

**The Challenge of Religious Education
The Greek Case**

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In our days we witness a reevaluation of the role and the function of religion at least on three levels:

- a) In a time, characterized by existential vacuum and lack of meaning of life for countless people, religion gives an orientation and provides with answers to crucial questions of existence, which again today excite the mind and the heart of man.
- b) It is emphasized that today the greatest cultural achievements of men and nations are related to religion. Religions have created and preserved the most famous works of civilization and its essential values. This is why religion is the ark of culture and the great spiritual inheritance of humanity. Besides, religion is related to the identity of people and civilizations. Belonging to a particular religion, means belonging to a particular civilization.
- c) The third substantial function of religion is its responsibility for the universal peace, since, without peace among religions it is impossible to have peace among people and civilizations (H. Kung). The revival of religions, if that were to be a true regeneration of their genuine elements, should mean a universal strengthening of the struggle for peace, for freedom and justice, for human dignity and human rights. It will be less and less possible for religions to divide instead of being forces of reconciliation. All these are related to the dialogue of religions, their rapprochement and cooperation.

If indeed religion is a vital element of person's life, if it is an important aspect of culture as a whole and for peace, religion must be placed at the center of education. If education is related to the question of what is to be human (i.e., what am I, what are we?), then it must make use of religion, because the deepest knowledge of what man is, is preserved in religious texts and the religious experience of humanity. If the purpose of education is to integrate the child into a civilization, then religion, which contains the most fundamental elements of civilization, must be taught in school. If education is an education of peace, then religious knowledge is indispensable because information about other religions is basic precondition for the understanding of the differences and the establishment of effective communication with people from other cultures.

Hence, it becomes obvious that the role of religious education is very important, but also, that this is not a problem to be solved easily. The difficulties of religious education have to do with the essence of the phenomenon of religion, which itself is multilevel and exceptionally complex; these difficulties are also connected with the particularities of the religious development of children. To these substantial difficulties one must add today new problems, which emanate from the spirit of our times, times characterized by liquidity and uncertainty, by pluralism, multicultural variety, the threat of the 'clash of civilizations' and fundamentalism.

As for the religious situation in Europe, there are contradictory estimations. It appears that Europe did not profit from the contemporary religious revival. In fact, the alienation of Western Europeans from the Churches continues. My teacher in Tübingen, Hans Küng spoke of the 'transformation of religion', of the 'individualization' and 'pluralisation' of religiousness, which is now progressing very fast. This individualized religiousness can coexist with the eudaemonism of everyday life, the measure of which is the satisfaction of as many needs as possible, expressed through an arrogant demand of one's rights, always claiming without giving anything in return.

Certainly, the question arises whether all of this has anything to do with Greece. It is an indisputable fact that in spite of the general anti-religious sentiment, and the atheistic ideologies, the Greek people have preserved a remarkable relationship with the ethos and civilization of Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is connected with the soul of the Greek people. It is still tied to their values and moral consciousness, their language, music and folklore, their happiness and sorrows. Orthodoxy is connected with the entire Greek civilization.

It is a fact that our country has witnessed tremendous changes-in recent years. Many children do not have the opportunity to the experience religious life in their family and often begin their schooling without any prior contact with Orthodox life. As a result, today religious education in Greece faces new challenges. It is no accident that religious education is constantly an issue of conflict, often under criticism and at the center of disputes.

At any rate, I believe that the significance of religious education in our country is particularly great today and its good organization is necessary. For this goal the support of pedagogy is necessary. In Greece, we face an unwillingness of many pedagogues, professors and teachers, to give to religious education the attention it deserves. Obviously there is here a real problem, which is related to the identity of modern education. Contemporary education should be persuaded that religious education does not oppose the

goals of modern freedom, autonomy, responsibility, creativity, solidarity, interculturality, sense of diversity and pluralism etc. In my opinion religious education can serve the humanistic goals of education; It can facilitate intercultural exchange, the openness to the other and the dialogue of religions. I think that the dialogue between pedagogy and Theology is the only way out of this impasse.

The goal must be to establish an open-minded religious education. This course:

- a) It should introduce children to our religious tradition not as a closed system but as a reality, which is understood correctly through its reference and openness to the other traditions. The knowledge of our tradition is a basic precondition for the right approach of other religions and traditions. For, how would it be possible to take the others seriously if one does not know and respect one's own tradition? Narrow religious education does not only fail to the point of the evaluation of other world religions, but also in relation to our own christian tradition as well, which is thus implicated in the impasses of fundamentalism.
- b) Religious education should give information about other world religions, enabling access to the other, facilitating the encounter and dialogue with it. This doesn't mean at all a transformation of religions education in Greece in a course of comparative study and education of religions. Nevertheless, religious education should prepare our children to be able to confront the problems in a multi-cultural and multi-religious environment, it should provide them with open spirit and critical thought.

Epilogue

Thus, we arrive back to our starting point. Today, religious education is invited to accomplish an important but difficult task.

Indisputably, without reference to religion, it is impossible to understand the past, to analyze the present and imagine our future. We know today the gravity of the error of all those, who underestimate the religious phenomenon, which is strongly connected to the deeper concerns of human existence and marks the whole history of the human being, the error of those who were blind in front of the dynamism of religions, the civilization and culture that they have created and its enormous social impact.

Religiousness is a matter of education and an open and critical religiousness is a matter of an open and critical education. In Greece, religious education draws from the great treasury of Orthodox Tradition. By helping children find genuine answers to their existential quests through the Orthodox tradition, we put them in contact with the meaning of the faith in the Trinitarian God, a relational God, the God of love. We also help them encounter the life in Christ. We thus introduce the children to the ecclesiastical dimension of Christian freedom, to the wisdom of asceticism, to the eucharistic use of the world. Knowledge of the Orthodox tradition brings openness to the other. Openness is one of the ultimate educational implications of the Christian Gospel. Therefore, the open religious education is both anthropologically and humanistically founded and it is not only a requirement of the educational responsibility, but above all, of the Gospel of Love.