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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN CROATIA FACES NEW CHALLENGES

This year, the Church in Croatia will celebrate the twenty-fifty anniversary of the reintroduction of religious education in the school system after it had been forcibly abolished by the communist authorities in 1951/1952¹. In the wake of the democratic changes in Croatia, religious education was reintroduced into the educational system during the 1991/1992 academic year. On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary, the first comprehensive empirical study was conducted with the aim of valorizing the status of religious education in the school, and its acceptance by students and religious education teachers². This was an opportunity for a type of audit and evaluation of religious education as a school subject. Since religious education is one of the dynamic and new disciplines in the Croatian school system, it is under the watchful eye of the public and subject to criticism. The study confirmed that religious education in our educational system is developing in the right direction. It has been well received by students and parents, and has largely met student expectations.

¹ Marin Srakić, *Zabrana školskog vjeronauka u doba komunizma* [The Prohibition of Religious Education in the Schools during the Communist Era], Zagreb 2000.

² Valentina Blaženka Mandarić, Alojzije Hobljaj, Ružica Razum, *Vjeronauk – izazov Crkvi i školi* [Religious Education – A Challenge to the Church and School], Zagreb 2011.

CHANGE IN THE RELIGIOUS AREA

Nevertheless, now, after a full twenty-five years of its presence in the educational system, current confessional religious education requires serious analysis and consideration, taking into account the recent political, socio-cultural, religious and educational changes in the Croatian society. In some elements, the Croatian society still has the characteristics of a transitional society in which two powerful trends intertwine: on the one hand, the powerful secularization and pluralization of the society and on the other, a return to tradition and traditional values. The strong polarization of the society has particularly been felt in the past several months, when there have been changes in the political scene. After four years of predominantly leftist political options, a democratic party has taken over the government.

Changes in Croatia have also occurred in the area of religion. In comparison to previous times, we can clearly discern a tendency of weakening religiosity among adults, which means among parents, who should otherwise be the strongest link in the chain of religious socialization. At one time, religiosity and Christian feeling were acquired naturally through Christian socialization in the family and the overall environment. However, the situation is completely different today³. A major study, *Values in Croatia and Europe*, is monitoring the trends in the expression and experience of religiosity in Croatia. According to a 1999 survey, in Croatia 11.1% of the citizens declared that they did not belong to any religious community, while in 2008 this figure was 16.7%⁴. In regard to confidence in the Church, the results of this study indicate that it is declining⁵.

The latest studies on the religiosity of adolescents also indicate such changes or a transition from a homogeneous to a heterogeneous society in terms of religious affiliation⁶. The study cited shows that out of the total number of adolescent respondents, 86.1% declared themselves as Catholics, while 10.4% do not identify with any religion⁷.

Since the respondents are high school students, their evaluations and rating of religious education as a school subject after some have taken it for 9, 10, 11 or

³ In school, we can encounter students who take religious education but whose families have nearly no connection with the Church, faith, sacraments, prayer or the Christian community. It is in school that they hear about faith, Christianity, the Church, prayers etc. for the first time.

⁴ Josip Baloban, Krunoslav Nikodem, Siniša Zrinščak (ed.), *Vrednote u Hrvatskoj i u Europi. Komparativna analiza* [Values in Croatia and Europe: A Comparative Analysis], Zagreb 2015, p. 329.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

⁶ The study was conducted in December 2015 in the city of Zagreb with a sample of 1,121 high school students. This empirical study was implemented within the framework of a project by the Catholic Faculty of Theology, University of Zagreb: *The Religiosity of Zagreb Adolescents*. The processing of the data and publication of the results are in progress.

⁷ In a 2000 study, there were 2% such students. Valentina Blaženka Mandarić, *Religiozni identitet zagrebačkih adolescenata* [The Religious Identity of Zagreb Adolescents], Zagreb 2000, p. 55.

even 12 years, depending on the year of high school they are currently in, are of interest. Of the total number of students, one third consider religious education to be an especially important subject, while 14.7% reported that another subject would be preferable to religious education. If we compare this with a study from 2000, this opinion was expressed by 11.2%, which means that there has been a slight increase.

The students in the majority of high schools gave religious education high marks: very good or excellent. When students taking religious education are asked about their motives for belief, they state that they feel that religion helps them in confronting life's fundamental problems (73%), teaches them to love all people (75%), and gives them hope and confidence (75.5%).

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND THE NEW COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM REFORM

In Croatia, a new comprehensive curriculum reform is in progress, which began in 2015. There has been an ongoing public debate on reform and all its segments⁸, as well as the documents and curricula of all subjects, including religious education. In the past six months, there has been intensive work on preparing curricula for religious education in elementary school and high school. This has provided a particular opportunity for certain changes and improvements, with the objective of thoroughly integrating religious education into the educational system.

Catholic religious education in the national curriculum has been better integrated into general academic knowledge. The manner of preparing curricula, i.e., linking the contents and experiences of individual subjects in the general educational area and cross-curricular topics, has provided improved horizontal correlation with other academic skills. In a curriculum so-conceived, the importance of religious knowledge in providing an education that creates the prerequisites for the comprehensive education of the individual has come to the fore.

A competence-focused curriculum has made it possible for Catholic religious education to define the learning outcomes by age more clearly and unambiguously. Thus, there is greater clarity with regard to knowledge, skills and values that students acquire from Catholic religious education. Such defined outcomes provide better vertical inter-curricular correlation and clearer criteria for evaluation.

Greater clarity with regard to outcomes and better integration into the whole of academic knowledge contribute to the clarity of the educational dimensions

⁸ See <http://www.kurikulum.hr/>.

of this subject and, consequently, greater clarity with respect to the relation between religious education and parish catechesis.

THE TRAINING OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHERS

For the successful implementation of the new curriculum reforms, the most important factors are trained teachers. This applies to all subjects and, thus, to religious education. Therefore, the issue of the education of religious education teachers is always raised anew. When we speak about improving the quality of teacher training, it is necessary to bear in mind that this does not only refer to initial education but that ongoing professional development and formation are also very important. In connection with this, there are several important issues: how to attract capable individuals to choose the calling of religious education teacher and how to organize initial education and in-service training that will ensure high quality religious education. It appears that the selection, preparation and retention of good religious education teachers are key strategies for improving religious education and, thereby, the contribution of religious education in achieving the basic objectives of the school. In Croatia, initial education can still be changed by adjusting the ratio between academic content and educational science. Therefore, in the study programs that train future religious education teachers, it is necessary to establish a balance between competence in the subject taught and teaching competence. A second important issue, which is particularly associated with the new curriculum reform, is the relation between learning outcomes and teacher competences. In connection with this, it is important to ask which competences a teacher of religious education should have. In order to answer this question, it is also important to ask which competences a student should acquire from religious education. The ongoing formation of religious education teachers should be coordinated with expectations and practical needs. In other words, if we want good quality and fruitful religious education, it is necessary to better align the education of religious education teachers with the specific needs and expectations that the religious education teacher encounters in the educational system.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

All the changes occurring so rapidly in society, including all areas of personal and public life, are also ongoing challenges for religious education. Starting from the society (which increasingly defines itself as a knowledge society) and the school (which places the acquisition of technical knowledge, competences and skills among its priority tasks), the need spontaneously arises for the

evaluation of the role of religious education within public schools. This requirement is particularly acute today, when Croatia is in the process of a thorough and comprehensive curricular reform in the educational system.

Since religious education in school is a constituent part of the educational system, engrafted in the fulfillment of school objectives, it is called to respond to these changes.