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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS: CONTRIBUTION OR NOT TO DIALOGUE AND TOLERANCE?

WHAT IS THE SUBJECT MATTER?

Lately, our public has been facing the question of whether children and youth in primary, secondary and high schools should be enabled to get acquainted with those religious contents which represent an integral part of the religious, cultural and national identity of regions they inhabit. The ways in which this question is posed and answered differ from each other to a great degree. They reflect a wide range of thought: starting from the position that in schools we should only find the “scientific” type of information on religion/religions, down to the idea that a “classical” type of religious instruction should be reintroduced to schools.

The current interest in this question is a result of the democratisation of our social reality and of the processes of demarxisation and deatheisation of our educational system. Along with this, the process of transforming a traditional into a modern social structure, i.e. striving to reach civil positions in post-socialist countries, which our country belongs to, imposes the need to bring our school programs closer to the current accomplishments in this field which we find in other European countries. This process should not be simplified and reduced to merely copying other countries’ experiences, because the very problem and its solution are pretty much determined by the actual historical, socio-cultural, political and even economic context of particular countries. There is no single solution to this problem in all Western countries.¹

The question is very complex, so we cannot expect the answers to be simple. The argumentation which is usually presented when determining *pro et contra* on this matter comes from eminent individuals from secular and religious world and cannot be easily refuted. What is more important than a passive submission to one of the extremes is a professional and responsible study striving to find actual solutions in terms of outlining directions, legal framing, choosing programmes, structuring textbooks and teaching practice and determining *the goals, contents and the style of communicating* religious culture in schools.

These are some of the questions: 1. Is it enough to enable students to get acquainted with religion/religious culture only as a part of certain subject curricula (especially those subjects related to humanities)? 2. Should we introduce a new subject or a group of subjects in order to achieve the same goal? 3. What should be the relation between the culture of religion in schools and the specific religious instruction in confessional communities? 4. How can we train teachers for putting into effect the proposed programs and curricula? 5. Who should be the involved parties in preparing school curricula and textbooks?

In order to find the best possible solution in our context, we should involve experts from various scientific disciplines, experienced representatives of various

¹ “After years of practice and important scientific explorations, Western European countries have accepted the following labels for religious instruction: a) Anglo-Saxon: religious education, b) German and Italian: religious teaching, instruction or training, c) French, Spanish, Portuguese: religious teaching, instruction or training, d) Flemish: school catechism” (Pranjić 1990, 4-5).

educational fields and competent social, religious and state institutions. Taking into consideration the mentioned interdisciplinary approach, we want to contribute to the issue of introducing religious instruction to schools by analysing the theoretical positions of *Jakov Jukić*, *Esad Čimić*, *Dragoljub B. Đorđević* and *Miomir Ivković*, all of whom are renowned experts in the fields of sociology of religion and sociology of education. After doing this, we will present our own position on this issue.

**IN FAVOUR OF A CONFESSIONAL SCHOOL
(JAKOV JUKIĆ'S POSITION)**

"Theoretically and for the sake of the future, when the required conditions are met, I would only support private schools ran by particular confessions. Communities are very important to religion. This is particularly applicable to Christianity, which cannot be imagined without companionship... And private schools represent that type of community."

Jakov Jukić

Jakov Jukić, the leading Croatian sociologist of religion, supports the opinion that schools currently represent an inappropriate means of spreading not only religious thought, but also religious culture. That's why it seems to him that we shall first discuss the future of schools in general – the current state of things being a result of the period of feudal ideologisation – and then start talking about religious culture within schools. This is so because the way in which schools will operate is very likely to determine the kind of religious culture would be presented in them.

Our society irrepressibly shakes off its former social traits and gets converted into a civil world. But, according to Jukić, not by means of revolutionary changes, characteristic of many countries and witnessed in history on many occasions, but by means of an "incomplete revolution" (as exemplified by various recent events in the Eastern European countries). This kind of revolution brings a large number of perplexities related to further development of numerous spheres of social action. One of them is the educational process in schools and the dilemma of whether the following steps would be directed towards a quicker leap into a civil society, or towards a temporary redirection whilst the slowdown coming from the previous system is being repaired. The worst outcome of this process could be replacing one ideology with another (the former being the one whose heritage we are trying to renounce), just because we feel the need to reject what has lasted until now. Or, as Jukić (1991, 9) defines it "imprudent persistence in what we want and not in what we can."

The author claims that our public lacks theoretical discussions in regard to religious issues: as if the serious circumstances we are surrounded by did not require such a serious consideration. When talking about religious instruction in schools, with sociological sobriety, Jukić speaks in favour of overcoming premature conclusions: "The easiest thing to do would be to let catechists enter classrooms and teachers' assembly offices, but this would not introduce religious instruction at all." Having in mind the difference between "what we want" and "what we can", the author finds it appropriate to "introduce religious instruction to schools in a gradual, systematic, organized, smart and a non-intrusive manner" (1991, 9), not because this represents an ideal solution, but because this would cause the smallest error in repairing the situation created by lagging behind the developed civil societies.

The right choice for Jukić, once the required conditions are met in the future, would be to organize *private schools ran by particular confessions*. The main reason to support them can be found in the importance of community and socializing

to religion, and private confessional schools represent communities in which religiousness can be developed in a free, unrestricted manner. A confirmation for this is the fact that modern restoration of religiousness primarily involves small religious communities: *sects, charismatic groups and new religious movements*.

IN FAVOUR OF THE CULTURE OF RELIGION (ESAD ĆIMIĆ'S POSITION)

"I will take my position simply and clearly: I find the proposal to introduce religious instruction to schools unfounded from the scientific and the humanistic point of view; creating possibilities for introducing religious instruction to schools does not sound strange to me; I believe that the right place for religious instruction would be in the parish (župa or džemat)."

Esad Ćimić

Esad Ćimić (1992, 6) claims that "... the degree of cultural and civilizational development of a society is reflected in its successful resistance against the total cleric and religious control over individuals and the total socio-cultural dominance of the state over its citizens." In this light, we shall view the need of modern societies to divide the church and the state duties, at the same time criticizing all those tendencies leading to their irreversible alienation and antagonism. The acceptance of the principle of state-church separation has as one of its consequences the *secular school*. The guiding principles of this kind of school are the following:

1. methodological scepticism, which, as a scientific principle, involves the idea of using the rational-experiential criterion to start education processes, this criterion being the only legitimate one within modern science;
2. not submitting to either the religious or the atheist point of view, which means that education processes shall be grounded in the autonomous religious contents which comply to what rational-experiential criterion in science demands;
3. pluralism of all relevant idea and value-related orientations, which can be mediated in an objective manner, supported by arguments;
4. being open towards all living cultural and civilizational heritage and being critical towards valorisation of the existing religious heritage, being "sensitive toward tradition and hostile toward traditionalism";
5. including numerous scientifically attested insights into religious and atheistic phenomena, based not only on the statics of the historical approach, but also on the dynamics of the current movements within the religious and the atheist life. This kind of approach would allow the possibility of introducing a new subject into school curricula, which could be labelled "The culture of religion" (or "Science of religion", or "History of religions").

In accordance with these principles, Ćimić concludes that no modern society possesses an alternative to this kind of "secular or layman school." In offering "multi-layered religious capabilities", schools opt for those forms and contents which are based on the principle of *humanistic education*, and not on the eternal theism-atheism dilemma. This does not mean that entirely theistic and atheistic values shall be excluded from educational processes; on the contrary, they shall be included, on condition that they get rid of its superfluous coating and that in them we recognize the genuine human contents.

When it comes to including religious instruction in the school system, Ćimić is not exclusive: opening this kind of possibility is not strange to him, but he primar-

ily believes that we should leave this to the church and that a subject named "The culture of religion" shall be included in compulsory curricula. In this way, we would allow acquiring, and avoid imposing religious culture. Namely, the culture of religion uses scientific methods to encompass knowledge on religious phenomena which an individual does not have to believe in nor to incorporate into his or her own behaviour. On the other hand, religious culture encompasses value judgments which are in accordance with a specific religion and tends to convert a way of thinking into a way of living and behaving.

This is why Ćimić believes that the culture of religion needs a scientific basis, becoming a separate subject in educational processes, allowing young generations in modern society to get acquainted with the deepest roots of civilizational and cultural development in an adequate manner. The latter gets more importance when compared to the obvious lack of interest in modern youth and with the common indifference towards religious and atheist topics. The author concludes that its existence is an outcome of social passivity left behind the previous socialist thought framework. The presented vision of the school system could change many aspects of the current state of things and contribute to the overall (including the religious) emancipation.

**IN FAVOUR OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION AS SOBORNOST
(DRAGOLJUB B. ĐORĐEVIĆ'S POSITION)**

"Because of this, all until new systemic conditions are created and private and confessional schools start operating, it is advisable that Orthodox education does not go beyond temples... Orthodox spirituality has always been spreading by means of liturgical and Eucharistic living and acting and it should remain like that."

Dragoljub B. Đorđević

When analysing the situation in the former socialist countries, especially those with the Orthodox background, our leading sociologist of Orthodoxy, Dragoljub B. Đorđević, starts from the fact that "all Eastern European nations experienced the misfortune of living under communist regimes for fifty to seventy years" (Đorđević and Đurović 1993, 215), which had a very negative impact on the Orthodox faith and churches. This is why the Orthodox nations nowadays face the difficulty of returning to the cultural and civilizational roots and keeping pace with modern, democratic Europe.

One of the most efficient channels for promoting the atheist culture and ideology in the past, as well as the assumed tendencies in the future, have always been educational processes in the school system. By depleting the spheres of culture and humanistic education and converting into an absolute antireligiousness, *scientific atheism* and *atheistic education* have failed and now they serve as a reminder to our previous cultural and social simplicity.

Democratisation of the public opinion and thawing of the rigid canons of thought have unavoidably given birth to questioning the treatment of religion in the school system, and, according to the author, to demanding a firm decision on whether we want to accept or reject its reinstatement. Secular authorities unanimously refuse the possibility of introducing religious instruction to schools, mitigation such an exclusivity by discussing a possible introduction of a new subject which would compensate the neglected religious component in education. Its main goal would be a comprehensive introduction of different religions as products of civilization, in re-

lation to various cultural aspects of human living and acting (morality, art, philosophy, theology, the science of religion/religions). The proposed names of the future subject are: "History of religion", "Basics of world religion teachings" and "The culture of religion". On the other hand, Orthodox authorities gladly support the opposite solution to the dilemma, but they also face numerous questions. Most of them are related to whether religious instruction should be optional or obligatory, electing religious instructors, creating curricula and textbooks needed for teaching, etc.

Having in mind the weight of the presented arguments, Đorđević supports Jukić's proposal *that the future of religious instruction lies in connecting them with private and confessional schools*. In this way, we would avoid tensions between believers and non-believers, and closeness and socializing within confessional schools would certainly promote religion and religiousness. As for the Serbian Orthodox Church, they are advised not to bring premature conclusions, until conditions for such confessional and private schools are created. Đorđević (1991, 26) concludes that this would be the only way to preserve the excellence of its influence, because "Orthodox spirituality has always been spreading by means of liturgical and Eucharistic living and acting and it should remain like that."

IN FAVOUR OF "PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION" INSTEAD OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION (MIOMIR IVKOVIĆ'S POSITION)

"Layman school (elementary, secondary, high) is not competent and it should not be competent for religious education, which has its own peculiarities in every religion... State, national schools shall remain layman schools."

Miomir Ivković

Trying to give his own contribution to the process of seeking answers to the questions of religious instruction, schools and education, and in accordance with his professional choices, Miomir Ivković (1994, 200) brings up the following issues: 1. How shall the young get acquainted with religion and knowledge on religion? 2. What exactly shall we do in schools, especially in elementary school and in lower grades? 3. Should there be a new curriculum or a new subject or shall religious phenomena be studied within the existing subjects in humanities? 4. If we choose to have a separate subject, should it be religious instruction (following the concept of the Serbian Orthodox Church) or another subject which would examine religious phenomena as a system of scientifically verified knowledge? 5. Which institution will take responsibility for creating a curriculum for such a subject? 6. Which grades should it be placed in? 7. Who is capable of teaching such a subject and who should do it?

Explaining that his answers have nothing to do with his non-believing nature or non-religious attitude and that he tends to be scientifically objective, the author draws on the presented ideas of Esad Ćimić, who sees school as an institution which provides humanistic education. Knowledge on religion is an integral part of such education (this knowledge would not include religious contents, along the lines with the presented difference between religious culture and the culture of religion, as proposed by prof. Ćimić). In transmitting this kind of knowledge, the following demands will need to be taken into consideration:

1. By means of school education, students should be presented only with the scientifically confirmed facts on religion, as the only valid basis for developing their own culture of religion;

2. The subject within which students are presented with religious phenomena shall be in accordance with the accepted scientific demands;

3. Accepting the principle of didactics, as the most general science on teaching, Ivković proposes "Philosophy and sociology of religion" as the name of the subject, as the greatest amount of scientific knowledge on religion can be found in literature on philosophy and sociology;

4. The curriculum of the subject should be created in the same manner as curricula of other subjects, involving the Ministry of Education, as well as the Educational Council (and not involving the Holy Synod, as the Serbian Orthodox Church demands). The author then presents a draft of such a curriculum, section by section;

5. The subject "Philosophy and sociology of religion" would be introduced to the final grade of secondary schools or, in accordance with opinions of other authors, in elementary and high education (in this case, the curriculum would include the basics on the elementary level and more comprehensive knowledge on the university level). The author believes that children in lower grades in elementary schools should not be encumbered with knowledge on religious phenomena, as they do not possess the required intellectual capabilities to perceive the abstract religious notions.

6. People who ought to teach this subject should be those with degrees in philosophy and sociology, because of their academic knowledge in philosophy, sociology, psychology and anthropology (regardless of their religiousness or non-religiousness).

The overall conclusion is the following: state schools shall not be burdened with religious education, especially due to its multiconfessional background. The need for religious education can be satisfied in private and confessional schools, which will soon start operating in these parts (on condition that they have religious instruction in their curricula), or in religious temples and legal church institutions, whose main goal should exactly be promoting religion and religiousness (in case of our confessional region, it should be the responsibility of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Faculty of Theology in Belgrade).

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION (A PERSONAL OPINION)

The fall of the socialist social system in the former Yugoslavia brought about the departure from the Marxist position, which treated religion as a mistake or an illusion, and emphasized the complexity of the religious phenomenon. If the new climate of relationships generated the belief that religion and religiousness (i.e. one's personal religious attitude and the reflection of such an attitude in various aspects of our common life) are an integral part of our experience of civilization, so that the knowledge of this experience and its cultural recognition (e.g. in art, philosophy, science, etc.) belongs to the general culture of all humans – then religious and religion education certainly should seek their own time and space. We should, however, also pay attention to the fact that the harmful effects of the atheistic type of education have not been of the same intensity in all parts of the former Yugoslav region. One shall particularly consider the case of stigmatizing Serbian Orthodoxy and demonizing the Serbian Orthodox Church, which did not happen to Catholicism or Islam. Braking the links between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the state, which, according to Blagojević (1994, 214), were in a traditionally symbiotic relation, and which followed the social revolution, irreversibly removed religion from the source of Serbian national identity. This is why we have to understand the desire of the church to

use the current social context to return to the socio-political scene in a degree greater than it used to have in the former decades.

As for the educational process in our country, we could see that the recent attempts of reform have not given the expected results. This only leads us towards the conclusion that there can be no harmless intervention in the education process, i.e. every change introduced to this process has to be a part of extensive social measures which ought to innovate it, and not a result of irresponsible actions and accidental circumstances and influence. If we approach the current question of introducing religious instruction to schools with this knowledge and if we do not define comprehensive purposes and goals of such an intervention, we will basically be determined by the old school's paradigm. If we introduce religious instruction as an antithesis of Marxism, the backbone of the current education system, then it would mean a mere role-switching; the principle of dominance and rightness of only one world view would still remain active. Such introduction of religious instruction would not mean creating a new school and a new vision of education and its values, but remaining determined by the same set of ideas which gave rise to the atheist type of school. This is why the discussion on religious instruction has to be grounded in the ideas and values directed towards criticizing atheism in schools. These are the ideas of *the freedom of choice and the right to take part in all forms of cultural identity*. Taking this into consideration, we support the idea that religious instruction, as a human need, shall be practiced in schools, not as an optional subject, as it would deprive those who take it of other knowledge included in the subject which would be an alternative to religious instruction. *But, not right here and not right now!* Religious training is primarily related to the family and the church and it should be related to the school in the degree demanded by the parents and the students. The parents and students of the current Yugoslav region have been under the influence of the official atheist orientation for too long and they are thus incapable of jumping into the "light" of religion from the "darkness" of atheism in an easy manner. The aversion to religion, which emerged from the socialist era, caused a significant "brainwashing", which prevents people from welcoming it affectionately. Thus, the most advisable decision would be to introduce *the culture of religion* as a separate "over-confessional" subject, which would use this feature to enable getting acquainted with different cultural achievements which emerged in the history of humanity, as well as the situation in which different confessions and atheism coexist. Within this subject, students would be thoroughly informed about Orthodoxy and Christianity in general, having in mind the long-lasting gap in knowing the religion of their ancestors (and being careful about not turning this into a one-sided promotion of our own confession). The Serbian Orthodox Church would certainly give much better results by starting confessional schools, which would gradually, thoroughly and alternatively eliminate the mentioned subconscious fear in most people.

Only when such activities of the state and the church institutions get started and when our narrow post-socialist perspectives get broadened can one try to officially legalize spiritual life as a separate dimension of human existence. Then, the introduction of religious instruction to the school system would not be considered a controversy or a dilemma. A school should primarily be a school of all students and the demand for the mentioned freedom of choice should mean freedom for everyone, regardless of how they experience their relationship towards the latter.

During the previous few years, one could see that a mere existence of the institutional framework for starting dialogue and constructing tolerance between citizens belonging to different nations and confessions is not enough. Dialogue and tolerance have to become an inner spiritual trait of lives of individuals educated using

the principles of democratic living, which do not favour confessional mentalities and bridge the gaps between the believing, the indifferent and the non-believing. Nevertheless, we do not obtain tolerance at birth (we can only wish it were like that!), but it is a result of the proper way of education, of well-designed and planned actions which cover the span of the complete life. A part of this belongs to the school system, as an institutionalized activity with the explicit educational function.

In getting to know the course of human development, an individual will inevitably come across the phenomenon of religion during the education period. Taking into consideration its complexity, the official school institutions have the task of presenting it thoroughly, while the recipients have the task of accepting it. This is why the existing confrontation of the affirmative and negative viewpoints towards introducing religious instruction to our school system has to be enriched with an additional, higher degree of consideration: "Should the new subject contribute to the expansion of dialogue and tolerance?"

Being aware of the current context, filled with intolerance and the bloody armed conflict in some parts of the former Yugoslavia, we have to understand those who doubt that the needed conditions for developing and affirming religious tolerance can ever be created. If we add the long-lasting mistreatment of religion in these parts (somewhere in a higher, somewhere in a lower degree), we are left with very few arguments in favour of coming to reliable and clear conclusions related to the possibilities of the school and the church to help the process of settling the conflict peacefully. Although our history is quite abundant in moments in which enlightenment thought was muffled in favour of promoting the existing traditional culture, we shall not easily reject such thought. The ideas of free spirit and free spiritual life have to prevail in the cultural currents of our times; only free spirit has the privilege of thoroughly considering the idea of promoting tolerance among people.

However, an important trait of the inhabitants of the Serbian Orthodox regions under the communist regime was a long-lasting deprivation in religious contents of all kinds. So, the loss got doubled: the general religious culture was neglected and the ties with the "faith of ancestors" were broken. This loss can now be compensated, but there is a painstaking, collective and individual self-questioning ahead of us. Mediation provided by the state and the church institutions is desirable, but the final decision should be individual, so as to avoid numerous perplexities in the relation between the community and the individual. In the environment not accustomed spiritual diversity, young people who long for having a broader perspective find themselves in a difficult position.

We have already mentioned that there is no innate tolerance, i.e. not being suspicious towards members of different confessions and non-believers, and that we have to be educated in it. The events we witness in the last couple of years confirmed how little has been done for developing this aspect of human personality. So, we have to ask ourselves if we are moving towards replacing one extreme with the other in the sphere of institutional education and if we are trying to deny the much favoured atheism by stressing the importance of confessional mentality. Playing with religious feelings by layman authorities for political purposes has additionally shaken young people's trust in the capability of the church and religion to affirm the plurality of ideas, beliefs and practice, as the basis of dialogue.

This is why religious determination shall be the result of an individual choice and not being imposed by the school system, which should primarily broaden the perspectives of young generations. Religious phenomena shall be approached with an open heart, without fear and without rejecting everything that goes beyond the habitual way of thinking. Fear is a natural feature of biological organisms, but hu-

mans differ other living beings exactly in their capability to use reason to explore the existential unknown. This is why the family, the school and the church shall fulfil their duties, complying to modern cultural patterns. Schools can significantly contribute to this by introducing the mentioned obligatory and overconfessional subject. This subject would have contents which would bring the young closer to knowledge related to numerous religions and confessions. An insight into social differences would not mean the necessity of an automatic choice. What one will believe in and how he or she will express their cultural identity – with the inalienable right not to be religious – is a matter of choice and intellectual maturity.

Finally, in order to cultivate tolerance in the young in a proper manner, another condition has to be met: we have to have educators who love their job and do it sincerely. In the past, educators were frequently responsible for the emergence of intolerant individuals, due to their being biased and impersonal. The previous educational system was burdened with one-sidedness and monolith thought. The future school system will have to be structured in accordance with the tendencies of modern civil societies. It should clear the way for recognizing different habits and create the atmosphere which would allow dialogue.

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