Teaching in the religious education in the Republic of Macedonia today

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Abstract

In secular usage, religious education is the teaching of a particular religion or about religion in general and its varied aspects—beliefs, doctrines, rituals, customs, rites and personal roles. In Western and secular culture, religious education implies a type of education which is largely separated from academia, and which generally regards religious belief as a fundamental tenet and operating modality, as well as a prerequisite of attendance. Many of the European countries have some kind of religious education. Implemented in school as confessional religious education or non-confessional religious education—as a separate teaching subject or incorporated in other subjects. Aspects - knowledge, creativity, culture of communication with others, teacher evaluation. Like in any education, main determinants and main factors are student, teacher, educational subjects and educational technology. All this in the religious education of 21st century has a specific role in the whole communication process. The implementation of religious education in The Republic of Macedonia at present is realized through the subject Ethics in the religious in the primary school.

Keywords: teaching; religious education; contemporary.

1. Introduction

Faith is an integral part of man. It is with him from birth. People are born with faith, and then through religious understanding they become deeply religious or not sufficiently familiar with faith. Faith can, should and must be learned. Children come to school with already acquired religious views in their families. Thus, religious education as education in general begins in the parental home. Teaching religious education, however, as an organized form of instruction refers more to school, though today religious shaping of individuals is influenced by religious instruction in religious buildings, presentations of religious communities in printed and electronic media and the Internet, film, literature, arts, and history. The new position of education has functional significance which should be in the function of forming individual citizens and persons who are themselves able to distinguish good from evil. The latest national program for the development of education in the Republic of Macedonia 2005-2015 is in the spirit of the new requirements that Macedonian society is faced with at the beginning of the 21st century, which seeks to found the changes on modern civilization values such as: knowledge, democracy, fairness, tolerance and humanism. Religious education organized or carried out in any shape in the school environment and wider society, contributes to the understanding of existential questions and behaviour towards themselves and towards others. The introduction of religious education in primary schools in the Republic of Macedonia is directed toward this.
2. Why religious education in the 21st century?

There is a well-known phrase that the 21st century is a period of domination of computerization and information of a community. In this sense, the dilemma why religious education is necessary at all in such a community is quite understandable. But the problem has deep roots, and the reasons for the introduction of religious education as an integral part of general education are numerous. Namely, religion, education and globalization are now in a very complex relationship in the view of the civilization environment. At first glance, it seems that the existence of different religions is an obstacle to globalization, and that the irreconcilable religions lead to global civilization fighting rather than to a global process of reconciliation. Hence education is set as a factor of reconciliation, hope and as an essential need. Education for democracy and tolerance, for religion culture and inter-religious respect are an integral part of the process of globalization. Today in many countries globalization is perceived negatively as a loss of identity. Education is a process that can help the reconciliation and tolerance among religions. It may also help to understand globalization as a process which is not identical to the process of creating a global identity, but a process that occurs as an achievement of new technologies in the transmission of information, as a result of a very fast transfer of knowledge and technology, a process in which all nations have their own interest. On the other hand, respect for the personality of a man (student) is probably the most important educational ideal of our epoch. The attempt of modern humanism to replace spiritual with the empirical in what is concerned with contemporary life causes a separation of a person from what is ethical in education and upbringing. The purpose of religious instruction in primary school is to fill the minds of students with religious content. Religious values that belong to the traditional model of behaviour have a significant impact on the whole system of values and a major role in the shaping of the character of value orientations. From that fact comes the question about the function of religious education today. Research made before and after the introduction of religious instruction in primary schools in Macedonia indicate that the largest percentage of respondents have a positive attitude towards religion and freedom in its choice. However, there are numerous fears of religious instruction, arising from the historical memory of the clash of different religious traditions. The culture of post-communist societies contains the idea that religious instruction today is supposed to mean a spiritual renewal of society, cooperation and respect for diversity. As an important factor of socialization, school always has a general goal which it organizes and integrates in its efforts to be truly representative of a society, which it should renew and develop with its work. The right to education means the acquisition of knowledge about faith and religion. Without knowledge of faith and religion many problems from different scientific areas and school subjects, e.g. philosophy, psychology, history, literature, fine arts and music, sociology, law etc., will remain misunderstood. Now we are talking about faith and religion as areas of knowledge, science and theory. This means that the facts of this knowledge should be implicated in the programs of all subjects that correspond with them. Moreover, the knowledge of faith must not be observed only functionally because the revision of the curriculum is not the ultimate goal of the school system reforming. Religious education possesses value in itself. It helps us understand ourselves and others and the world in which we all live together. Religious education and upbringing, through its methodological - methodical entirety, aims to study, form and create pedagogical practices by which the child will acquire not only knowledge, skills and habits, but will also be trained in an ethical, theological and aesthetic sense to live on the foundations of the biblical educational science. Secular, and Christian pedagogy also understand upbringing as "a specific interpersonal relationship based on communication with which a specific effect of one person upon another wants to be achieved", respecting all the peculiarities of the addressed age that are defined by developmental psychology. If by education we primarily mean "the totality of influences on the development and formation of a personality in line with the set targets", and such impact is made by family, social groups, organizations and institutions, the question emerges which is the first step

1 http://www.edukacija.hr/vijest/religijska-kultura-kao-alternativa-vjeronauku/105/
in religious pedagogy aimed at developing a child’s personality? Many authors consider socialization to be the first, initial letter in the development and understanding of the alphabet of life with which a child begins to interpret himself/herself. Socialization is the formation of a personality as a holder of dispositional properties important for a certain social community and individuals living in that community, but also the formation of a personality as a universal system and all-embracing system of psychic phenomena. It is more than necessary that religious communities, by means of a scientifically established system, to adapt pedagogy and didactics and involve them in the fundamental stages of the process of socialization, if it wants to have lasting impact on the child.3 In this sense, teaching religious education is organized and implemented in order to ensure the development of several components of the individual student – connative, cognitive and emotional. In analyzing the results of religious education in public schools, the question of its practical impact on the school population could be asked first. Above all, it is about how religious education contributes to the spiritual and religious development of students and it influences the social integration of the young in nationally and religiously mixed environments, and its influence in the lessening of ethnic and religious distance in multinational environments. Because of this, knowledge and understanding are the central objectives in the National Framework for religious education. Religious education also encourages children to develop positive aspirations in their learning and in the belief and values of others. The teaching of religious education among students develops awareness, respect for all, and openness of thought, accessibility and curiosity.4 We believe that the above mentioned theoretical and empirical experiences are sufficient arguments in favour of the introduction of religious education in schools in Macedonia today.

3. About the importance of teaching religious education

Three types of religious education can be identified: education into religion, education about religion, learning from religion. But regardless of the type of religious teaching, religious education benefits are the same and relate to: knowledge about different religions; development of open identity; development of local and environmental meanings; support of the moral development of children; development of conditions for responsible choice. International Commission on Education for the 21st century in its document ‘Learning: The Treasure Within’ (Report 1996), a document of UNESCO, based its work on four fundamental principles, the four pillars as a framework for formal and informal education: learning for knowledge (refers to ways of understanding); learning for action (to be capable of creative work in the environment); learning to live together, learning to live with others (to participate and cooperate with other people in all human activities), learning to be (striving for development and complete fulfilment of man in all the fullness of a person). Religious education has special contribution in this direction. Given the general goal of the educational system regarding the adoption of values of young people that are in the function of developing the existing social system, religious education aims not to "inform" and “transfer knowledge" to students, but to stir up existential issues and questions in them, and to offer answers that are found in religious teachings. Hence the purpose of religious education theological, universally human (anthropological), experiential, cognitive and action, and the contents are inseparable from these goals. Religion as part of general culture has become an integral part of education. It must be presented from an inter-disciplinary aspect of science and life, in terms of spiritual and worldly views, but its purpose cannot be believing, but knowing, so, not as religious training, but as study of its values.

4. Factors of teaching religious education

Key factors that determine any teaching are the teacher, the student, curriculum content and teaching technology. The aim in this paper is to study the factors of teaching religious education in their complexity. The problem of the factors of teaching religious education is complex and requires more space for elaboration. This paper will mention

\[\text{Ibid. 64}\]

these factors in sincere hope that this will be an incentive for some subsequent research. A short reminder in the next few lines is in the context of teaching religious education. A new approach to religious education dominates nowadays. It is called critical religious education. It is based on the assumption that children come to school with a religious worldview that is in development. It has almost certainly been adopted from adults and other authorities in the life of every child. Such religious pre-thinking does not necessarily have to be internally stable and well understood. Most important for effective education is that children are encouraged to be free in order to recognize and articulate their religious beliefs and attitudes that they show without coercion and manipulation, as well as the views of students - regardless of their material content – to become conscious and integral parts of the learning process. One is the perspective of adults, with pedagogical intention, and the other is the child’s perspective that understands that conflict and gives meaning in a concrete context. Children as actors act in a meaningful manner, intentionally and not instinctively, irrationally, spontaneously and without thinking. The relationship children – adults changes from “role code” into “communication code”, and education as a social activity of adults and help in growing up of children and young people is transformed into communicative action. Children understand the world as adults do, they are active in the world of adults and take roles with equal worth (but not equal) as adults. When we speak about religious education we should emphasize that the teacher is, in fact, the key figure because the method of transferring experiences of faith is essentially based on a personality, on personal relations that should be realized. And the teacher in teaching religious education should respect the personality of the child, trying to speak his/her language, be interested in his/her needs and share his/her concerns. The task is very complex and involves a personal experience of faith, a special gift and creativity in the implementation of teaching. Maturity of the student for the content of religious teaching, his/her knowledge and experiences, interests and opportunities for abstract thinking - these are useful guidelines for religious teachers to see that continuous measuring of the material volume, quality and method of relocation instruction is necessary. The teaching contents must be value oriented and allow systematic development of culture in human behaviour and actions in all moral relations, such as: relations of a man with other people and himself, relationship with his family, with broader communities in which individuals work and act, relations with other nations and the entire world community, attitude to work and all material and spiritual values, God, faith and holiness. This must be built into the whole educational activity. Since religious education takes place in the family, pre-school, parish, high schools, working with adults - all these places have specific conditions and characteristics that must be thought out and are an essential part of religious teaching methods. In addition, it is a skill to know how to weigh how much of the material is to be presented in general terms, and how much should be focused on the individual, on the abstract, and how to insist on a practical and concrete level of knowledge. The learning material has its limits; the teachers limit them each time and in each new teaching situation, with their own interests, with their capacity to deal with specific problems, with their students, their needs, requirements and time that is provided for a specific educational topics. Faith and knowledge are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. Such a concept models the concept of religious culture as scientifically, religiologically (not exclusively theologically or confessionally) outlined - it means trans disciplinary or interdisciplinary, or from the aspect of the philosophy of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion and history of religion (but theological approach must not be excluded). Educational work on literary texts can be of great help in interpreting the contents of religious education, which, as usual, has to be in textbooks, the material is interpreted by means of concepts, judgments, generalizations and other logical categories. Furthermore, knowledge of religious education helps the interpretation of literary texts. Creative expression of students in the teaching of religious education is very important to build a motivating environment in the classroom. The ability of authentic personal expression is one of the important qualities of a person, oral and written expression, scenic expression, artistic expression, musical expression, media (visual, auditory and audio-visual). Hence the evaluation of the results achieved in religious education is based on several aspects - layers of the achieved results: knowledge, creative expression, engagement, culture of mutual communication, evaluation of teacher. Beside textbooks, it is necessary to use other materials - manuals, atlases and brochures, magazines, photographs, posters, diagrams, maps, drawings, models, photo slideshows, movies, videos, computer programs, Internet, CDs and other. Illustrations bring light to the narration, and the object of narration becomes concrete, fleshly, and visible. In religious education, the Internet is used most often for the purpose of research, search and learning information. The Internet
improves communication, whether it is a computer networking class or sending e-mail messages - improves teacher-student communication (with filling of electronic spreadsheets, sending homework), contact with persons, organizations. The programs for word processing, graphics, photography, movies online, offer new opportunities for presenting the results of work. An important dimension of religious teaching with the Internet is to know how to critically approach, think about and evaluate contents. For teachers it is useful to know the teaching support systems (internet pages - platforms of religious communities and organizations for religious education, blogs, Wikipedia, Instructional Media). The use of art reproductions, films and music is typical, as well as their analysis. The contents of any instruction including those of religious education cannot be simply put into the students’ heads. They should be made available; they should be discovered and thought about. The choice of methods should fit the specifics of a particular teaching unit of a certain age. A wide range of methods is used - working with text, image, music, different voice methods and special methods of open and free work in teaching. All methods of work, combined with the forms of educational work such as individual, pair work, group and teamwork of students, are aimed at acquiring permanent knowledge, satisfaction in teaching, they help research and experience based learning, they develop students’ personalities and the culture of interpersonal communication. In order to make teaching interesting, obvious, dynamic, emotional and experiencing, visual, auditory, audio –visual and text media are used. Therefore, contemporary religious education emphasizes the importance of quality instructional media. It particularly emphasizes the respect of the appropriate criteria not only for the selection but also for the production of quality printed and other media for teaching religious education. In that sense, one of the characteristics of religious education is the ability to freely express opinions and attitudes of pupils thus expressing respect for the student’s personality.

5. Teaching of religious education in Macedonia

Religious education in the Republic of Macedonia was introduced in 2010/11 academic year in primary schools within the subject Ethics in religion, which in its conception and content is located on the border of confession as religious education. The course Ethics in religions handles ethical dimensions of religions found in the Constitution. The teaching subject Ethics in religion has the status of an optional subject in the fifth grade of the eight year primary school. According to the curriculum, the course Ethics in religion is represented with 2 classes per week or 72 classes per year. The contents of the program Ethics in religions represent a solid foundation for achieving the basic goals that aim at gaining knowledge about ethics as the science of the good and morality, knowledge about the basics of ethics and basic ethical concepts in different religions (such as Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Catholicism, Judaism, Evangelical – Methodist teaching). The nature of the teaching subject and the conceptual structure and specifics of the content will enable students to familiarize themselves with different religious affiliations of citizens in the Macedonian social community and to respect them. The Contents of Ethics in religion aims to foster the development of skills for tolerance in students, dialogue, mutual understanding and cooperation. The contents are divided into three topics: Ethics as the science of the good and morality (10 classes), Ethics in religion (20 classes) and the third topic has a status of an optional module. Depending on religious background, the student studies one module. Each optional module anticipates 42 classes. The elective modules are: Ethics in Orthodox Christian doctrine, Ethics in Islamic learning, Ethics in Catholic Christian learning, Ethics in Judaism and Ethics in Evangelical - Methodist Christian doctrine. Each optional module is divided into three components related to theoretical foundations of a religious learning, its ethical and moral basis. As for the teaching of religious education, it monitors changes in the didactic-methodical sense in order to meet the demands of a modern concept of teaching all its aspects. Hence we think that in modern society with its crisis of moral values it is necessary that children, while growing up, grow to become familiar with basic ethical principles underlying the European civilization. Students who opt to study the subject Ethics in religions in accordance with their parents can adopt knowledge of ethics founded on Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Catholic and Evangelical - Methodist teachings, they can develop moral reasoning skills and are encouraged to respect human relations among people. In this way they today open the path towards the European family.
6. Conclusion

Religion cannot, should not and must not be outside the educational process because every education and upbringing that do not show respect for religious aspects of life are incomplete and partial. This has been proven by European and world experiences in the area of the religious education we are discussing here, and for projects and documents adopted to regulate this important area of educational and pedagogical process. Hence comes the interest and concern of many countries to create the right relationships and an adequate study of the religious content in the educational process. There are several approaches to the study and to insertion of religion into the educational system and almost the entire world community is still searching for the most adequate model. In teaching religious education in the 21st century there are many opportunities for the use of educational technology and new achievements in pedagogical and didactic science. We distinguish two models of religious education – confessional and non-confessional with several possible variations. In the case of the Republic of Macedonia several approaches are being balanced during a longer period of time. The newest is Ethics in religion, as an almost semi-confessional subject. Teaching of religious education has its own laws which should be obeyed, and the situations that illustrate it need to derive from everyday, real life. In this regard we agreed that an inter-religious dialogue is possible to achieve through an education that includes understanding with information about religions can be realized with an education that means (learning about the religion of others) by developing the skills of tolerance and communication (learning from the religion of others) in a way that young people will be encouraged to achieve personal moral and spiritual synthesis through a process of perceiving personal synthesis (learning in religion). This model of inter-religious learning develops heuristic, social and existential competences that include knowledge about others, respect for others, and all this primarily through learning that will enable respect of a person for the very self. Teaching for diversity and learning for common interest is a model within which the particular and the universal can equally exist. The today's school must enable and facilitate the development of dynamic capabilities and various talents of students because only informed, competent and motivated people can be open to any changes that are brought by the modern society and can contribute to its development.

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