

**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
„RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND CATECHESIS IN EUROPE  
WITH A SPECIAL EMPHASIS  
ON POLAND, ENGLAND AND SLOVENIA”**

*(Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana [Slovenia], 25 March 2010)*

There was an international conference on the topic of modern religious education and possibilities of the future catechesis under the auspices of the Department of Applied Theology at the Faculty of Theology in Ljubljana on 25 March 2010. Participants were various national and international European experts in the field. Dr. Stanko Gerjolj, PhD, Dean and Associate professor at the Faculty of Theology, highlighted basic psychological needs of adolescents in his introductory address. If modern adolescent should be giv-

en opportunity for self education and responsible freedom, the religious-educational process is self-evident from the viewpoint of integrated education. That is of vital importance especially for post communist countries in which one's own identity was often formed differentiating from the enemy outside. Dr. Elżbieta Osewska, Professor, gave an excellent presentation on religious education in England. Ethnic and religious diversity calls for education for multireligious cooperation. The faithful are encouraged to be loyal to one's own religious community. That is especially evident in Catholic schools which take into account basic religious diversity while leading to the preservation and strengthening of personal faith in one's own religious community. Religious education in Poland was convincingly presented by Dr. Józef Stala, Professor. He emphasised the strong connection between school religious education and feeling with the Church and pointed out the complementariness between religious education at school and parish catechesis. Dr. Erika Prijatelj, Professor, exposed EU's initiatives in the field of religious education which should lead to inter-religious openness and coexistence and cooperation among different religions. Dr. Janez Vodičar, Professor, presented the development and place of religious education in the Slovenian state school system, which only appears to be solving the issue by providing the optional subject Religions and Ethics in the last triad of primary school. Dr. Andrej Šegula gave a presentation on the possibilities for catechesis in Slovenia. He expects that the inculturation of the process of maturing in faith will lead to the faith which will engrave the feeling of redemption in the hearts of individuals as well as communities. Dr. Tadej Stegu highlighted the revival of catechumenate in Slovenia and its role for adult education, exposing the future challenge of inclusion of the newly baptized into the live community of the Church.

## I. THE POSSIBILITIES FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND CATECHESIS IN THE SECULARISED EUROPE

Let us have a close look at the possibilities for Religious Education and Catechesis in the secularised Europe.

We live in the time of global changes. Globalization has brought a new religious renaissance, migration of the sacred, post-modern religiosity, post-secular laicism, deprivatisation of religiosity, various theologies of religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue, etc.<sup>26</sup> The transformation of the social reality brought the change of the geo-political role of religions and consequently the comprehension of the laicism of state and school.

- The right to religious freedom as one of the basic human and civil rights has been included into statutes of international organizations.

---

<sup>26</sup> Comp. F. Pajer, *Liberta di credere, diritto di conoscere, dovere di formare*, in: *Ubi Petrus ibi Ecclesia. Sui sentieri del Vaticano II*, LAS, ed. M. Sodi, Roma 2007, p. 758-771.

- A passage from the laicism of ignoring to the laicism of the positive uncovering of religions.
- The concept of neutral lay state school as the counterpart of confessional school has been changed by the concept of asymmetrical laicism, which is not afraid of confrontation with various views of the world.
- A clear distinction between a confessional education and education of the culture of religions (the first is dedicated to the formation of religious students, the second to the discovering of basic components of various cultures and religiously heterogeneous realities)<sup>27</sup>

Let us focus on the attitude of some influential European institutions towards religions.

Educational politics has been directed by the Council of Europe and other European institutions. In the field of education, these institutions have set the goal of strengthening of basic European values such as: respect for human rights, stimulation of pluralist democracy and a state based on the rule of law. Thus, they strive to achieve a greater level of interpersonal awareness, tolerance and respect in the midst of European society. Europe is more and more conscious of the precious role of religious communities in this task. The Council of Europe stated in *State, Religion, Secularity and Human Rights* (2007) in point 11: „governments should take into account a special significance of religious communities striving for peace, cooperation, tolerance, solidarity, interreligious dialogue and spreading of European values”<sup>28</sup>

The sign of the rising awareness of the importance of the impact that religions have on social life and the life of an individual is the opening of the European Wergeland Centre for the research of interreligious dialogue, human rights and democratic citizenship. The Centre emphasises that the time has come for the Council of Europe to view not only various language, historical and other cultural traditions as „cultural facts” but also religions and other religious convictions. Political institutions are obliged to promote familiarization with and understanding of major religions and other non-religious convictions and their role in the society<sup>29</sup>

A significant contribution has been made by the research on how young people view religion, religious variety and possibilities for interreligious

---

<sup>27</sup> Comp. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, in: <[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/)> (19.10.2009), 68-69; comp. also: R.J. Campiche, «*La régulation de la religion par l'État et la production du lien social*», in: „Archives de Sciences sociales des Religions”, 121 (2003), 5-18.

<sup>28</sup> *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: A Reference Book for Schools*, ed. J. Keast, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publ., 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Comp. R. Jackson, *The Council of Europe and Education about Religious Diversity*, in: „British Journal of RE”, 31 (2009), 85-90.

dialogue, financed by the EU and carried out between 2006 and 2009 in eight European states<sup>30</sup>. It has been found that<sup>31</sup>:

- Majority of students are interested in religious education;
- Majority of students who took religious education classes are more willing to talk about religions and views of the world with the students from other environments than those with no such education;
- Those students who find religion important in their personal lives pay more respect to the religious background of other people.

Experts have found out that a relaxed conversation about religious experience develops when also the teacher finds it easy to talk about their own religious experience<sup>32</sup>

In the light of the facts just presented, the confessional form of religious education has gradually become less appropriate by the majority of European states. Confessional Religious Education is more typical for confessional schools or for less secularised countries like Malta, Croatia, Poland. During the confessional R.E. lesson student has no opportunity to be confronted with the members of other religions and views of the world. Therefore, there is a new tendency in the European space to introduce a subject called culture of religions. It could be dedicated to all the students regardless of their own religious membership and equip them with basic objective information about religions present in their own countries. Of course, such a reform of religious education is quite a challenging project for most European countries.

## II. GOALS AND AIMS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Now, let us have a look at some basic goals of Religious Education. What should religious education dedicated to all students look like? For a start, school could set the following basic educational goals of religious education for all students: information about religions, education for the freedom of choice, education for tolerance and harmony in dialogue<sup>33</sup>

Information about the phenomenon of religions. Religious education should equip students with the ability to recognize religious elements of a society, various symbolic expressions of religions and their historical development. Objective information about religious dimensions of a society is

---

<sup>30</sup> States where the research took place are: Germany, England, France, Netherlands, Norway, Estonia, Russia and Spain. The sample consisted of 14 to 16 year old high school students and 6 teachers for every of the 6 chosen states. The research combined qualitative and quantitative methods, privileged witnesses, etc.

<sup>31</sup> REDCo *Religion in Education: Contribution to Dialogue. Policy Recommendations of the REDCo Research project*, in: REDCo, *Documentation of a public event in the Council of Europe (March 2009)*, www.redco.uni-hamburg.de. (25.11.2009), 7-10.

<sup>32</sup> Researchers suggest that the fact be taken into account also with religious education teacher training.

<sup>33</sup> Comp. R. De Vita, *La religione nella società dell'incertezza. Per una convivenza solidale in una società multireligiosa*, ed. F. Angeli, F. Berti, Milano 2001.

a precondition for the comprehension of one's own nation as well as other nations. In the period of growing cultural pluralism school can no longer afford to present its student only one religion. Quite the opposite, it needs to take into account all religions and non-religious value systems in its student's living environment and their differences and similarities.

Education for the freedom of religious belief. School has no right to impose one religious belief on its students, as well as it must not force agnosticism or sceptic confrontation with religious phenomena. As ignorance enables no freedom of making religious decisions, school is obliged to open religious questions, equip students with appropriate tools to face them, critically confront different religious value systems, form criteria for ethical decision making, and qualify them for a mature and conscious religious choice, whatever it may be. That is an important fight against all unauthentic and deviant religious phenomena of modern society.

Education for coexistence and dialogue. Social plurality has become a fact, present in our daily lives and will become even more obvious. Attitudes of acceptance, understanding and cooperation are not always natural and spontaneous attitudes of people. This is especially true of the nations which have lived in a monoreligious type of society for centuries and are thus not used to confront their own views of the world with other life styles in a positive dialogical way. Conditions for a better mutual understanding and a more tolerant dialogue are as follows: better knowledge of one's own religious-cultural identity which prevents the loss in syncretism as well as its fundamentalist forms; thorough information about other religions in one's environment, including new ones present due to the migration processes.

Among important goals, experts include the demand that students learn that religions are not merely systems of beliefs but a phenomena influencing the image of a specific culture and giving identity to nations and societies. Therefore, it is necessary for a student to find out the following: historical development of religions; religion in the life of an individual and in the life of society (rituals of transition); religion as an element which forms one's living environment (religions influence architectural images of places, economy, art, geography); view of religions and other views of the world of students on basic existential questions (such as the meaning of life, evil, suffering, death, etc.); Jewish-Christian tradition as one of the basis of the western culture (biblical understanding).

While discussing and searching for opportunities for religious education it is of vital importance a good knowledge of the Roman Catholic Church stand.

A: Congregation for formation warns against „religious education being restricted to the presentation of neutral and critically comparative information about various religions may create even greater confusion or even religious relativism and indifference”<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Congregazione per l'educazione cattolica, *n. d.*, 12.

What is acceptable for the Roman Catholic Church is religious education which would not only enable students to confront with the religious expressions of their own culture and open them for a dialogue with the members of other religions and cultures but enable students to find out religious dimensions of their own existence and strengthen their own religious affiliation.

B: In the secularized Europe of the present day we can feel the crisis or the value system change, which is one of the reasons of the catechesis crisis. Children in the secularized society are no longer given appropriate *Christian socialization* or *education* or so called *first socialization* which is the predecessor of the catechetical activity. The Church in the changed Europe is faced with the challenge of how to approach the unevangelized person in the process of growing up or an adult; how to approach one to start thinking existentially (why am I in the world? What makes my life and work meaningful? etc.) and how to provide one with a religious experience which would lead them in a personal relationship with God.

Nowadays, catechists detect the need for the first evangelization, catechumenate and missionary catechesis of some kind, that is the real catechesis which will be included in the real, concrete personal and social situation of people in the process of the growing up and adults. Such a catechesis is Christocentric, and at the same time uses the language and experience of everyday life. That presents a shift from the catechesis which addresses people on the rational level (teaching and learning of dogmas) to the catechesis which focuses attention to the experiential and existential dimensions. The catechesis of that kind strives for a holistic development of a person.

The basic tasks for the modern catechesis are the following two: Solidifying Christian identity which heightened the awareness of baptism, faith and membership in the Church; Preparation for a dialogue with people of different beliefs.

Lively discussion following each presentation showed the diversity of approached and situations of religious education in contemporary Europe. It has been pointed out that the diversity itself can be precious in searching for new opportunities that would help enter the mysterious world of faith and life from it. Having the experience from Poland, dr. Elżbieta Osewska, Professor and dr. Józef Stala, Professor opened new aspects, which deepened the discussion and gave profound reflection on the topics mentioned. Thus, we would make every effort for further scientific and professional cooperation with the specialists in Catechetics and Pastoral Theology from Poland.

*Erika Prijatelj OSU*