



PARTICULARITIES IN A APPROACHING THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The study of religion in the Romanian school is a delicate subject. In the context of the existence of a majority Orthodox religion with a proportion of approx. 85% believers, the state imposed at a certain moment the study of the Orthodox religion in schools. Still, it can be noticed that the society becomes less and less interested in religion and this is a tendency specific to the European space, visible in mass-media through the number of shows and hours assigned for religion. The religious communities in Romania started to be financially involved and to have their voice heard by means of acquiring their own media channels to broadcast the divine message.

Key words:

Education, religion, mass-media

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1. Introduction

Why must religion be taught in schools? Is it really a need of the contemporary man? Many studies on the topic of education understand school as an agent of change; the information that school offers the students modifies their perceptions, values and manner of understanding reality. Starting from this premise, pro and con debates on the topic are present in the public space every year. The Romanian contemporary society is attempting to solve this dilemma which did not exist in the communist period. Religion, in communism, did not represent topic for debate, religion was according to the Marxist doctrine "opium for the masses" (Marx K., 1970, p.139). God is not allowed in the public space. Religion belongs only in churches and about the divinity one is allowed to discuss only in private, at home.

After the fall of communism, Romania continues to be a lay state, fact also consecrated in the Constitution through the separation between the church and the state. Still, religion has a different status, compared to the communist period. Due to the marginal status of religion in socialist Romania, after the fall of the communist system, the church was able to obtain very many privileges that it was not allowed in other Western countries.

The Romanian State allowed the cults to freely express themselves, to build churches and to purchase

radio and television stations; also, it allowed the teaching of religion in schools. Still, the high number of Christian-Orthodox persons made the discrepancy between cults very wide and that led to discussions, dissensions and tensions. The Romanian Orthodox Church (in original, BOR) has as adepts 86% of the country's population, fact which confers it an important word in the context of the Romanian religious market. The second cult as importance is the Catholic Church, with 5% of the country's population, followed by the Neo-Protestant cults, which, together, amount also to 5%. The minority groups claimed repeatedly that BOR receives disproportionately high funding and that the state offers it large real estate properties and it does not sanction BOR's discriminatory attitude. BOR, say the minorities, repeatedly breaches the principle of dialogue and through its discourse it instigates to discrimination, both through mass-media and in the public schools (IRFR, 2009, p. 3). "This is not specific only to Romania, but to the entire European communist block, very many politicians, former communists building their electoral discourse in relation to religious symbols and terms, in order to become more popular" (Apostol M.S., 2012, p. 93).

Countries that declare themselves Catholic, like Poland and Croatia, or Orthodox, such as Russia, Romania and Bulgaria, offered privileges to the dominant religion to the detriment of the minority

religions. In all these countries, the religion of the majority became an object of study in the state schools, compulsory subject for the lower grades.

In Romania, the Government does not demand the presence of religious education in the public schools, attendance to class being optional. The students may be exempt by filling out a written petition. At their choice, the students may opt for other recognized cults, which have the right to teach in the public schools, provided that there are candidates.

2. Religious education in other states/in the world

In the Western space - French, English, North-American - religious education in the public schools is a subject debated at large. The teaching of religion in schools continues to be considered in the West as "an educational method for the manipulation of the young, unformed minds" (Trigg R., 2007, p. 22).

In the Western space, both North-American and West-European, it cannot be said that the much-desired separation of the religious and political powers is an absolute reality and an essential fact for democracy. "Even in these countries with secular tradition, the religious dynamics continues to influence the political decisions, until a certain point" (Stan L., Turcescu L., 2007, p. 14).

At the end of the 20th century, religion could not be found in the curricula of the North-American schools, giving the impression that the subject had no relevance in the social life of the rural and urban communities. A careful research of the school materials on this topic showed the reticence with which the topic was approached, and if it were presented, the information offered was stripped of the religious emotional weight. Different religious holidays were presented to the students as simple beautiful events about the historical event, carefully eliminating anything that could remind of the religious content of the story. Rituals consecrated in the American tradition, such as "Thanksgiving had the same fate, the religious messages being altered in order to respond to the different pressures exercised by the political real, civil society or other cults, all who consider themselves harmed in one way or another by the religious message" (Viteritti P. J., 2007, p. 87).

Still, at the beginning of the 21st century, one can notice a change of position of the educational institutions regarding the interest for religious education in the American schools, "fact also underlined by the attention certain editors give the religious subject, increasing the number of publications dedicated to students" (Viteritti P. J., 2007, p. 88). Of course, "religion will continue to be presented as a retrograde and repressive subject, often describing tense episodes

in the history of the church and of the manner in which, until the end of the 19th century, the majority was persecuting the religious minorities" (Viteritti P. J., 2007, p. 88).

An opinion poll performed in 2000 by *People for the American Way* illustrates the fact that 68% of the population considered that the evolutionist ideas and the religious creationist ideas are perfectly compatible. "In 2004, *CBS News*, following the answers received concluded that 60% of the population agrees with the teaching in school of both the evolutionist theories and the creationist doctrine, and 37% of the respondents favored the religious theories" (Viteritti P. J., 2007, p. 89).

The pro and con approach regarding teaching the two theories lays on the shoulders of the teachers who share different opinions regarding the teaching of the creationist or the evolutionist theories. While certain teachers have an extreme position and consider that attacking Darwin's evolutionist theories constitute an insult against science and the contemporary man, others believe that in school science should be taught, and not religion, but admit there are very many mysterious things to which science does not find answers, while other teachers have an ambivalent approach, which does not wish to draw borders, leaving this dilemma at the latitude of parents and the traditions inherited by them. The permanent dialogue with the parents and the organizations connected to the schools determined the teachers to have a looser vision, closer to the people they are in daily contact with, with respect to this issue, in contrast with the attitude of no direct involvement of politicians, editors, the scientific community and, not least, of the religious community. Each of these communities defends its own values and starts from a reality that justifies their interests, forgetting in this process about the interests of the student (Murray T. R., 2007, p.2).

At the same time, the protestant religions continue a form of missionary activity in the countries of South Africa. The American missionary teachers coming to Africa to teach English to children in the state schools blend education with Christian religion. The teachers present the biblical texts as usual course support, but, at the same time, broadcast the Christian message by means of the texts presented. Of course, the protestant missionaries consider that the power of the Bible is able to transform for the good and to save the world with the help of the divine message. Thus, the teachers, through the texts taught in English, by means of the Christian rituals practiced daily, such as prayer and making a cross, by the power of the teacher's example, induce the Christian morals as behavior norm to the African children. These practices are debatable from the point of view of the secular Western schools, which consider

an intrusion in the private and public life of those states. The Euro-centrist discourse that these missionaries carry with them alters the manner of educating the students, but deeply changes the ethnographic structure and the fundamental myths of the respective society, leading towards a form of cultural colonization.

Education, consider the secular people, was and is an important factor in the development of the contemporary society; the moving of the religious discourse from schools and the public space to the private space, at home, is not synonym with the disappearance of religion, but represents a personal choice of each individual, to choose his own values. "Religious plurality represents the recognition of the multitude of faiths and traditions, not only the unilateral, dominant and unequivocal discourse of a single religion with superior qualities, which to monopolize the public space" (Stambach A., 2009, p.3).

3. Religious education in the Romanian schools

„*The religion class*” in the Romanian state schools became a highly debated subject in the public space. Pro and con sides attempt to impose their viewpoint on the manner of teaching, on the need of inclusion in the school curricula, on the fact that it is an outdated subject or a useless subject that models the spirit of the children etc.

The topic of discrimination against the other cults is constantly present in the public space, mainly due to the disproportion existing in the social texture, the high number of Christian-Orthodox believers, in comparison with other cults existing on the Romanian territory. The number of religions officially recognized in Romania is considered low by the international institutions, even though there is no legislation to prevent it. Still, the recognition system of the religious groups is complex and considered strongly bureaucratic.

Thus, a difference is made between three types of organizations: religious groups, religious associations and religious cults. The religious groups are groups of persons who share the same faith, but are not exempt from taxes and do not benefit of the state's aid. The religious associations are legal entities and do not benefit of funding from the government, but only of limited tax exemptions. In Romania there are recognized 18 cults: the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Serbian Orthodox Bishopric in Timisoara, the Roman-Catholic Church, the Greek-Catholic church, the Christian Russian Orthodox Old Rite Church, the Reformed Protestant Church, the Christian Evangelical Church, the Romanian Evangelical Church, the Evangelical Church of Augustan Confession, the Lutheran Evangelical Church – Presbyterian Synod, the Unitarian Church in Romania, the Baptist Church, the

Pentecostal Church, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Armenian Church, the Jewish Community, and the Muslim Community and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The recognized cults are eligible to receive governmental support, according to the percept of population they represent. They have the right to establish schools, to teach religion in the public schools where they have adepts and they receive funding to erect places of worship. Also, the state may pay the salaries of the clergy and their housing expenses. The law allows them to request broadcasting licenses and they can broadcast religious shows on the radio and television (IRFP, 2012, p.5).

With a population of 19,98 million inhabitants, according to the Statistical Yearbook of Romania 2014 and on the basis of the last census, a percent of 86.8% of the population declared that they belong to Romanian Orthodox Church and to the Serbian Orthodox Bishopric in Timisoara. The Roman-Catholic church represents 4.7% and the Greek-Catholic church less than 1%. The Greek-Catholic church considers that this percent does not reflect reality, claiming that the correct percent is 3.6%. The Christian Russian Orthodox Old Rite Church, the Reformed Protestant Church comprise 701,077 worshippers, the Christian Evangelical Church – 44,476, the Romanian Evangelical Church – 18,178, the Evangelical Church of Augustan Confession – 8,716, the Lutheran Evangelical Church – Presbyterian Synod – 27,112, , the Unitarian Church in Romania – 66,944, the Baptist Church – 126,639, the Pentecostal Church – 324,462, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church -126,639, the Armenian Church - 383, the Jewish Community – 6,057, the Muslim Community – 67,257 (G.R., D.R.I.).

It is also important to mention the percent in which these religions and nationalities are found in the different areas of the country, in order to realize why in certain areas there is a media concentration, while in other areas the space is more weakly represented by certain cults. Following the statistical research, it is established that there are representatives of the cults spread in the entire country, but a certain concentration can be seen in some regions. The majority of the Catholic, Greek-Catholic and Protestant believers are in Transylvania, but there are groups of Greek-Catholics also in Bucharest, Banat and Crişana; also, there is a concentration of Catholics and protestants in Bacău County. In the census of 2002, the geographical distribution of the Roman-Catholic population presented as follows: in Harghita – 212,937 believers, Bacău – 19,618, Covasna – 80,432, Timiş – 72,094, Satu-Mare – 66,247, Neamţ -60,483 (IRFR 2009).

The members of the Reformed, Protestant, Roman-Catholic, Unitarian and Lutheran in Transylvania are, in majority, of Hungarian nationality. The members of the

Orthodox Old Rite Church are lipoveni and they live in Moldova and Dobrogea. Also in Dobrogea live most Muslims. The ethnic Ukrainians Orthodox or Greek-Catholic are in the North-West, the Orthodox Serbian nationals in Banat area, and the Armenians are concentrated in Moldova and in the south of the country (IRFR 2009). Following the opinion polls, it was established that the great majority of respondents - 85% - declared that they believe in the existence of God. Still, only 1% of the population of Romania declared going to church every day, 3% several times a week, 19% once a week, 17% several times a month, 5% once a month and 34% declared that they go only for holidays: Christmas or Easter, 9% go less than once a year, 11% do not ever go and, still, 83% of the Romanians consider the church as the institution they trust most (IRFR 2009).

"[...] look, we witness the perverting of some of us with the illness of secularity, which indicates the religion class as being an instrument of stress and discrimination and which, as a consequence, invokes its removal and elimination from around our children, because they could be contaminated by the ghost of indoctrination and bigotry or pietism! And this would be in opposition with the modern state of the youngster, bombarded by other less Christian subjects, sciences, currents, doctrines and educational instruments, such as those of the television or computer, isn't it?!..." (Gombos S., 2014).

Increasingly more, voices emerge, stating that "after numerous polemics, scandals and complaints of the parents, religion was removed from the school curricula as compulsory subject, remaining only in the form of an optional class. Thus, one of the problems was solved. Still, we face a second, discrimination. Religious discrimination, between Orthodoxy, the majority, and the other religious cults, the minority. The only religious cult taught in the schools in Romania is Orthodoxy. Indeed, those of other faiths may choose to not attend the religion class, but discrimination remains present – why is only Orthodoxy taught? Why is the option not offered to the other cults to teach in schools about their own religion? Orthodoxy is a monopole which does not observe the equality between all religious cults" (Reut S., 2012).

In fact, Romania and BOR have been repeatedly accused by the domestic minority religious communities and by international organizations that they practice discriminatory tactics and instate the Orthodox religious monopoly on the entire territory. Some journalists warn that these discriminatory tendencies may deepen in the context of the political interests.

The Romanian political elite chose a modified variant of the pluralist model and of the state-church relationship. Both the political actors and the minorities

understand differently the religious pluralism and pluralism understood by the religious minorities is closer to the democratic ideal than to the quasi-pluralism managed by the politicians. This system is defectively managed due to the burdening bureaucracy, necessary to record new religious forms and to the fact that the Orthodox Church is favored by the political, both at the formal and the informal levels (Stan L., Turcescu L., 2007, p.4).

Still, it can be noticed that society becomes less and less interested in religion and this is a tendency specific to the European space, visible in mass-media through the number of shows and hours assigned for religion, due to the fact that religious shows do not have a high number of viewers. Establishing which determined the religious communities to become financially involved and to have their voice heard by means of acquiring their own media channels to broadcast the divine message. After the fall of the communist regime in Romania, the religious organizations started to compete for supremacy on the religious market in Romania.

Conclusion

It is quite difficult to find a solution in what concerns the study of religion in the Romanian school. The state, respectively the Ministry of Education, attempted to solve this problem by introducing the written agreement through which the students, on the basis of consulting their parents, to decide if they want to study religion in school. Contrary to the expectations, the decision was in favor of the Orthodox religion classes in school in a proportion of more than 85%.

Still, the religion classes have a low level of attractiveness, the students mainly accepting them as a consequence of the decision imposed by the parents.

We consider that the religious moral rules must be adapted to the target-group and transmitted in an agreeable manner in order to fulfill their educational role in the development of the new generations. The church, together with the school, has a decisive role in the development of the individual's conscience, in finding a way in life. Any institutional approach in this field must be followed by a careful process of monitoring and assessment in view of adapting the methods to the context of a communication society, dominated by multiculturalism.

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