



THEME 4: Regional conflicts

Teaching and Learning aids

Muslims in Thrace

Can different religious concepts lead to an «explosion» in the area?

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Reading the articles published in the daily press on the account of the events in a village of Thrace, we can point out the following:

A. Are efforts of rapprochement between Christians and Muslims being made on the Greek side?

Although social osmosis of the two cohabitant elements in the region of Trace has advanced in recent years, it has not however reached such level allowing to consider the problem as solved.

Efforts are made however by the Media, through TV series, such as the «Archipelago» or even Turkish series responding to the need of Christian - Muslim rapprochement and to get to know more details about each others way of life and beliefs.

Is it easy, however, for something like that to happen and indeed in a region like Thrace, where in the past various episodic incidents occurred? (text Ia, II)

B. Precarious balance

The incidents occurred in the mountainous village Echinós of Xanthi reveal the difficult aspect of the undertaking. The Muslims in the area regarded the entering of a «half-naked» woman into the mosque as lack of respect, a fact that caused their rage and reactions. The situation got even worse as many Muslims were at the same time praying in the mosque, celebrating an important to them ceremony. This was taken as a great offence. One might, of course, suggest the Christians might also have reacted in a similar way if they same happened in an orthodox church or even if a film offended their principles and religious beliefs. The question is however whether things did indeed happen in the way the Muslim population believe. Has there been an attempt to provoke and insult indeed on the part of the TV team or has there been a misinterpretation of the facts?

It is well known that people behave in a very different way as a crowd, especially when individuality is not developed, to a great extent because of their low standards of living as well as to reasons of ideology. In order to understand things better, we should also take into account the special characteristics of the region, as well as the Greek policy in respect of these minorities. (text II, IV)

C. Historical review - Remarks

After the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) many efforts have been made by the Turkish side for the control of the area, culminating in 1988. To this contributed Greek policy leading the minorities of the region to the Turkish influence.

Until 1996 there was a degree of discrimination against Muslims, who were not accepted as citizens of Greece of equal rights. A characteristic example of this is the forbiddance of entry to the region of Pomaks (Muslim minority of Thrace) existing until 1996

Today, this is not the case and the official position of the Greek state is 'respect for the particularities of the others, as well as the secrete character of all places of religious cult'.

But to what extent should this tolerance go? The authorities of the region talked about justice, which, however, was not granted. A group of people attacked another. Should this case not be cleared out and those responsible be punished? Is this the kind of tolerance we are talking about? Is this tolerance compatible with the notion of justice?

The policy of Greece was to react quickly and to close the issue. Would the same happen on the Turkish side when it concerns the Greeks of Constantinople? We live in a period when relations between Greece and Turkey and mutual dependence concerning major political issues, like the entry of Turkey in the E.U., the recognition of the Cypriot Republic demand a solution concerning relations between the two peoples, which will not be unfair to either side, will help to the harmonious coexistence of the two peoples. It is therefore necessary to define the terms justice, tolerance, respect. (texts II, III, IV)

On the basis of the initial question and in order to avoid the explosion in the area, it is worth taking into account the following principles:

- Peaceful coexistence
- Justice
- Respect
- Tolerance

Questions for thinking and debate in class:

- Why did Muslims react in this way only at the suspicion that something of offence was happening for their religion symbols and places of religious cult?
- How should the Greek state deal with the religious minority in Thrace?
- Is the coexistence of Muslim and Christian element in the area dangerous? How can the conflict be avoided in the future?
- Tolerance, justice: What do these terms mean to you?