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The Croatian Experience: Catechism and/or Religious Culture?

We are talking about one existing and one non-existing school subject, which should improve the level of knowledge and education on religious phenomenon among recent and future generations of young people in Croatia.

After 60 years of neglecting religion and religiosity as a possibly relevant social phenomenon for the broader education of young people, in Croatian society, with a Catholic majority and very high percentage of religious people, two studies were made partly dealing with the dimension of religious knowledge in Croatia:

- Religious changes and religious values in Croatian society (Zagreb region), 1999.
- Social and religious changes in Croatia, 2004.

We wanted to know whether respondents know some elementary religious facts which are part of culture in general.

Zagreb region, 1999.

- Only 25% of respondents recognized all four of the evangelists
- Only 6% of respondents recognized the names of three old testament prophets
- More than 80 % of respondents knew nothing about the II Vatican Council
- 16% of respondents do not distinguish the notions of Christianity and Catholicism – the question was: which religions do you know except Christianity? Respondents listed, among others, Orthodoxy, Protestantism, certain protestant denominations, Jehovahs witnesses, Greek Catholics...

Croatia, 2004.

- 52 % of respondents knew that Easter is the basic Christian holiday
- 66 % of respondents knew how many holy sacraments there are
- 91 % of respondents knew how many commandments there are
- 57 % of respondents knew how many mortal sins there are
- 37 % of respondents recognized four of the evangelists
- 10 % of respondents recognized names of three old testament prophets

One of the questions was especially interesting: Which of the listed denominations are Christians (answers – percentage answering yes)

- Adventists 21%
- Scientologists 2%
- Orthodox 51 %
(as many as 49 % of respondents are not aware of the fact that Orthodox believers are Christians)
- Jehova's Witnesses 13%
- Sai Baba followers 0.5%
- Greek Catholics 53%
- Baptists 16%
- Kopts 7%

These indicators relate to recognizing only a few broadly well-known facts from Christianity's corpus of knowledge. These data indicate the pronounced ignorance of adult respondents, mostly self-identified Catholics and believers, and the necessity of integrating religious contents in school teaching.

Mediation of religious contents in schools

Religious contents can be mediated in different ways:

- As confessional education (different names has been used – catechism, religion, religious education, religious instruction...)
- As non-confessional education (ethics, religious culture, religions and ethics...)

- Religious contents can be integrated in some other subjects (literature, art, history, sociology...)
- Through crosscurricular contents within different subjects

Mediation of religious contents in the Croatian schools

- Catechism
- Religious contents integrated through some other subjects
- Crosscurricular issues

Catechism

I use the term catechism instead of the terms religious education or religious instruction, because it is a literal translation of the notion that has been used in Croatian educational system.

Catechism has been taught in Croatian primary and secondary schools for more than 10 years. The question of catechism has been resolved as many other questions referring to the relationship between state and church, even before the Croatian state signed agreements with the Holy See. One of them, relating to areas of education and culture, regulates performing of catechism in pre-school and school institutions.

The Catholic Church persisted and succeeded in its intention to introduce catechism from church to school, to prepare programs and to educate teachers. We may agree or disagree on whether school is a place for teaching catechism, whether that means that state is separated from church or not, and whether the signed agreement can be rejected in the near future or not, but the fact is: Catholic catechism in Croatian schools has already got its history.

So, I think that in this moment the focus of discussion should shift from the Catholic Church to the Croatian state.

The question is: what has the Croatian state and its Ministry of Education done for the past 15 years and more to introduce a confessionally neutral school subject?

Religion through other subjects

At primary schools, there is no alternative subject to catechism. Besides through catechism, religious contents has been mediated through some subjects: history, geography, art and literature. The extent to which this has been done is not sufficient, and the way in which it has been done is not adequate: The textbooks presuppose that children already have previous knowledge about religious facts and historical perspective (especially in history), but this is not a realistic expectation.

Besides, why should it be self-evident that authors of various textbooks automatically possess knowledge about religion? There are many cases showing the opposite. For example, in one fifth-grade geography textbook, a photo of the Vatican was captioned: The Vatican, religious centre of all Christians.

In secondary schools, besides through catechism, religious contents are mediated through a few subjects: Sociology (in gymnasium – one year, two hours a week), crosscurricularly through Ethics as an alternative subject to catechism (three or four years), and through a subject named Politics and economy (one year).

At the same time as the Ministry of Science supports a project named Evaluation of teaching programs and development of curriculum model for compulsory education in Croatia (including religious education), the Ministry of Education introduces a new program of Ethics as an alternative subject to Catechism, from which a systematic presentation of religious issues has been completely omitted, even though Ethics is an alternative subject to catechism.

And after 60 years without any religious education, what have we got now?

Confessional education and a confessional picture of the religious situation in the world as the only source of information on religion in schools. Pupils attending catechism will get a more or less reduced and confessionally coloured view of the historical features of

certain religions and religious movements in the contemporary world, according to which, for example, Jehovah's witnesses or Mormons or Adventists are not Christians. I have to commend the endeavours of authors of catechism textbooks to present seriously and tolerantly other Christian religions, non-Christian religions, and new religious movements. But the confessional approach is deficient by definition. No matter how much it has been tolerant and dialogic, no matter how much it wishes to be ecumenical, it still evaluates these religions from confessional standpoint. For example, how can the catechist present to pupils New Age spirituality and not evaluate? The ultimate goal of every evangelisation, no matter how tolerantly performed, is conversion into the true faith. And every religion is true, from its own standpoint.

Religious culture

Religious culture is a subject which would scientifically, neutrally and religiologically (interdisciplinary) treat the diversity of the religious phenomenon as a historical and socio-cultural fact in history and today.

In the context of confessional education as a fact of the Croatian school system, what news would a subject named religious culture bring?

- A possibility for pupils to broaden, articulate and contextualise religious knowledge acquired in other subjects. Pupils who have had religious upbringing within the family would have an opportunity to contextualise their religious tradition within a broader frame and meet different approaches to the religious phenomenon.
- Those pupils who have not had religious socialisation within the family would have the opportunity to meet the world and values of different religions and world-views. The main goal of such a subject, referring to an essential part of a society that wants to be pluralistic, democratic and civic: development of the consciousness that religious difference is worthy of respect, development of capacity for dialogue and tolerance and better understanding of world and human beings at all.

Conclusion

The main goal of teaching religious education should be:

- not to create a good believer
- not to create only a good citizen
- but to create a free, critical, broadly educated, whole person in broader sense than a pragmatically realized «good citizen» - a person who is able to reflect over different religious and non-religious standpoints, outlooks and world views, without any prejudices.

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