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## Religious Education in Greece - Orthodox Christianity, Islam and Secularism

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### Abstract

This study is an attempt to address the issue of religion in the public sphere and secularism. Since the Eastern Orthodox Church has been established by the Greek constitution (1975) as the prevailing religion of Greece, there are elements of legal agreements- which inevitably spawn interactions- between state and Church in different areas. One such area is Religious Education. This article focuses on Religious Education (RE) in Greece which is a compulsory school subject and on two important interventions that highlight the interplay between religion, politics and education: firstly the new Curriculum for RE (2011) and secondly the introduction of an Islamic RE (2014) in a Greek region (Thrace) where Christians and Muslims have lived together for more than four centuries. The researches are based on fieldwork research and they attempt to open the discussion on the role of RE in a secular education system and its potential for coexistence and social cohesion.

**Keywords:** religious education, secularism, curriculum, Islam, public sphere

## **Introduction**

This article is focused on Religious Education (hereafter referred as to RE) in Greece and the ongoing debate that is taking place within the Greek public sphere. A debate that involves public education, citizens' rights, the relationship between the church and the state, the country's peculiar historical relationship with Turkey, the identification of Islam—in the collective narrative—with “Turkish Islam,” the presence of indigenous Muslims in Thrace since the Ottoman era, the country's policies on public education and particularly the subject of RE, and the emergence of an ever-increasing radicalism within the public sphere of a part of the populace, which derives from the austere economical situation of the country, massive immigration, high unemployment, and the manipulation of citizens' fear and misery by extreme political and/or religious groups.

Furthermore, the discussion will point to a new issue that has arisen with the introduction of a course on Islam in the Greek state school system—specifically in the region of Thrace, where many Greek Muslim citizens live—and the attendant heated debates as well as the related minority options of state policy on this issue, and the political antagonism between Greece and Turkey and how that affects this specific community in Greece with its multiple identities.

## **Religion in the Public Sphere**

Analysis of the role of religion in modern society is closely linked with the process of secularization and the theory (or theories) that interpret it. Secularism is a multidimensional process that goes back to the historical conditions surrounding the formation of the modern state and the loss of religious power via political legitimatization. As a concept, it appears with various meanings depending on the perspective of the researchers who analyze this notion, primarily theologians, philosophers, sociologists, and jurists. Grace Davie has attempted to identify the significance of religion in the modern global order and to rethink the predominant ways of thought concerning the place of religion within secular societies. Looking at the history of Europe, Davie concludes that is not immediately clear what exactly the notion “theory of secularism” means; at the same time, she underlines that it is quite clear that the sociology of religion must admit that religious experience and religious changes have their impact on societies. Without devaluing all aspects of the notion of secularism—viewing, for example, the legal separation of religion and state as a “healthy” stage of modernism—, she concludes that secularism does not necessarily entail the marginalization of religion to the private sphere nor even the diminution of religious practices. Davie argues that if we want to understand secularism and globalization, we have to take into consideration humanity's' complex and continuous relationship with religion. She maintains that it is possible for society to be both religious and secular (Davie, 2007, pp. 160, 224-243).

It would be argued that modern European societies are at the same time secular and religious, with the possible exception of the French *laïcité* (Bouretz, 2000, p. 58); but even this *laïcité* today suffers at the practical level from the public demands of French Muslims. Secularization is therefore part of a broader political process, the main feature of which is the affirmation of the individual as the subject of political rights and obligations. Among these rights, one which stands out is freedom of thought and religion, which, in order to be fully implemented, requires, from a legal point of view, the separation of Church and State.

The spectacular return of religion to the European public space is due, mainly after the 1990's and especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> c., to the demands of faithful Muslims within secular societies, and the confrontation of issues concerning "public Islam and the common good." (Salvatore, 2006, pp. 543-561). Therefore, secular European states are facing new issues that have been raised with the emergence of Islam's public demands within secular "western" countries.

Similarly, European education, with diverse models in each country, faces the challenge of finding ways to promote the peaceful coexistence of various religious identities in the public space and is thus called upon to manage multiculturalism and multireligiosity in schools. In the European area there has been a dialogue for inter-religious and intercultural education since 2001. Moreover, the Committee of Ministers agreed to a policy recommendation (CM/Rec(2008)12) that all member states should include the impartial study of religions within the curricula of their school's systems. This recommendation which incorporated ideas from the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, gives a compelling cultural argument for the study of religions and legitimacy for a compulsory RE. It should be mentioned that its principles provide intercultural dialogue and its dimension of religious and non-religious convictions as significant factors for the development of tolerance and cultural coexistence (Koukounaras Liagkis, 2013a). In 2014 The Council of Europe published *Signposts* as an aid for policy makers, schools and teacher trainers in member states to enable them to interpret and act upon the 2008 recommendation from the Committee of Ministers on teaching about religious and non-religious convictions (Jackson, 2014).

The above raise the controversial question: What are the educational policies of secular states towards their multireligious citizenry (Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, non-religious, etc.), and how is the issue of the majority's religious identity expressed in educational, political, and religious terms? Religious diversity can operate as a cohesive bond or a divisive factor between citizens, and in the case of Islam, what do European Muslims, as well as the newly arrived immigrants, desire for themselves? Is there only one will, and how can secular states satisfy the many different religious tendencies within their societies and support a capable educational system?

These questions are only the beginning of a series of questions, both old and new, that pertain to most of the countries of Europe and especially the countries of the Balkan

Peninsula, which has been seized by the most intense religious, political, and territorial antagonisms throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during and after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and where much of the so-called "old" Islam, an inheritance from the Ottomans lives (Ziaka, 2013). According to Tsioumis (2011), the case of Greece "could not be excluded from the attitude of modern-nation states of the Balkans, where ethnic identity developed as opposed to the identity of the 'other' and this reality has also affected the management of minority—and majority we could add—educational policy". The emergence of new nation states also relied, particularly in the case of Greece, on collective memories and traditions about their lost homelands, their resistance to the efforts of Islamisation, the Orthodox faith's contribution to the preservation of Greek literature, language, culture, and identity (Molokotos-Liederman). The consensus view seems to be that the Greek state is deemed as a case study regarding the secularization process (Prodromou, 1998).

### **Greek state schools and Religious Education: old debates under new realities**

Greek state schools require RE to be taught in each of the six years of secondary education for two hours per week, while in the upper primary grades RE is offered, from the third grade until the sixth. The framework for RE in schools is provided by the basic Law for Education (1566/1985) which requires that all students on a mandatory basis have to have been taught the 'authentic' tradition of the Orthodox Church (article 1, paragraph 1). Besides article 13, paragraphs 1-2 of the constitution guarantee the basic right to freedom of religion and associate it with the development of religious consciousness. Moreover, according to Law 1566/1985 the state has to provide RE to any religious community who wants to organize its confessional RE on condition that 5 students apply for it. Since 2013 only the Catholic community has been a case in point and in their case they only applied to have their own RE teachers though they have followed the official Curriculum and textbooks of Greek RE from 2003 onward. Of course, every student has a right to be exempted from RE through an application, which must be signed by the two parents, arguing that he has reasons related to other doctrines, religion or religious consciousness, in general (Koukounaras Liagkis, 2015). What is important to stress at this point is that, according to personal fieldwork research, Muslim students in Greece who are immigrants and they do not live in the region of Thrace (north part of Greece) do not likely apply for exemption from RE.

In primary education, those who teach RE are primary school teachers who have not received any special RE training during their university education; in secondary education, RE teachers have graduated from one of the country's two Theological Schools (Athens, Thessaloniki). RE focuses primarily on the Christian faith and Orthodox tradition; Students also are taught about the other major world religions, with two extended sections placing special emphasis on Islam in the textbook of the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade of the Lyceum (Ziaka, 2009). Some but not many references to Islam are in the RE textbooks in primary school and high school/Gymnasium (Primary: 4<sup>th</sup> grade,

a photo, p.46, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, a section (33). High school: 1<sup>st</sup> grade, a text, p. 78 and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, a photo. p.83). In both primary and secondary classes textbooks dominate, since the Curriculum (2003) has remained a content-focused designed Curriculum containing content basically derived more from 'Theology' (related to a particular religion and faith) instead of 'Religious studies' (related to different religions, cultures and traditions). Every teacher is free to extend their teaching to other religions, speaking largely in historical terms about the three monotheistic religions and their historical and cultural encounters with one another. The teachers are Greek civil servants and are not controlled, or appointed by the Greek Orthodox Church and the same holds true for university professors of theology.

All the above were forced to change with the emergence of new realities within the country, and the drafting of a new curriculum for the "New School," as the whole project was named by the Ministry of Education, beginning with the 2010-2011 academic year. The Pedagogical Institute, with the support of the Ministry of Education, developed a new Curriculum and a pilot program for the RE (as all the other subjects of the Curriculum). The pilot program which was organised initially to run for the 2011-12 school year was extended for one year and then more until the June of 2015. Until today there is no certainty, as it is stressed below, that the new Curriculum will be implemented or that there would be changes at least on the current RE Curriculum (2003).

The new Curriculum though is not confessional is still an open Christian Curriculum, with only a 10% of its content dedicated to the study of world religions. The Curriculum, mainly derived of the British experience, defines the inclusion of epistemological, theological and pedagogical approaches, remaining a compulsory subject of the Greek school curriculum. The foregoing discussion implies that the Curriculum has two main characteristics: a) It avoids equating Religious Education with Theology as did all the previous curricula and b) It fundamentally provides a basic constructivist approach to teaching and learning about religions focusing on learning not on teaching. (Koukounaras Liagkis, 2015; Karamouzis, 2011). This approach which has given rise to criticism from the more traditionalist theologians and religious educators who are strongly influenced by either one or the other underlines that it offers new pedagogical tools to the older Curriculum, such as that of interaction between students and teacher, and many other positive developments. Without undermining the older Curriculum it rendered interesting facts but in an outdated and old-fashioned way, in which both the teacher and the student are controlled by the mediating textbook, a static piece of material, which was often unclear and tedious for the student, while the new Curriculum place the student at the center of the teaching process with new pedagogical methods. Thus, the pedagogical methods employed in the new Curriculum are much friendlier to both the students and the teachers, providing more than one interactive choice per lesson, and the possibility of independent study on the part of the students with the facilitation—rather than the necessary intervention—of the teacher, thus the students' recollection

of other information sets, experiences, and skills are related to an ecumenical view and understanding of the world, geography, ecology, the environment, and others which are rightly associated with RE. Furthermore, some Greek researchers lend support to the claim that “the New Pilot Curricula (RE and Greek language) promote the education of the students without social, economic, educational, religious, or cultural discriminations and inequalities. Both cases are marked by an effort to promote the principles of intercultural education within the pedagogical framework where the Curricula are implemented.” (Mitropoulou, Rantzou, & Anagnostopoulou, 2015).

That reform spawned a maelstrom of criticism that continues to gain strength, taking, however, away the essence of the project and contributing nothing to a competent presentation of the material in the new Curriculum (i.e. the texts of the *Curriculum* and the *Guide for the Curriculum*) in the school community or within the broader public sphere. At the same time, the failure to take into account society’s changing needs and the insistence on a religious “primitivism” (Kairidis, 2008) runs counter to class on religion itself. It is commonly accepted, even by the Hierarchy of the Church of Greece, that the character of the RE “in the framework of the overall program of education should not be ‘catechetical,’ ‘confessional,’ or ‘religious studies’ in the absolute sense, nor should these exclusively define its content” (Anthimos, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, RE teachers have been divided into the supporters (progressives) and the non supporters (traditionalists) the new Curriculum. Trine Stauning Willert, with a long standing research on Greek Orthodox thought and society, notices that between theologians and RE teachers in Greece two views and types are identified: “The first used a traditionalist agenda envisioning Orthodoxy as the essence of Greek culture and a return to the ‘good old days’ through a revival of Orthodox values in education. The other took contemporary Greek society as a key point of reference advocating the Orthodox theology and Orthodox values are compatible with a contemporary outlook which can contribute to society as it really is today and not as it should be or as it, supposedly, was in ‘the good old days’” (Stauning Willert, 2014).

The issue remains open until now; the new Curriculum has not been implemented yet. With regard to political initiatives, which are constantly changing due to political uncertainty and political opportunism, this is a debate which has been underway since 2009 onwards and in which three tendencies can be observed relative to RE. The first is that of technocrats, who are skeptical about the usefulness of RE, and—in light of the general spirit of austerity—were inclined to cut the “unproductive” religion classes. This attitude characterizes also a portion of the anti-bailout (memorandum) politicians and citizens on the left, who display their ideological prejudices on the topic of religion. On the other end of the spectrum, we find a caustic ethno-religious rhetoric, which is supported by right-wing forces and groups of Christians, theologians, and others, including some leading ecclesiastical figures (Zoumboulakis, 2013). In the middle, there are a group of theologians, citizens,

religious leaders, the Institute of Educational Policy and also a group of politicians who are trying, without exaggerating, to reshape RE in Greece and prevent social conflicts.

### **Introducing Islamic RE in the Greek State Schools**

In recent years (since 2013), a part of the current political leadership, i.e.: the General Secretary of Religious Affairs has seemed amenable toward the aforementioned changes, and is trying to reconcile all the various forces by preserving RE within the state school system while also updating it in the light of the new social challenges. The General Secretary of Religious Affairs of the Greek Ministry of Education has, also taken a step further with the initiative to introduce an optional Islamic RE in the Greek state schools of Western Thrace, where the Muslim minority of “old” Islam lives according to the Lausanne Treaty (1923). They are entitled to their bilingual educational system but as the Minority schools, especially High Schools, could not satisfy all the applications due to different reasons (big number of students, limited linguistics skills concerning the Greek language and societal reasons), an increasing number of Muslim adolescents register at Greek Secondary schools. Bearing in mind that situation someone could conclude that the initiatives above-and mainly with the introduction of Islamic RE in the state schools- are aimed primarily at safeguarding the non-instrumentalization of the minority by the Turkish policy through religion in the region and also to start preparing the field to the growing religious, political, and social needs of the Muslim immigrants, by creating an atmosphere within the state Greek school community that is friendly toward Islam and works against stereotypes and Islamophobia.

In order to move forward with this initiative, a committee, including Muslim citizens of Western Thrace, was appointed for the “improvement of the educational system of the religious (Muslim) minority of Thrace” with the main aim to investigate the ways of the best possible and most effective application of the provisions of Article 53, entitled “Teachers of religion of the Muslim minority of Thrace, and the improvement of education for Muslim children in the public schools of Thrace,” of Law 4115/2013 (FEK 24/30-1-2013), which was composed by Ministerial Decree 27147/A3/27-02-2013. At the conclusion of its meetings in mid-November 2013, this Committee recommended to the Ministry of Education, among other things, the appointment of another special committee to write the textbooks for the Islamic RE. In accordance with the RE Curriculum, the Islamic RE will consist of two hours lessons per week. One hour of reading the Qur’anic texts in Arabic, and one hour devoted to the class on Islam in Greek. The issue of language has primarily led to debate and tension within a part of the Muslim community, which calls for the teaching to be in Turkish. But this would be a paradox for the Greek educational system, especially when there are already the so-called “minority schools” as well as two madrasas in the cities of Komotini and Echinós, where pupils enjoy the right to be taught specific lessons in the Turkish language, including the class on religion. Furthermore, after almost two years

of inauguration and implementation of the optional Islamic RE, it is increasingly understood, by a large part of local population in Thrace, that the communication of religious diversity in a common language and school environment, may remove the perplexities and controversies, and lead to a constructive conversation within the public sphere (Ziaka, 2015)

Nevertheless, a part of the political left, specifically some components of the SYRIZA party do not support the introduction of the Islamic RE in the Greek public school system, as much as they generally oppose the teaching of religion in schools, prioritizing instead the safeguarding of human rights within the secular state. There is also a lively discussion about the identity of the Muslims of Thrace, the marking of multiple and often crossing identities (Sebba & Wooton, 1998)—specifically whether or not they are all purely Turkish—, and their right to their mother tongue within Greece. Of course, the preservation of their “mother tongue” is guaranteed by the Lausanne Treaty (1923), but its teaching is implemented to the minority schools (Tsitselikis & Mavrommatis, 2003), with the Turkish language to be the predominant one in education and the expense of the two others non written languages (Pomak and Roma).

This why, the issues of minority education in Thrace are regulated under the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne (Articles 40, 41, 45), which provides for the religious, linguistic, and educational freedom of religious minorities, both in Greece and Turkey. Issues regarding minority education are also dealt with by the Educational Protocol of 20.12.1968, which is still in effect. Essentially, this opened the way for the infusion of Turkish national identity into the Muslim minority of Western Thrace and its discussion until today (Trubeta, 2001, pp. 41-42; Trubeta, 2003). Since 1930, and particularly between 1950-1970, Turkey was directly involved in minority education, through the sending of books, funds for the construction of schools, teacher education, etc. The Greek-Turkish Agreement of 1951 (20 April) connected the minority even more with the Turkish state (Mavrommatis, 2006). The Treaty of Lausanne was further complemented by provisions in the Greek-Turkish Protocol of 1968 (Educational Protocol between Greece and Turkey, 1968), and the Agreement of 2000 (Ministerial Decree G2/933, 3.3.2000 [FEK B 372, 2000]: Timetable of forms A, B and C of Minority High Schools) (Tsitselikis & Mavrommatis, 2003, pp. 28-31). The Greek-Turkish educational protocol of 1968 included adjustments regarding the language of instruction, the Turkish language, audio-visual aids, school textbooks, etc.

On this legal basis, compulsory primary education is provided by the minority schools in a bilingual program (six years' duration, as in state education). In Greek, the students are taught history, environmental studies, geography, and the Greek language, while in Turkish they are taught the Turkish language, natural sciences, mathematics, and religion. When gymnastics, arts, and music are not taught by specialized teachers (as is the case, for example, in the small schools in the Rhodopes mountains), they are taught by the Muslim teacher. In the Rhodopes mountains,



therefore, primary education takes place exclusively in the minority schools, as opposed to the urban areas, where the minority and state elementary schools coexist.

### Shifts in the number of minority elementary schools in Thrace

**Table 1**

Province	Xanthi	Rhodope	Evros	Total
Elementary Schools (2004 - 05) (Liazos, 2007)	76	135	21	232
Elementary Schools (2014) (Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education/Eastern Macedonia and Thrace)	52	92	15	159

Minority Secondary education in Thrace operates, by law, with: one Gymnasium (3 years compulsory high school) and one Lyceum (an optional 3 years school after Gymnasium) (Cümülcine Celal Bayar Lises) in Komotini founded in 1952; one Gymnasium and one Lyceum (İskeçe Muzafeer Salioglu Azinlik Ortaokul ve Lises) in Xanthi founded in 1964; and two madrassas, one in Komotini, and one in Echinof of Xanthi. Since 1999, the madrassas in Komotini and Xanthi have moved from a five-year to a six-year program (Ministerial Decree G2/5560 of 25-11-1999). These madrassas follow the same program as the minority secondary schools, except that additional courses with religious content are taught, such as: Interpretation of the Qur'an, Arabic Language, Islamic History, Imamat etc. (Ziaka 2009, pp. 168-171). Recently, the committee for the improvement of the educational system of the Muslim minority of Thrace proposed, among other things, the examination of the reform of the school schedule, with a RE specialized program of 17 or 18 hours for Gymnasium and the first grade of Lyceum, 14 hours for the second grade of Lyceum, and 9 hours for the third grade, for a total of 42 hours, based on the model of the state schools for fine arts, music, etc.

The minority secondary schools also follow a bilingual program. The courses taught in the Greek language are: Ancient and Modern Greek, History, Geography, and Civics ("theoretical" courses), while the other courses (the "positive" courses: Science, Mathematics, etc.), together with the Turkish language, are taught in Turkish. It is characteristic that, in the minority schools, apart from the general education courses, all the courses of the positive sciences as well as some technological education (Mathematics and Science) are taught in Turkish. Only theoretical courses—which are usually not an option for students, so they do not apply—and the rest of the technological education courses are taught in Greek.

In the completely Muslim mountain regions of Thrace, there are also five Gymnasia and one Lyceum, which fall into the general Curriculum (in Organi in Rhodope province, and in Xanthi province in Sminthi, where there is also Lyceuml, in Glafki, in

Echino, and in Therma). The Muslim students in these schools are taught the course on religion in Turkish, the Qur'an in Arabic, and all the other courses in Greek (Liazos, 2007, p. 117). In the city of Xanthi, there is also a minority Vocational School. All these schools follow the curricula of the state schools.

Without engaging in ideological rivalries concerning the prevalence of the Turkish language in virtually all the minority it could be argued that much of this populace has not been sufficiently trained in the Greek language, which makes the relationship between the state and citizen much more difficult. The critical stance towards the largely outdated educational methodology of minority education that continues to exist in the Greece of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is inevitable, and also the consequences it has, both educationally and psychologically (Askouni, 2011). Indeed, these are some of the reasons that today there is an outflow of students from the Muslim minority schools and into Greek state schools. Particularly after 1996, the percentage of Muslim students who have continued and completed secondary education has greatly increased when compared to previous years. The special quota of 0.5% for the admission of minority pupils to higher education institutions has contributed to this increase. This is an important affirmative action measure for Thracian Muslim students, which essentially offers them an additional 350 positions at Greek universities (AEI) and higher technical institutes (TEI). A further reason for choosing Greek-language education is the prospect for continuing their studies at Greek universities (Ziaka, 2009, p. 170).

Towards this aim and during the past fifteen years, more attention has been given to minorities and the matter of their education than in the past. In addition to the positive contributions of the legal measures referred to above, the Greek Ministry of Education has also undertaken important initiatives, in collaboration with the Greek university community, to work out special professional development programs both for minority educators as well as for many other areas of Muslim education (Androussou, Askouni, Dragona, Frangoudaki, & Plexoussaki, 2011). The program for the education of Muslim children (1997-2008) concerned minority pupils (firstly, primary school level, and to a somewhat lesser extent, secondary-level). They were provided with a series of new books for learning Greek and to assist their integration into the wider environment, not only the Greek but also the European.

The attempt, however, to introduce an Islamic RE into the Greek state schools of Thrace raised many questions and posed several difficulties. The former pertain to conflicts within the Muslim community over the choice of language, i.e., Arabic for the Qur'an and Greek for teaching purposes. The latter relate to the Muslim RE teachers themselves and whether they are ready to teach the Qur'an and Islam in state schools in Arabic, with Greek as simply an auxiliary language, after training at the madrassas and a very brief introductory seminar, which was supported by Thessaloniki's School of Theology, as well as by doctors of Muslim theology and pedagogy, in late September and early October 2013. During this training seminar, personal research stressed that

the Turkish language had been partly “sanctified” by the Muslim minority, and at the same time they felt comfortable with the rendering of Qur’anic terms into Turkish. Among the Muslims chosen by the Greek state to become RE teachers in the state school system (20 during the first (2013) phase and 24 during the second (2014) phase), there is also a broad linguistic amalgam. Some speak Turkish well and know how to read Arabic, but are less adept at Greek, while others, and especially those graduate of the Special Pedagogical Academy (E.P.A.T.H.)—which aimed at the “education and training of native Muslim teachers,” according to its founding charter (PD 31/1969), but, for political reasons, was closed two years ago—have sufficient proficiency in both Greek and Turkish, but much less in Arabic, even though many of them are graduates of madrassas. Moreover, some Muslim members of the Greek Parliament object to the proposed model, since the creation of new teachers of religion and Imams, who will be educated by the Greek state, will probably cut into the influx of imams and preachers from Turkey but also from other parts of the Middle East, mainly from Saudi Arabia. Egypt used to be also a country of preference, until recently, but not anymore, because cannot provide scholarships as the other two states do. Also critical of the Greek state’s proposal are Muslims Muftis elected from a certain part of the minority, not those Muftis appointed and recognized by the Greek state. The elected Mufti of Xanthi, employing nationalistic rather than theological arguments, warned their fellow citizens who were appointed by the Greek state not to proceed with their jobs, since soon imams will appear without “circumcision” (**Gündem newspaper January 16, 2014**). **Of course in Thrace** sometimes the national and the religious compete, and sometimes the religious is identified with the national—such as in the case of the election or appointment of the Mufti and the great debate that began after 1980 about the application of Shari’a law and other, similar issues (Ziaka, 2013). Furthermore, there was a pedagogical view that has fostered debate on the reason Greek state established a confessional Islamic RE in Thrace when at the same time attempted to literally reform the RE in state schools to non-confessional (**Koukounaras Liagkis, 2013b**). At the same time, another debate has begun regarding the broader public sphere and the minority issues of Thrace. There are the voices of those who are critical of the “hegemonic elite” of the Greek state, and other agents at the region like the Media and the local “elites” (**Gkintidis, 2013; Tsibiridou, 2006**). There are also other voices who talk about taking responsibility for the teaching of RE within Greek state schools and within a frame of a broader national educational strategic. An initiative who can lead to a mutual understanding of religious “otherness” and non-religious voices, within the local and national context, without abandoning the religious education only to denominational/catechetical circles that they do not share, the most of the times, a public common space for dialogue and even progressive debate (Ziaka, 2015a).

The reality is that, of the 82 teachers of religion, 58 are serving the mosques as imams and the other 24, of which 23 are graduates of EPATH, entered the schools at the beginning of 2014. RE was chosen by the majority of the students, with few

exceptions. At the same time a pioneering project entitled “Lifelong Learning Program for Christian and Muslim Theologians of Thrace on Issues Related to the Teaching of Religion, Religious Otherness and Intercultural Religious Education” has started and it is still in process until September 2015. The programme prioritizes, educationally, religious diversity in Thrace as a factor of peaceful coexistence and interaction in the public sphere. The programme was designed by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the School of Theology by the Scientific Responsible Angeliki Ziaka and its aim is to teach religion as a catalyst for a harmonious and constructive coexistence, and not as a source of tensions. Therefore, meetings between Christian theologians-RE teachers in Secondary schools and Muslim RE teachers in Primary and Secondary schools have been held basically on the subject of ‘teaching of religion’, with the additional motive of promoting their acquaintance and mutual support in the public school environment. So far, there have been 390 hours of training in two phases of the program (1<sup>st</sup>: September 2014-December 2014 and 2<sup>nd</sup>: February 2015-April 2015), with interdisciplinary and interfaith approaches, for 65 RE teachers (of the total 90 appointees) and 82 imams and RE teachers of Islam. Already, 140 people have registered for the joint training for teachers of Christianity and Islam that will take place in September within the framework of the program and it admittedly would be the most interesting part for research and evaluation. From the program’s progress to this point, for the sake of discussion some issues would be addressed: The program a) has been welcomed by the educational communities of the aforementioned areas and particularly by our theologian colleagues in secondary education and the teachers of Islam. b) was a good beginning for communication and public debate on the needs and educational priorities both now and in the future on issues of religion and an intercultural approach to them, c) created an atmosphere of trust and communication in the broader public space. d) the optional Islamic RE in the Greek state school of Thrace has little or no drop-outs, and in this sense forms a safeguard for the state school system’s RE with a broader intercultural character not restricted to the narrow confines of emotional and region-based confessional approaches (catechism). The same is also true of the RE lessons in the broader Greek school system (Ziaka, 2015b).

## **Discussion**

In the light of the Greek situation, that is articulated above, the role of “public religion/s” (Casanova, 1994; Eickelman, 2002) seems more stable, and some understand the role of the religious leaders (Bishops and Muftis) as guarantors of social security within the public sphere of religiously “other” citizens. For still others, religious faith works not “as a means to bridge differences between them (Muslims) and the majority, but rather as a dividing chasm” (Trubeta, 2001, p. 245). Furthermore, secularism in Greece has had a dialectical stance with and dependence on religion/the Church (Kalaitzidis, 2012) in which relationship Islam also has a local presence, even though it has been on the margins of society for decades (Salvatore, 2006, p. 555).

The interplay between religion and the public space in Greece reveals the important assumption that the Greek constitution proclaims not only the principle of "religious tolerance," but also that of "religious freedom." In modern Greece, religion has never been absent from the public sphere, and there is a special relationship between the Church and the State. One of the bases for the relationship between the Church and the State is the Constitution of 1975, which was revised in 1986, 2001, and 2008. It is important to note that the non revised Article 13, paragraph 1, expressly establishes the right of "religious freedom". But as the Eastern Orthodox Church is established by the Greek constitution as the prevailing religion of Greece no one can deny that there are elements of legal agreements- which inevitably spawn interactions- between state and Church and furthermore between groups of citizen or religious communities in different areas. RE is inevitably a crucial factor in that case and therefore state recognition that trying to reform it and adjust it with the European environment-is not always successful. Obviously the question of RE and its role in pluralistic societies is dominant but at the core of the study, however, the question of symbiosis exists and how (some would argue if) religious and non religious people should believe, behave and belong independently and at the same time commonly within the public sphere. Of course European and Greek research examine and illuminate at the same time the inclusive view of religious freedom and the potential of RE.

In such environment, where religion in the public space raises tempers and engenders conflicts, examples of acceptance and respect for religious diversity within the country's academic institutions is of paramount and symbolic importance. The Theological School of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki has already played a leading role in this regard, having since 1970 granted a prayer room to the university's Muslim students guaranteeing safety to every Muslim who wished to pray.

The School of Theology in Thessaloniki, moreover, taking into account all the tension and debate in the public sphere concerning religion generally and Islam specifically, is also moving towards the creation of a research direction of Muslim Studies. The goal of the project is to open the doors to the study of the religion of Islam on an academic rather than confessional basis. In this vein, parallel to the purely Islamic courses (Qur'an, Sunna/Hadith, Tafsir, and Shari'a), there will also be courses on: Muslim tariqa, which has a rich history in the Balkan peninsula; the history of relations between Orthodox Christianity and Islam; and local expressions and understandings of Islam, all focusing on social and cultural relationships and mutual understanding between members of the two religious traditions. Such a project has the support of parts of the academic, political, and ecclesiastical establishments, but also has critics, who view such a project through an ideological spectrum and believe that such a project would open the doors to the Turkification and Islamization of Greece and Europe. Criticism is also voiced by Christian and Muslim citizens and representatives of Christian and Muslim associations about how it is possible for Christianity or Islam to be taught within the Universities without a confessional orientation.

The main question that remains is whether or not to disengage religion from state hegemony and religiously institutionalized hegemony, leaving it therefore with the ability to operate in the public sphere and in civil society, with freedom and creativity as a social and cultural agent. If secularism really exists to emancipate humans from religious authority, would not the words of Tocqueville, two centuries later, apply? "When there is no longer any principle of authority in religion any more than in politics, men are speedily frightened at the aspect of this unbounded independence. [...]" (Hervieu-Leger & Willaime, 2005, p. 74; Van de Putte, 2010, p. 487). Seeing now, however, the state of religion in the public sphere some two centuries later than Tocqueville, it can be concluded that religions will continue to be an integral part of societies. Whether or not the secular and religious institutions find a way to work together will be an indicator of whether democracy itself can continue to be sustained and survive. And, in this case, the relationship is not one-sided, but bilateral.

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