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Religion in the Greek education in the time of globalisation

IOANNIS EFSTATHIOU^a, FOKION GEORGIADIS^{b*}, AND APOSTOLOS ZISIMOS^c

^a *Doctoral student, Institute of Education, University of London, UK;* ^b *Doctoral student, Institute of Education, University of London, UK;* ^c *Pedagogical Department of Primary Education, University of Thessaloniki, Greece.*

Abstract

Few are the countries where religion does not play an important role in public life. As far as Greece is concerned it has always been a key element in Greek public life including education. Religious education is a compulsory subject for orthodox students taught in a confessional and catechist way while Orthodoxy saturates school culture making the Greek educational system intolerant towards students of different religious backgrounds. In this paper the Greek case is examined against two different perspectives - the globalist one as well as that of the sceptics.

Λίγες είναι οι χώρες όπου η θρησκεία δεν διαδραματίζει σημαντικό ρόλο στη δημόσια ζωή. Όσον αφορά την Ελλάδα θρησκεία είναι πάντα ένα βασικό στοιχείο στην ελληνική δημόσια ζωή συμπεριλαμβανομένης της εκπαίδευσης. Η θρησκευτική εκπαίδευση είναι ένα υποχρεωτικό μάθημα για τους ορθόδοξους μαθητές/ μαθήτριες που διδάσκονται με έναν εξομολογητικό και κατηχητικό τρόπο ενώ η ορθοδοξία διαποτίζει το σχολικό πολιτισμό που καθιστά το ελληνικό εκπαιδευτικό σύστημα αδιάλλακτο ως προς τους μαθητές διαφορετικών θρησκευτικών καταβολών. Σε αυτό το κείμενο εξετάζεται η ελληνική περίπτωση ενάντια σε δύο διαφορετικές προοπτικές – αυτή των ‘παγκοσμιοποιητών’ καθώς επίσης και αυτή των σκεπτικιστών.

Keywords: globalization, religious education, national identity, interculturalism, Greece.

* Corresponding author: Fokion Georgiadis, Doctoral student, Institute of Education, University of London, 4, Kimis street, 10446 Athens, Greece.
Email: azfg2005@yahoo.gr.

Introduction

Few are the countries where religion does not play an important role in public life. As far as Greece is concerned it has always been a key element in public life including education. Even in the time of transition towards modernisation in a globalising context religion continues to influence the Greek population while religious education is taught in a catechist way in the primary and secondary education despite the ever growing number of students with different religious backgrounds. Drawing on the notion that society and education are intertwined we attempt to investigate the reasons for the persistence of religion in the contemporary educational culture in Greece by testing the validity of two accounts concerning social responsiveness to globalisation against Greek social reality.

The first part of the paper briefly outlines the globalist account on tradition and religion (Giddens 1995, 2002), the account of the sceptics on the formation of global culture (Green, 1997) as well as our position in relation to the validity of these accounts in the Greek case. In the second part the two accounts are tested thoroughly examining the Greek society as a whole as well as the behaviour of power agents such as the clergy and the politicians.

Two accounts on social responsiveness to globalisation

The last decades have been a period of rapid socio-economic restructuring for Greece. Modernisation has been the key ideological concept which is perceived as a change of the conditions and contexts of social and political power within European Union (Zambeta, 2001). Within this context attempts have been made to modernise Greek education through constructing new curricula and installing new technology and as Zambeta (2001) claims, through adopting an entrepreneurial culture in many cases. Socio-economic structures and the cultural landscape of the country have recently been influenced by the presence of large numbers of economic immigrants. Although this has led to the acknowledgement and celebration of multiculturalism as a new challenge towards modernisation in a globalised world (ibid), religious education and the Orthodox culture that saturates the school environment have remained unchanged. Religious education is compulsory for orthodox students taught in a confessional and catechist way while the spirit of Orthodoxy is omnipresent in school activities making the Greek educational system intolerant towards students of different religious backgrounds (Sotirelis, 1998 and Zambeta 2000; 2003; 2005). Why could modernisation be compatible with the persistence of religion in Greek education if many students do not belong to the Greek-orthodox dogma?

As school curricula in Greece are controlled by the state and taking for granted that social, political and religious interests are represented in the formation of school knowledge (Coulby, 2000), I will try to answer this question by testing the Greek social reality versus two theories on social responsiveness to globalisation, the one of Giddens on the globalist side, and that of Green on the side of the sceptics.

Giddens (1995) claims that in pre-modern cultures tradition located in various social institutions, among which religion had a leading place, was 'a prime source of authority'.

In such cultures the dominant dogma left little space for religious alternatives and submission to religious authorities could be understood as consequence of

unpredictable daily life and of the fact that religious authority 'created mysteries' which presumably was able to cope with.

Religious authorities in particular quite often cultivated the feeling that individuals were surrounded by threats and dangers – since only the religious official was in a position to be able either to understand or to seek successfully to control these (ibid, p. 195).

In a globalised society, as he further argues, 'religion not only refuses to disappear but it undergoes resurgence' (ibid, p. 195) for reasons that have to do with uncertainty and doubt, caused by modernity. Individuals face a dilemma of authority versus doubt but there is a basic contrast with pre-modern societies.

Forms of traditional authorities now become 'authorities' among others, part of an indefinite pluralism of expertise (ibid, p. 195).

In this case the expert is quite different from the authority in that authority becomes essentially equivalent to specialist advice. Furthermore, in Giddens's view (2002) fundamentalism as a response to novel circumstances is identified with traditions – and among them religion - defended in the globalisation process.

Fundamentalism has no time for ambiguity, multiple intersection or multiple identity – it is a refusal of dialogue in a world whose peace and continuity depend on it (ibid, p. 49).

Fundamentalism revitalises the guardians of tradition like the clergy who gain secular as well as religious power either by taking over the government directly, as is the case in Iran or by collaborating with political parties.

On the other hand, Green (1997) claims that cosmopolitanism is a very uneven phenomenon and challenges the globalist arguments within the cultural realm. More concretely, while globalists advocate the dissemination of a global culture owing to the rapid development of communications technology that cannot be controlled by governments, Green alleges that responses to cultural globalisation can be different depending on the political forces in any given state.

For the foreseeable future, it would seem that there will continue to be a dichotomous pattern of increasing cultural globalisation inducing deepening cosmopolitanism in some states and escalating cultural nationalism in others. The different responses depend to a large degree on the political forces in any given state (ibid, p. 165).

The role of the state may be changing but internationalisation does not reduce the scope or importance of its functions concerning external and internal relations. In terms of external relations while states have willingly transferred power to supra-national organisations, like the EU, they still remain the latter's 'building blocks' without which they would have no legitimacy. On the other hand, powers of the state have not necessarily been weakened by the growth of supra-national agencies.

The rise of the European Union for instance has led to near hysterical reactions from Euro-sceptics and nationalists who fear the erosion of national autonomy and identity (ibid, p. 166).

In the long run central governments in EU member countries have increased their strategic control considerably in areas like education and health while the nation state still constitutes guarantee for social cohesion and solidarity.

As one can see from the first reference to Giddens (1995) he describes two different social states, a pre-modern one and a globalised one. Although in Greek society religious authority is quite conspicuous claiming to possess the expertise for helping people face effectively existing and invented threats, it would be oversimplifying to accept that Greek society is a pre-modern one. Greece has been a member of the EU for many years and has been in a period of transition towards modernising its economic, political and cultural structures. Additionally one could not seriously contend that Greek society is in a state of high modernity, as Giddens understands it –

a society where religious authorities are just authorities among others deprived of their old power. As it will be explained later in this paper the Greek Church has a prominent position exerting considerable influence on people. Moreover, although fundamentalism could appear in a period of transition, as Giddens (2002) alleges, this presupposes generalised spontaneous hostility of society against europeanisation and globalisation. However, as it will be shown, such a tendency is not observable in Greece. As it will be argued, Greek society is conservative and for various reasons devoted to the idea of national identity, a combination of history, language and religion as distinctive components of Greekness, but under no circumstances are Greeks hostile to europeanisation or globalisation. On the other hand, part of politicians and the clergy have made themselves guardians of the supposedly threatened national identity and have devoted themselves to protecting it by all means and of course by keeping religious education in the schools. Although present Greek social reality rather matches the account of the sceptics it remains to be seen whether its resistance to submitting itself to a uniform global culture will endure. In the next section I will analyse the Greek social reality, first as a whole and then by investigating the actions of the two major power agents – politicians and the Greek Orthodox Church with the aim of explaining the persistence of religion in Greek education.

The Greek social reality

The Greek society as a whole

The allegation that the major part of the Greek society has always been conservative can hardly be disputed. Abela (2004) in his study on religion in EU observed in Greece prolongation of institutional religion alongside new individualised spiritualities to have a hold over society and polity. He found that a paleo-Durkheimian model prevails in Greek society wherein people's connection to the sacred entails their belonging to a church mainly coexistent with society. According to Eurobarometer (2004) the majority of the Greek citizens (61%) trust the official church although this percentage slipped down to 40% in 2005 according to a recent survey (VPRC, 2005). This decrease in trust is due to the disclosure of various scandals conducted by the high rank clergy. According to another survey conducted by the same company and published in the same newspaper the vast majority of the population regardless of political orientation think that religious education should remain as a compulsory subject in school. In the light of this data we could conclude that Greece remains a conservative religious country adhering to tradition as a pillar of national identity. This can be partly explained by the kind of education all Greeks have gone through and the fact that education is part of the self-perpetuating national ideology structure which follows obvious national curriculum policies (Schleicher, 1993). The role that traditionalist curriculum plays in the formation of controlled identities is best expressed by Coulby (2000, p. 49):

School and university curricula...serve to ensure that as each individual is engaged in the process of identity formation or reformation, a central inscription will consist in the taken-for-granted rightness of the principles and practices of the state concerned.

In order to be sure that this is fully understood it is mandatory that we should go a little deeper into detecting the nature of Greek education. The construction of the national identity does not only mean the determination of the 'self', it entails the complementary process of determining and excluding the 'other' (Dragona, 1997). This has been the case of the Greek education the aim of which has always been the

reproduction of the national identity (Zambeta, 2005). The constitutional recognition of Orthodoxy as the prevailing religion in the Greek state combined with the constitutional demand for 'the development of national and religious conscience' of the Greeks as one of the aims of education have led to Orthodoxy being taught in schools in a monophonic and catechist way (Sotirelis, 1998). The aim of this privileged placement of Orthodoxy in education has been the systematic assimilation of the 'prevailing religion' as a core element of the 'Hellenic-Christian civilisation' by students within the framework of a religious state (ibid). Religious spirit saturates the whole educational process by spreading religious messages also through other subjects like History and Greek language in such a way that any reference to other religions is made only through the optic of Christianity and always in contrast to the values of Orthodoxy (ibid). Morning collective prayer and visits to church so that religious feelings can be reinforced are still included in the contemporary school culture thus widening the gap between the 'self' and the 'other'. Additionally more opportunities for religious propaganda are still offered via cultural events prepared by students. As Coulby (2000) claims, religious teaching through cultural events can be more effective than explicit religious teaching. Religious education becomes a means of socialisation the basic aim of which is the construction of a passive citizen who accepts the disciplines and values promoted by the church as irrefutable as well as of one who follows the social practices set by the church. (Zambeta, 2003). A theory developed by Gotovos (1994) on national identity and education based on psychological and emotional aspects which tries to explain the present situation in Greek education reinforces and widens the argument of the influential power of education on the formation of identity. He considers the fact that Greek education has always advocated a national identity structured with elements from the past – Hellenism and Orthodoxy - as a precautionary tactics. As he explains, national pride could be cultivated only on the grounds of ancient grandeur due to the lack of modern accomplishments.

The fact that Greek Orthodox Church is still a strong power exerting mechanism should not allow us to conclude that religious authority in Greek society is simply one of many others in an environment of high modernity. However, from what has been argued until now, one could infer that Greek society is a pre-modern one, though mistakenly, because since 1981 Greece has been a full member of the EU. Ever since, it has continuously tried to modernise its economic, political and cultural structure in a multicultural environment with Europe being a key element in every field of national policy (Zambeta, 2001). In this context Greek economy has been undergoing drastic restructuring and although this had hard socio-economic consequences EU has not been seriously doubted by the major social actors (ibid). According to the last Eurobarometer survey (2004) most Greek citizens think that their country has benefited from the EU, desire a European constitution, support the political unity of the EU, and demand acceleration of its integration. At the same time the majority are very proud of their national identity whereas about half of the population is also proud of its European identity. As far as globalisation is concerned about half of the population believes that it will not have any positive effect at a national level. These results clearly show that Greek citizens are happy with EU while they show moderate discomfort caused by globalisation. Under these circumstances nobody could seriously contend that there has been a spontaneous generalised opposition to the EU in the form of fundamentalism within Greek society.

The power exerting agents

In Greece it is taken for granted that school curricula should be controlled by the state and the ultimate say on the content of textbooks rests with the Ministry of National Education and Religions (Coulby, 2000). Given the importance of the process of selecting and approving of what is to be taught religious authorities might have strong views not only on what belief system should be taught but also on wider issues concerning scientific knowledge (ibid). This is exactly the case of Greece. According to the Greek constitution the state and the church are not separate but their roles are distinct (Sotirelis, 1998). Despite its distinct role the church has always intervened in matters of the state while education lies among its main interests (Zambeta, 2003). The slightest effort to change the religious culture in education has caused the protest of religious leaders (ibid). In 1981 when the newly elected socialist government tried to loosen catechism and modernise curriculum by introducing Darwin's evolution theory in education the church protested strongly against the intrusion of atheist and materialistic ideology (Sotirelis, op cit). When the present conservative government raised the matter of a new constitutional reform the leader of the Greek Orthodox Church, archbishop Christodoulos, stated that he could agree to a 'velvet' separation between state and church but under no circumstances would he accept the abolition of religious education in schools. The reasons are obvious. Although religious teaching has been unsuccessful in reproducing fervent Christian beliefs, it has performed far more effectively in legitimising versions of history and tradition as well as in reproducing values like virtue, family, respect, continuity and authority (Coulby, 2000). Since 1998 when the archbishop was elected by the Holy Synod the church has challenged the distinct roles of state and itself and multiplied interventions in political matters by bitterly criticising governments, scholars and by publicly expressing its opinion on international matters (Kontogiorgis, 2000). This new role is deemed compatible with the 'word of God' and within this framework the church appears to be the institutional guardian of Orthodoxy and the Greek nation (ibid). According to archbishop Christodoulos (1997) the relation between Orthodoxy and Hellenism is exactly like the relation between Siamese twins and therefore its separation can cause irreparable damages. He further defends the compulsory and catechist character of religious education because it contributes to the development of the orthodox conscience of Greek students and warns against assimilation of Hellenism by the West. European integration, he stresses, is dangerous because national identities are abolished, therefore action must be taken so that Hellenism will not disappear. Further, globalisation harms traditions and religions and since politicians are reluctant to take any action to save Hellenism it is the church that has to stand up against the modern world. By accusing politicians of being the 'Trojan horse' of Europe the clergy consider themselves as the authentic representatives of citizens (Kontogiorgis, 2000). In this way the latter become members of the church who follow religious leaders rather than elected governments. So, if citizens act like members of the church politicians will have to ask for church's approval before they take any action and obey the clergy in order to gain legitimacy (ibid). The clergy defend their right to intervene on the grounds of the problematic and much disputed building of the national identity that is based on the version of the continuity of the Hellenic civilisation through Byzantium within the framework of 'Hellenic- Christian civilisation' (Zambeta 2000,2003, 2005). According to this framework Hellenism was christianised in Byzantium whereas Hellenic civilisation was incorporated by the new religion. Besides Greek Orthodox Church strong advocates of this view have been the conservative political wing as well as the 'Neo- Orthodoxy' group which spans the

entire Greek political spectrum (Zambeta, 2000). Modernisation in Greece has been followed by scepticism not only among right wing politicians but also among socialists who initiated it (Zambeta, 2001). For these politicians while modernisation has been positive in the sense that it linked Greece with western political and economic culture the preservation of the national identity was even more important (ibid). According to Coulby (2000) misunderstanding the nature of transitions and the resistance to them have led states to consolidate traditionalist and modernist elements within school curricula in such a way that are both unsuited to the needs of the knowledge economy and destructive to democratic pluralism. Interests of church and political parties are often interwoven in such a way that the clergy's interventions in political life are tolerated by some politicians who in turn ingratiate themselves with the church in order to augment their influence over society and obtain political gains. The case of an ex-minister of education who once received the archbishop by saying that the few voices opposing the words of 'the holy leader of the church' contradicted history as well as the case of candidates in municipal elections who visited the archbishop in order to be blessed by him are indicative of church's influence on politicians (ibid). According to Simitis (2005), the ex-prime minister, although the separation of state and church was the intention of his government, it was not achieved in the constitutional reform in 2001 because of reactions on behalf of the church, large part of Greek society as well as of many politicians.

It is evident that a peculiar kind of religious fundamentalism on the part of the hierarchs supported by conservative politicians is present in Greek society. The increasing mobility of the clergy in defence of the 'endangered nation' and Orthodoxy as well as the rhetoric against European integration and globalisation betrays anxiety regarding the future of the church within Greek society. Hence, according to the clergy religious education should not be abolished because this might decrease the influence of religion and if European Union promotes religious neutrality in education this can harm the Orthodox Church and consequently the nation. In its effort to preserve its power and privileges the church takes advantage of the religiosity in the Greek society to influence politicians while at the same time the latter use the church to accomplish political gains.

Concluding remarks

The notion of different national responses to global culture supported by Green seems to be applicable in the case of Greece. Since globalisation in the realms of politics cannot be demonstrated, as he argues, the different responses depend on the political forces in any given state. Moreover, educational systems still attempt to serve national needs under the control of national states. Finally, reactions from Euro-sceptics and nationalists, fearing erosion of national autonomy and identity can result from the growth of supra-national agencies. Greece is in a period of transition trying to modernise its economic, social, political and cultural structure. Although modernisation and tradition are considered as contradictory concepts it is clear that they can coexist within a social reality in periods of transition. Greek society seems to be gradually adapting itself to the conditions of europeanisation and globalisation. If national identity, a synthesis of religion, history and language, continues to be of vital importance, besides the influential power of education this is also due to the fact that Greece is a relatively new state with scarce modern accomplishments. The protection of the national identity by society has by no means taken the form of a fundamentalist movement against europeanisation or globalisation. If most people wish religious

education to continue to be taught despite increasing multiculturalism in schools this is mainly because of the culture that is still promoted by the clergy and big part of the politicians. They probably fear that without the assimilative power of education national identity will fade away and that they might eventually lose their traditional control over society.

This situation, however, might not last for long. There are already strong movements among left wing politicians and intellectuals advocating the liberalisation of the society from traditionalistic ideas. On the other hand, we must not forget that the ultimate aim of the EU is political unification, which Greek society strongly supports. Whenever it is accomplished the role of the nation states is not to remain the same in the future. If globalisation in the realms of politics cannot be demonstrated now, as Green argues, this might be possible in the future. To what extent there are still going to be different responses to cultural globalisation and whether Giddens's account will come true remains to be seen.

BIO NOTES

Georgiadis Fokion (MA in Comparative Education) studied Pedagogy and Psychology in the Universities of Rhodes and Athens and worked as a Primary schoolteacher since 1988 in Greece and Britain. He participated in many conferences in Greece and abroad and authored intercultural educational material for University of Athens and Crete. At the moment he attends the Doctoral School of Education in the Institute of Education, University of London. His research interests are around Inter-/Multicultural aspects of education. He is a member of the International Association of Intercultural Education (IAIE), the Society of Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR Europa), the British Association for International & Comparative Education (BAICE), the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) and the Pedagogic Society of Greece (PSG).

Efstathiou Ioannis MA (Econ) studied Economics in Athens University of Economics. He worked in the Commercial Bank of Greece as Economist and since 2001 as a teacher in the secondary education in Greece and in Germany. He speaks English, German, Spanish and French. He participated as rapporteur in International congresses. At the moment he is doing Doctoral studies at the Institute of Education UoLondon.

Zisimos Apostolos (MA in Primary Education) studied Pedagogy in the Universities of Thessalia and Athens. He worked as a Primary school teacher since 1985 in Greece and Britain. He participated as presenter in various congresses on education in Greece and abroad. He co-operated with the University of Crete on the 'Education of the Greek Diaspora' programme (E.DIA.M.M.E). In 2005 he completed his postgraduate studies in the Brunel University in London on Primary Education. At the moment he is a doctoral student at the Doctoral School of Education, University of Thessaloniki. His research interests are around racism and cinematography in education. He is a member of the International Association of Intercultural Education (IAIE) and the Pedagogic Society of Greece (PSG).

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