

Teaching of Other Religions in Religious Courses in Schools in Turkey in the Past and today

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Introduction

Teaching of other religions *in religious courses* is one of the important subjects of modern religious education researches and discussions. It is well known that the meaning of ‘living together’ is changed by the conditions of communication and interactions, which are arising from globalisation. Because of globalisation the world’s societies turned into a small village.

Present-day religious education feels the effects of globalisation closely. Even it can be said that this feeling is much stronger than in the other fields of education. Pluralism, objectivity and criticism are tried to be made the principal criterions of the current religious education as an effect of globalisation. Various international authorities and organizations support and encourage a religious education that involves and applies these principles. These improvements have the characteristics of a challenge for Islamic religious education too.

Teaching of other religions is not too strange to tradition of Islamic religious education. It is well known that especially the divine religions are subjects of Islamic religious instruction and education although the base of the education is Islam. After all it can be said that

the Islamic religious education has historical experiments in teaching of other religions more than other religions especially Judaism and Christianity have.

Turkey has the experiment of living together with different religions since the Ottoman Empire. Therefore Turkey has also an experiment about the subject of other religions in religious courses.

In my statement, firstly I summarized the education of non-Muslims in The Ottoman Empire. After that; I tried to exhibit treating of other religions in the curriculums of the religious teaching in Turkey. For this aim I have investigated the curriculums of religious teaching for primary and high schools starting from 1924 to 2007, using document and content analysis. I determined the chapters, topics, partial purposes, principles and goals relating to other religions. I tried to express these determinations in a descriptive way. While doing this, I followed the historical process of religious teaching in schools. Eventually I evaluated various historical periods in private and by comparing.

1. The Education of Non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire

The governance of The Ottoman Empire was based on ‘the millet system’¹. According to millet system different religious congregations in other words different nations were independent in the field of education like they were in their religious organization. The government of The Ottoman Empire was interested in the field of

¹ See for the millet sytem: Bilal Eryılmaz, *Osmanlı Devleti’nde Gayr-i Müslim Teb’anın Yönetimi*, İstanbul 1990.

education only on the base of military and administrative affairs. Public education was religious centred and it was executed by foundations.

First civilian schools established by the government were middle schools named “rustiya” in 1838. With the “Ordinance of Tanzimat “ (Rescript of Gulhane) of 1839, The Ottoman Empire supplied some rights to non-Muslims in the direction of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. With the “Ordinance of Islahat (reform)” in 1856, non-Muslims rendered equal with Muslims in the field of education like in all other fields. These developments accelerated the establishment of non-Muslim schools in the land of the Ottoman Empire. New schools were added to the schools of non-Muslims citizens of the Ottoman Empire and new foreign non-Muslim schools were established. Even with the establishment of foreign non-Muslim schools, the number of non-Muslim schools reached a level passed the number of Muslim schools.

With regulations of Public Education in 1869 (Maarif-i Umummiya Nizamnamesi) the right of studying in the public schools equally with Muslims was made certain. According to these regulations it was agreed that; separated middle schools (rustiyas) were going to be established for Muslims and non-Muslims in the small towns that contain 500 houses. In these schools each student group was going to take their religious courses from the teachers of the same religion with themselves. In the towns that contain 1000 houses; it was agreed that senior high schools (idadis), where Muslims

and non-Muslims study together, were going to be established and in these schools there were not going to be religious courses.

The equality of Muslims and non-Muslims in the field of education and their permission to establish their own private schools took part in the first constitution named Kanun-i Esasiya of 1876².

Since all these arrangements came across the recession of the Ottoman Empire, they could not be accomplished in their planned way. Quantity of the non-Muslim schools especially foreign ones, which were working for the aims of missionaries, increased. Even these schools were preferred by Turkish children. Non-Muslims did not prefer public schools and studying together with Muslim students although they brought equality to education.

Lots of non Muslim schools remained in the lands, which were detached from The Ottoman Empire. After 1924 some of the foreign schools, which remained in the lands of present Turkey, shut down or they were shut down since they broke the laws about education. But Minorities' schools were guaranteed with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. These schools are carrying out education and teaching presently³. They have the rights of studying religious courses with their own teachers and in their own languages. The non-Muslim students, who were studying in public schools in Turkey, were exempt from the religion courses. They could join these courses as listeners with the written permission of their parents. Except for this there were

² See. Osman Ergin, *Türk Maarif Tarihi*, Volume: 1-2, Eser Matbaası, İstanbul 1977; Ali Güler, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Azınlıklar*, Ankara 2007; Yahya Akyüz, *Türk Eğitim Tarihi*, Alfa yayınları İstanbul 2001.

³ For more information see: Ayten Sezer, *Atatürk Döneminde Yabancı Okullar (1923-1938)*, Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, Ankara 1999.

not given any religious courses to non-Muslims in Turkish public schools in Turkish Republican Era.

2. The Non-Muslim Religions in Curriculum of Religious Education in Modern Turkey Developed Among 1924-2007

Entering of Non-Muslim religions as independent subjects into religious teaching curriculums of Turkey took place with curriculums for secondary schools of 1956. Not any religions except for Islam were treated in the curriculum of religious courses which developed among 1924-1938. Among 1926 and 1938 religious education was voluntary and denomination centred.

The curriculums developed among 1924-1938 were completely Islam centred and had properties of a doctrine. Its aims and contents were Sunni Islam centred although its topics were restricted; For example 'Loving God', 'Loving Islam' 'Benefits of Muslims' faith union' were mentioned among the purposes of these courses. In those years being a voluntary course supported this quality. The properties of being voluntary and being Islam centred continued after 1948, but with a remarkable increment in cognitive side of the course. The emotional goals of the first periods had been removed gradually after 1948.

Before curriculum for secondary schools of 1956, the topics regarding other religions that can be seen were limited to the prophets and holy books doctrines of Islam.

With curriculum of 1976, an increment to a size of a chapter of topics relating to other religions, took place. There were some topics

such as at first class ‘The Greatest Divine Religions’ and at third class ‘Islam among Divine Religions’.

From the Curriculum of Religious Culture and Ethic Course of Primary and Secondary School that developed at 1982 until day; a completely cognitive nature dominates in curriculums of religious education in accordance with the statute of this course. Name of religious culture and its compulsory nature reflected a different approach in comparison to years before 1982, although there is the Islam culture in centre. With obligatory religious culture and ethics course, dealing with other religions increased in quantity and quality. A continuous shifting to more objective character formed. In the curriculum for primary education in 1982, in the chapter entitled ‘The Concept of Religion’, after giving general information about religion, other religions took part under the titles of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Giving part to topics like traditional religions, Indian religions, and Chinese religions represent coming to an end of the approach, which deals with the other religion in Islamic centre, so gives place only the divine religions. In the curriculums before 1982 only the divine ones of other religions are treated and in every topic they are compared with Islam. We can easily understand that from the titles of topics.

In the curriculum of religious culture and ethics course developed in 2000 it is seemed clearly that the other religions took part more than in the curriculums developed before. In both general and private aims and in the chapters and their expansion in almost

each class direct or indirect elements regarding other religions took part. Curriculums before 2000 involve general expressions like respecting others' opinions and beliefs, but in this curriculum it is clearly focused on that, students should have knowledge about other religions. The objectivity in teaching of other religions is completely defined as a principle of the curriculums.

Topics relating to other religions take part almost in each element of the curriculums 'Religious culture and ethics course for secondary schools of 2005 and primary schools of 2007'.

In the introductions of both curriculum; showing respect to people, opinion, freedom, morals and culture inheritance are presented as the primary approach of religious teaching.

On social and universal bases, there are common expressions regarding other religions in the explanations, that are given for the question, "Why religious teaching in schools".

In the explanations, relating to the necessity of the religious courses regarding to social life at public schools, it is said that "We have to know our beliefs and take them into consideration even in our relations in friendship and neighbourhood. In this respect; we should recognize and bear in mind not only our religion but also the religions, the religious comprehensions and the way of living forms in our environment"⁴.

In the explanations relating to the necessity of the religious courses regarding to universal extent at public schools; the common

⁴ *Ortaöğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı*, pp. 10; *İlköğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı* pp. 7.

expressions are as follows; “Globalisation, developments in the world, and their instant influences to all countries of the world, affect the education life and religious education. These rapid changes in the world made it essential to learn the fundamental information about the religions living in our country too. It necessitates learning their beliefs, conducts, and the reasons of differences in their culture and the values, which give directions to their behaviours, in order to understand other nations and to be in good relations with them. Because having information about religions and ethical lives of other communities make it easy to be in good relationships with them.”⁵

In vision explanations of both curriculum this expression is common; “To train compatriots of Turkey who know other religions, show understanding to people of same religions with themselves and to people of different religions”.⁶

While explaining the religion scientific approach of curriculums it is said that; “...investigation based information about Islam and the other religions has been kept in the foreknowledge and groundless or superstition based incorrect information has been kept away “⁷. In the middle teaching program it is said about the explanations regarding scientific approach; “Giving place to other religions; the course gain a character of being a course with interreligious expansion.”

Similar expressions are used while explaining the gains in the religion scientific approach of the curriculum are those; “To give

⁵ *Ortaöğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı*, pp. 10; *İlköğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı* pp. 7.

⁶ *ibid*, pp. 11; *ibid*, pp. 8.

⁷ *ibid*, pp. 12; *ibid*, pp. 9.

students general information about other religions for bringing them to an expanded belief and culture world and make them be more tolerant and well behaved to people of different religions. “⁸

These two curriculums differ in their structure of general aims. Therefore, it is suitable to focus on each of them separately; In the curriculum of secondary schools; general aims related the other religions are as follows: (The students)

34. Learn the culture of living together and tolerance.

35. They understand the unifying role of religion in the globalizing world.

36. They participate in universal values in the light of their own religious information and consciousness.

37. They recognize the general features of other religions.⁹

And; in the curriculum of primary education, these general aims are determined related to the other religions; (The students)

7. “Comprehend Islam and other religions taking their own literatures as bases”.

14. “They recognize that different religious comprehensions and living with them in the society is a social fact”.

15. “They approach the beliefs and life styles of other people with respect and tolerance”

27. “They know other religions with their main elements and show respect to their believers.”¹⁰.

⁸ *ibid*, pp. 13; *ibid*, pp. 10.

⁹ *ibid*, pp. 15.

There are similarities in the learning fields and the explanations regarding other religions of these two curriculums. For instance, in the field of learning worship it is said that; “To satisfy the feeling of worship in a right way and to train students who have the habit of behaving temples in a respective way (in primary education: to religions and their worship, too)¹¹. Additionally in the learning field of worship in the curriculum of secondary schools, following explanations took part; “Students learn the ways of worship in Islam and in other religions. They show respect to the temples and holy days.” “The students transfer their knowledge and the skills they learned in the religious courses to the real life and so they do activities to learn the other religions in their environment”. At the twelfth class they will learn the kinds of worship, places of worship, important days and nights. The abilities of showing respect to the worship and temples of other religions will be supported by activities¹².

Similar explanations in the ‘Learning field of religion culture and civilization’ for secondary schools and ‘The field of religion and culture’ for primary schools are as follows¹³,” ... it has been aimed to teach the common features of religions and to respect the different beliefs”, (only for secondary schools: “The students learn the great religions present today and they show the countries where these religions are lived on the map. They order the periods of historical

¹⁰ *İlköğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı*, pp. 11,12.

¹¹ *Ortaöğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı*, pp. 19; *İlköğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı* pp. 14.

¹² *Ortaöğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı*, pp. 19.

¹³ *Ortaöğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı*, pp. 22; *İlköğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı* pp.17.

process of the divine religions. They explain the general features of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Shinto's.”). They become aware of common sides and universal ethical principles of divine religions about belief and moral.¹⁴ They respect people who have different beliefs. They notice the showing importance of religions on protecting environment and they exemplify it. They become aware of the importance of interrelations between religions in the globalizing world... and all these goals will be supported by activities that will improve the respect and tolerance for different religions”. Additionally the following explanation take part in the curriculum for secondary schools; “They will learn the important features of living religions, similar features of religions and interrelations between religions in the globalizing world”.

¹⁴ *Ortaöğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı*, pp 22