

## Conference Religion in Schools: Problems of Pluralism in the Public Sphere

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### Attitudes Towards Religious Education in Croatia

#### 1. Introduction

Croatia, together with most post-communist countries of central and eastern Europe share some common features of religious changes in the transitional period (despite their differences): the phenomenon of revitalization of religion, the increase in number of new religious movements, interconnection between religion and nation, interconnection between religion and politics and aspiration of churches to restore the positions from the pre-communist period (Borowik, Babinski eds., 1997). But, according to some authors, the revitalization of religion in Croatia followed a different path from some western countries, i.e. it did not manifest a rise of the so-called religion *à la carte*. Revitalization occurred more within the framework of retraditionalization, retotalization and recollectivization, and it was perceived as a return to the ancestral religion and rooting (Vrcan, 1999). We may say that religious changes in the postcommunist period in Croatia can be observed in connection with (at least) the following processes: the openness of leading social and political structures toward religion and church in a transitional and transformational environment (especially through institutional solutions)<sup>1</sup>, acting of churches (especially the Catholic church) in pre-war, war and post-war environment, and the accompanying national and religious homogenization.

Nowadays, the position and role of religion and church in Croatia are totally altered in comparison with their position in the communist period. They are present in the educational system, in mass media and in public and political life by means of their inclusion in discussions on problematic issues of the Croatian transitional reality. The evidenced growth of religiosity in Croatia has been confirmed by results of different research studies (Črpić, Kušar, 1998; Goja, 2000; Marinović-Jerolimov, 1999, 2000; Zrinščak, Črpić, Kušar, 2000).

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<sup>1</sup> In 1996 and 1998, the Republic of Croatia and the Vatican signed four contracts (on cooperation in education and culture, on legal matters, on the care of Catholic believers in the army and police forces of the Republic of Croatia and on economic issues).

This paper is focused on religious education in public schools in Croatia, namely on some attitudes towards religious instruction in schools among the population in Croatia. I organized my presentation around three points: 1) presentation of data which indicate the “religious picture” of Croatia, 2) basic information regarding religious instruction in public schools and 3) presentation of data concerning people’s attitudes toward religious instruction in public schools.

## 2. Religious “picture” of Croatia

In sketching the religious “picture” of Croatia usual indicators of traditional church religiosity which is most widespread in Croatia were used:

- Religious affiliation
- Religious identification on six-item scale from convinced believer to those opposed to religion
- Religious socialisation
- Religious beliefs and
- Religious practice

Data presented in Table 1 are from the 2004 study Social and Religious Changes in Croatia conducted by the Institute for social Research in Zagreb on a representative sample of 2,220 adult respondents aged 18 years or more.

Table 1. Religiosity in Croatia in 2004

INDICATORS OF RELIGIOSITY	(%)
Religious affiliation	
Catholics	87
Religious identification	
Religious	78
Sacramental practice	
Baptised	94
First communion	85
Confirmation	81
Religious socialisation	
Religious upbringing	81
Religious instruction	83
Religious beliefs	
God exists	82
God created world and men	72
God is the source of morality	70
Heaven and hell exist	53
There is a life after death	52
Religious practice	
Go to church weekly	27

Table 1 shows three things: 1) elements of traditional church religiosity transferred through family socialisation are found in very high percentage, as are some basic

church beliefs; 2) beliefs are fragmented, which is a fact that has been observed in different studies on religion in Croatia for decades and 3) the level of regular religious practice is lower than other elements of religiosity. These data indicate that Croatia is, together with Ireland, Poland and Romania, among the most religious countries in Europe (Davie, 2005; Zrinščak, Črpić, Kušar, 2000). A similar level of religiosity had been registered during the 1990s too. According to this fact it is not surprising that the question of religious education was highlighted on the institutional level and played an important role in the dynamics of the church-state relations.

### 3. Religious education in Croatia

For the position of religious education in Croatia, besides these facts it is important to say that the rights of religious communities in Croatia are regulated

- by the Constitution and
- by the Legal Status of Religious Communities Act.

Also, I have to stress that Croatia is in the process of educational reform and at this time there is no systematic and complete analysis of syllabi, textbooks and teaching materials. However, there are some insights on the basis of partial analyses of textbooks, current official documents and official information available.

- First of all the Strategy of the development of the republic of Croatia «Croatia in the 21st century» education: white paper on Croatian education adopted by the Croatian government in 2001 clearly states that the Republic of Croatia is founded as a democratic, multicultural and multi-confessional state and is therefore interested in development of pluralism within the educational system, a task that requires certain measures of encouragement (Strategy ..., Ministry of Education and Sport of the Republic of Croatia, 2003, p. 92). But this document has not been acted on completely to this day.

- The government of the Republic of Croatia is signatory to special contracts regulating the rights of religious communities regarding financing, pastoral care in hospitals, prisons and armed forces, return of nationalized properties and cooperation in the fields of education and culture: it has passed a law on ratification of a contract between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia regarding cooperation in the fields of education and culture in 1996 and in 1998; more recently, it has also signed contracts with the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Religious Community, the Evangelical Church and the Reformed Christian Church, the Evangelical Pentecostal Church and its subjoined members the Church of God and the Union of Pentecostal Churches,

Adventist Church and its subjoined members the Reformed Movement of the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists, the Union of Baptist Churches and its subjoined member the Council of the Churches of Christ, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Croatian Old Catholic Church. A contract has been arranged with the Jewish Community as well, but it has not been signed as yet. The Jehovah's Witnesses refused to agree on a contract with the Republic of Croatia, although they were interested in settling some issues with the state such as marriages and pastoral care in hospitals.

- Concerning religious educational institutions the situation is as follows:

There are religious pre-school institutions in the Republic of Croatia, but no religious primary schools. There are 10 Catholic grammar schools in Croatia, and 2 secondary schools of other religious communities.

- Formal curriculum in primary schools for compulsory education includes confessional education, which is taught as an elective/optional subject in two weekly lessons (70 lessons per academic year) throughout all of the eight grades.

The religious communities design the confessional education syllabi. For such a syllabus to be approved by the Ministry of Education and Sport it must include an ecumenical and dialogical dimension and an introduction to other religions and cultures so as to provide the students with an ecumenical and a dialogical dimension of religious culture (Primary school syllabus, 1999: 244).

The Catholic syllabus is the most elaborate of the syllabi, allowing for cross-curricular teaching (through the native language and literature, history, geography, fine arts, music and physical education syllabi) with every lesson.

the curriculum for secondary schools teaches the religious content through three subjects:

Ethics is an elective subject taught in single weekly lessons, i.e. 35 lessons per year throughout 4 years. The syllabus for the subject stresses that it does not prefer a single worldview or a single philosophy, and it aims to ensure a respect of multiculturalism and a philosophical openness for dialogue. Within each academic year religious content can be taught through 2 lessons pertaining to multiculturalism, coexistence, human rights and universalism, whilst one unit is allocated in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade on the differing approaches to morality, one of which is the religious one.

Sociology is a compulsory subject in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade taught in 2 weekly lessons. The accompanying textbook contains a special chapter encompassing the sociological definition of religion, magic and religion, the classics of the sociology of religion, types of religious groups, secularisation, interconnectedness of religion and societal

change, as well as the religious communities in Croatia. It is up to the teacher's discretion which parts of the textbooks to teach in greater depth.

Politics and economics is a compulsory subject in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of grammar school and is taught in 1 weekly lesson. A single lesson, politics and religion, is dedicated to the relationship between politics and religion in relation to the rights of an individual human being and a citizen.

- For the teacher training religious organisations are responsible. For instance, Catholic confessional education teachers are educated at the Catechetic Institute, Faculty of Theology at the University of Zagreb. Teacher training for Catholic confessional education teachers is provided through seminars organised by the Croatian Conference of Bishops.

#### 4. Attitudes towards religious education in public schools

This basic information important for our theme leads us to data on attitudes towards religious instruction in public schools in Croatia.

Although not comparable at all, for the sake of illustration I used data from

- 1989 and 1996 research on a representative sample of the adult population in Croatia
- 1999 research on a representative sample of the adult population in Zagreb region
- 1999 research on a representative sample (15 to 29 years) of youth in Croatia.

At the end of the 1980s political pluralism and the disintegration of the former socialist Yugoslavia began. At that time a de-ideologization concerning religion and religious people had been observed, together with the desecularization process.

In research conducted in 1989 in Croatia on the question: "Should a greater role in education for religious organizations be allowed?" adult citizens of Croatia responded as follows:

- 68% agreed
- 32% disagreed

The data show that there was tolerance and readiness to accept the greater role of the church in children's education among a majority of respondents at that time.

In research conducted in 1996 in Croatia the following question was asked: "What do you think about introduction of religious instruction in schools?" The respondents answered as follows (in %):

- It should be obligatory      28

- It should be optional 65
- It should be expelled 7

When confessional education had been introduced in primary and secondary schools at the beginning of the 1990s, the majority (65%) of respondents in 1996 survey declared that religious/confessional instruction in public schools should be optional – which it is. Obviously the present situation is convenient to the majority. But having in mind that more than 70% of the Croatian population declared themselves as religious, one can argue that only 28% thought that confessional education should be obligatory.

When we asked respondents in Zagreb region in 1999 what they think about religious education in schools they responded (in %) that it is a

Table 2.

Part of religious tradition	91
Obligation of church community	90
Religious education is needed	90
Part of religious and national identity	83
Obligation of parents	80
Obligation of society	53
Obligation of schools	49

So, according to these data, almost all respondents thought that religious education is needed, that it is a part of religious tradition and the obligation of the church community. For the great majority it is a part of religious and national identity too. But less than half of respondents (49%) thought that confessional education is the obligation of schools. In their opinion it is rather the obligation of the church community (90%) and of parents (80%).

The difference between religious and irreligious respondents with regard to this question is presented in the following table:

Table 3.

	Religious %	Irreligious %
Part of religious tradition	93	88
Obligation of church community	93	77
Religious education is needed	97	48
Part of religious and national identity	88	60
Obligation of parents	87	33
Obligation of society	59	10
Obligation of schools	55	19

What can be observed from this data?

Firstly, only half of religious respondents think that confessional education should be the obligation of schools.

Secondly, a high percentage of irreligious respondents thought that confessional education is part of religious tradition and an obligation of the church community, and

part of religious and national tradition. Almost half of these respondents thought that religious education is needed. Obviously for these respondents religion has not disappeared from their life. It is a part of their family, national and cultural tradition. Although we did not ask respondents whether confessional education should be taught in school or in church, the above results could indicate that they prefer the church. And finally some data from the study on youth in Croatia in 1999. We asked our respondents “How should religion be taught in school?” The following table shows the difference between what two groups of religious respondents and irreligious ones answered to this question:

Table 4.

	Total	Convinced believer	Religious	Irreligious
Confessional religious instruction	41	64	38	14
Religious culture	29	14	35	41
Both	18	20	20	10
Neither	12	3	8	34
Total	100	100	100	100

Although the dominant answer was that it should be taught as confessional instruction (41%), more respondents thought that it should be taught as religious culture or both (47%). The majority of convinced believers<sup>2</sup> was for confessional instruction, but the other 36% not. Only 38% of “religious who do not accept everything their religion teaches” were for confessional instruction, but 63% thought differently. Even 14% of irreligious respondents thought that it should be confessional, but from these answers we cannot differentiate whether they meant only for religious students – as they possibly did.

## 5. Some concluding remarks

- 1) We can conclude that general population in Croatia is open to religious instruction in school as an optional subject.
- 2) More respondents think that religious instruction is a matter for the family and church than for schools and society.
- 3) If parents and children could choose between confessional instruction and religious culture or to have both as optional subjects in school, I wonder what the results would be. To answer this question it should be stressed that confessional education in primary

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<sup>2</sup> For religious identification a six-item scale was used: I am a convinced believer and I accept everything my religion teaches; I am religious but I do not accept everything my religion teaches; I am not sure whether I am religious or not; I am indifferent to religion; I am not religious but I do not have anything against religion; I am not religious and I am opposed to religion.

school is combined with attending Mass in church on Sundays (which is obligatory for pupils that attend confessional education) and organization of the first communion and the confirmation. So, this could be convenient for parents because everything is organized by the school and church. On the other hand, in an already over-burdened curriculum it could be tempting to avoid 2 hours of confessional instruction in school.

4) In a relatively stable situation concerning the level of religiosity and the dynamics of church-state relations, together with an institutionally “resolved” question of confessional education in schools, we cannot expect any changes in this respect in the near future.

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