliefs and contemporary social expectations.

When navigating these challenges, MOC-AO is at a crossroads. Adaptation to a changing landscape requires not only a preservation of traditional practices, but an innovative approach to articulate the relevance and principles of the Church in a way that is involved and resonates with the citizens of contemporary Macedonia. The interreligious dialogue has become a fundamental mechanism to promote cooperative relations between different religious communities in Macedonia, particularly in the context of its complex sociocultural landscape.

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[15] Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), "Orthodox Mission: Past, Present, Future," in *Orthodox Perspectives on Mission,* Vol. 17, ed. Petros Vasiliadis (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013), 32.

By actively participating in interreligious initiatives, the Church has not only contributed to social stability but has also shaped the broader narrative of identity and belonging within the multicultural Macedonian milieu.

A notable aspect of this interreligious dialogue is the participation of the Church in various platforms and events that promote collaboration between religious leaders. These meetings not only facilitate the exchange of ideas but also encourage mutual respect and understanding among communities that have historically experienced friction. For example, the *Council for Inter-Religious Cooperation*, in which leaders of different religions meet to discuss common social challenges, thus positioning the Church as a mediator and messenger b of peace, and above all, as imitator of God's love, and inviting all people to imitation and communion of love: "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us" (John 17:21).

The key event in interreligious dialogue took place in Ohrid in October 2007 with the First World Conference on Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue. This gathering brought together 400 participants, including global religion leaders, diplomats, academics and representatives of civil society. The event received extensive media coverage and elicited a strong public response both in the country and internationally, concluding with the adoption of a Declaration. In May 2010, Ohrid hosted the Second World Conference on Inter-Religious and Inter-Civilizational Dialogue. The third conference was held in Skopje in 2013, followed by the fourth in Bitola in 2016. Each of these conferences underscored the significance of dialogue among different religions, emphasizing love, tolerance, and respect.[16]

The implications of the Church's commitment to the interreligious dialogue extend beyond mere social stability. This commitment contributes to fostering an inclusive citizenship model that values the contributions of all cultural and religious groups, as well as to promoting peace. For example in 2002. As the Church supports the stories of shared values and collective responsibility, it paves the way for a pluralistic society where diversity is not simply tolerated but celebrated.

In addition, educational initiatives headed by the Church in collaboration with other religious communities serve to instill tolerance and coexistence values among younger generations. By incorporating interreligious education in community programs, the Church cultivates a new social ethos that empathizes with compassion and understanding. This

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[16] For further information on this topic, see Gjoko Gjorgjevski, "Nurturing the Culture of Dialogue: A Macedonian Experience," *op. cit.,* 406.

proactive approach to education also addresses and opposes the potential of religious extremism and discrimination, since it establishes the basis for relationships based on respect and shared humanity.

But the establishment of the *Council for Inter-Religious Cooperation* is probably the best example of the Church's proactive engagement to nourish cultural diversity, interfaith dialogue and mutual respect.[17] The *Council for Inter-Religious Cooperation*, constituted by the heads of the five major religious communities listed in Macedonia's constitution: Macedonian Orthodox Church-Archbishopric of Ohrid, the Islamic Religious Community, the Catholic Church, the United Methodist Church, and the Jewish Community, is actively working on topics, such as the wording for a new law of religious communities, the introduction of religious education in the schools, and the process of restitution of religious property seized during the Yugoslav Communist regime.[18] In that way, the role of the Church in the interreligious dialogue has long-range implications to improve multiculturalism in Macedonia. The historical roots of the institution, together with its contemporary initiatives, are fundamental to promote cooperative relations between various religious communities. This, in turn, not only reinforces social cohesion, but also enriches the cultural tapestry of Macedonia, affirming the notion that collaborative coexistence can produce a stable and harmonious society. Through these efforts, the Church demonstrates its adaptability and commitment to foster a culture of peace, promoting the evolution of Macedonian sociocultural identity within a framework that honors both its diversity and its unity.

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[17] For more, see Gjoko Gjorgjevski, *op. cit.,* 400-402.
[18] Ibid.