



The Future of Lifelong Learning in Europe: Example of Good Practice in Religious Education in Romania

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1. Introduction

All over Europe religion is a fundamental element of national, European and universal culture. For example, travelling through Europe we may discover beautiful sites and objects illustrating Europe's spiritual wealth and the diversity of monasteries, churches, pictures and sculptures, but also musical and literary masterpieces. In almost all countries of Europe religious education is offered as part of the national public or private school system. We shall, however, notice that there often is a gap between theory and practice.

2. The European context of religious education

The European Community (now: the Union) began to take an interest in education in general and in lifelong learning in particular in the 1990s. The Maastricht Treaty contained the first explicit reference to education. The preamble of the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) gave the European Union the mission to "promote the development of the highest possible level of knowledge for their peoples through a wide access to education and through its continuous updating" [1], this approach is made "in the context of the accomplishment of the internal market" [2]. In this way economic aspects were given priority over personal and spiritual development. At European level, there are several legal instruments which may have a bearing on religious education, the most important being the Fundamental Rights Charter of the European Union and the European Human Rights Convention of the Council of Europe to which the European Union plans to adhere.

The European Human Rights Convention signed at Rome on 4 November 1950 guarantees the right to freedom of religion in the following terms:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance" (article 9, par. 1).

Later, on 20 March 1952, the first Protocol to the European Human Rights Convention concerning the right to education and, more specifically, the right of parents to ensure education in conformity with their religious convictions

"No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religions and philosophical convictions" (Protocol 1, article 2).

The Charter of the European Union took up the same ideas and guarantees, namely **the freedom of thought, conscience and religion:**

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance" (Article 10, par. 1).and also **the right to education:**

"The freedom to found educational establishments with due respect for democratic principles and the right of parents to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions shall be respected, in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of such freedom and right" (article 14,par. 3).

The most recent case law in this field is the judgment of the European Human Rights Court in Strasbourg, pronounced on 20 March 2011 and concerning the crucifix in public schools in Italy. In this case, the European Human Rights Court stated that the "The cross, as the symbol of Christianity, can therefore not exclude anyone without denying itself; it even constitutes in a sense the universal sign of the acceptance of and respect for every human being as such, irrespective of any belief, religious or other, which he or she may hold. ..." (par.13.4). The Chamber of the European Human Rights Court decided that a crucifix in Italian classrooms could not be seen as violation of the human rights of atheist parents.

3. The Romanian legislative framework for Christian-orthodox education

European legal instruments are of relevance to lifelong learning and religious education, since they have to be taken into account by national legislation. Conformity between international instruments and national law is necessary, because "the Romanian State pledges to fulfill as such and in good faith its obligations as deriving from the treaties it is a party to" and also 'the Treaties ratified by Parliament, according to the law, are part of national law' (article 11, par. 1-2 of the Constitution). In Romania over 18 Churches and different religious communities are recognised by the State. The Christian-Orthodoxy Church is the most important one. For this very reason this presentation will only deal with Christian-Orthodox education. The Romanian **Constitution** states



that “all religions shall be free and organised in accordance with their own statutes, under the terms laid down by law” (article 29, par. 3) and also the “parents or legal tutors have the right to ensure, in accordance with their own convictions, the education of the minor children whose responsibility devolves on them” (article 29, par. 6). Concerning the right to education, the Constitution guarantees that “the State shall ensure the freedom of religious education, in accordance with the specific requirements of each religious cult. In public schools religious education is organised and guaranteed by law” (article 32, par. 7). In legislation, religious instruction had been introduced after the breakdown of communism, first either as compulsory or optional subject depending of the level of schooling in question. At present, under article 18, the **Act No. 1/2011 on national education** and lifelong learning, in force since January 2011, grants religious teaching the same status as the other subjects [3]. Therefore in Romania the Christian-Orthodox Church enjoys the freedom to organise religious teaching in public schools for its members but the law makes no reference to pre-school and adult education.

4. Examples of good practice in religious education in Romania

The legal framework for religious education offered to members of the Christian-Orthodox Church seems appropriate. In this context, several recent research projects studied the pedagogical methods used, pointing out examples of good practice. The most interesting and effective examples were the following:

- **Biblical stories and parables** are used in order to familiarise pupils with the Holy Scripture, giving them relevant interpretation of these texts and the teaching of Jesus, his Apostles or – later - the so-called Fathers of the Church. This type of instruction may take place during religious knowledge classes at school as regards pupils and - less often – as regards adults at the church
- **Visits of monasteries and churches** in Romania or abroad with the aim of giving people an opportunity to discover places of great relevance to their faith, of praying together, of deepening their faith, of creating the feeling of belonging to a wider Christian-Orthodox community including other countries
- **Prayers and actions of solidarity** are organised in particular in the context of the great Christian holidays (Christmas, Easter, Saint Nicolas), trying to raise pupils’ religious awareness. On the one hand the idea is to make them adapt a daily programme, a certain rhythm of prayers, and on the other hand to help them to practice charity for those who may be in need
- **Painting classes** are trying to develop pupils’ artistic creativity and introduce them into religious art such as icons, sculptures, etc. The idea is also to illustrate the importance and the evolution of pictures in the Orthodox Church
- **Learning religious hymns** is rather a “recreational” activity which develops the sense of beauty in music and the skills to sing in harmony with the others members of a choir.

These methods and examples of good practice are supplemented by other forms such as portfolios, essays [4], team work presentations, etc. according to the teacher’s imagination.

5. Conclusions

At the moment the question is whether religious education will remain on the agenda at international and national level. There is constant tension between the European and the national level as well as between theory and practice. At the political level one might recall the controversial debates about reference to the Christian roots of Europe during the elaboration of the Draft European Constitution (which was never adopted). It became clear that economic progress continues to be the priority of the European Union. Some authors, like J.H.H. Weiler and George Weigel spoke of an attitude of « christophobia » [5] or a form of “neo-barbarism” developed by Alessandro Baricco [6]. An in-depth analysis of European culture and history will reveal that Christian values used to constitute the basis of inspiration for the humanities, literature, culture, and also for human rights. It is therefore not possible to neglect or ignore the religious development of human beings. “Christianity gave birth to the very notion of Europe, in the modern sense of the term, and this not as a merely geographical reality, but it was always Christianity which developed and achieved Europe as a community of Christian countries sharing the same kind of civilisation” [7]. This debate, on the one hand stressing the need of religious education for the development of people and, on the other hand, opposing the religious dimension in public, is likely to continue and is worth analysing at the dawn of the 21st century. Information on examples of good practice in this field may contribute to the enrichment of the religious.

References

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