

Religious Education in Public Schools: Macedonian Experience

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1. The Historical Foundations of Church-Based Education in Macedonia

The tradition of education as an integral part of religious life is well established in the history of Christianity. In the Balkans, the first schools for Slavic literacy emerged within the Church in the second half of the 9th century. Ohrid, one of the most important cultural centers of medieval Europe, had around 3,500 students over a span of seven years. This institution primarily aimed to prepare future priests for service in the Church, but it also served as a hub for transmitting knowledge and experience that could be applied practically in the daily life of the community. Additionally, there are historical accounts that provide insights into the specific organization of church-related education during that time.¹

During the seven years of St. Clement's teaching activity, the strong foundations of local Slavic literacy were firmly established. Within this school, a trained educational staff was prepared and sent to teach, preach, and serve in the priesthood across various regions, including Western

¹ It is noted that in order to carry out his mission of enlightenment, St. Clement was granted three houses in Devol. In Chapter 18 of the Extensive Life of St. Clement, there is also a discussion of the worldview that formed the foundation of his educational concept: "What were Clement's works? He taught everyone about the commandments of salvation and divine dogmas, emphasizing that just as a godly life without proper learning is dead and foul-smelling, so learning without a righteous life does not lead to eternal life. He compared the first to a blind man who has legs and arms but no eyes, and the second to a man who has eyes but whose arms and legs have been cut off." St. Kliment Ohridski, *Collected Works: Words, Grains, Lessons* (ed. Jovan Takovski), Skopje 2012, xii; Aleksanir Milev, *Greek life of Kliment Ohridski*, Sofia 1966, 125–127.

Macedonia, present-day Albania, and other parts of medieval Bulgaria.² The large number of students is undoubtedly evidence to the success of St. Clement's visionary project, one that could only have been led by an exceptional person. This organized school system, with a primary focus on literacy, also played a crucial role in training and empowering church staff. It stands as an extraordinary and unparalleled educational system for its time, and as such, it holds a unique and significant place in both history and the cultural landscape of the Balkans.³

After the deaths of Saints Clement and Naum, the Ohrid Literary School was continued by their students, who primarily focused on transcribing the works of their teachers. Later, the activity of the Kratovo Literary School emerged in the north-eastern part of Macedonia, where monasteries such as St. Prohor Pchinski, St. Joachim Osogovski, and St. Gavril Leskovski became important literary centers. In these monasteries, literary and Slavic written traditions flourished more actively between the 12th and 14th centuries, continuing to develop until the 19th century.⁴

Medieval literature reflected the unity of spiritual and cultural life in the Byzantine Empire, territory of Macedonia, and other South Slavic regions. The full scope of this literary heritage cannot be understood without considering the literary centers, schools, and scriptoriums previously mentioned. These were not just abstract concepts but tangible institutions where literary, educational, and scientific activities took place during the Middle Ages. Often, literary centers were closely associated with scriptoriums, although some scriptoriums existed independently. The existence of numerous literary centers and scriptoriums is attested by places such as Bigorski, Zrzeski, Kratovski, Leskovski, Osogovski, Matejce, Markov, Slepchenski Monastery, and others.

During Ottoman rule in the territory of Macedonia, education and culture were inseparable from church activity. Schools existed only within churches and monasteries, which served as the primary centers for education, literature, and culture. Even after the abolition of the Arch-

² Branko Panov, *Missionary Activity of Kliment Ohridski in Macedonia*, in: *Annual Seminary of the Faculty of Philosophy* 46 (1993), 6–7.

³ Gjoko Gjorgjevski, *Religiskata edukacija – makedonskoto i evropskoto iskustvo*, in: *Proceeding of the International Symposium "VIII Days of Justinian I"*, 13–14 November 2020, Ckonje (2021), 312–323.

⁴ Ilija Vele, *Kratovski Literary Centre and The Literary Activity of Pop Joan Kratovski in Post-Byzantine Macedonian Literary Historical Development*, in: *Slovo: Staroslavenska instituta magazine in Zagreb* 65 (2015), 127–166.

diocese of Ohrid, more than forty monastic cultural and educational centers continued to thrive on this territory, with many also establishing cell schools. In addition to language and arithmetic, most other subjects had a theological focus, as many students were being prepared for the priesthood or other church-related roles.⁵

One of the most significant developments in the 19th century on this territory was the process of revival, driven by an increased awareness of the importance of literacy and education. This movement led to the opening of schools in the local language within larger churches and monasteries. To ensure greater accessibility, the *esnaf* (guilds of merchants) became involved in organizing and maintaining these schools. Over time, church-school communities transformed these institutions into public and free schools, with teachers receiving support from the local municipalities.⁶

Starting in the mid-19th century, schools for higher education – known as class, or high schools – began to open. The first such school was established in Veles in 1857, followed by one in Stip in 1861. In addition to subjects like history, geography, arithmetic, and geometry, theological courses were also offered, including catechism, Bible studies, Biblical history, and more. In 1874, the class school in Prilep was reorganized into a pedagogical-theological school. In addition to general subjects and the mother language, students also studied courses such as liturgy, catechesis with the introduction to sacred writings, psalmody, and others.⁷

The first steps toward establishing municipal community centers in Macedonia were taken by the Skopje Church-School Municipality between 1848 and 1853. During this period, Sunday schools were also established, holding classes on Sundays and religious holidays after church services in churches and monasteries. In this context, it is important to mention the seminaries in Bitola. The first were those of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the 19th century, followed by the Seminary of St. John the Theologian, which was organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 20th century.

⁵ Aleksandar Trajanovski, National Municipal and Pedagogical-Theological Schools in Macedonia in the mid-19th century (following the example of the teaching of Joseph Kovachev, D. Miladinov, Sl. Dingova, K. Shapkarev and others), in: Annual Seminary of the Institute of History and Archaeology, Gotse Delchev University – Stip 2/1 (2011), 111.

⁶ Aleksandar Trajanovski, Theological Schools in Macedonia, in: Annual Seminary of the Orthodox Theological Faculty “St. Constantine and Helena. Kliment Ohridski” – Skopje 13 (2009), 139–178.

⁷ Trajanovski, National Municipal, 114–115.

During World War II, the first schools were established in 1943 on the liberated territories of Western Macedonia. Religion was an integral part of the curriculum, but it was later removed for ideological and political reasons.⁸ In primary and secondary schools, religious education (*veronauka*) continued to be part of the curriculum for several years after liberation⁹, before being completely removed from the education system.

2. Constitutional Debates and Legal Regulation of Religious Education After Independence

After the independence of the Republic of Macedonia, religious education remained absent from schools, as outlined in the 1995 Primary Education Act¹⁰. Article 13 explicitly prohibits two things in primary schools: the formation of religious and political organizations, as well as the teaching of religious education.

It was not until 2002 that religious education was reintroduced, following a decision by the Minister of Education, and it was taught as an optional subject in the third grade.¹¹ However, in November 2003, the Constitutional Court of the State ruled to abolish the Minister's decision.¹² The court's analysis of the ruling can be interpreted through at

⁸ Vane Stojchev, Macedonia in World War II, in: The History of the Macedonian People, ed. Todor Ceparanov, Skopje, 2008, 298–299.

⁹ Aleksandar Simonovski, Culture and Education in Bitola and Bitola in late 1944 and early 1945, in: Philosophical Studies 13/2 (2015), 105–106.

¹⁰ Law on Primary Education, in: Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, year: LI, no. 44, Skopje, 20. 9. 1995, 1129–1137.

¹¹ Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Macedonia, Decision No. 10-2858/1, Skopje, 3. 10. 2002.

¹² Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia, Decision No. 42/2003-0-0, Skopje, November 5, 2003: The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia, based on Article 110 of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia and Article 70 of the Official Journal of the Constitutional Court, held a session on November 5, 2003, to decide on Decision No. 10-2858/1, dated October 3, 2002, issued by the Minister of Education and Science. This decision pertained to the adoption of a curriculum for religious education in primary schools, specifically for the third grade, as an optional subject. The Court ruled that religious communities and groups are separate from the State and are considered equal before the law. The State, or any of its authorities, cannot mandate religious practices of any kind, in any form, within public institutions or outside of them through the issuance of legal acts or the performance of legal actions. Religious education, even as an optional subject, is regarded

least three legal perspectives: 1) The State cannot impose religious practices on citizens in any form; 2) The State must maintain neutrality in matters of religion; 3) Any actions related to religious orientation or even the study of religious texts should take place within religious communities or groups, not within state schools, which are public institutions.¹³

In 2008, the Parliament adopted a new Law on Primary Education, which allowed for the reintroduction of religious education in schools, this time in the fifth grade.¹⁴ Religion, along with the course “History of Religions,” became optional. However, it was Article 26 of the Law (“Religious education as an optional course can also be implemented in primary education”) that became the subject of a constitutional court hearing. The transitional and final provisions of the Law specified that Article 26 would come into effect on September 1, 2008, marking the start of the school year. During the 2008–2009 school year, the Ministry of Education and Science introduced a religious education program for sixth-grade students. Parents could choose between the course “Religion (*veronauka*)”, which was catechism-like instruction in religion, and the subject “History of Religions”, a secular-agnostic approach to the study of religion.

On 15 March 2009, the Constitutional Court ruled again that the “Religion” case violated the constitutional separation of Church and State. The Court’s interpretation was primarily based on Article 11 of the Law on Primary Education, which prohibits “religious organizations and activities” as well as “the promotion of religious symbols.” Following a petition from a political party, the Constitutional Court initiated a procedure¹⁵ to assess the constitutionality of Article 26 of the Law on Primary Education. The procedure concluded with a decision to repeal Article 26¹⁶, thereby prohibiting the teaching of religion in primary education.¹⁷

as religious practice when it is implemented as a continuous process throughout the school year. This constitutes a religious act resulting from a legal act issued by a state authority – in this case, the Minister of Education and Science.

¹³ Aleksandar Spasenovski, Religious Education in the Macedonian Education System, in: Second Decade with the subject Ethics in Religions (Experiences and Challenges), Skopje 2023, 21–22.

¹⁴ Law on Primary Education, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, year: LXIV, No. 103, Skopje, 19. 8. 2008, 3–44.

¹⁵ Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia, Decision, No. 202/2008-0-0, Skopje, 11. 2. 2009.

¹⁶ Law on Primary Education, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, year: LXIV, No. 103.

¹⁷ Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia, Decision, No. 202-2008-0-1, Skopje, 15. 4. 2009.

The Constitutional Court also later addressed Article 27 of the 2007 Religious Communities and Religious Groups Act, which outlines the involvement of religious communities in the preparation of educational programs.¹⁸ The explanation provided by the Court appeared superficial and lacked satisfactory argumentation:

“Based on the principle of the separation of State and religious communities, or the principle of secularity, the freedom of religion, in the Court’s view, necessarily encompasses several fundamental principles. These include the right of every individual to freely determine their religious beliefs, to accept or reject a particular faith, to adopt a different faith, or to remain non-religious; the right to profess or not profess one’s faith, and the right to participate in or abstain from religious rituals. In this context, the State, adhering to the principle of separation from religious communities, must remain neutral. It must not interfere in matters of faith, nor should it promote or inhibit adherence to any particular religion, nor impose religious conformity or require religious activities as socially desirable behaviour [...]. Regarding the contested provision of Article 26 of the Law on Primary Education, the Court concluded that it creates an opportunity for the introduction of a subject in primary education focused on a particular faith. This, in turn, introduces guidelines on how a member of that faith should behave, a practice that the Court considered to be religious education, religious lessons, or simply ‘religion.’ The Court further noted that the implementation of the contested provision, in its entirety, aligned with this interpretation. By offering this form of religious education, which was framed as an opportunity under the law, the State overstepped the academic and neutral character of public education, a characteristic of state-run institutions. This involvement of the State in organizing such religious instruction violated the principle of separation of State and Church, limiting the free space for religious communities to establish their own religious schools. Consequently, the Court determined that the contested provision of the Law on Primary Education did not comply with Article 19 and Amendment VII of the Constitution”.¹⁹

A second statement from the Constitutional Court regarding the Religious Communities Act follows, in which Articles 27, 28, and 29 are found to

¹⁸ “According to the Court, this part of the analysis regarding religious education must also consider that Article 27 of the Law on the Legal Status of the Church, Religious Communities, and Religious Groups (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 113/2007) stipulates that religious education may be offered in educational institutions as an optional subject, in accordance with the law. When preparing the curriculum and program for establishing an elective religious education course, the authority responsible for matters concerning the relationship between the state and religious communities may consult with churches, religious communities, and religious groups. The Court concluded that, in the context of organizing religious education in primary schools, which are state-run institutions, consultations with religious communities are permissible during the preparation of the curriculum and program for the optional religious course”.

¹⁹ Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 113/2007.

be inconsistent with the Constitution, with explanation that “This type of religious education, derived from the law, undermined the academic and neutral character of public education, a defining feature of state-run schools, and involved the State in organizing religious instruction, which violated the principle of separation of State and Church.”²⁰

Based on the aforementioned, it can be concluded, from the perspective of the Constitutional Court’s views, that the State, as a secular and neutral entity in education, must not assume responsibilities that fall under the jurisdiction of religious communities and religious groups. The study of specific aspects of religion should be competence of religious communities and groups, not the State. In line with this decision, the Ministry of Education and Science complied with the Constitutional

²⁰ U.No. 104/2009 of 22 September 2010 Skopje. Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia, Case No. 2679 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia No. 132, 4 October 2010): The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia, based on Articles 110 and 112, paragraph 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia and Article 70 of the Official Journal of the Constitutional Court, issued a decision on 22 September 2010. The Court ruled that Articles 27, 28, and 29 of the Law on the Legal Position of the Church, Religious Communities, and Religious Groups (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia No. 113/2007) were unconstitutional and therefore abolished. The constitutional legal justification for the contested provisions of Articles 27, 28, and 29, according to the Court, was undermined by the possibility of their indefinite and extensive application. This raised concerns not only for primary and secondary schools, as discussed earlier, but also for other educational institutions, including universities, higher vocational schools, and all public, private, and mixed educational institutions. These institutions, as public entities engaged in educational activities, would be affected by the provisions. The Court rejected the government’s argument that the state has an obligation to provide both general education and the right to religious education to its citizens. The government contended that enabling religious education in schools fulfilled its obligation to citizens, not to the Church, religious communities, or religious groups. However, the Court had already addressed this issue in its decision U.No. 202/2008 on 15 April 2009, which resulted in the repeal of Article 26 of the Law on Primary Education. The Court had previously ruled that the provision allowing religious education as an optional course in primary schools created an opportunity to introduce a course based on a particular faith, establishing rules regarding how members of that faith should behave. The Court found this to be a form of religious instruction – often referred to as “belief,” “religious lessons,” or simply “religion.” This type of religious education, derived from the law, undermined the academic and neutral character of public education, a defining feature of state-run schools, and involved the state in organizing religious instruction, which violated the principle of separation of State and Church. Therefore, the Court concluded that Articles 27, 28, and 29 of the Law on the Legal Position of the Church, Religious Communities, and Religious Groups did not comply with the Constitution.

Court's ruling and ceased teaching religion as part of the curriculum. However, the Court's decision allowed the subject "History of Religions" to continue being taught until the end of the school year. As a compromise, the subject "Ethics of Religions" was introduced for fifth-grade students, which focuses on the moral aspects of recognized religions in accordance with the Constitution. Since 2010, as a partial solution and substitute for Religion, the subject "Ethics" has been offered as an optional course for fifth-grade students.²¹ Along with this, students can choose from "Familiarization with Religions," "Classical Culture in European Civilization," and "Ethics in Religions." However, students are required to select only one of these courses.²² At the beginning of each school year, class teachers are required to provide parents with the curricula for the three optional subjects available to their children. Based on this information, parents decide which of the three subjects their child will study.

3. Religious Education in Transition: Secularism, Identity, and Democratic Rights

In accordance with the above, it is possible to conclude that during the period of transition in governance and the acquisition of State independence, several attempts have been made to introduce religious education into primary schools within the public education system. The legal regulation of this issue has been marked by legal uncertainty, and five distinct periods can be chronologically identified:²³

- First period (1991–2002): Religion was not taught in primary education.
- Second period (2002–2003): Religion was first introduced and studied in primary education.
- Third period (2003–2008): Religion was once again excluded from primary education.

²¹ Bureau for Education Development of the Republic of Macedonia, in: Curriculum in ethics in religions for the V department of eight-year primary education (bro.gov.mk), 2.2.2012.

²² Tanja Karakamiseva / Aleksandar Spasenovski, Handbook on the Right of Religious Communities and freedom of religion of the Republic of Macedonia, Skopje 2018, 79–83.

²³ Spasenovski, Religious Education, 21–22.

- Fourth period (2008–2009): The study of religion was reintroduced, albeit temporarily.
- Fifth period (2009–present): Religion is not formally taught in primary education, but certain forms of religious education are still offered.

In reference to the foregoing, let us remind ourselves that our own educational system and European schooling, both are deeply rooted in the educational activities of the Church, where religious education, in various forms, has historically been – and remains – an integral part of the curriculum. Notable figures in this tradition include our religious revivals such as Joachim Krchovski, Kiril Pejcinovic, and Theodosius of Sinaitsky, as well as individuals with theological education like Krste Petkov Misirkov and Dimitrija Cuposki.

The key difference today is that, despite growing secularism and alienation from Christian roots, European countries still maintain space for religious education – although in various forms – within their educational systems. In contrast, Macedonia's experience has been marked by a continuous process of either denying or minimizing religious education in school programs.

Furthermore, it is concerning that efforts are being made to impose educational content that contradicts the religious convictions of parents, who are, by and large, devoutly religious. These parents have a constitutional right to raise and educate their children according to their worldview, as stated in Article 11 of the Constitution. This issue also raises questions about respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which asserts that “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” (Article 26, paragraph 3). Moreover, the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, adopted on December 14, 1960, obligates member states to “to ensure in a manner consistent with the procedures followed in the State for the application of its legislation, the religious and moral education of the children in conformity with their own convictions” (Article 5,1b).

The absence of religious education in schools not only represents a failure to implement these international declarations and conventions but also signifies a disconnect from our own history and traditions, as well as from the foundational principles of education. This gap highlights serious shortcomings in the Macedonian education system. Throughout history, the national identity and spirituality have been built on faith, which has been seen and affirmed as the foundation for progress in many areas. In contrast, today some are trying to push it to the margins of so-

ciety – or, even worse, define it as an opponent of progress and a barrier to advancement. This approach, often justified in the name of secularism and the separation of Church and State, clearly impacts the educational system, particularly the place and role of religious education at all levels of schooling.

However, even in a secular society, if it is truly democratic, there must be space for religious education. Numerous European countries provide evidence of how this issue can be addressed in a balanced way. The real problem lies in the promotion and interpretation of secularism as the complete erasure of religion from the public sphere, including education. In such an anti-religious climate, whether consciously or unconsciously, resources that could significantly contribute to the social fabric and development of our diverse society are being removed.

The need for religious education is even more pronounced in this country, which is home to various religious traditions. The importance of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue is unquestioned today – on the contrary, it is actively encouraged. But the critical question arises: How can we engage in such a dialogue and truly understand the beliefs and traditions of others if we do not know appropriately our own? Is it possible to be properly prepared for life in a multi-religious society without quality, objective knowledge of one's own religious tradition?

4. The New Educational Concept and Parental Rights

An intensive implementation of a new educational concept is currently underway in primary schools. However, one key course – Ethics in Religions, which has been taught for only a year so far – has been limited to just one semester, creating significant difficulties for teachers in maintaining their positions during the other semester. Meanwhile, a number of controversial topics, which contradict the beliefs and worldviews of many citizens in this country, have been incorporated into all curricula and educational plans. This new concept aims to promote inclusivity, gender equality, and multiculturalism, advocating for “a society for all” in which there seems to be no room for faith and religion.

In September 2021, the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric (MPC-OA) issued a statement to the Ministry of Education and

Science concerning the ongoing reforms in the country's education system, particularly the introduction of "gender ideology" and "gender-sensitive education" as part of "comprehensive sex education." The statement was prompted by concerns from parents about the introduction of ideologies deemed inappropriate for children, especially in primary education. Parents expressed that it was unacceptable for children to be exposed to such content at such a sensitive age, which is crucial for their proper development, education, and socialization. On the contrary, it is essential that teaching content remain free from controversial expressions. To protect children from potential misdirection, it is necessary for curricula and programs to respect the rights of parents, ensuring that they can guide the moral and ideological upbringing of their children. These rights are guaranteed by both the Constitution of the country and international agreements (such as conventions and declarations) ratified by our State.

According to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right shall include the freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching [...]. The States Parties to this Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents, and when applicable, legal guardians, to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions." Similarly, Article 13, paragraph (3) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states: "The States Parties to this Covenant undertake to respect the liberty of parents [...] to choose for their children's schools, and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions."

According to a 2012 Gallup poll, Macedonia is the most religious country in Europe and the fifth most religious country in the world. While the number of practicing believers is somewhat lower than the number of those who identify as religious, a significant portion of the population still respects traditional religious customs. However, the new educational concept that has already begun to be implemented in primary schools clearly violates the rights of parents to raise their children in accordance with their philosophical and religious beliefs. In other words, there is a flagrant violation of basic human rights, as children are being taught content that contradicts the religious worldviews of their parents.