

# Documents

## Atheism in the Kindergarten

*Little overt anti-religious propaganda has appeared in the Bulgarian "popular" press in recent years. Even during the repressive campaign of 1984-85, aimed at the assimilation of the (mainly Islamic) Turkish ethnic minority, Islam as such did not come under frontal attack in the national media, which put out frequent assertions (clearly contradicted by the 1986 Amnesty International report on the situation) that the Muslim population enjoyed complete freedom of worship. As far as the mainly elderly, and predominantly Orthodox, Christian community is concerned, the authorities have, on the whole, appeared satisfied that it posed no serious threat to the political status quo, and that consequently there was no pressing need to disturb publicly what they saw as the residual sentimental attachment of a small minority to an outdated ideology.*

*However, it appears, from some recent articles in the more specialised sections of the Bulgarian printed media, that some party ideologists are becoming concerned at the shortcomings of current atheist education and the vulnerability of young people in particular to the influences of religion. We quote below extracts from an article by Kameliya Gal-*

*cheva entitled "Towards Atheism for Those of Pre-school Age" which appeared in Ateistichna tribuna (Atheist Tribune), 1987 No 2.*

As part of the basic socio-pedagogical infrastructure, the kindergarten is called upon to build foundations upon which the human character will be formed and hence also to prepare the ground for effective atheism in the future. The importance of the pre-school social institutions in the formation of atheist attitudes in the individual is enhanced also by the fact that the children of both atheists and believers are brought up together here. From analyses of pupils from our own and foreign countries, it is known that the period from three to six years of age is the most favourable for the reception of primary religious notions, on an emotional-imitative basis.<sup>1</sup> As it is known that children from this age-group are remarkable for their heightened susceptibility and propensity to imitate, an atheist upbringing must be regarded as an important element in relation to the inculcation of a view of life and to the moral training of the child's character.

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<sup>1</sup>N. Mizov, *Istinata i neistinata za religiyata* (Sofia, 1977), p. 223.

This is the basis on which we have investigated the educational possibilities of certain socio-pedagogical factors and their contribution to the atheist education of children of between three and six. We do not pretend that we have been able to answer every question exhaustively. We set ourselves the task of establishing to what extent, in the educative process in the kindergartens, by using broad pedagogical methods of instruction, correct ideas and concepts about the environment (as the basis for the child's atheistic outlook) may be formed. Besides this, we have undertaken to study the participation of parents in building atheist attitudes towards the world through their endorsement of the instruction received at the kindergarten.

We used the following methods of scientific pedagogical research: observation — we organised and conducted sixteen studies under the heading "Introduction to Life Around Us"; a talk plus conversation designed to define the range and quality of knowledge about natural and social phenomena, with Group III children from the towns of Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, Peshtera, Velinograd and Stamboliiski; an investigation into atheist issues with parents from Plovdiv, Pazardzhik and Peshtera; and an examination of the programmed subject-matter entitled "Introduction to Life Around Us", based on the M.N.P.'s\* 1984 syllabus for educational work in kindergartens.

A prerequisite in the inculcation of an atheist outlook in those of pre-school age is that they should acquire correct notions and concepts which prove the material nature of the world around us: the development of plants and animals; how natural processes and phenomena are

linked and interdependent; and also the positive and negative roles of mankind in changing nature.

The learning material provided for in the kindergarten's educational syllabus, which the children of different age-levels are obliged to assimilate, offers opportunities for the inculcation of correct notions and concepts regarding cause and effect in the world around them and also contributes to laying the foundations of atheist views in the rising generation. For example, an introduction to natural phenomena (how night follows day; how the seasons change; how animals change colour according to the time of year; rain, storms, thunder, rainbows, frost, the movement of clouds etc.) provides an opportunity for the child to understand, with appropriate explanation on the part of the mistress, how the laws of nature work and the fact that there is no supernatural intervention in natural phenomena and processes. A variety of themes (the different seasons in the playground; the work of farmers in the orchards and market-gardens; how living creatures prepare for winter; the care of domestic animals etc.) provide opportunities for the children to learn to discover the causal relationships and dependencies underlying the changes which occur in nature.

Introducing children to social and folk festivals and the manner in which they are observed orientates them towards the festival system of socialist society. In addition to this introduction to national festivals, an original system of festivals has been created in children's establishments, appropriate to the cognitive and emotional capacities of the children: the object of this is to endorse the new rituals and traditions in our way of life. Celebrating festivals like Autumn Fruitfulness and the Farewell to Autumn; welcoming Grandfather Frost, Grandmother March,

\*M.N.P.: *Ministerstvo na Narodnata Prosveta* (Ministry of Education) — Ed.

and Spring; the Assembly festival, the sending of the children to school; celebrating birthdays and the various sporting, technical, musical and literary festivals — all these help to consolidate what they have learned in the regular course of their educational studies.

The subject-matter of these children's festivals provides an opportunity for the children to broaden their experience as they meet new situations in the course of their everyday lives. The festival of Autumn Fruitfulness, for example, allows the children to meet working people from the farming community. In this way, the idea that the harvest depends on the labour of these people is consolidated. [ . . . ]

The picture [the children have] of the real world is turned into concepts which become permanent features of their character, subject to the correct use of conversational approach whereby the children's knowledge is widened and their ideas formed. In practice, teachers often do not raise specific questions and the talking becomes a dialogue which merely restates what has been seen in the course of the observation. The children must approach problems by discussion, and on the basis of the life-experience they already possess must aim to become familiar with different elements of natural processes and phenomena, and to formulate their own concepts of these. In this way, they will consolidate and absorb the atheist ideas and views of life they have acquired; these will become a further guarantee of effective resistance to all religious influences exerted on them in later years and will be the healthy foundation for a truly materialist outlook. [ . . . ]

As a socio-pedagogical agency, the kindergarten sets out purposefully to lay the foundations of an atheist view of life for the children; but if atheist

education turns out to be in conflict with family education, its efforts will be in vain. The participation of parents, through their endorsement of the atheist notions and attitudes to life moulded in children's institutions, should be sought in two respects: they should add to the children's knowledge of nature and society, and should include the children, with the family, in the celebration of social and folk festivals of an anti-religious character.

The findings of this study show that opportunities are created in the family for the consolidation and enrichment of the children's knowledge of natural and social phenomena and of the processes taught in the kindergarten. There are various opportunities for guidance in the course of conversation. Parents very often direct their children towards a given phenomenon and proceed to explain it to them. In other cases, the initiative comes from the children, through their asking questions. Particular situations often give rise to opportunities for conversation. What the parents tell their children about natural and social phenomena is corroborated by the children themselves. Conversations about nature and social life come second in number only to those on themes to do with home life. Parents' explanations of observed processes and phenomena of a natural or social character derive from their own understanding of them, but they reinforce scientific authenticity and are simplified in order to be understood by the children. Sometimes, elements of fantasy (Grandfather Frost, dwarfs and other fairy-tale characters) are used — but without any superstition or mysticism. In our view, parents assist the work of the kindergartens in these ways by broadening the children's knowledge of real life around them.

Family celebrations are some of

the most longed-for and best-loved customs. However, the observance of national festivals does not prevent many parents from celebrating religious ones as well (Easter, Shrove-tide, Christmas Eve etc.). Participation in these sustains religious traditions and creates a basis for building a positive disposition among children towards the cult-ritual system of the church. Many parents acknowledge that they believe in incantations, fortune-telling and witchcraft; they may thus undermine their children's understanding and conviction regarding the strength and invincibility of the human genius and a belief may become implanted in the intervention of supernatural forces and the availability of religious miracles in the life of the people.

An investigation into the feelings of parents about atheist activity shows that a significant proportion or parents consider scientific atheist propaganda and educational work needful and beneficial; but others, for various reasons, undervalue it.

Taking everything into account so far, we consider that the political, social and pedagogical aspects of atheist education ought to be considered as questions of current importance, awaiting a solution from the socio-pedagogical system of today and tomorrow. Atheist instruction must be carried out as an integrated educational process, under the combined pedagogical influence of the kindergarten and the family.

In their common work, it is imperative that the functions of each of these two agencies of influence be made clear, that modern forms of pedagogical instruction of parents be sought, forms that show how the family can exert its influence endorsing the children's atheist outlook as inculcated in the kindergarten. Only through the combined forces of the kindergarten and the family will the desired goal be attained, namely that the foundations of atheism may be laid in children's characters while they are still young.

## Bulányi Replies to the Vatican

*In RCL Vol.15 No.3, pp. 346-50, we published the Vatican's condemnation of the teachings of Fr György Bulányi as it was conveyed in the form of a letter to Bulányi from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Faith, dated 1 September 1986. We also included in that issue a short bibliography of published documents and articles concerning the Bulányi controversy and its place in the current Hungarian Catholic context.*

*Cardinal Ratzinger's letter was published in the Hungarian Catholic press in June 1987. In his response to the letter, published below,*

*Fr Bulányi criticises the Cardinal for allowing his letter to be published, defends his own actions and repeats a qualified declaration of loyalty to the teachings of the church.*

Budapest, 15 October 1987

Your Eminence,

In your letter of 31 January 1986 you told me that you had found "wrong, dangerous and mistaken" views in my essay (*Church Order*); you were intending to publish this assertion of yours and were requesting me for my part to recant.