



The Role of the Bulgarian Church in Education – Traditions and Modernity

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Abstract

In the complex historical periods from the development of Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Church has always played a crucial role for the preservation of the Bulgarian language, religious belief and self-consciousness. The paper traces and analyses the role of the Bulgarian church in the development of Education in Bulgaria historically and in contemporary times. In connection with the implementation of the activities under project ДН15/4 "Creation of a Model for the Safeguarding, Promotion and Socialization of Churches in Bulgaria" a number of field studies were conducted in different regions of the country. It was found that in almost all the temples there were schools, which, having emerged as the so-called "cell-schools", gradually became classrooms with a secular character of education. It is noteworthy that the inhabitants of the small settlements far from the center of the country showed a desire for education and enlightenment and with their own means and forces opened schools next to their churches. Nowadays, the role of the church in education is more educational. There are Sunday schools attached to the temples throughout the country, which are on a voluntary basis. The website of the Holy Synod, the websites of the individual holy dioceses and the websites of individual churches in the country provide information about the work of the working Sunday schools, which maintain constant contact with children and their parents and in the form of various entertaining games and activities acquaint them with the foundations of the Christian religion, together with the various religious holidays and rites. On the territory of the Sofia Holy Metropolis alone there are more than 15 Sunday schools, there are no fewer in the large metropolitan cities of Plovdiv, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Varna, etc.

Keywords: Education, Bulgarian Church, Sunday schools

1. Introduction

In the complex historical periods from the development of Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Church has always played a crucial role for the preservation of the Bulgarian language, religious belief and self-consciousness. The paper traces and analyses the role of the Bulgarian church in the development of Education in Bulgaria historically and in contemporary times.

Ever since the first Christening of the Bulgarians in 864, the church has played its role in society as an enlightening factor. Gradually, literary centers were established for each newly-built monastery and church, which were the first educational institutions in the Bulgarian state.

With the fall of the state under the Ottoman rule at the end of the 14th century, when the Bulgarian population became part of the Ottoman Empire, the process of establishing the Bulgarian state and its cultural and educational development was interrupted. In the new historical conditions, only the Bulgarian monasteries and temples in villages and towns remained as centers of education from the 15th to the 19th century.

During the five centuries of national dependence – from the end of the 14th to the end of the 19th century, the Bulgarian Church (BC) played a significant and multifaceted role in preserving the Bulgarian self-consciousness, faith and language. This role was extremely important and decisive during the most powerful cultural period in our history – the Revival (from the end of the 18th to the end of the 19th century).

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Nowadays, the role of the church in education is more educational. There are Sunday schools attached to the temples throughout the country, which are on a voluntary basis. The website of the Holy Synod, the websites of the individual holy dioceses and the websites of individual churches in the country provide information about the work of the working Sunday schools, which maintain constant contact with children and their parents and in the form of various entertaining games and activities acquaint them with the foundations of the Christian religion, together with the various religious holidays and rites. Only on the territory of the Sofia Holy Metropolis there are more than 15 Sunday schools, there are no fewer in the large metropolitan cities of Plovdiv, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Varna, etc.

The work with the children in the Sunday schools is varied and organized in an interesting way. In addition to getting acquainted with carefully selected religious talks suitable for kids' age, there are various schools at the temples within the Sunday schools: acting, icon painting, children's church choirs, and entertaining games related to various religious holidays.

Observations and analysis of historical and contemporary facts about the role of the BC in the education and upbringing of children show that there is a desire to preserve and modernize traditions in this regard.

2. Historical predispositions

From the start of its existence – the conversion of the Bulgarians into Christianity in 864 – the Church has perceived its role in society as an educator. Gradually, literature centers were established with every newly-built monastery and church. These were the first educational institutions in the Bulgarian state. Monks were educated there, liturgy books were translated, original work was written. Preslav and Ohrid literary schools became known as enlightening and educational centers, some of the most significant for their time.

Throughout the complex historical periods of Bulgaria's development, the Bulgarian Church has played an important role for the preservation of the Bulgarian language, religion and self-consciousness. With the state falling under the Ottoman rule at the end of the 14th Century, when the Bulgarian people became part of the Ottoman Empire, the process of establishing the Bulgarian state and its cultural and educational development was interrupted. After the Ottoman invasion, the educational system in the Bulgarian lands declined. The Ottoman rule became an obstacle for the evolutionary cultural development of the Bulgarians. The greater part of the old educational centers were destroyed, the Bulgarian intellectuals of the time, who took education to extreme heights during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (12th-14th centuries), were dispersed or killed.

In the conditions of a destroyed state, high bodies of the Church like the Patriarchate and the archbishoprics, and as a result of the secession from the European civilization, the incredibly difficult task of preserving the Bulgarian educational tradition, nationality and self-consciousness fell to the Bulgarian Church. Only the Bulgarian monasteries and temples in villages and towns remained centers of education from the 15th to the 19th century in the new historical conditions. In the so-called 'cell schools' (schools at the monasteries) the Bulgarian lower clergy taught Bulgarian children and thus helped to preserve the Bulgarian language, the Bulgarian cultural heritage and Christian consciousness. Schools were opened near almost every church and monastery, where Bulgarian children became literate.

This education aimed to provide writing, reading and a few arithmetic skills. Church books were mainly used for textbooks. Everything was taught in Church Slavonic or Greek. Cell education had an elementary and religious character, but in the conditions of the Ottoman rule it played a huge role in maintaining the national self-consciousness of the Bulgarians.

In the 18th century the cell schools became even more widespread and by the middle of the century on the territory of today's Bulgaria there were over 100 cell schools, and by the 1830s they were 235, among which the most famous in the cities of Sofia, Kotel, Samokov, in the monasteries of Etropole, Troyan and Rila.

Throughout the five centuries of national dependence – from the end of the 14th to the end of the 19th century, the Bulgarian Church played a significant and multi-functional role in preserving the Bulgarian self-consciousness, faith and language. This role is extremely important and decisive during the most powerful cultural period in our history - the Revival (from the end of the 18th to the end of the 19th century). During the Revival, the Church played the role of a unifier of the Bulgarian population on the territory of the Ottoman Empire and manifested itself as a factor in understanding the building blocks for the preservation of what was Bulgarian.



In its significance, goals and comprehensiveness, the Bulgarian Revival is similar to the European Renaissance, although in its specificity it differs significantly from it. It developed three centuries later, which made it possible to benefit from the experience of advanced countries. The Renaissance motifs on Bulgarian land appeared at the beginning of the 18th century and grew into a national liberation ideology and movement. Without going into more detail, we will emphasize that due to the specific Bulgarian historical circumstances, the main priorities of the Bulgarian Revival became education, the struggle for an independent Bulgarian church and the struggle for national liberation.

Bulgarian Revival leaders realized and followed something extremely important: the pursuit of education must be a priority of the Bulgarian population, because only an educated person can be aware of the need for freedom and independence. In the country, too, a powerful movement for education emerged and gained momentum among the Bulgarian population.

The movement for modern Bulgarian education is an important element of the general development of the Bulgarian Revival and is organically connected with other Revival processes. The connection with the church-national movement is especially close. The two movements are intertwined because of the common goal - the struggle for spiritual self-determination. The new Bulgarian education was born and developed in the conditions of a society, with the Christian religion in an important place in its view of the world. The movement for modern Bulgarian education was realized as a secular parallel to the movement for church independence in the religious field. Both movements are perceived as a means of survival and establishment of the Bulgarian nation. In this struggle, the church and the school were allies. The churches and monasteries with the cell schools operating on their territory also became the leading educational centers of the historical Bulgarian lands.

Based on the model of the cell schools at the churches and monasteries, patriotic Bulgarians gradually began to open schools with a distinctly secular character of education. Most of such schools were established at the end of the 18th and in the first three decades of the 19th century. In addition to the initial religious education, mostly secular knowledge was taught in them. The striving for secular education is explained mainly by the purely practical needs of the emerging Bulgarian bourgeoisie. Its representatives must be able to read, write, count, have knowledge of geography, commodity trade, history, science, etc., so that they can not only produce but also sell their goods in countries near and far. The expanding economic contacts with the surrounding Christian world, as well as the purposeful cultural and political penetration of France, England, Russia and Austria into the Balkan region, highlighted even more the shortcomings of cell education. The acquisition of secular knowledge was also necessitated by the spiritual needs of society, by the growing interest in new bourgeois ideas, in the historical past, in the Bulgarian language and in folk traditions.

To summarize, we can say that in Bulgaria at the dawn of the movement for modern Bulgarian education, church institutions were the main place where it was born and established. In this sense, it can be confidently argued that historically the Bulgarian Church is the main factor in the emergence of the Bulgarian educational system. In connection with the implementation of the activities under project ДН 15/4 "Creation of a Model for Safeguarding, Promotion and Socialization of Christian Churches in Bulgaria" a number of field studies were conducted in different regions of the country. It was found that in almost all the temples there were schools which began as cell schools and gradually became schools with a secular character of education. Such schools existed in Dobrich (founded in 1859 in a specially constructed building in the yard of the St. Trinity Church), in the Church Holy Epiphany (1868) in the village of Radovtsi, Drianovo Municipality; in Shiroka Luka in the yard of the church St. Virgin's Assumption, in the villages of Pavelsko, Chokmanovo and Nedelino. We can't help but notice that the inhabitants of the small settlements far from the center of the country had shown a desire for education and enlightenment and with their own means and forces opened schools to their churches. For example, we will point out the villages in the Rhodopes, where, despite the difficult mountainous terrain, schools were opened in every village. The first schools in the Rhodopes were in Smolyan /the Pashmakly School-1848/, Dolnoraykovo School, Petkovo School /1837/, Slaveynovo School /1848/, Momchilovo School /1848/. Schools were opened in Shiroka Luka, Pavelsko, Chepelare. The town of Zlatograd started it all opening its school in 1830 to the Church St. George-the Martyr, which marked the beginning of the educational activities in the Rhodopes. The oldest written monument of the Rhodopes Revival was discovered here – Zlatografski Pismovnik – 1852 /A Letter Book of Zlatograd/. In 1852, the population of Zlatograd raised money and built the Vzaimno School, which was the third in the town after the first two cell schools.

3. The role of the Church today

Today, many of the old cell schools have been turned into museums preserving the memory of the work and merit of the patriotic Bulgarians who gave their strength and resources for the education of young people. In the town of Dobrich, a classroom of a Revival mutual school has been restored, and



the school building in the yard of the church in Shiroka Luka is currently being restored and renovated with state funding. When the building is ready, a church museum will be opened in it with exhibits reflecting the development of education in this area.

The most significant museum on education is the one in the town of Zlatograd. The exhibition entitled "Education in the Mid-Rhodopes" was opened in 1978 and is the second of its kind in Bulgaria after Aprilova High School in Gabrovo (the first secular school in the country). The school in Zlatograd was built with donations and the work of Zlatograd people in 1852. It is located in the building of the Mutual School. Apart from the reconstruction of the classroom with teaching aids and the teachers' room, the museum also keeps a unique collection of old-print editions, notebooks and teaching aids, registers and notebooks as well as everyday possessions of teachers. Among the most valuable exhibits is the Zlatograd Pismovnik /A Letter Book of Zlatograd/, which is a hand-written composition of 1852. The teachers' library is as impressive as rich in books, textbooks and dictionaries in Church-Slavonic, New Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish, Hebrew, English, French and German languages. The museum also keeps books with copies, possessions, photos and documents on the history of the town of Zlatograd. Over 3,500 exhibits have found their home in the museum. As already mentioned, this museum is in the yard of the St. George – the Martyr Church, where the school used to be in the past.

It is interesting to see what the role of the church in education and upbringing of young people is today.

There are Sunday schools in the temples all over the country organized by local priests and working on a voluntary basis. The website of the Holy Synod, the websites of the individual holy dioceses and the websites of individual churches in the country provide information about the work of the working Sunday schools, which maintain constant contact with children and their parents and introduce them in the form of various entertaining games and activities to the foundations of the Christian religion, with the various religious holidays and rites. Today, more than 15 Sunday schools operate on the territory of the Sofia Holy Metropolis alone, and there are no fewer in the large metropolitan cities of Plovdiv, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, as well as in almost all small and large settlements. In the city of Varna, for example, there are more than 5 Sunday schools – almost in every church.

The organization and work of Sunday schools, as mentioned, is on a voluntary basis, as the main inspirer and initiator is the Bulgarian Church in the face of its representatives – priests, trustees and active laity. Classes with children are held on Sunday, after the liturgy, and they are conducted under the guidance of qualified tutors – teachers, theologians, priests. The parents are present indirectly – they are waiting for the end of the activities on the territory of the temple, and in most cases they are provided with a small treat in the end.

The work with the children in the Sunday schools is varied and interestingly organized. In addition to being acquainted with carefully selected for their age religious talks at the temples within the Sunday schools there are different schools: acting, icon painting, children's church choirs and entertaining games related to various religious holidays. The fact that the classes are held in the temple gives the children the opportunity to learn about its history with the icons, with the contribution of different personalities to the preservation of the temple in the course of its existence. In each group of Sunday schools there is a purposeful conversation with the children about the temple, its history, its icons and murals. Its importance in the history of the settlement is emphasized.

In Varna in the church "St. Athanasius" work with children, in addition to the Sunday school, has been expanded by publishing a children's church magazine called Kambanka /Bell/. The magazine has been published since 2012 with the blessing of the then Metropolitan of Varna and Veliko Preslav Kiril. Its distribution is completely free for readers.

Kambanka is the only children's religious magazine in our country focusing on the religious and moral education of children. According to the priest in the church, Father Doncho Alexandrov attempts are being made to publish similar magazines elsewhere, but so far Kambanka is the only one. It is written on a voluntary basis by professionals who try to diversify its content, make it interesting and accessible for children of different ages. The entire organization of the publication and responsibility for the content of the magazine fall upon the priest at the church Father Doncho. Apart from being a paper edition, Kambanka is also available in electronic form, which makes it more widespread.

4. Summary and conclusion

Observations and analysis of historical and contemporary facts about the role of the Bulgarian Church in the education and upbringing of adolescents shows that there is a desire to preserve and continue the traditions in this regard. Today there are careful and well-thought-out forms and activities for working with children with the involvement of parents in order to achieve a sustainable positive attitude towards the church, religious values and morals. On the one hand, interesting and entertaining activities with children are achieved for raising the numbers of worshippers who visit the temples not



only on major holidays. On the other hand, the population expresses their readiness to participate in the preservation and maintenance of temples at a local level and in many cases at a national one.

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