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# Religious Education and the Teaching about Religions

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The term “religious education” can be understood in different ways. However, for the purpose of this paper,<sup>1</sup> we can say that there are two clearly distinctive terms: “denominational religious education”, which is also called “confessional religious education” or “confessional religious instruction”; and “nondenominational or non-confessional religious education”. Denominational religious education is a form of religious education whose main aim is to produce religious commitment to one particular faith or, in other words, to strengthen a “student’s belief in a particular religious tradition”.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, “nondenominational or non-confessional religious education” aims to

- 1 This text is a partially rewritten and extended paper “Teaching Religion or Teaching about Religions?”, which I presented at the International Congress on Philosophy of Education, “Philosophical Dimension of Educational Problems in the Globalisation Process”, (Ankara, EGITIM BİR SEN, 6-8 Mart 2009), and which was translated into Turkish and published in: Açar, Halil Rahman (ed.), *Küreselleşme sürecinde eğitim sorunlarının felsefi boyutu*, Ankara: Eğitim-Bir-Sen, [2011], 713-717.
- 2 P. R. Hobson and J. S. Edwards, *Religious Education in a Pluralist Society*, Woburn Press, London 1999, 17-18. In the US, for example, Protestants use the term “Christian education” to describe religious education which includes the formative and usually also evangelistic activities of the church in developing Christian beliefs, attitudes and behaviors (cf. J. Astley, *The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education*, Religious Education Press, Birmingham 1994, 13-14). Catholics prefer to describe this activity as “catechesis”. But in Europe, the catechesis is now a school subject only in a few countries. In other predominately Catholic countries it has been replaced in schools with a confessional religious education which has different names but the same meaning in the sense that it is understood as a complement to the catechesis that is provided in the churches. Its aim is, in opposition to that of catechesis, more educational than religious, more informative than formative. In some countries the emphasis is given to confessional religious education, but in the majority of European countries this is no longer understood as a task of public schools. It is rather seen as a task of families, religious communities (P. Schreiner, “Religious Education in the European Context”, in: E. Kuyk, R. Jensen, D. Lankshear, E.L. Manna, P. Schreiner (eds.), *Religious Education in Europe*, IKO, Oslo 2007, 9), or private confessional schools.

teach about different religious beliefs and practices without engendering belief or a desire to participate. The purest form of non-confessional religious education is “teaching about religions”.<sup>3</sup>

The term “teaching about religions” refers to teaching about beliefs, values and practices of different religions (which should be discussed in a neutral, objective and balanced manner), and to understanding the role of religions in the historical, cultural and social development of different countries.<sup>4</sup> Teaching about religions can be taught as a specific school subject or as an integral part of other regular subjects such as history, ethics, philosophy, arts, civic education, etc. The integration of the content about religions in these regular school subjects is more or less present in all countries, while teaching about religions as a particular subject exists only in some countries.

In this paper, I will briefly present three topics: first, some characteristics of teaching about religions and a few arguments for providing it in public schools; second, the human rights framework of this teaching; and third, the Slovene model of teaching about religions in public schools, which includes teaching about religions as an integral part of regular school subjects and as a particular elective subject called “Religions and Ethics” as well.

### Some arguments for teaching about religions in public schools

In strictly secular countries where confessional religious education is forbidden by law in public schools (as, for example, in France, Slovenia and in the USA) only teaching about religions – which is a form of non-confessional religious education – is possible. This possibility to learn about religions is very important if we agree with some of the conclusions given in the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public*

3 In this sense, “teaching about religions” is similar to the “multi-faith” religious education in Great Britain (cf. J. P. Willaime, “Different Models for Religion and Education in Europe”, in: R. Jackson, S. Miedema, W. Weisse, J.P. Willaime (eds.), Waxmann Verlag, Münster 2007, 63-64; R. Jackson, *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality*, Routledge-Falmer, London 2004, 22-24).

4 Z. Kodelja and T. Bassler, *Religion and Schooling in Open Society*, Open Society Institute, Ljubljana 2004, 8-9. The term “learning about religion” can be understood as “enquiry into, and investigation of, the nature of religions, their beliefs, teachings and ways of life, sources, practices and forms of expression. It covers students’ knowledge and understanding of individual religions and how they relate to each other as well as to the study of the nature and characteristics of religion. It includes the skills of interpretation, analysis and explanation. Pupils learn to communicate their knowledge and understanding using specialist vocabulary” (*The Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, OSCE, 2007, 24). Similar, but not identical, is the concept of “learning from religion”. This form of non-confessional religious education “is concerned with developing students’ reflection on and response to their own and others’ experiences in the light of their learning about religion. It develops pupils’ skills of application, interpretation and evaluation of what they learn about religion” (ibid.).

*Schools* (2007), where it is stated that “knowledge about religions and beliefs can reinforce appreciation of the importance of respect for everyone’s right to freedom of religion or belief, foster democratic citizenship, promote understanding of societal diversity and, at the same time, enhance social cohesion”; that such knowledge has “the valuable potential of reducing conflicts that are based on a lack of understanding for others’ beliefs and of encouraging respect for their rights”; and that it is “an essential part of a quality education”, since “it is required to understand much of history, literature, and art, and can be helpful in broadening one’s cultural horizons and deepening one’s insight into the complexities of past and present”.<sup>5</sup>

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in its *Recommendation on Religion and Education* (2005) also recognized the importance of knowledge about religions. Two reasons for its importance are mentioned. First, that “by teaching children the history and philosophy of the main religions with restraint and objectivity and with respect for the values of the European Convention on Human Rights, it will effectively combat fanaticism”, and second, that “understanding the history of political conflicts in the name of religion is essential”.<sup>6</sup>

What is important to stress here is the fact that according to this Recommendation, teaching about religions is not needed only in so-called secular countries, but also in others – particularly in those “where there is a state religion and in denominational schools” where religious education is “focusing on only one religion”.<sup>7</sup>

For this reason, it is recommended that “even countries where one religion predominates should teach about the origins of all religions rather than favour a single one or encourage proselytizing”.<sup>8</sup>

A similar recommendation was already written by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 1999 in its *Recommendation on Religion and Democracy*, where it was – amongst other things – also said that school “curricula should be revised, as a matter of urgency, so as to promote better understanding of the various religions”, and that “religious instruction should not be given at the expense of lessons about religions as an essential part of the history, culture and philosophy of humankind.” In addition it was recommended that Member States “promote education about religions and, in particular:

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5 The *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, 13-14.

6 Recommendation N. 1720, *Education and religion*, 2005, point 7.

7 *Ibid.*, point 9.

8 This knowledge of religions is, in this context, understood as “an integral part of knowledge of the history of mankind and civilizations”, and as such “distinct from belief in a specific religion and its observance”.

- a) to set up the teaching about religions as sets of values towards which young people must develop a discerning approach within the framework of education on ethics and democratic citizenship”; and  
 b) to “promote the teaching in schools of the comparative history of different religions, stressing their origins, the similarities in some of their values and the diversity of their customs, traditions, festivals, and so on”.<sup>9</sup>

The Recommendation also says that the State should “avoid – in the case of children – any conflict between the state-promoted education about religion and the religious faith of the families, in order to respect the free decision of the families in this very sensitive matter”.<sup>10</sup> This means that teaching about religions in schools must respect the right of parents to freedom of religion, which is – as is well known – a universal human right.

### Teaching about religions and human rights

In different international documents on human rights, it is stipulated that parents have the right “to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own religious or philosophical convictions”. In school, this parental right must be respected in two ways. First, parents with different religious or philosophical convictions must have the possibility to choose private schools based on specific moral, religious or secular values. If such schools do not exist, parents must have the right to establish them.<sup>11</sup> Second, parents’ religious or philosophical convictions must be respected also *within* the public schools. According to the interpretation of Article 2 of the First Protocol to the *European Convention on Human Rights* by the European Commission and the European Court of Human Rights, for instance, the State must “protect the children of certain parents from compulsory religious or philosophical instruction which is not directed at providing information but which is concerned with indoctrinating children with unacceptable beliefs, convictions or ideologies”.<sup>12</sup> Since “compulsory education in one religion without the possibility of exemption would violate Article 2,”<sup>13</sup> the exemption from classes on religion must be allowed. “But Article 2 neither expressly nor implicitly grants a general right of exemption from all subjects where religious and philosophical convictions may be

9 *Recommendation on Religion and Democracy*, 1999, ii, a, b.

10 *Ibid.*, ii, e.

11 *The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 1966, art. 13.3; *Convention against Discrimination in Education*, 1960, art. 5. 1.b.

12 Digest of Strasbourg Case - Law relating to the European Convention on Human Rights, 1998, Vol. 5, C. Heymanns Verlag KG Köln, Berlin, Bonn, München 1998, 801.

13 *Ibid.*, 801.

involved”.<sup>14</sup> Otherwise, the State “could not guarantee the right to education of all children”,<sup>15</sup> which is also guaranteed by the same article. However, the State must have, according to the Court’s opinion, a “good reason for the introduction of a subject in the public school, which may interfere with the religious or philosophical convictions of some parents”, and it “must show respect for these convictions in the way in which the subject is taught. Respect must mean tolerance towards the different religious and philosophical convictions, which are involved in a particular subject”.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, the State “must take care that information or knowledge included in the curriculum is conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner. The State is forbidden to pursue an aim of indoctrination that might be considered as not respecting parents’ religious and philosophical convictions.” This is a limit that, according to the Court’s opinion, must not be exceeded.<sup>17</sup>

Since teaching about religions is by definition a form of instruction and not of indoctrination,<sup>18</sup> it does not violate this right of parents. For this reason it seems that teaching about religions can be acceptable for everyone regardless of their religious or philosophical convictions and it can be applicable to different national school systems and traditions. Despite this, it seems that such teaching can be acceptable only for those religious parents who are persuaded that the exposure of their children to other influences is compatible with the religious education of their children and that it might help them to form their life ideals and also to make autonomous choices as to whether to accept or reject religious faith.<sup>19</sup> And the opposite, it is unlike-

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14 Ibid., 801

15 Ibid., 815.

16 Ibid., 815.

17 Ibid., 810-11.

18 The following guidelines for teaching about religions (which can be permitted in public schools in the USA) clearly show that such teaching cannot be a form of indoctrination:

“The school may sponsor study about religions, but not sponsor the practice of religion.

The school may expose students to all religious views, but may not impose any particular view.

The school’s approach to religions must be one of instruction, not one of indoctrination.

The function of the school is to educate about all religions, not to convert to any religion.

The school’s approach to religions should be academic, not devotional.

The school should study what all people believe, but should not teach a pupil what he should believe.

The school should strive for student awareness of all religions, but should not press for student acceptance of any one religion.

The school should seek to inform the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to conform him or her to any one belief” (J. R. Kirkpatrick, “Public Schools and the American Heritage of Religious Freedom and Religious Pluralism”, in: J. E. Wood (ed.), *Religion, the State, and Education*, 119-120).

19 Cf. T. H. McLaughlin, “Parental Rights and the religious Upbringing of Children”, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 1984/18, 75-83.

ly that teaching about religions would be acceptable for parents who believe that their religion is uniquely true, since they can regard teaching about religions in the same way as some adherents of the major religions, who regard teaching about religions “as misrepresenting their particular religious beliefs and values through its insistence on the equal truth of all religions”, and who “conclude that there is no true respect for religious difference, for true respect acknowledges the right of religious believers and traditions to define themselves and not to have imposed on them the kind of fluid or relativist religious identities that follow from liberal theological commitments”.<sup>20</sup>

In this context, it is necessary to point out that parents’ right to educate their children in conformity with their own religious or philosophical convictions was granted unconditionally in international documents only until 1989, when the *Convention on the Right of the Child* was adopted. Since then, this parental right seems to have been limited because the *Convention on the Right of the Child* obliges States to respect two different things: first, the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion;<sup>21</sup> and, second, the rights and duties of parents “to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child”.<sup>22</sup>

As parents are obliged to respect the right of children to freedom of religion considering a child’s evolving capacities, it seems to be obvious not only that parents are no longer permitted to make decisions only on the grounds of their own religious or philosophical convictions, but also that parental influence on children should be decreased in proportion to the increasing capacities of children. Although the *Convention on the Right of the Child* does not define the capacities of children, it seems plausible that these capacities should be related essentially to the child’s rationality, and consequently, that in the moment when the child becomes a rational being, that is to say, when a child can make an autonomous choice about religion, the parents’ right to direct him comes to an end.

### Teaching about religions in Slovenia

The teaching about religion at public schools in Slovenia is, from a legal point of view, similar to that in France or the USA and at the same time, different from that of the majority of European countries where the laws guarantee religious instruction within the framework of the public school. According to the Slovene Constitution, there is a separation of Church and State. For this reason the confessional religious instruction is, at public schools, explicitly prohibited by law.

20 P. Barnes, *Religious Education: Taking religious difference seriously*, Impact 2009/17, 13-14.

21 *Convention on the Right of the Child*, art. 14.1.

22 *Ibid.*, art. 14.2.

However, two forms of the teaching about religions in public schools are permitted: first, as an integral part of some regular school subjects, in particular, civic and moral education, history and literature; and second, as a specific subject. This subject, called "Religions and Ethics", is optional and non-confessional. It was conceived in 1996 in the context of the educational reform, which introduced optional subjects into the curriculum of primary schools. Each school must offer at least six optional subjects in the seventh, eighth and ninth year of schooling. Among them must be "Religion and Ethics", but students are free to decide on whether to choose it or not.

The contents of this optional (elective) school subject are divided into three parts. In addition to the obligatory topics, there are optional topics from which the teachers and the students can choose. The principal religious topics are the following:

In the seventh year of schooling (35 hours):

- Obligatory topics: world religions; Christianity; Islam; and Buddhism.
- Obligatory-optional topics: ideals and idols; uniqueness and diversity.
- Optional topics: Judaism; Asian religions (Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism); new religious movements and traditional religions.

In the eighth year of schooling (35 hours):

- Obligatory topics: religious culture; religions, rites, symbols, religious experience; religions and the problem of evil, sin, death; human rights; ethical dimensions of religions; religious freedom and freedom of conscience.
- Obligatory-optional topics: family; friendship, love and sexuality; work and professions.
- Optional topics: religious communities, such as churches, sects and monastic communities; relations between church and state; magic and occultism; solidarity and egocentricity; dreams, wishes, goals and disappointments.

In the ninth year of schooling (32 hours):

- Obligatory topics: the Bible (Old and New Testaments); Christianity and Western Civilization; religions and the meaning of life.
- Obligatory-optional topics: growth of Christianity and its divisions
- Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism; the Enlightenment; Christianity in Slovenia.
- Optional topics: religious (in)tolerance, religious wars; science and religious belief; atheism and humanism.

The syllabus of this school subject was prepared by the Curriculum Commission, that is to say, by a team of experts: sociologists, philosophers,

educationalists and theologians (as experts on some religious topics and not as representatives of the Catholic and Lutheran Church). The representatives of registered religious communities were also consulted during the process of preparing the syllabus.

Until now the contents of this school subject have not been the target of criticism. The cause of mistrust and quarrel has been the introduction of "Religions and Ethics" as a specific subject in public schools. For those who do not agree with the introduction of this new subject, it is only a masked or hidden confessional religious instruction, a Trojan horse that allows the return of the Church to the public school. For the Catholic Church, the teaching of the subject "Religions and Ethics" is unacceptable because it is non-confessional. In other words, it is unacceptable because it is the teaching of religions and not the teaching of a particular religion, and especially, because everything concerning this subject (the training of the teachers, preparation of the educational programs and textbooks and the follow-up) is the responsibility of the official institutions of the State, as is the case in all other school matters and not the responsibility of the Catholic Church itself, as it would like.

The main aim of the subject "Religions and Ethics" is to give students an opportunity to further expand and develop their basic knowledge of the world religions and ethics which they obtain in other subjects (history, civics and ethics, etc.) and in this way to help them understand the importance and meaning of religious and ethical issues; to stimulate and prepare them for a tolerant and respectful discussion of religious and ethical questions; to develop the capacity to understand others in their otherness; to prepare students for a life in a pluralistic society; to be critical of the negative phenomena which may be rooted in religions; and to help them develop their own religious or nonreligious philosophy of life. The subject is planned and proposed for students who have already had a religious education at home and also attend confessional religious education in their religious communities, as well as for those without religious education at home and no religious adherence. For this reason, in this class, children of different religions or no religion are taught together from the viewpoint of a neutral approach to religions and different world views.

Finally, I would like to say that the subject "Religions and Ethics" could be taught by teachers with a university diploma in Theology, Religious Studies, Sociology, Philosophy, Cultural Studies, Psychology, History or the Slovene language. However, in addition to the required relevant degree in social and humanistic studies, as well as the teacher's necessary pedagogical, psychological and didactic knowledge and skills, all potential teachers are also required to complete an additional study programme for this subject,

which consists of 400 hours of lectures and seminars. This study programme is organised at the University of Ljubljana jointly by the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Theology.

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*Key words:* Luhmann's Theory of Education, education

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### **Luhmannova teorija izobraževanja**

Kadar govorimo o vzgoji in izobraževanju, običajno mislimo na mednarodne dejavnosti, ki poskušajo razviti sposobnosti (kompetence) posameznika, ki potem vodijo k neke vrste družbenemu delovanju. To izhodišče ima osnovo v naslednjih rezultatih raziskovanja problema vzgoje in izobraževanja. Pojem (koncept) vzgoje in izobraževanja kot socialne aktivnosti je osnovan na premisah, ki izvirajo iz družbeno-zgodovinskih okoliščin in iz teoretičnega premišljevanja o človeku kot socialnem bitju po eni strani, po drugi stani pa iz teorije družbenih sprememb. Potreba po tem, da bi razjasnili pojem vzgoje in izobraževanja in to, kar lahko pričakujemo od vzgoje in izobraževanja, izhaja iz tega, kako lahko konceptualiziramo odnos med človekom in družbo.

*Ključne besede:* Luhmannova teorija izobraževanja, izobraževanje

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### **Religious Education and the Teaching about Religions**

The concept and term "religious education" are usually understood in two different ways: firstly, as a "denominational religious education", which is also called "confessional religious education" or "confessional religious instruction" and, secondly, as a "nondenominational or non-confessional religious education". In strictly secular countries, where confessional religious education (which main aim is to produce religious commitment to one particular faith) is legally forbidden in public schools (as, for example, in France, Slovenia and in the USA), only teaching about religions - which is a form of non-confessional religious education - is possible. Teaching about religions can be taught as a specific school subject or as an integral part of other regular subjects such as history, ethics, philosophy, arts, civic education, etc. The integration of content about religions in these regular school subjects is more or less present in all countries, while teaching about religions as a particular subject exists only in some countries. One of them is Slovenia, where the subject is called "Religions and Ethics". Its main aims are to give students an opportunity to further expand and develop their basic knowledge of the world religions and ethics, which they obtain in other school subjects and in this way to help them understand the importance and meaning of religious and ethical issues; to stimulate and prepare them for tolerant and respectful discussion of religious and ethical questions; to develop the capacity to understand others in their otherness; to prepare students for a life in a pluralistic

society; to be critical of the negative phenomena which may be rooted in religions; and to help them develop their own religious or nonreligious philosophy of life. Since the aim of teaching about religions is not to produce religious commitment to one particular faith and also because it respects the rights of parents, children and teachers to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, it seems that teaching about religions can be acceptable for everyone regardless of their religious or philosophical convictions and it can be applicable to different national school systems and traditions.

*Key words:* religious education, teaching about religions, ethics, public schools

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### **Religijski pouk in pouk o religijah**

Koncept in termin "religijski pouk" sta običajno razumljena na dva načina: prvič, kot denominacijski religijski pouk«, katerega drugo ime je tudi »konfesionalni religijski pouk« ali »verouk«, in drugič, kot »ne-denominacijski ali ne-konfesionalni religijski pouk«. V striktno sekularnih državah, v katerih je konfesionalni religijski pouk (katerega glavni cilj je vzgoja za določeno religijo ali veroizpoved), v javnih šolah zakonsko prepovedan (npr. v Franciji, Sloveniji in ZDA), je možen le pouk o religijah, ki je oblika ne-konfesionalnega religijskega pouka. Pouk o religijah se lahko izvaja kot poseben šolski predmet ali pa kot integralni del obveznih predmetov, kot so zgodovina, etika, filozofija, umetnost, državljanska vzgoja itd. Integracija učnih vsebin o religijah v te obvezne učne predmete je bolj ali manj prisotna v vseh državah, medtem ko imajo pouk o religijah kot poseben predmet le v nekaterih državah. Ena izmed njih je tudi Slovenija, kjer se ta predmet imenuje »Verstva in etika«. Glavni cilji tega predmeta so: ponuditi učencem možnost, da razširijo in poglobijo svoje znanje o svetovnih religijah in etiki, ki ga pridobijo pri drugih predmetih, in jim na tak način pomagati razumeti pomembnost in pomen religijske in etične problematike; jih spodbujati in pripraviti za strpno in spoštljivo razpravo o religijskih in etičnih vprašanjih; razviti njihovo zmožnost razumeti druge v njihovi drugosti; pripraviti učence za življenje v pluralistični družbi; biti kritičen do negativnih pojavov, katerih izvor so lahko religije; in jim pomagati razviti lastno religiozno ali nereligiozno filozofijo življenja. Ker glavni cilj pouka o religijah ni vzgoja za določeno religijo in tudi zato, ker spoštuje pravice staršev, otrok in učiteljev do svobode misli, vesti in veroizpovedi, se zdi, da je pouk o religijah lahko sprejemljiv za vsakogar, ne glede na njegova ali njena verska ali filozofska prepričanja, prav tako pa tudi za različne nacionalne šolske sisteme in tradicije.

*Ključne besede:* religijski pouk, pouk o religijah, etika, javne šole