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The employment of religious heritage as a tool for promoting multiculturalism dialogue in schools through Religious Education

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Η αξιοποίηση της θρησκευτικής κληρονομιάς ως εργαλείο ενίσχυσης του πολυπολιτισμικού διαλόγου στα σχολεία μέσω της Θρησκευτικής Εκπαίδευσης

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Abstract

This paper focuses on examining the role of the religious heritage as a tool for promoting multiculturalism dialogue in Greek schools through the contribution of curriculum of religious education. The author highlights the need for the educational use of religious heritage and its integration into contemporary social life for two reasons: first of all, the importance of those in charge of the intellectual cultivation of people and, secondly, their abundance in Europe and their key role in linking the past with the present. The author believes that the religious heritage should be substantially exploited and proposes the innovative approach of monuments not only by the general public, but especially by the teachers.

Key words: religious heritage, religious education, multiculturalism.

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage manifests itself in many shapes and forms (tangible, intangible, natural and digital) and has a universal value for us, as individuals, communities and societies. As our heritage has a significant role to play in shaping the future of Europe, it is important to preserve it and pass it on to the next generations (UNESCO, 2011).

‘Heritage’ as a manifestation of the past is a crucial aspect. Most cultural events and festivals are historically related to religion and, often, to religious conflict. Religious heritage art forms, whether architectural or musical, movable or intangible, traverse national borders. A secular understanding of it can contribute to the forging of the

European social identity as well as the strengthening of inter-cultural tolerance. It encourages us to understand our own place in history (Future for Religious Heritage, 2014).

Religion is a social dimension connected with the cultural environment and, at the same time, affecting and highlighting it. Contact with a civilization can unite people by helping them understand the “other” perspective and it simultaneously reveals the cultural differences that exist, not as polar opposites, but rather as mere points Association of Disputes (Kanakidou & Papagianni, 1998; Mitropoulou, 2007).

The European Parliament, understanding the continuous nature of religious and sacred heritage and having the capacity to protect its authenticity and integrity, backs key report on preserving religious heritage. On 8th September 2015 the European Parliament adopted, by an overwhelming majority, a report drafted by MEP Mircea Diaconu, on an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe (European Parliament, 2014).

The fundamental purpose of this paper is to address the question of the effectiveness of exploitation of religious heritage as a tool for promoting multiculturalism dialogue in schools through Religious Education (RE). The combination of RE and the use of religious heritage as an educational tool, along with the ways in which heritage can be translated for audiences and students that do not identify with local religious traditions, posed a challenge for the author. Another demanding topic is whether public schools in Greece can, or should, foster dialogue between groups in multi-religious societies.

2. The vital role of Religious Heritage

In Greece, the ecclesiastical tradition of Orthodoxy is an inexhaustible source of wealth. Byzantine churches, monasteries in inaccessible areas, catacombs and architectural buildings are merely some of the samples of the rich Orthodox heritage. Moreover, according to the data in the possession of the Directorate of Religious ministrations (Document by the Directorate of Religious Administration of the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, Ref. 67182/Θ1/20-4-2016), the existing worship places of non-Christian religious communities, amount to twenty (20) and belong to the following religious communities: Buddhists, 7 worship places, Hindus, 3 worship places, Islam, 4 worship places and Baha’i, 6 worship places.

The existing legally authorized worship places of Christian communities-confessions amount to approximately 300 and include the Anglican Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the German Evangelical Church in Greece, the Greek Evangelical Church, the Assyrian Church, the Armenian Evangelical Church, the Free Apostolic Church of Pentecost, the Apostolic Church of Pentecost, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Adventist Church, the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other religious groups with a small number of adherents. There are over 129 churches and monasteries of the Catholic Church in Greece¹⁸ according to data resulting from Law 4301/2014.

Unfortunately, many incidents of earlier years against sites of various religious communities were reported (such attack on the synagogues, desecration of a Holocaust

Memorial in Thessaloniki, vandalism of a Muslim cemetery in Komotini, desecration of the historic mosque Halil Bey in Kavala, desecration of orthodox churches and many other places according the Report of Acts against religious sites in Greece (Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, General Secretariat for Religious Affairs, Directorate of Religious Education Department of Religious Freedom and Interreligious Relations, 2015).

Religious heritage matters today for several reasons (Future for Religious Heritage, 2014). Firstly, is its social value. The religious buildings bind communities together through the worship and non-worship activities that take place within them. They are often the only public buildings remaining.

Secondly, there is its economic value. Places of worship attract visitors not only from faraway countries but also from neighboring places. The digital revolution has drastically altered the traditional economic relations at both sectoral and macro levels. In the contemporary economic environment, they occur with high frequency and unprecedented intensity, phenomena that were rare by the standards of traditional economy. Religious buildings represent five out of ten of Europe's most visited sites and make a major contribution to tourism. Religious tourism - or «pilgrimage tourism» - is today's form of alternative tourism (Rinschede, 1992; Sfakianakis, 2000), with a particular contribution to the development of the marginal areas of the country (Almpanaki, 2017b).

Its environmental value is also significant. Their physical presence either in the urban landscape or the rural environment invigorates all passersby. Furthermore, its cultural value is to be considered. Sacred buildings, their contents and their history represent the single most outstanding portfolio of Europe's historical patrimony. Historical and religious sites can be highly appealing tourist attractions.

A poll that was conducted by Sociovision and Toluna in April 2014, on behalf of the network "Future for Religious Heritage (FRH)", shows that Europeans of all generations have a strong attachment to their religious buildings and want to safeguard them for the future (Future for Religious Heritage, 2014)¹ (4 out of 5 Europeans think that religious buildings are essential for community life, and want them to be used more widely).

The need to preserve religious heritage is urgent. A report adopted in 2015 by the European Parliament states that "*religious heritage constitutes an intangible part of*

1 6000 Europeans from France, Germany, UK, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden were asked to rank the importance of religious heritage for their cultural heritage, the importance of religious heritage conservation for their community's current and future life, and the possibility of churches and other religious buildings being open for non-religious activities. The poll shows that 84% of Europeans of all ages (18<), in all the regions polled, agree that European shared religious heritage – the 500,000 buildings themselves and their contents with a history dating back well over 1,000 years – represents a unique and essential part of Europe's cultural heritage and are a key element of European identity. Europe's religious buildings have been central to its communities for hundreds of years and continue to be an integral part of community life today. 79% of people polled also believe that they have a crucial part to play with regards to the future survival of their communities. The poll shows that 87% of European citizens are also very open to the idea of promoting religious buildings and their architectural or artistic treasures to tourists. 72% of Europeans also think that, as well as worship, religious buildings should be open to other activities.

European cultural heritage and that historical religious heritage must be preserved for its cultural value, regardless of its religious origins.” Also affirms that religious heritage constitutes an intangible part of European cultural heritage; stresses that the importance of places, practices and objects linked to religious practices should not be disregarded in a discourse of European cultural heritage or be subjected to any form of discriminatory treatment (European Parliament, 2015).

The historical religious heritage, including architecture and music and must be preserved for its cultural value, regardless of its religious origins. The progressive aim of religious heritage is to promote churches as centers of the local community and history. The creation of a database of tangible and intangible religious heritage object is very important. Very significant also is the European funding for religious heritage and support, with dedicated funding, studies, research and pilot measures. Nowadays, European funding for religious and cultural heritage is available under several EU programmes. Religious heritage sites can also serve as the ‘engine’ for regional development and tourism and improving accessibility for people with disabilities.

Finally, the pedagogical value of Religious heritage is of the utmost importance teachers can encourage the use of religious heritage as an educational tool (European Parliament, 2015). As a tool in education it is concerned as an essential component in preserving Religious heritage. With the increasing diversity in the field of what we call formal education, it is no longer clear what ought to be included and excluded under formal education (Rogers & Hansman, 2004). In such a multiculturalism environment young people are facing problems concerning the choice of partner due to cultural or religious differences. In this light, the need of all European people to co-manage a future determined by the geography of the region becomes evident. Students could cultivate “empathy”, namely the ability to see through the eyes of another person. This ability, according to Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 2006), is also a feature of interpersonal intelligence and leads students to understand the position of other people through their own perspective, to feel solidarity and to defy prejudices and stereotypes (Essinger, 1991).

3. Introducing religious heritage and multiculturalism dialogue in schools through curriculum of Religious Education in Greece

The approach of RE in the Greek school has gone a long way and has passed from teacher-oriented instruction and catechism to the consideration of pedagogical, psychological and theological criteria as a modern educational process emphasizing the religious and moral development of the child (Perselis, 1994; Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2013).

The RE in Greece is compulsory in all schools (primary and secondary level) in accordance with the official mandatory curriculum established by the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. In Greece, there are numerous schools of Muslims and Catholics residing in the country. On the other hand, the students of the minority who attend Greek public schools have the right to withdraw from the course of RE due to reasons relating to their religious consciousness (Amendment of Law

3536/2007-16 January 2013) (Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2013).

The Greek State, few years ago, has radically transformed the Curriculum of RE for Greek compulsory education aiming, theoretically at least, to have a non-confessional RE. (Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2013). Today, the curriculum of RE is adopted and implemented by each country and the two axes on which this will develop will remain unambiguous: (a) the framework of stable European values, such as democracy, social cohesion, social justice and human rights, and (b) the clear educational criteria and the associated educational objectives such as sensitivity, respect, tolerance, unity, understanding, critical thinking, and the widening of its horizons (Institute of Educational Policy, 2017). Thus, RE nowadays, is considered an open-ended educational process that does fair justice to religious pluralism whilst providing religious literacy and supporting students in developing their cultural identity by teaching mainly Christian Orthodoxy and other religions (Yangazoglou, 2007).

One of the purposes of the new curriculum is to create opportunities for the social interaction of young people by fostering multiculturalism dialogue among individuals from different countries and helping them develop a mutual understanding and focus especially on human rights, cultivating the interdisciplinary spirit among students, along with collaboration, resilience and learning the values of respect (Koukounaras & Ziaka, 2015). The RE must meet the following necessary criteria according the Curriculum of RE, 2017:

- personal identity, knowledge of human identity in relation to religions and outlooks on life.
- cultivation of humanitarian and Greek education. Humanitarian education in official education needs to be grounded in an interpretive search for the meaning of life. Emphasis on the analysis of the nature of this meaning and of the educational goods that the student needs to explore and discover as an essential infrastructure for his/her own life. At this point, the Greek society intersects with the timeless tradition and culture of Orthodoxy.
- Religious literacy. The adolescent / teenager and then the adult is not enough to be acquainted with literacy only in terms of words and symbols. The knowledge of the context, which generates and shapes the concepts, as well as their cultural impact, is the essence of religious literacy, which in education is part of the multigraphism, i.e. the ability to construct meaning in different cultural, social or spatial contexts, as well as the ability to use alphabetical and multimodal representations.
- The acquaintance and communication with the «other». The pupil is familiar with the pluralistic character of the society in which he/she lives and realizes its religious elements, but also the multiplicity of his/her personal identity and the evolutionary dynamics in the collective and social expressions. At the same time, the student exercises the values of acceptance, respect and dialogue with the other, the dynamic tolerance towards the different and the right to diversity. Christianity, the other religions of the world and different outlooks on life, their characteristics and how they are expressed by individuals and groups in the present. The ability to analyse

religions and outlooks on life based on different interpretations and perspectives.

According to the new curriculum, numerous activities can be planned for the students, such as journalistic reports, digital and artistic designs, and dissemination activities. Additionally, the following activities could also be included: collection of material related to European religious centers, monuments, monasteries/hermitages, Byzantine churches, chapels, catacombs, religious centers, mosques, religious museums and Hebrew synagogues through the exploitation of texts, icons, maps, videos etc. and search through authoritative sources and official websites (such as Religiousgreece, Yougoculture, Religiana).

In relation to the learning objectives, it is expected that the pupils will acquire the following knowledge and skills (Albanaki, 2017): (a) Understanding the contribution of Christians to the development of European and world-wide civilization; (b) Understanding the influence of the Bible on the life and culture of Greece and Europe and discovering in the Bible answers on fundamental issues of social organization and behavior (Perselis, 2005) (c) Developing empathy towards religious narratives (Essinger, 1991); (d) Supporting the research, study and evaluation of texts and information; (e) Spatial thinking skills and cartographic competences, (f) Cultivating the collaborative skills, developing rules and confronting fanaticism.

The curriculum of RE, refers to Early Christian and Byzantine monuments, testimonies to an invaluable heritage and a tremendously long history. Also, dwells on the exploration of local religious history and tradition, aiming at the knowledge, preservation and renewal of the local cultural heritage, the approach of religious beliefs in general and Christianity in particular with multiple criteria (cultural, moral, social, historical, personal, theological), the decoding of the religious background of cultural traditions and the recognition of the religious dimensions of modern culture (Institute of Educational Policy, 2017).

4. Conclusions

The churches, monasteries and temples narrate the story of every place because they are directly related to the history and culture of the people. Churches are a place of worship for the believers of every religion and they are buildings the construction of which was particularly attentive due to their connection to the daily lives of people (Almpanaki, 2017b).

The religious heritage can instigate, maintain, and enhance the process of dialogue necessary for the process of inculturation, which involves and implies cultural diversity (Carlo-Stella, 2003). The teaching of religious heritage is aimed at enhancing pupils' co-operation within and outside schools, alleviating potential competition and achieving individualized and diversified instruction. Such a humanitarian approach presupposes cooperation between pupils which a) is an integral part of the democracy of the wider society; b) helps to integrate pupils with special needs or other peculiarities; c) is considered the most appropriate method of intercultural education.

In this way the school functions as a “workshop of values”, in which the students become researchers, learn to respect diversity, religious and cultural heritage and embrace the importance of its protection and emergence. The new curriculum of RE, invites students and teachers to reflect on current problems, deal with them as active citizens and creates opportunities for social interaction between young people by fostering dialogue among students from different countries in order to develop a mutual understanding. Recognizing the impact of institutional roles on learning outcomes, students play an active role in the learning process. The activities were designed to improve the communication of the team, mitigate conflicts and involve both educators and learners, helping them to overcome temporal/local constraints and raise the school’s/local community’s awareness (Stanton, Foreman & Wilson, 1996).

Moreover, the new curriculum focusing on a major trend at the interface of religion, identity, politics, and material culture and gives students and teachers the tools to undertake work in the heritage. Creatively makes use of the past to forge new identities in the present and negotiate the tension between heritage preservation and engaged ownership. Students develop personal interests concerning religious heritage and identity issues, linking what they process to their personal experiences, understanding the historical-economic-social context of the countries and linking cultural-religious findings to the present day. They also critically read about the monuments, understand the cultural and humanitarian aspect of Christianity and other religions and they detect and justify religious, theological and political motives behind the inspiration of art creators. Through these activities, students not only discover their unique skills, but also their peers’ cultural and religious background and heritage. Moreover, teachers of RE can cultivate European consciousness and identity, the empowerment of European values, the acquaintance with the religious, cultural and geographical diversity of Europe and the contact of students with arts and culture, so that Europe can take a more meaningful approach, especially in times of fanaticism, nationalism and homogenization.

The diverse cultural environment of Greece paints a positive and self-evident picture of the peaceful coexistence of people with different cultural identities. Religious heritage, related to important stages of human history, has ecumenical value and constitutes part of humanity’s common heritage. The use of religious heritage as an educational tool can help to deal with societal issues in order to bring people living in Europe closer together and promote multiculturalism dialogue.

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