Religious Education Teachers and Social Challenges in East-European Contexts – A Croatian Perspective

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Abstract: *The first part of this article discusses the challenges of social conditions in East European contexts in relation to education and schools. The second part deals with Religious Education in schools and the possibility of promoting social dialogue. The third section presents empirical research results on attitudes towards religious and worldview differences among Religious Education teachers in Croatia.*

1. Socio-cultural conditions as a challenge for education and schools

1.1. East European societies and new tasks for education and school

Social conditions in the post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe are characterized on the one hand by positive signs of social and democratic progress while on the other are faced with numerous difficulties and problems. A return to traditional values, among which religious and national values have a significant place, goes hand in hand with aspirations towards speedier modernization and catching up with development in western democracies (Sekulić, 2011, 61). These societies are also engulfed by globalization processes and even more pronounced differentiation that is characteristic of the present day world, while being distinguished by mutual reliance, inter-connectedness and inter-dependence. Economic, political, cultural, ethnic, ideological, social and other differences which give rise to tensions, conflicts and exclusion of the weakest have become visible precisely since the beginning of the economic crisis of 2008 and recession in Europe (Benić, 2012). The consequences of war that has marked the recent past in Croatia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina are deep and multi-layered. War has been marking the present in East Ukraine since spring 2014. Wounds of the past, suffered injustices, suppressed identities, unjustly implemented transition of social into private ownership linked with corruption as well as the acquisition of wealth by a few and impoverishment of many can typically be found in post-socialist European countries. These feature are interlinked with the pressure of competitiveness on the labour market, migration processes and the restructuring of meaning within traditional social communities. This begins with families and is further instilled through ideological divisions, which constantly burden the lives and prosperity of individuals and communities in general.

Learning to live together, beyond collectivism and individualism, recognizing and accepting plurality in these new circumstances that exist in the world and humankind have become prime social tasks today, both at the global and local level. The world is becoming ever more connected through fast communication and transportation means. It is characterized by a mixture of individuals, nations and cultures as a result of increased opportunities and freedom of choice. According UNESCO's *International Commission for the Development of Education for the 21st Century* learning to live together is one of the pillars of lifelong education alongside the tasks: learning to know, learning to be and learning to do (Delors, 1996, 22-23). According to this recommendation, learning to live together happens

> "by developing an understanding of others and their history, traditions and spiritual values and, on this basis, creating a new spirit which, guided by recognition of our growing interdependence and a common analysis of the risks and challenges of the future, would induce people to implement common projects or to manage the inevitable conflicts in an intelligent and peaceful way." (Delors, 1996, 22)

1.2. Cultural changes and their impact on education and school

School as a social institution is on the threshold of a changing cultural paradigm caused by various factors, especially considering the extremely rapid development of new media as a channel for lifelong education. Human learning is a dynamic social activity that is situated in lived social practices (Rogoff, 2003). The school has maintained its crucial role in education and development of individuals; a role awarded to it by democratic society. To prevent this institution from becoming socially isolated, it is necessary to cooperate and collaborate in an innovative way with all other social factors that are important in the upbringing and education process. Several decades ago, this insight was voiced by the cultural critic, Ivan Illich, who advocated for the "de-schooling of society." According to him, students should be taught outside the school (for example, in libraries, laboratories, museums); they should also learn through encounters with individuals who are important mediators of cultural values, with their peers as well as other generations, particularly older people that have rich experiences and wisdom (Illich, 1972, 104-143). Alternative schools, such as Waldorf and Montessori schools, were particularly inspired by these ideas. More recent pedagogical endeavours, which advocate the development of a school culture in which cooperation should be implemented between schools, parents and the broader social community, including its political, social and cultural potentials (Grunder, 2001) were also influenced by these ideas.

As a reflection of the world on a small scale, the school is simultaneously called upon to possibly build a better future world. The humanistic tradition of European education has always been guided by the idea that a morally upstanding individual, as a rule, will create an upstanding society. In a way, giving prominence to the integral development of an individual, attainment of in-depth knowledge and to the establishment of a critical and creative relationship towards knowledge is in opposition to the currently dominant, pragmatic approach, which lays emphasis on extensive knowledge based on the principles of rationality, utilitarianism and universality (Gordon, 2013). Today, the dominant vein of educational reforms in Europe is embedded in their orientation towards the speedy acquisition of and pragmatic application of knowledge and skills, including flexibility and agility required by the precarious labour market (The European Parliament, 2006). The question is to what extent can the neo-liberal market oriented school with its centralized top-down management model and predetermined precisely defined body of outcomes, skills and knowledge simultaneously nurture and educate wholly developed, responsible and socially sensitive individuals who will one day develop a better society. The competence approach directed at acquiring applicable knowledge (material teaching tasks) inevitably pushes the encouragement of developing positive willing and character traits of students to the background, both in regard to their own development as well as the development of positive relations towards their closer as well as broader social communities. The mentioned competence approach regards the school as an industry, speaks of individuals as human resources and through corresponding norms and rank-lists encourages and promotes competitiveness, which is aimed at individual or group efficiency (Livazović, 2012, 63).

School in democratic societies which accepts the values of human dignity and human rights, free choice and critical thinking, individuality and autonomy on the one hand, diversity, tolerance and connectedness on the other hand should promote "the fulfilment of the whole man and of every man" (Paul VI, 1967, 42). In other words, educate students who are aware of their capabilities, interests and possibilities. This includes those who have a developed positive image of themselves and are ready to accept others in their diversity and to cooperate with them. In future circumstances which are difficult to predict and in light of how quickly knowledge is produced, the curriculum should develop strong and self-confident individuals capable of interaction and cooperation with others, encourage critical thought, develop a creative relationship towards knowledge encouraging curiosity and love of learning, teaching students how to learn and master information (Livazović, 2012, 63).

2. Religious Education in schools and its contribution to social cohesion

2.1. Religious Education at school in post-socialist countries – between welcomed and contested

Schools, their principals and teachers in post-socialist societies are still in the process of learning to accept the legitimacy of pluralism and diversity as well as training to manage the complexity of social tasks and challenges. Religious Education in schools is given a place in the school curricula in different ways, depending on the historical and social relevance of religious communities and their relationship to society in a particular country. In most Central/East European countries confessional Religious Education was introduced in schools for all religious communities, provided that there was a sufficient number of interested pupils, adequately qualified teaching staff, approved syllabi, curricula and text books (Filipović, 2011, 140-141). In some countries, such as the Czech Republic, due to a small number of interested students, Religious Education is taught as an optional, extracurricular subject. In Albania and Slovenia, religion is still not accepted as a legitimate world view in public schools (Jäggle, Rothgangel and Schlag, 2013).

In Croatia, Religious Education, after forty years, was introduced again in the school year 1991/1992 as a subject in the system of public education. Today, it is taught on the basis of agreements with various religious communities in confessional form in all classes of elementary and secondary schools. On account of ideological controversy in society, particularly because of the imposed Marxist ideology in the country's communist past, the place and role of Religious Education in schools is frequently contested by certain circles in public discourse, although 92.81 % of the population is religious. According to the 2011 Census (Državni zavod za statistiku, 2011), the majority of the population (86.28 %) are Catholics. This is a significant social factor, in a society in which ideological polarizations and strained confrontations, mutual accusations and divisions are apparent. It would appear that a sufficiently convincing and constructive path of public dialogue has not been found yet (Filipović, 2014, 662).

2.2. Essential content and messages of religions as resources to build social cohesion

The request for dialogue, on behalf of Christian Churches, is not only based on democratic reasons linked to civil society, but also on theological reasons. Two of them can be mentioned here: a) theological anthropology and b) the social dimension of Christian faith. a) Newer

theological considerations known as the relational turn in theology conceive the human being, as an image of God, as a relational achievement constituted in relation to others. The theological model of such relationalism is analogically derived from the dynamic, perichoretic conception of relationality, which is at the core of God's dynamics of the triune. It is based on the relational ontology of the person that is deduced from theological deliberations on the nature of God as a threefold being. In the popularization of the relational turn, an important role was in fact played by the Greek Orthodox theologian, John D. Zizioulas, whose theology ties in with patristics, particularly with the Cappadocian fathers: Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus. On the basis of the Cappadocian fathers' ontological revolution, the human being can be understood as relational in a similar way as beings of the Holy Trinity (Zizioulas, 1997).

b) The social dimension of faith in Christianity is an essential element of every faith content from the incarnation of Jesus to the paschal mystery. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* points out that "God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person but also the social relations existing between men" (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, 52). In his new commandment of love, Jesus Christ teaches all Christians how the transformation of the world and of social relationships towards a universal brotherhood/sisterhood responds to the demands of the Kingdom of God, that he proclaimed and whose coming he initiated (1 Jn, 4:8). Therefore, every Christian proclamation, evangelization and catechesis advocates generosity and love towards close ones, deals with issues of the common good, justice and solidarity, advocates for the promotion of human dignity and peace among peoples and nations, talks about development and liberation (Francis, 2013, chapter 4). This, of course, applies to Christian religious education in schools.

3. **Attitudes of Religious Education teachers in Croatia towards religious and worldview differences**

   3.1. Empirical verification of the competence of Religious Education teachers in Croatia to deal with diversities and differences

A constructive contribution of Religious Education to social cohesion is particularly important in post-socialist societies and religious communities that are not yet familiar with democratic culture and plurality. Empirical research conducted in Croatia in April 2015 aimed to check the competence of Religious Education teachers when dealing with diversities and differences

that they face in teaching and the classroom. The research included Religious Education teachers from all religious communities which implement Religious Education in schools. From the estimated number of 3,033 Religious Education teachers of all confessions, calculated by a random systematic procedure, 471 completed a survey on a website set up for this research. This corresponds to 15.52% of the estimated total population of Religious Education teachers. 425 of the respondents or 90.2% were Catholic and 46 or 9.4% were from other Christian and other religious communities (Pentecostal, Reformed, Baptist, Adventist, Evangelical and Muslim). Orthodox and Jewish teachers did not respond to this survey. Other Christian churches and religious communities do not have Religious Education classes in many places due to the small number of students. Since there are a small number of Religious Education teachers of other confessions and religions (less than 100 in the sample) they could not be considered separately in this presentation. Thus, the analysis includes all Religious Education teachers taken together. When non-Catholic teachers are considered separately, this is only as an illustration for comparative purposes. A more comprehensive presentation of these survey results has already been published in the Croatian language (Filipović, 2016). Some of these results and correlations will be presented in another article in the English language.

3.2. Principle acceptance of diversity

This research has shown that Religious Education teachers of all religious communities in Croatia generally possess a high level of culture in relation to accepting diversities and inclusive treatment with respect to differences. Values on a scale from 1 to 4 concentrate around 3-4 when responses are expressed in a positive sense, while they are around 1-2 when they express negative attitudes. The questionnaire covered the level of acceptance of diversity of people, their situational characteristics, cultures and world views, respect for sexual and gender differences, as well as the cultural and regional differences of students. The questions also focussed on relationships towards the socially underprivileged and respect for differences in relation to the psycho-physical and psycho-social development of children and youth. It also dealt with differences with respect to the levels of the pupils' religious socialization, teachers' discourse on other religions and confessions in Religious Education well as with different world view positions in the teaching process. The questionnaire also contained questions about teachers' reactions to mutual insults and humiliation among students as well as the amount of

institutional support they receive for dealing with diversity from their own religious community and from school authorities.

Although the majority of the results do not differ, it is still possible to observe some significant nuances in Religious Education teachers' responses. All the differences between the groups have been verified by the T-test and the correlations with Pearson's correlation coefficient. This overview only relates to the significant differences and correlations (at the level of 95%). Although statistically significant, they are not large in absolute terms.

When asked how many accept the diversity of people, situations that characterize them and the diversity of cultures and worldviews in their communities, Religious Education teachers responded on a scale from 1 (hardly accept or difficult to accept) to 4 (openly accept). On average, their responses ranged between 3.08 and 3.45. Acceptance of different worldviews (M = 3.08) was the lowest score, even though this is relatively very high (cf. Table 1).

Table 1: *Accepting the diversity of cultures, the diversity of peoples, their situational characteristics, diversity of worldviews*

	Range	Mean
Diversity of cultures	1-4	3.45
Diversity of peoples	1-4	3.35
Diversity of situations that characterise people	1-4	3.22
Diversity of worldviews	1-4	3.08

3.3. Discussion about different religions and confessions in Religious Education

For the theme of inter-religious dialogue and its contribution to shaping a new Europe it is important to see how Religious Education treats religious and worldview plurality.

Confessional Religious Education introduces students to a particular religion or confession, but also discusses other religions and religious communities. Official Religious Education programmes require that this is done in an objective and open way with respect to dialogue. However, how do Religious Education teachers implement such an approach? The results of

this study show the following. a) Religious Education teachers presented other religions and confessions from the perspective of their religious communities pointing out what is different with this frequency: regularly (23.4%), often (37.8%), occasionally (30.4%). b) Discussion about similarities and differences, avoiding negative qualifications in percentages and ratios are shown in Table 2. Correlations show that this is the case among Religious Education teachers with more work experience than those with less experience (r = 0.159).

Table 2: *Discussion about similarities and differences between religions and confessions avoiding negative qualifications*

I discuss similarities and differences, but avoid negative qualifications	Catholic Religious Education teachers (N=425) %	Others (N=46) %	All (N=471) %
Rarely or never	1.9	6.5	2.3
Occasionally	10.4	19.6	11.3
Often	34.6	43.5	35.5
Regularly (always)	52.0	23.9	49.3
No response	1.2	6.5	1.7
Mean (M, 1 - 4)	*3.38*	*2.91*	*3.34*

c) In the majority of cases, exclusionary attitudes (i.e., only the faith of their own religious community is the real faith) among Religious Education teachers was relatively rare, as shown in Table 3. Male Religious Education teachers are somewhat more inclined to express this attitude than females (males M = 1.81; females M = 1.58).

Table 3: *Emphasis that only their religion is the right one*

I make it clear that the faith of my religious community	Catholic Religious Education teachers	Others (N=46)	All (N=471) %

is the only real religion	(N=425) %	%	
Rarely or never	62.1	50.0	60.9
Occasionally	18.1	28.3	19.1
Often	10.4	8.7	10.2
Regularly (always)	7.5	8.7	7.6
No response	1.9	4.3	2.1
Mean (M, 1 - 4)	*1.63*	*1.75*	*1.64*

d) Table 4 shows how often Religious Education teachers invite representatives of other religions or churches to their classes to present their religion or Christian confession. Surprisingly, more than half Religious Education teachers (52.9%) do this rarely or never. It is evident from the correlation that Religious Education teachers with more work experience do this more often than those with less experience (r = 0.170). Authentic information can be best provided by authentic representatives of a particular religion, while previous acquaintances with teachers of religion further contributes to a culture of interreligious and ecumenical dialogue.

Table 4: *Inviting representatives of other religions or churches to present their religious community*

I try to bring in representatives of other religions and churches who present their religious communities	Catholic Religious Education teachers (N=425) %	Others (N=46) %	All (N=471) %
Rarely or never	53.2	50.0	52.9

Occasionally	31.1	23.9	30.4
Often	9.2	15.2	9.8
Regularly (always)	4.9	2.2	4.7
No response	1.6	8.7	2.3
Mean(M, 1-4)	*1.65*	*1.67*	*1.65*

e) In most cases, Religious Education teachers only occasionally ask students to independently study other religions and confessions and to share the results of this research in class (cf. Table 5).

Table 5: *Encouraging students to independently study other religions and confessions and to present research results in class*

I ask students to independently study other religions and confessions and to share the results of this research in class	Catholic Religious Education teachers (N=425) %	Others (N=46) %	All (N=471) %
Rarely or never	20.2	26.1	20.8
Occasionally	54.1	34.8	52.2
Often	20.0	26.1	20.6
Regularly (always)	3.5	4.3	3.6
No response	2.1	8.7	2.8
Mean (M, 1-4)	*2.07*	*2.10*	*2.07*

3.4. Dealing with different worldviews and positions in Religious Education

In Croatia, as in other post-socialist societies ideological disputes often surface. Is Religious Education equipped for dialogue with different worldview positions? How do Religious Education teachers of both sexes relate to topics for which there are different views in their religious communities and liberal societies? Do Religious Education teachers feel uncomfortable when they have to discuss topics for which there are divisive opinions in their religious communities and pluralistic society? On a scale of 1 (rarely or never) to 4 (regularly) Religious Education teachers generally respond negatively (M = 1.28). Moreover, religious Education teachers who practice their faith entirely in accordance with the tradition of their own religious communities feel lees discomfort (r = - 0.111), probably because they feel more secure in their faith.

Different positions on some issues that exist within religious communities and liberal society are discussed relatively often to make students interested in the subject (M = 2.82), and as an incentive for students to profoundly reflect on these issues and to take up their own position (M = 2.95). Female Religious Education teachers more often encourage their students to engage in in-depth thinking and to commit to their own positions than their male colleagues (females M = 3.00; males M = 2.81). Correlations show that Religious Education teachers with more work experience adopt this approach more often than those with less experience (r = 0.128). Religious Education teachers occasionally (M = 1.92) only explain the viewpoints of their religious communities on topics for which there are different opinions in the religious community and society. Between occasionally and often (M = 2.68) Religious Education teachers present different views, but also assuredly teach that their religious community is right about these topics. Religious Education teachers who are traditionally oriented and fully conform to the tradition of their religious communities teach in this way more often (r = 0.096).

Conclusions

Numerous social changes have taken place in societies of Eastern Europe following the collapse of communist regimes, ranging from the return of once oppressed traditional values to keeping pace with the processes of modernization. Democratic processes are mixed with the challenges of globalization and pluralism as well as the requirements of a market economy, which has an impact on all areas of life. Cultural changes are reflected in the influence of the

new media and increased migration. Education and schools in these frameworks are faced with the new task of advocacy and promotion of the integral human person as well as teachings of coexistence and cooperation with those who are different through respect and dialogue.

Religious Education in schools, on the one hand, meets the spiritual needs of students and the desire for stronger rootedness in historical religious traditions. On the other hand, in some social groups this is met with denial, among other things because of atheistic defamation of religious worldviews in the communist period. In this situation, Religious Education in schools must demonstrate the strength of its dialogue in terms of openness and its potential to build better social relationships. In this way, Religious Education shows the public meaning of religion and theology in society. All religions whose Religious Education is being taught at schools in Eastern European countries have resources to fulfil this task. This article has indicated the exemplary dimensions of the Christian faith.

The results of the empirical research conducted in Croatia serve as an example in a double sense. They principally show in an exemplary way the openness of all Religious Education teachers in all religious communities to accept and respect heterogeneity and diversity in Religious Education. Concordantly, they show the need for greater empowerment of Religious Education teachers, through initial and continuing education, which would contribute to a greater openness and didactic competence to constructively deal with diversity. This includes a differentiated and reflective perception of differences, which make plurality possible.

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