

## SHOULD STATE TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

### -An Example from Turkey-

#### ABSTRACT

*As education of religion is a debated field this situation dates back to its being private branch in changing education system. However debates come until today. Different comments, which come up with the coming of new secularist system, reawakened the education of religion and since 1946 with transition to multi-party system education of religion became a lively matter in the agenda of policy. In March 30, 2012 a new law, which regulates education system as 4+4+4 and makes it obligatory 12 years on and off, was accepted. In this system Life of the prophet Muhammed and Quran became elective courses in curriculum. As a result, arguments about the education of religion in Turkey grew violent again.*

*In this article, firstly history of religious education in Turkey is mentioned. Then necessities of religious education are discussed in the light of discussions on new education system. At last the position of State in Religious Education are discussed from the example of Turkish situation.*

#### **Introduction**

Education of religion at schools in Turkey has always been a debated matter in every period since the ends of the 19th century. Until the western style schools, which were opened before Tanzimat Reform Era and got involve in education system, education of religion was arranged as the only main subject not as a branch subject in Madrasah which is an old education institution. But in western style schools this situation was vice versa education of religion was only a part of curriculum. (Zengin, 2004)

In this period until republic, education of religion continued to be a part of general education in western style schools but at the same time existence of madrasahs continued as well. And consequently traditional and contemporary education institutions coexisted.

#### **1-Religious Education before 1980**

Changes starting with republic affected education system as well. In March 3, 1924 a new law on unification of education came into force and according to this law all madrasahs were closed and all educational institutions in Turkey were joined to Ministry of National Education. With the proclamation of republic in new policy this law also determined the position of education of religion. Accordingly Quran and religion education started to take part from second year of primary school. To educate religious experts, Faculty of Theology was opened. Also to meet the demands of public religious vocational high schools were opened. Education of religion in the early years of republic aimed at supporting the modernization activities and correcting the misinterpretation in the area of religion. After the law on unification of education came into force changes in policy understanding also affected the general education. The first manner of application unfortunately was not be able to preserved and later it caused to start a problematic period in terms of education of religion.

The first problem in the education of religion started in 1926. The length of religious course was one hour in the curriculum of 3rd, 4th, 5th grade primary school students. And according to the 30.11.1929 dated decision of Ministry of National Education Board of

Education and Discipline firstly in city primary schools education of religion took part a student did not get exam from this education and later according to another 29.10.1930 dated decision only voluntary 5th grade students could get education of religion which takes 30 minutes on every Thursday afternoon. (Doğan 2003; 616-120)

Although education of religion took part in curriculum, according to a regulation it was removed from village primary schools in 1927 and later in 1936 education of religion was removed completely however in village primary schools it was continued out of curriculum until 1938. But it was witnessed that no education of religion took part in the curriculum of any school according to the regulation done in 1939. In the program development activities which were started to be done after 1927, education of religion was removed from secondary school and between 1929 and 1931 it was gradually removed from teacher training schools as well. (Doğan 2003; 616)

In this process in 1929 religious vocational high schools and in 1933 Today's Istanbul University Faculty of Theology were closed and there was no institution providing education of religion or religious staff at that time. (Yürük 2012; 107)

Removal of education of religion and its institutions from education system ended up with tragic results. Negotiations, which were done in the 7<sup>th</sup> CHP congress that gathered in November 1947, are interesting in terms reflecting the situation without education of religion in recent years. Because in this congress CHP Sinop Deputy Vehbi Dayıbaş stated the complaints of voters with such words: *“Christians go to church and pray there but what our children will do and how are they going to pray? They are devoid of necessary religious knowledge! For what reason I think education of religion should be given.”* Abdulkadir Güney, representative from Çorum, also stated his ideas with such words: *“According to analyses that we have done it is clear that those nations who support their religion have always been pioneer in social development, those who does not care their religion have been undeveloped. While all world nations appreciate our religion and holy book Quran why do we ignore our religion's development?”* By asking such questions he expressed the results of deprivation of education of religion. Sinan Tekelioğlu, deputy of Seyhan, made a great speech in the congress and left nothing to say with his such words: *“Christian, Jewish and Turkish Sects had opened schools for themselves and raised priest there! Let me tell you what I heard from villagers, they don't have anyone to bury their death. Today, gambling and drinking alcohol are in an unbelievably high level. There is no fear of God in such a country of faithless nation. There is no respect for father, mother an elder people. When they are asked who is God? Children cannot give any answer, they don't know their God!”* Such similar complaints were expressed in 1948 dated Selamet Mecmuası (a kind of magazine) by the editor of Cumhuriyet newspaper Nadir Nadi. He complained about the lack of imam (someone leading prayer) and muezzin in Villages and mosques. (Tanrıover 1948; 457)

After these quarrels in 1948, education of Religion came into force at primary schools but it was out of curriculum. And in 1949 Ankara University Faculty of Theology was opened later in 1951 religious vocational high schools were opened again to continue education of religion. (Öcal 2012; 218-219)

## **2- Religious Education after 1980**

Until 1980 Military Coup religion courses were elective. September 12 1980 is the beginning of a new period in terms of education of religion in Turkey. In this period one of the most important event is that education of religion became obligatory under the roof of formal education. Problematic events in 1970s played an important role in education of religion's being obligatory. 1970s is the period when problems were not debated in good conditions and ideologies frequently conflicted with one another. In ideas and it left

saddening bloody memories in the mind of Turkish Nation. After such saddening events military management realized that it was necessary to solve all the problems by re-unifying national values and to reach their aim they started to create a new state understanding by beginning from constitution. (Ayhan 1999; 252, Altaş 2002; 146)

Apart from the elective Islamic courses before 1982 religious culture and moral knowledge lesson taking part in the curriculum to support the unity in the society and to know the society where everybody lives was designed as a lesson which comprises all sects. In that period Prof.Dr. Beyza Bilgin struggled to make the education of religion obligatory at schools and she explained why the name of the course changed as religious culture and moral knowledge when it becomes obligatory. The reason was to keep all the sects away from insisting on one another. So every sects could be represented freely under religious culture and moral knowledge. According to Bilgin, Turkey adopted obligatory religious culture and moral knowledge lesson after experiencing different education of religion systems. It is necessary that the adopted lesson should not cause conflicts and it should support the social unity and solidarity also it should be complied with the facts of society. (Bilgin 2007; 66-81) For that reason it was needed to have supplementary religion education models which meet the demands of society: Turkey tried to meet her demand with the mentioned model above.

Turkish Republic had witnessed a seventy year experience in terms of secularity. In this process especially in the area of religious education there were many applications. Firstly education of religion and then removal of it later optional religious courses and ultimately obligatory religious education.... This was the last point that we have reached. Having education of religion in state schools is the result of experiences. (Tosun 2005, 108)

Prof.Dr. Cemal Tosun who is one of the leading religious education academician in our country argued about the necessity of religion courses in a secular country and he stated that religion has social, cultural, philosophical, universal and legal essentials. He also explained his ideas with such words: "One of the basic functions of the educations is to reveal and support the skills of all individuals and to meet the basic demands consonantly. It is asserted that religion is necessary to meet the need of faith which is one of the important needs of human being. According to these assessments sense of religion is an inborn and ongoing ability and need. It is an ability because every human being has tendency and ability to believe in Supreme Being. It is sense religion and faith are the features that make human being a human being. This religion sense of human being is infinite. But by hook or by crook he satisfies himself. What expected from the education is to prevent people from this random or faulty satisfaction and to enhance the physical and spiritual ability of individuals. To separate the religious need and feeling from the other needs or disregard them is against the aims of education. The other important subject that should not be disregard is that human being is a social essence. Another vital task expected from education is to socialize new generations. Socialization can be defined as; to enable people comply with the society that they live in. (Tosun 2005)

Education of religion can help people to socialize in two ways.

- To provide background experience to those who want to attend religious activities by teaching them necessary knowledge, attitude and behaviors.
- To provide positive appreciation and better comprehension to those who do not attend religious activities done by others.

Education is to convey the cultural heritages to new generations which are not obstacle to advance. In every society's cultural heritage there are of course concepts that come from religious knowledge. Religion is also a decisive element in a nation's or society's identity. Religion is a part of culture as important as language and history. Moreover it affects the other

cultural elements as well. Consequently religions is necessary to teach as it is both an element of culture and its affective factor. Otherwise new generations will have identity problem and they will not be able to appreciate and comprehend the cultural values and it would result in cultural degeneration. (Tosun 2005)

As some people stated obligatory religious courses in Turkey were not put into curriculum to insist on a specific sect or belief. Religious culture and moral knowledge course was designed within the frame of basic values of Islam and as it comprises of all sects it left nothing for misinterpretation. With this education programme students are aimed to have true knowledge about religion and morality and to enhance their basic skills while contributing to the general aims of national education. While religious culture and moral knowledge course teaching programmes were being improved, research oriented information about Islam and other religions was used and the whole inconsistent information was removed. In Islam oriented datas Quran and sunnah centered consolidative approach was applied. Basic values of Islam which covers related issues were given high priority. These values that are related to faith, prayer and morality were cared to be on the common grounds based on Quran and sunnah. The main aims is to provide useful and true information about religious, cultural and moral values. All religious and moral values which are appropriate for this approach became the subject of teaching but it was also paid much attention not to insist on a doctrine (especially based on a specific sect.) (Kızılabdullah&Yürük 2008, 32-40)

### **3-Current Situation of Religious Education**

In March of 2012 Turkish education system was changed. The primary education stages, which includes the first two stages of four years' education each, will entail four years of mandatory elementary education, followed by an additional mandatory four years of middle school education, in which students will be able to choose whether they want to study at a general education middle school or a religious vocational middle school, which are referred to as Imam Hatip schools. After being shut down as part of the strict regulations enforced during the February 28th 'postmodern coup'<sup>1</sup>, the new legislation includes the reopening of Imam Hatip middle schools. Primary education establishments will be set up separately as independent elementary schools and middle schools. (Genç 2012;39)

Courses on the Quran and the life of the Prophet will be offered as electives for middle school and high school students. The Ministry of Education may also prepare elective courses on Christianity and Judaism. Middle school education will be made mandatory beginning in the 2012-2013 school years. (Genç 2012;40) And also Religious Culture and Ethics courses

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<sup>1</sup> The 1997 military memorandum refers to the decisions issued by the Turkish Military leadership on a National Security Council meeting at 28 February 1997 which initiated the 28 February process that precipitated the resignation of prime minister Necmettin Erbakan of the Welfare Party and the end of his coalition government. As the Erbakan government was forced out without dissolving the parliament or suspending the constitution. At the National Security Council (MGK) meeting on 28 February 1997, the generals submitted their views on issues regarding secularism and political Islam on Turkey to the government. The MGK made several decisions during this meeting and the Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan from the Welfare Party was forced to sign the decisions. The decisions were intended to protect the secularist ideology in Turkey. Some of the decisions that Erbakan was forced to sign are:

- Forcing people to donate skins of sacrificed animals to the Turkish Aviation Board (THK)
- Strict headscarf ban in universities
- Eight year primary school education
- Shutting down Koran schools and Imam-Hatip middle schools
- Abolition of Tarikats (sufi orders)
- Control of media groups which object to the decisions of Yüksek Askerî Şûra (Supreme Military Council) to fire religious soldiers on claims of "irtica" ("reaction"/"reactionaryism")

still compulsory and were to be taught from fourth grade primary to the end of middle school for two hours per week; and, in high school, for one hour.

## **Conclusion**

There are a lot of examples from the history of Turkey for State should take or take not responsibility for religious education. When state does not take any responsibility for Religious education, Turkey suffered great hardships. In the light of all these experiences, Turkey take responsibility for religious education.

In recent education system coming in to force in March 2012 there are elective courses such as Life of Prophet Muhammed and Quran , but it does not necessarily require that religious culture and moral knowledge course should be removed from the curriculum. Because this course addresses all people in terms of its context and it keeps students away from alienation to his own society and world by means of gaining objective information about his own religion and other religions.

It is important for state to take responsibility about religious education to provide the correct religious knowledge and ensure to social cohesion. State should give information for their citizens about religious and cultural life of their community. Otherwise we meet the following three conditions are

1. People who receive religious education in school.
2. People who receive religious education in private individuals.
3. People who have never receive religious

This situation is dangerous for the establishment of social peace in multicultural world. Prevent the recurrence of these situations, and establishment of social peace, State must take responsibility for the religious education.

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