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between the state and religious in Bulgaria

Zhasmina Donkova

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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND THE FORMS OF COOPERATION BETWEEN THE STATE AND RELIGIOUS IN BULGARIA

ZHASMINA DONKOVA¹

Abstract

The question about dialogue and cooperation between different religious institution and communities in Bulgaria and the role of government in this process is discussed during multiple round tables and conferences. Not only organizations from the non-government sector, but also governmental structures are engaged in the accomplishment of the practically efficacious model of interreligious dialogue. The governmental policy on religions in Bulgaria is performed on the grounds of the local regulation and its intrinsic main principles. The support and encouragement of the dialogue between religions is set in the Constitution, where is stated that “The freedom of consciousness and thought and the choice of religion and religious and atheistic opinions are inviolable. The government facilitates the maintenance of tolerance and respect between believers from different religions as well as between the believers and non-believers”. (Article 37, Paragraph 1)

Keywords: religions, governmental structures, interreligious dialogue, cooperation, believers, non-believers.

Rationale

The need of a dialogue between different religions results from the understanding that religious doctrines are still occasionally an obstacle to the peaceful coexistence and social binding of the people. The establishment of relations based on respect and the acknowledgment of common values and the respect to differences in religions makes it possible not only to overpass the limits of routine tolerance but also to avoid the danger from religious extremism.

The good knowledge of both your own religious tradition and the rest is an important condition for the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue. Differences should be accepted not tendentiously but the spirit of peace, understanding and respect should be looked for. It is a fact that the presentation of any religion accentuates the pretensions to universality and validity. However, this should not be an obstacle to a dialogue and the full participation in socially important debates over various questions.

¹ Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

The public announcement of religious symbols or celebrating religious holidays of the prevalent religions in separate countries should be considered neither an insult to the importance of the rest religions, nor a threat from social tension between the believers from different religious communities.

The other important condition for the efficacy of a dialogue is that the process of its accomplishment should concern a wide specter of questions but not accentuate only problems related to religious traditions and practices. It should be looked for convergence based on all-human values, but, at the same time, also the questions that lead to disagreement, uncertainty and even a fear from the other should not be neglected.

After the events of 11 September 2001, the questions related to the interreligious dialogue in its social and geopolitical dimensions gained a special actuality worldwide. Due to its multilayeredness, the problem of the interreligious dialogue is examined by different social activists, politicians and scholars in multiple discussions and analyses.

Not only organizations from the non-government sector, but also governmental structures are engaged in the accomplishment of the practically efficacious model of interreligious dialogue.

The dimensions of the intercultural dialogue, which essential part is also the dialogue between various religions, led the European Community to proclaim 2008 the year of intercultural dialogue. Within the frameworks of this initiative, a series of events and meetings, dedicated to the mutual agreement and respect between the representatives of the different religious communities in Europe took place.

European Initiatives for the Encouragement of International Dialogue

Realizing the need of interreligious dialogue, increasingly more religious leaders from Europe omit their own narrow doctrinal restrictions and accept the mission to work together for the encouragement of peaceful coexistence and the prevention of the conflicts based on religion. According to them, the dialogue is important for a peaceful and prospering Europe and therefore the religious leaders of all religious traditions from any part of the Continent must actively participate in the dialogue that is based on the principles of respect to anyone's rights. One of the projects for the accomplishment of this goal is the initiative for the establishment of the union of religious leaders to solve different challenges occurring before the modern European citizen.

After performed meetings and discussions aimed to specify the parameters of the future organization, the European Council of Religious Leaders – Religions for Peace (ECRLRP) was created in Oslo in 2002. It unites the spiritual leaders of traditional religions in Europe – Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and also the

representatives of Buddhism, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism were included as active participants.

One of the goals of this council is to work for the accomplishment of cooperation between all religious persons in Europe for peace and stability by means of dialogue and support. On the Continent, where religion is often considered a source of conflicts and tension, ECRLRP aims to act as one of the resources for the provision and maintenance of peace in the region. In the context of the planned goals and aims, the members of ECRLRP performed a meeting in Berlin – the city symbolizing the history and divide, reconciliation and new beginning in Europe, from 3 till 5 March 2008. During this meeting, the participants declared their readiness to support interreligious dialogue at all levels in the European society. To this purpose, the declaration was prepared and approved that stated that interreligious dialogue should be performed on the grounds of the acknowledgment of human rights, which are set in different religious traditions and objectified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In the same context, in May 2009 the Council approved another declaration concerning dialogue between different cultures for the achievement of peace. It states that any separate culture is unique and should be considered the complex of different values and traditions, which determine a worldview and lifestyle. Since religion is closely related with culture and is an essential principle for the encouragement of peace on the grounds of religion, an important condition is to pay sufficiently attention to the cultural dimension of religions.

Dimensions of Interreligious Dialogue in Bulgaria

As the result of the global processes in the sphere of dialogue between religions, a special attention is paid in Bulgaria to this question during the last two decades. The questions that permanently circulate in public sphere are directly engaged with this problematic and refer to the free exercise of the religious rights and freedoms, interreligious dialogue and the place and role of the government in the settlement of these problems.

The question about dialogue and cooperation between different religious institutions and communities in Bulgaria and the role of government in this process is discussed during multiple round tables and conferences. The general opinion is that due to the complexity and delicacy of the problem for interreligious dialogue a serious attention should be primarily paid to the media interpretation of the image representing the different religious traditions in public sphere of our country. It is especially important to show a regular citizen that mutual respect and consideration for anyone's right to profess what corresponds to his own inner convictions and spiritual needs is an inviolable right. The Law on Religions settles the right of religion and juridical state of the

religious communities, institutions and their relations with government (Article 1) according to international directives.

A special place is assigned to the essence and way of exercising an individual right of religion. According to Article 2, Paragraph 2, “*The right of religion includes anyone's right to form freely his own religious convictions and to choose, change and profess – correspondingly to exercise – freely his own religion, personally and collectively, publicly or privately, through worship, education and rituals*”. No one can be persecuted or restricted in his own rights due to his own religious convictions (Article 3, Paragraph 1).

The right of religion is exercised through the formation and expression of religious conviction, establishment and participation in a religious community, organization of institutions in the community, performance or religious education, etc. (Article 5, Paragraph 1). In this connection, the moments, in which the fulfillment of this right can be restricted, are specified (Article 8).

The governmental policy on religions in Republic of Bulgaria is performed on the grounds of the local regulation and its intrinsic main principles. The support and encouragement of the dialogue between religions is set in the Constitution, where is stated that “*The freedom of consciousness and thought and the choice of religion and religious and atheistic opinions are inviolable. The government facilitates the maintenance of tolerance and respect between believers from different religions as well as between the believers and non-believers*” (Article 37, Paragraph 1). The same principle is incorporated also in Article 4, Paragraph 3 of the Law on Religions, where is stated that the government provides conditions for free and unhampered exercise of the right of religion assisting the maintenance of tolerance and respect between the believers from different religions as well as between the believers and non-believers.

It is another question that it is impossible to perform this dialogue at all levels. For example, it is not possible to accomplish dialogue at the level of doctrines due to the exclusivism in any religion. An example for this is the inefficiency of the efforts at a theological dialogue on the questions in relation to main doctrinal truths of faith between the three Christian confessions.

In the context of all above, the question about the degree, to which government can participate in such process, arises.

The Directorate of Religions to the Council of Ministers is a specialized division of governmental administration, which coordinates the relations between executive power and religions and assists the Council of Ministers in the performance of the governmental policy on maintaining tolerance and respect between different religions and follows the observance of religious rights and freedoms from assigned officers.

In this regard, I will examine three points from the activity of the Directorate of Religions considering the accomplishment of interreligious dialogue and types of cooperation between the government and religions.

Establishment and Activity of the Expert Consultative Committee

The Expert Consultative Committee (ECC) is a consultative organ on the religious problems established with the Directive 845/2004 of the Council of Ministers on the grounds of Article 21, Paragraph 1 of the Law on Administration associated with Article 35, Point 3 of the Law on Religions. The staff of ECC includes the representatives of Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Defence and Directorate of Religions. The head of the Committee is the director of the Directorate of Religions.

ECC gives opinions, statements, and conclusions on concrete problems of religions and assists the Council of Ministers in the performance of governmental policy on the religious communities in the country.

Performing its functions, ECC contacts and cooperates with governmental and non-governmental institutions and organizations in relation to the harmonization of regulations considering religions. At the same time, it assists the participation of different religions in international organizations, forums and initiatives.

The representatives of both the religions and non-governmental organizations can be engaged in the work of the Committee if required.

An example for this is the examined by the Committee question about the place and role of religious marriage in the modern Bulgarian society, which is one of the problems sporadically set and repeatedly discussed after democratic changes in Bulgaria.

The increasingly immersing crisis in the Bulgarian family and expected changes in the Constitution in relation to entering European Union led the leaders of the Gergiovdan Movement Political Party to prepare and introduce in the secretariat of 40 Parliament the draft-law of the change of Article 46, Paragraph 1, which states that only civil marriage is legal in Bulgaria.

The draft-law was introduced in the secretariat of the Parliament in December 2005. With a letter of December 2005, the leaders of the movement asked officially the Directorate of Religions to the Council of Ministers about an expert statement of the question.

In its reply, the Directorate underlines that it principally supports the proposal since it has its rationale but the real transformation of church (religious) marriage into an alternative to the civil one should be a result of the profound discussion over a series of questions. On this occasion, the Directorate referred to question for examination by ECC preliminary sending the text of the

draft-law to the majority of the officially registered religions in the country. The question was discussed during two consecutive meetings of ECC (28 February and 21 March 2006), in which the representatives of different religions participated.

Generally, by means of their representatives the religions expressed satisfaction of the legislative initiative of the Gergiovdan Movement Political Party and outlined in their statements the consensus that there is need to align the statutes of the civil and religious marriages and that divorce procedure must be performed by the currently established local procedural order.

Unlike them, separate ministries sent to ECC negative statements by their representatives, the majority of which included the motive that religious marriage has its social role but cannot exist autonomously and raise juridical consequences. The equation of the statutes of two types of marriage will lead to serious legal problems in relation to the arrangement of registries of marital status. According to them, the insistence of civil marriage does not impair the religious feelings of Bulgarian citizens.

No common statement, which can be introduced in the Parliament, was formed due to the differences in the perspectives on religious marriage of the representatives of separate ministries (members of ECC) and religious communities. Nevertheless, the mutual discussion of this law initiative shows the willingness of both the religions and government to pursue dialogue and elaborate such problems. Unlike the preceding governmental regimen, when governmental institutions took one-sided decisions on certain questions, at this stage the government asks also the other part for opinion, in this case – separate religions.

Second, the fact is obvious that in spite of the large differences in doctrinal plan of the participating in the dialogue religions, all they joined together around the idea that religious marriage should gain legal status.

Determination of the Days for Religious Holidays of Religions

Based on Article 173, Paragraph 2 of the Labour Code, which states that the employer must allow the officers and workers, who profess some religion different from Eastern Orthodoxy, to use electively a part of annual paid or unpaid vacation under Article 160, Paragraph 1 for the days of related religious holidays, but not more than the amount of the days for Eastern Orthodoxy religious holidays under Article 154. Similarly, the text of Article 57, Paragraph 2 of the Law on Public Servants states that the hiring authority must allow the public servants who profess a religion different from Eastern Orthodoxy to use a part of the annual paid or unpaid vacation for the days of related religious holidays but not more than the amount of days for Eastern Orthodoxy religious holidays under Article 55, Paragraph 1).

According to Article 173, Paragraph 3 of the Labour code, the Council of Ministers defines the days for religious holidays that are different from Eastern Orthodoxy, at the suggestion of the leaders of the rest religions.

Establishment and Activity of the National Committee of Religious Communities in Bulgaria

In 2007, by the initiative of the House of Lords and the Bulgarian embassy the representatives of government and the religious leaders of larger religions in Bulgaria were invited in London to observe the model of relations between the government and religions and between the religions themselves, and to gain knowledge about the United Kingdom experience in this area.

During this meeting, the members of Bulgarian delegation formed the idea to create union of religious communities on the model of many European organizations, which can propose forum, where the representatives of different religious communities can meet each other on the grounds of equality and participate in discussions on important questions of mutual interest.

Based on the Constitution of Republic of Bulgaria that warrants the rights of freedom of consciousness and thought and the choice of religions and religious and atheistic attitudes and the right to form association and based on the mutual agreement of religious communities in Bulgaria, the National Committee of Religious Communities in Bulgaria (NCRCB), including the representatives of different religions in the country, was established with the support of the Directorate of Religions to the Council of Ministries on 11 August 2008.

The representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Muslim religion, Catholic Church, United Evangelical Churches in Bulgaria, Armenian Church and Israelite Spiritual Council were among the founders.

Generally, the aims of NCRCB can be summarized in the dimensions as follows:

- (1) To encourage the agreement and mutual relations between individuals with different religious convictions in Bulgaria. It should work primarily for the distribution of knowledge between different religious communities about their principles and values systems, related with establishment of a peaceful and fair civil society in Bulgarian and globally.
- (2) To promote the development of dialogue between religious communities and governmental institutions, non-government and volunteer organizations in relation to the questions related with the development of the civil society in Bulgaria.

Conclusion

The short review of the performed initiatives for the accomplishment of interreligious dialogue and the forms of governmental participation shows that a lot of things are still desirable. Generally speaking, this process is already beginning but more resources and the development of new forms for the accomplishment of similar initiatives are required.

Legislative framework in our country clearly delineates the governmental functions and obligations in the process of maintaining the tolerance and respect between believers from different religions. Together with this, the willingness of the government to work on the parameters of interreligious dialogue is observed.