

ENGLISH only

Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Freedom of Religion or Belief
9 - 10 July 2009

Religious education – Education of tolerance and non discrimination in schools

Two issues related to the integration of children from different ethnoses in schools

1. For and against the religious education in Bulgarian public schools

One of the main aims of school education is the development of such values and behavior among adolescents, which will allow them to assess the diversity and richness of different ethnic, religious, social and cultural groups. The knowledge, understanding and acceptance of spiritual - and in particular ethnic diversity - it is at the core of religious education. Its implementation as a subject in Bulgarian schools has both *supporters*, and many *opponents*.

According to the opponents, religion and the church have no place in Bulgarian public schools, which by law are secular institutions, teaching is a form of religion to indoctrinate adolescents, it can strengthen nationalism and discrimination against religious minorities, has not demonstrated the link between moral development of children and religious education - crime and violence exist in countries with such training, but also in those where it is absent, the religious education of children is the responsibility of their parents, etc.

The supporters of religious education in Bulgarian public schools believe that learning about the great religious traditions can increase tolerance among students; teaching in a dominant religious tradition supports the national culture and identity, teaching of religion plays a main role in overcoming the moral crisis among young people in society.

Already in 1999 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in its' Recommendation on Religion and Democracy' recommends the Member States: to support religious education as a network of values on which to develop sensitivity training in ethics and democratic citizenship; to focus on the comparative history of different religions with emphasis on their common values and diversity in their customs, traditions, holidays, etc.; to support the study of history and philosophy of religion and research in these subjects; to avoid - for

children - as it is a conflict between religious education supporting by the state and religious faith of the family in order to respect the freedom of religion.

Bulgarian membership in the European Union till 2007 has required changes in regulation of education. Religious education has been introduced as a non compulsory subject in public schools. This means it is allowed but not mandatory. Study of religion depends only on the school's ability to organize and finance such training. In terms of the delegated budgets so it is impossible. Any school that wants to provide religious education to the students should seek additional funding to develop projects. Bulgarian state provides religious education in schools only on paper but not in practice, which means that the state itself is for and against the religious education. So is there a sense to blame its supporters and opponents?!

2. Tolerance – the relationship between religious and multicultural education

As religious, as multicultural education include understanding, empathy and critical evaluation of religious and cultural views of ethical and philosophical point of view. They both educate not only tolerance and pluralism, but also the ability to interaction and cooperation.

Religious and multicultural education is based on the following principles:

- Learning is for all adolescents and respects the views of all;
- Comply with specific conditions in each country, region and school;
- Allow students to use their own beliefs and values regardless of any religion or ethnicity they come;
- Based on authentic materials for the religious or ethnic tradition;
- Provide opportunities for debate and dialogue, religions and cultures are presented not as closed systems, and (in terms of their different approaches to fundamental problems of human life) in their mutual points of intersection, the debate inside and run in different religions and cultures which are also many internal and pluralistic;

- The education is carried out by teachers with good and deep knowledge of religious and cultural traditions and related with respect and support the views of children.

The variety of human ways to God, our mercy to the sinner and social outsider are just some of the elements that form in children a sense of tolerance. *If there is no tolerance, integration of children from different ethnic groups in school is impossible.*

Tolerance expresses the degree of diversity, of change permitted by law, a value system (ethnic, religious, etc.). In this sense it is an indicator of the degree of freedom allowed by the system. Manifested by such features as:

- Recognition of the right of existence of the others of their respective rights, freedoms, values, ideas, interests;
- Denial of violence against the public group, individual ideas, values, interests;
- Willingness to coordinate, to compromise in a conflict between different interests, ideas, values, interests;
- Strive for peace, dialogic resolve differences, disagreements, conflicts, or at least wish to be understood the reasons for the different arguments, which carry the others.

We can say that tolerance is not only a characteristic of religious and multicultural education, not only a fixed value, but it gives the appearance of the society – tolerance is occurred in the scope and nature of all prohibited and permitted, within the limit freedom of religion or belief, within the power of sanctions. The more prohibitions and limits of freedom are in one society, the less liberal it is.

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Annex

Blagoevgrad city is situated in the South-Western part of Bulgaria.

Ninth Elementary School is a comprehensive one with 263 pupils from pre-school to 8th grade. 88 of them are Roma children and more than 80% of them come from the ghetto.

From 2007 Roma Education Fund in Budapest, Hungary has funded the school in order to better school conditions to be provided in the process of desegregation.

It is important for such a process of desegregation to ensure the physical conditions such as transport, meals, educational materials and equipment, but more important is **to invest in the spiritual growth** of the children. The children from the minority should feel part of the school life, to understand that they are well accepted by the others, to have desire to learn and to change the environment in which they live.

Within two projects we have organized many everyday class and out-of-class activities, each of them for mixed groups of children (Roma and non Roma).



Coloring of eggs – an Easter tradition

