

Dr. Zorica Kuburić  
Philosophic faculty  
University of Novi Sad

### **Religious education in Serbia**

A specific characteristic of the society that we live in is that, over the last fifty years, our relationship towards religion has varied in most extreme forms, from being accepted to being rejected and then revived in all aspects of society. Naturally, changes in relations toward religion have not only been connected with religious systems themselves, but also with educational and political systems.

It is common in the systems of stable societies that the educational process has the support of all socializing agents. However, in conditions of domination and elimination, it is often realized apart from, and even against, commonly accepted values, in a counter-cultural manner. In the matter of religion and its position in society, atheism and theism along with the political systems that supported them, were in competition.

Numerous questions drive researchers of religion and education to find the truth of religion and especially the ways in which it is passed from one generation to the next. The question of purpose is first in our interest. Why have religious education? Is it about continuing education where we left off 60 years ago? Is it the nature of politics and religion, or is it an inner need of pupils?

In an education system that was oriented toward knowledge and scientific truth, an oasis for religious education was formed through a political decision. Even though it was not compatible with the contents of other school subjects, or with work practices, or staff, religious education started to live and work in schools of Serbia in November 2001, as an optional subject for students of the first grade of elementary school and high school (9th grade). Pupils could choose one two subjects or neither of them. The next school year (2002/2003), religious and civil education received the status of being subjects of choice, that is, pupils had to attend one or the other. In the school year 2003/04 the status remained the same but was also effective for the third grade of elementary school. In the school year 2004/05, an innovation was that the choice of the pupil applies to the commencing cycle of elementary or high school. By doing this Serbia approached, after ten years, the position in Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina, where by demand of the dominant religious communities, confessional religious education has been implemented since 1991, which means since the breakdown of Yugoslavia.

Churches and religious communities, which got the same rights to conduct religious education in community schools, differ in the number of children that belong to major church and minor religious communities, so religious education could be conducted formally. It is interesting that the right to organize confessional religious education in community schools was granted only to those churches and religious communities that supported national organization. Seven of them are: Serbian Orthodox Church; Islamic community; Roman Catholic Church; Slovak Evangelical Church; Reformed Christian Church; Evangelical Christian Church and Jewish Community. The tasks and contents of religious education are defined for each of the seven churches and religious communities. This points to the confessional character of religious instruction.

The number of children who applied for religious education was over 50% of pupils in elementary schools, and half as much in high schools, although it was not put into practice in that percentage because of technical and staff issues. In the second year, informal data showed that enrollment was 49% for the first grade of elementary schools. A study of the Center for Empirical Research on Religion, situated in Novi Sad, and the Institute for Pedagogic Research situated in Belgrade, in a project which was realized in 2003 and published in *Religious and civil education in schools of Serbia*, shows that around half of all pupils chose religious education, and the other half chose civil education, while samples was equal upon examining the questionnaire answers of pupils and their parents in this research.

The structure of the subject by which children are introduced to the life of a religious society, which is one that provides religious studies in its educational system, is established by a plan and curriculum created with suggestions from the religious societies. The literature content used in religious education, which is available to everyone, is partly introduced in the classroom where religious education is being held. Teachers and priests have a key role in the realization of religious education as they present knowledge in their own interpretation, and answer numerous questions from pupils, transform their own faith in God into religious action, and their action towards believers of other confessions. Children encounter numerous fears and are freed of them. For this kind of class especially, an elementary knowledge of pedagogy and psychology is needed. The Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Serbia has paid special attention to the introduction of religious education and organized a seminar for teachers on 6th and 7th of February 2004, dedicated especially to methodology, knowing that religious education classes are taught by priests and laypersons who may not have had psychology and pedagogy in their education.

The practical introduction of classes in religious education was developed according to given possibilities, created alone, gaining experience which would be helpful for future work.

However, it was challenging for researchers to find answers for the second year of religious education for those who had chosen the subject. What were the impressions? Were expectations met? The majority of the population in Serbia are of Orthodox Christian confession, which implies that the results of research showed the realization of religious education conducted by the Serbian Orthodox church. In the same context we question how it relates to other churches and religious communities and also its reaction to civil education, that is a secular social context which keeps its confessional beliefs private.

According to data gathered by research which examined, among other things, the reasons why students and parents chose religious education, the majority of children encountered mentioned acquiring new knowledge and interest in the subject as their motive. In the matter of meeting expectations, religious education has succeeded more with parents than with students. More details of the research can be found in publications: *Religious and civil education in schools of Serbia* and *Religion, religious education, tolerance*. Another useful source of information is CEIR's magazine: *Religion and tolerance*. The list of literature at the end of this text indicates texts and research on general public, college and high school students as well as parents in certain phases of discussion on religious education.

Religious education in Serbia passed through the twentieth century, followed by all political changes, from being the main value system carrier to being the main guilty party, who had to be expelled together with teachers who taught it. Then, after fifty years, it was reinstalled into the education of countries in transition, from which stability is expected, mainly in the moral behavior of young people. Scientists' and parents' expectations of religious education have mainly been fulfilled. Empirical studies show that religious education is accepted only at the level of free choice of those who want it. Any force or rejection is not in agreement with essence of liberty and elementary ideas of identity, both for the individual and for the church and religious community

It is especially important to point out that in Vojvodina, a multi confessional area, there is resistance to religious differences, which magnifies the distance and is a strong indication of religious signs which make all other religious communities feel rejected.

According to the results of research carried out by the Department of Sociology, University of Philosophy in Novi Sad, answering the question: *Are you bothered by the exaggerated indication of religious confession*, 72% of those questioned replied that they were indifferent to which religion it was. The summary is the recognizable need for a normal level for all issues, especially on subjects like education and religion.

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