

# **Religious Education, the State and the Principle of Laïcité**

**By Xhavit Shala**

Fifteen years ago, after an interruption of more than a quarter of a century<sup>1</sup>, Albanians were allowed again to worship in freedom. The new democratic state established by law the principle of laïcité and the country broke for good with the policy of state atheism. But while time has passed, our country has still to find a legal arrangement on the issue of religious education which can not wait any longer. All parties hesitate to involve oneself with the issue of religious education from fear that the principle of Laïcité and of a secular educational system could be undermined.<sup>2</sup>

During the communist period religion and religious education were replaced with the teaching of Marxist Leninist ideology. Belief in the divine was replaced by belief in the party. This type of teaching permeated not only the school curricula but every cell of the society. Marxism was gradually transformed into a religious creed.

Due to the demographics of religious communities in Albania, the issue of religious education can not be simply an educational or pedagogical issue but also a matter that affects our national security as well. The introduction of children and teenagers to twisted religious education, aggravated by the the provision of economic aid by suspicious organizations, can open our children up to easy manipulation and make them tools of illegal activities. Under the effect of these teachings these young people could become a serious threat to religious tolerance in our country.

While the state has stood aside, NGOs with missionaries from Arab countries, Italy, Greece and other countries are already working on providing religious education according to their own means and goals. Some of these associations providing religious education have drifted away from the traditional religious teachings in the country and in some cases are also making diversions against them. According to reliable sources from our law enforcement agencies, in the Region of Elbasan there were about 500 children aged from nine to 15 years of age that were attending illegal or semi-illegal course conducted by Arab NGO, with a selafi-wahabi backed funding and origin.<sup>3</sup> The religious curricula used in these courses differed sharply from the traditional Islamic teachings in Albania. The introduction of Jehovah Witnesses into the religious map of Albania sparked not only the jealousy of the traditional religious communities but was also

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<sup>2</sup> The article, with some small changes, was first published in the daily "Tirana Observer", February 1, 2006

<sup>3</sup> The Information is confirmed by the Intelligence Service branch in Elbasan.

followed by a series of minor's suicides in the early 2005. The media blamed the religious teaching being provided by the Jehovah Witnesses but until there has not been any evidence produced to back up this allegation. In some cases, official representatives of our religious communities have denounced the presence of foreign missionaries who operate in their name.

The presence in the country of 17 different religious groups and of 85 centers of professional training with about six thousand students; the presence of 571 Christian missionaries, 379 catholic ones and 115 Muslims missionaries; the shutting down of 12 religious schools and kindergartens by the Ministry of Education are all facts that speak clearly to the existence of a whole network of illegal or semi-legal system of religious education in our country. The discussion on whether religious education is needed or not in our country is already surpassed. What's important now is to put this system of education on a legal frame and legalize and define the relation between public education and religious one. When we talk about religious education we must first make clear the difference that exists between religious teaching and religious education. While religious teaching aims to provide general information about religions and their rituals, the term religious education implies a system of teaching that aims to instill and deepen belief in a certain faith and also includes a system of studies to train the clergy.

If one looks at world practices in religious education, it would note that while these practices may vary widely in their application, they are always treated with seriousness. Western practices, which we often refer to, varies widely. According to the American system, religious education in public schools is prohibited and the system allows only the presentation of religious information from a natural and academic perspective. Such information is provided through theology course or theology departments. While discussing the American system we must keep in mind that the U.S. has had a strong tradition of separation between the state and religion. The religious education of believers and ministers is provided by the religious bodies.

In Europe there exist different systems of education and different ways through which the states funds religious education. These systems vary from state to state. In Norway there is a class that focuses on providing information on main religions. Greece provides classes that focus mainly on Greek Orthodox practices while Italy and Spain classes that focus mainly on Roman Catholic teaching. In Germany<sup>4</sup> and the Netherlands<sup>5</sup> students can choose to attend classes on Protestant or Catholic teaching or opt to take a class in ethics,

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<sup>4</sup> There are about 3.2 million Muslims who live in Germany and yet there are no German schools that provide any teaching classes about Islam. The University of Munster is about to open a new branch that will train the future teachers of the religious class on Islam to public school students Professor Muhamed Sven Kalish, a Muslim scholar who will lead the new center, says : « For us it is very important that the teaching be provided in German. If we want the Muslim religion to become a part of the German Federal Republic then we must make sure that Muslim believers learn about their religion in the German language so they can be integrated into the society here » (“Kosova Sot”, July 31, 2004, Prishtina).

<sup>5</sup> Religious education – From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

instead. In former communist countries religious education has largely taken the place that was once occupied by the old communist system of indoctrination.

France forbids state funding for religious education due to the traditional separation here between the French Republic and the Catholic Church. But France is swiftly moving towards abandoning this system and is seriously considering introducing religious education into its public system. The presence of a large Muslim community of a mainly northern African origin and the need to introduce to them appropriate education on Islam and other religions is pushing the change forward. Many hope that these changes will help facilitate a better integration of the Muslim population into French society and prevent incidents such as the ones that took place at the end of 2005.

The religious education system in the United Kingdom is of special interest.<sup>6</sup> Children there are given the opportunity to receive religious classes on six religions that are prevalent in the UK and Commonwealth, namely Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and the Sikh faith. Such a variety of teaching comes as no surprise when one learns that one hundred years ago there were Muslim MPs seating in the British parliament.

The English system of religious education is based on some very important principles. First of all, while religious teaching in the UK is required by law, the system is a secular one. The teaching does not intend to convert people or promote a particular faith but instead aims to provide information on the various religions and promote respect for the values of life. Religious indoctrination is strictly forbidden. Both the curricula and the staff teaching it uphold secular principles and the religious classes are considered a regular professional responsibility of the teacher. The teachers in these classes may have a degree in theology or religious studies and are expected to teach other regular classes also.

The British system of religious education promotes the values of critical thinking and is aimed at helping children and students develop their ability to think critically and to provide them with understanding about religious values and a well rounded view of the world. Its goal is to develop a civic sense within a multicultural society.

Decentralization is another important principle of the English system of religious education. Despite being a legal obligation, the application of religious education curricula is the responsibility of local authorities. The religious education class is part of the curricula that is determined in cooperation between teachers and parents.

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<sup>6</sup> John M Hull, University of Birmingham England - Religious Education and the Globalised Economy (<http://www.bham.ac.uk>).

Given the circumstances that exist in Albania, it would be appropriate to consider including a class on religious education into our public school system in a way that respects fully the laicité of the state and the secular nature of our educational system. The class should provide sufficient information on the main religions in Albania with the goal of providing the students with a well rounded view of the world and promote the development of a critical thinking and of respect for the values of the society. A legalized religious education system will not only strengthen the principle of state laicité but would also provide a positive investment towards our national security and religious tolerance in the country.

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