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## THE ATTITUDES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN YUGOSLAVIA TOWARDS INTRODUCTION OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION INTO SCHOOLS

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**Abstract.** *A question how to provide our children and young people attending elementary, secondary and academic schools with the religious knowledge constituting an integral part of the religious, cultural and national identity of their environment as objectively and as completely as possible, is put forward in our general public with an increasing frequency. To formulate such a question and to attempt to answer it are two entirely different tasks. This is where a wide span of opinions is reflected: from those allowing only for "scientific" information on religion/religions in schools, to those favoring re-institutionalization of the "classic" religious instruction in schools. Along with a review of the standpoints taken by several Yugoslav scholars, the paper analyzes the attitudes of the Yugoslav secondary school students on introduction of religious instruction into schools. The obtained data are a part of a wider socio-empirical research carried out in 1997 in the several regions of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.*

**Key words:** *religious instruction, young people, church, school, tolerance*

### INTRODUCTION

Correspondence between the competent ministries of the Governments of Serbia and Montenegro and the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Serbia concerning introduction of regular religious instruction into elementary and secondary schools in Yugoslavia has been going on since 1990, but so far with no epilogue. Basically, the Synod would argue on several occasions that education of children, young people and adults in the spirit of Orthodoxy is one of the most important ecclesiastical-educational and enlightening missions of the Serbian Orthodox Church, however a reaction of the

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official state bodies failed to come. It would be understandable if this prolongation came as a result of the caution of our authorities due to the complexity of the procedure of introducing religious instruction into schools. For, it is highly probable that, to cite an example, the Greek model (a country with 98 percent Orthodox population) would not be directly applicable in our country with only 65 percent Orthodox population. The Greek church is not dissociated from the state; hence, religious instruction falls under the same legal regulations as all other school subjects. Their school classes regularly begin with a prayer, and catechism is an obligatory subject from the third grade of elementary school to the end of secondary education. Instruction is carried out by theologians, or, as it is a case in lower grades, by school teachers. Once in two weeks pupils/students go to church.

On the other hand, it is highly unlikely that the West European or North American models could be directly applicable in our country. To start with, the mentioned countries belong to the Protestant and Roman-Catholic tradition; moreover, their social conditions are obviously different from ours. Thus, for example, the Germans have religion as an obligatory school subject on all levels of elementary and secondary education. Up to the age of fourteen pupils may choose between the Roman-Catholic and Evangelic religious instruction; from then on, as it is believed that they have become "religiously mature", they are given opportunity to decide whether they want to study general religion as one among other social sciences or not. Otherwise, pupils have no ritual obligations. In the Catholic Italy, religious instruction is elective. Grades are given on a separate sheet of paper which is only enclosed with the report card. A grade in religious instruction is not taken into account in the calculation of the pupil's average grade; furthermore, it cannot be a reason for the repetition of any year of studies. Children who have chosen not to attend religious instruction attend instruction in some other subject, in accordance with the principle's decision. In the Great Britain two areas are studied: comparative religions (fundamental theories of all major world religions) and religious morality (fundamental human values which endure through centuries in different societies). In the multi-denominational United States of America a question whether the Bible can be a subject of study in American state schools or not was decided by the Supreme Court. Its decision was affirmative. Pupils and students may organize sections for the Bible study on the basis of their constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion, but in an extracurricular form. This rule does not apply to private schools, since they are not maintained out of the civil taxes, and the one who bears expenses automatically takes the risks awaiting in the market, and may independently decide on the contents of his offer.

Let us also mention a model characteristic for Yugoslavia in the period prior to the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War: religious instruction was an obligatory subject represented in the curriculum with one class per week. Instruction was carried out by theologians who had to be formally appointed school religious instructors. Appointments were formalized by the state upon proposals made by church authorities. Religious instructors were equal members of the school teaching staff. Grades in religious instruction were treated as grades in any other subject. Text-books were approved by church authorities. Religious rituals with pupils/students, usually conducted by the same priest who performed the duties of a religious instructor, were solemnized in churches (mosques).

A serious and thorough approach to the problem of introducing religious instruction into the school curricula would imply a study of the essence of various models, a research of both parents' and children's dispositions, as well as answers to a number of questions

such as: who is to undertake the duties of religious instructors, which text-books are to be used, what curricula and syllabi are to underlie twelve years of instruction, how to adjust the programs of various religious communities, how to provide the funds for such a complex operation... If we add to all this a fact that present generations live in altered circumstances in comparison with the first half of this century, and that the influence of the Internet on shaping religious views is already seriously discussed in the world - it becomes clear how serious and complex the obligations of our state bodies are if they would thoroughly get down to their accomplishment.

#### PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS INTRODUCTION OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION INTO SCHOOLS

After the decline of the Communist regime which imposed on schools the concept of "Marxization" of the entire system of thoughts, it became obvious that modernization of education should involve openness for religious as well as other forms of spirituality. However, a simplified interpretation of this attitude in the post-Communist countries gave rise to the opinion that it is enough to make schools religious in order to endow them with spirituality: "The major mistake in which the societies outgrowing Communism, i.e. the rule of an atheistic ideology, keep falling is their tendency to put spirituality and religion on the same level. In the countries of the European East everybody is nowadays in search of spirituality, attaching the concept of spirituality exclusively to religious beliefs... Spirituality is not religiousness only; it is rather a set of virtues constituting general human morality. Spirituality can be found in the mundane life, too, in the historical tradition, culture, folklore: it is not solely reserved for the church and its teachings" (Kont-Sponvil, 1997:XVI).

Due to a confusion which is present in the general public about the idea of religious instruction, **Miroslav Ahtik** (1998) focuses on the meaning of the term *science* in the compound word "veronauka" ("vero" = faith/religion + "**nauka**" = **science**) which is a Serbian word for *religious instruction*, on the one hand, and in the syntagm "science of religion" on the other, concluding in the end that "veronauka" has nothing in common with the science of religion, either in general or in terms of any specific religion. The science of religion tends to explain religious beliefs and sentiments as human creations which are rooted in the actual facts of human life, in man's position in the world, in his terms with the world. In contrast to this, theology tends to prove that man maintains the idea of the supernatural being, because such a being really exists. The science of religion comprises: a) psychology of religion, b) philosophy of religion, c) sociology of religion and d) history of religion. Psychology of religion deals with the analysis and description of the sentiments in which "man sees himself as weak and insignificant faced with the superior phenomena in the world (fear, terror, horror, helplessness, fear of death) as well as with man's "strivings for safety, happiness, full life, immortality". Philosophy of religion "evaluates the verity of religious ideas, studies the meaning, role and value of religion in the complexity of man's entire cultural and life experience". Sociology of religion focuses on the study of the structure and circumstances of religious communities, i. e. organizations and explores the influence of the secular society on religion and vice versa.

The author points out that "veronauka" is something entirely different. It is only a

school subject which should form in pupils/students specific religious beliefs and morality of their denomination. While teachers of other school subjects give lectures on things, phenomena and abstractions, processes and laws which are either directly or indirectly provable, the teacher carrying out religious instruction, a clergyman, lectures on "the nonexistent beings, things, phenomena, situations, events, i. e., on imaginary creations as if they were real and true: on God, Holy Spirit, the son of a supernatural father, impossible child conception, angels, Satan, hell, the last judgment, Kingdom of Heaven, resurrection, salvation, life after death, sanctity of supernatural and real human beings, miracles, powers of church rituals to turn a piece of bread and a teaspoon of wine into the Christ's body and blood, events in which the supernatural beings allegedly took part ..." (p. 31)

Hence, to allow lecturing which would present the students of state schools with interpretations of the contemporary world in the way that primitive and superstitious people used to do several thousands years ago would, in author's eyes, be equal to inexcusable collaboration in an intercultural crime against present and future young generations and society in general.

**Ivan Ivić** (1997), professor of developmental psychology at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, insists on a difference between *familiarization with religion as a culturological system*, and *believers training*, once known as religious instruction (veronauka) or catechism. Catechism, in its literal meaning, implies that the main objective is not to know something about religion, but to train young believers. The Church itself makes it clear that it wants religious instruction (veronauka) as its means of believers training. Familiarization with religion, or to be more precise, religion as a part of man's understanding of his cultural tradition and history, which often includes a comparative study of different religions, has an entirely different meaning. Follows a question: "Won't religious instruction - aimed at training of believers who would uncritically believe in some religious dogmas - once reintroduced in schools, become, even more than before, an obstacle for the development of a free personality in our context, in which we already have our children imprisoned by the school as it is?" (p. 27)

From the angle of developmental psychology there is yet another dilemma: are the children of a specific age and period of development able to understand extremely complex and abstract theological concepts, and if they are, to what extent? If the intention is to present children with some aspects of this essentially complex matter in the area of human faith, such as the system of values or complex theological concepts, then the syllabi to underlie this school subject as well as the books and teaching methods to be used must comply to the same requests valid for any other subject. In his conclusion the author warns that introduction of 'believers training' into the system of the social, public sector of education in a country in which one third of population is neither nationally, nor ethnically, i. e. religiously Orthodox bears a risk of discrimination, particularly in regions inhabited with culturally, nationally and religiously mixed population.

**Aleksandar Jovanović** (1997), professor of the Teacher-Training Faculty in Belgrade, proposes introduction of a subject "Fundamentals of Christian Teachings / Christian Fundamentals of the European Civilization" with the following general chapters: Introduction (concept and features of religion); Religion and Other Disciplines; Beginnings of Christianity; Rudiments of Christianity; Religious Service (types and significance of Christian services); Christian Church Through Centuries; Eastern

Christianity - Orthodoxy; Orthodoxy with the Serbs; Religious Sects; Christianity and Morality; Christianity and Culture (ecclesiastic and secular culture inspired by the Christian spirit).

According to the author's opinion, the reasons for introducing such a subject are manifold: from general-civilizational and historical-national, ethnic and cultural to religious and psychological. There is no doubt that the European art and culture over the past two thousand years would not take this course if they were not featured by the Christian teachings and church. There is no branch of art - from architecture and painting to music and literature - which has not been, at least, inspired by the spirit of Christianity, or, as it turns out to be much too often a case, has been - directly or indirectly - an artistic expression of that spirit, points out the author. And then he concludes: "If we overlook this, we shall remain blind not only for the works of church art: temples, frescoes, icons, spiritual music, but also for the creations of the greatest artists of the mankind and the greatest artists of the Serbian culture: Dante, Michelangelo, Bach, Goethe, Njegoš, Dostoyevsky, Mokranjac, Chagall, Andrić, Nastastasiević, Rilke, Popa..." (p. 24).

#### THE ATTITUDES OF YOUNG PEOPLE TOWARDS INTRODUCTION OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IN SCHOOLS

Our empirical material was acquired on the basis of an opinion pool carried out among secondary-school students in May 1997 in several regions (Novi Sad, Subotica, Belgrade, Niš, Pristina, Bar and Podgorica) of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, within an "omnibus" research entitled "The Attitudes of Young People on ...".

We were of the opinion that argumentation pro and contra the idea of introducing catechism (religious instruction) in our educational system should be backed up with the attitudes of secondary-school population for whom a positive outcome would mean one more subject in their regular education. A question "Do we need religious education in schools?" was not too precise and personal (as for example: would you attend classes of religious instruction if introduced in the regular school system), which was in accordance with our tendency to determine a general attitude. The research sheds light upon a subject matter which has not been investigated so far which makes the obtained results even more valuable.

We obtained the following general data: 16.7% of secondary-school students is of the opinion that we need religious education in schools, 64% gave a positive answer, but only for those who want to attend it, and 19.3% think that it should not be introduced. A category of our respondents who have a tolerant attitude towards institutionalization of religious instruction and insist on the respect for the individual choice immediately stands out. The lowest number of answers showing unreserved acceptance of the new school subject was recorded among the young people from Subotica (3.4%). A huge majority of them favored the attitude that those who want it should be given opportunity to fulfill this particular interest, while one-fifth said that they would not burden themselves with it through their regular education.

We noticed an unequal distribution of opinions with regard to the solution "should not be introduced" among the declared members of the Orthodox and Islamic religious bodies, as two denominations with the highest number of representatives in our sample.

Namely, while 13.8% of our respondents - members of the Orthodox Church showed no benevolence towards religious issues, this percentage doubled among the young Islamic people (26.6%), mostly to the detriment of the tolerant population. However, it should be pointed out that the share of the members of the Orthodox Church is significantly higher in the total denominational representation (64.8%); moreover, this was also expected due to the religious homogeneity of some regions included in our research.

Young people's distribution on the scale of personal religious identification which, as our previous research projects have shown, is the most precise instrument for the measurement of religious sensibility, has revealed that positive declaring in religious terms is not followed by a dogmatic reaction in imbuing the sacral with the secular. This confirms the attitude that for the young in the period of adolescence "faith" is still of secondary significance. Among those who "accept all demands of their religion", only 41.5% favors institutionalization of religious contents in schools, while more than one tenth does not insist on this at all. However, the group of our respondents who declared themselves as "religious persons who do not accept everything preached by their religion", showed a significant grouping around the mentioned "tolerant" solution (only for those who want it": 68.8% and 70.1%), much in the same way as traditional believers. Even the non-religious do not impose their non-religious attitude to others, as they do not discard discussions on "religion in schools", but rather leave a room for a choice to be made by those who have a different opinion.

Measuring the attitudes of young people towards different value orientations, we have offered one with the following description: "To have faith in God and live in compliance with the canons of one's creed. To find in religion one's peace and truth of life. To be a true believer and honor religious feast days and customs". Summing up the answers of secondary-school students we have noticed an even distribution of: "I would like very much" to live in such a way - 14.2%, "I would like"- 24.3%, "indecisive" - 24.7%, "I would not like" - 22.6% and "I would not like at all" - 14.3%. The lowest, yet equal rates have been recorded in case of the two extreme poles on the continuum of religious value orientation, while other solutions tend towards one-fourth in an equal proportion.

Having cross-examined the above data with the reactions of young people on the offered 'believers training' option in the system of education, definitely confirmed our assumption that the obtained correlations should be interpreted as a gesture of tolerance, more freedom in expression of personal convictions and, generally, as a democratic orientation of the Yugoslav secondary-school students. Although pronouncedly oriented towards the idea of living in compliance with religious norms, 42.9% of young people belonging to this group do not lay others under any such obligation; this percentage rises to three-fifths among those who accept religious life style in a more moderate way, and surpasses three-fifths among those belonging to the indecisive group. Out of 290 secondary school pupils in our country who do not find themselves in the values offered by religion, only one-fourth (26.9%) gave a decisive "no" to the idea of introducing religious instruction in schools. Tolerance prevails even among those who are the most skeptic towards religious instruction as more than half of them opted for it.

#### CONCLUSION

The experts of various profiles - theologians, philosophers, sociologists, pedagogues - disagree about the proposition to introduce classical, ecclesiastic religious instruction into schools. Some of them are strict supporters of the opinion that this subject will neither help the young generations comprehend the truth nor properly illuminate their way through life, as church representatives claim. Others are of the opinion that there is a severe clash between the intentions of religious instruction which demands belief and the critical spirit theoretically developed by the modern school. The third group recommends instruction which would comprise scientifically grounded knowledge of religious phenomena with no request to believe in them, nor build them into one's personal behavior. This would provide opportunities to acquire religious culture, rather than impose it on individuals.

The attempts of the Serbian Orthodox Church to use current social circumstances in order to return to the socio-political stage with more authority than during the last few decades is quite understandable. However, there is no excuse if the issue of religious instruction is opened, primarily, as a matter of a political arrangement between the highest circles of our governmental, i. e. political, and ecclesiastical hierarchy. For, "Orthodox spirituality is essentially spread through the liturgical and eucharistic way of life and activity" (Đorđević, 1991:26). Such words may, as well, be heard from some church dignitaries in their public appearances. The bishop of Braničevo, Ignatije, points out that religious instruction in state schools would help the young understand the history of our civilization which has been grounded in the Christian *tradition*, rather than Church: "Christians are not raised in schools... The warehouse of knowledge cannot substitute the things which should be carried in one's heart, and which can be obtained exclusively in the church, through the religious service. This is possible with the Protestants; their believers are trained in schools and awarded diplomas of formal admittance into the creed. But this is not in the nature of Orthodoxy, nor is accordant with our tradition" (Gligorijević, 1998:17).

Our former educational system was heavily burdened with single-mindedness and monolithic opinion. The one to be established has to be reconciled with the developmental tendencies of modern, middle-class societies. If the new climate has given rise to the assertion that religion and religiosity constitute an integral part of the human civilizational experience - than religious education necessarily requires its time and its space. Let, then the family, the school and the church - each of them in accordance with its original mission - fulfill their obligations imposed by the modern cultural patters. The school, in particular, can give a significant contribution within the mentioned model of obligatory, super-denominational subject. Such a subject, with its contextual orientation, is supposed to give the young the guidelines for understanding religious culture in general and thus satisfy their curiosity and fill the vacancies in their knowledge of numerous religions. The church would, on the other hand, accomplish best results by self-organizing, for example, in the form of "denominational schools", which would, through their gradual, high-quality and alternative work, make up for a long-groomed aversion towards religion.

Hence, religious affiliation should be a result of one's individual choice, rather than a fabricated or pushed-up officiousness forced upon by the school system with the aim to

provide for impartial broadening of young people's spiritual horizons. The young and their parents of the present Yugoslavia have been much too long exposed to an atheistic orientation to be easily transposed from the "darkness" of irreligiousness into the "light" of religion. Only a social consensus on religious instruction (achieved by the state, religious communities, political powers, cultural agents, young people, their parents, experts, general public) and an expert debate which would set the guidelines for the design of the program of instruction, contents of text-books and other didactic materials, form and contents of instruction, and consequently, prepare those who would carry out such instruction - could prepare ground for its introduction into the regular school system as an elective. The words of the Serbian Patriarch, His Holiness Pavle, uttered on the occasion of introducing religious instruction in the schools of the Republic of Srpska, strengthen this attitude: "We insisted on its introduction as an elective subject. We are not unreasonable, so we did not insist on introducing religious instruction as an obligatory subject, because it would mean that we are the same as the materialists who once, introduced their materialism as an obligation" (Gligorijević, 1997:17).

As we have already mentioned, the omnibus character of our research has limited us as for the number of questions to make an in-depth investigation of the (non)religious nature of the Yugoslav secondary-school students. That is why a problem of such exquisite importance, as institutionalization of religious instruction, could not be operationalized in the form of more questions. We concentrated our attention on one of them, aware of its general nature, wishing to, at least in passing, throw light on the attitudes of those who are never asked anything, but are often used for experimental purposes of our political or other elites.

Due to the formulations used for the questions, our respondents gave their answers in the third person. Also, the options offered for answers - two extreme and one moderate - provided grounds for sincere, as well as answers which may mask the respondent's individual strictness behind a declarative support to the attitudes of the general public. As for the respondents' age, we stress that it is exactly the age when the influence of religion on one's personality has low intensity, and when numerous other interests prevail over religion. Hence, it is possible that many of them have covered their personal indifference or ungrounded attitude concerning any specific question under the veil of acceptance shown for a solution which is closest to the tolerant attitude. There is no doubt that similar research projects to be carried out in future should eliminate the mentioned dilemmas in order to offer a more complete and informative answers than the one we carried out.

We do not neglect each sixth young man or woman who opted for the promotion of religiousness in schools; it is a sign that once initiated de-Marxization of our educational system has to be continued. The stated interests should undoubtedly be satisfied, but by no means in a way which would be experienced as an enforced activity. The very fact that 64% of the persons pooled, faced with the question concerning the need of introducing religious instruction in schools, opted for "only for those who want it", indicates the most suitable form for the presentation of this corpus of knowledge, as favored by young people on the threshold of maturity. In its description we shall use the words of Dragoljub B. Đorđević (1997:47), our distinguished lay sociologist of religion: ".. if a society reaches a general consensus about institutionalization of religious instruction in elementary and secondary schools, then my attitude is that it has to be an optional subject, a discipline chosen on the basis of one's (and his parents') free decision".



Dialogue and tolerance must become an internal spiritual feature in the life of individuals, brought up on the principles of democratic way of life which do not recognize: a preferential treatment of the religious mentality, demolition of bridges between the believers, the indifferent ones and the non-believers, and the like. If the results of our research are to be trusted, our young generations have taken a firm hold of their future.

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## STAVOVI MLADIH U JUGOSLAVIJI O UVOĐENJU VERONAUKU U ŠKOLE

**Dragan Todorović**

*U našoj javnosti sve češće se postavlja pitanje kako deci i mladima u osnovnim, srednjim i visokim školama omogućiti da se što objektivnije upoznaju sa religioznim sadržajima koji su sastavni deo verskog, kulturnog i nacionalnog identiteta sredina u kojima žive. Formulisanje tog pitanja i pokušaj da se na njega odgovori vrlo su različiti. U njima se ogleda veliki raspon mišljenja: od onih prema kojima bi u školi u obzir mogla doći samo "naučna" informacija o religiji/religijama, do onih koji se zalažu za ponovno uvođenje "klasične" veronauke u školu. Uz osvrt na gledišta nekolicije poslenika naučne reči, u referatu smo analizirali stavove jugoslovenskih srednjoškolaca o uvođenju veronauke u škole. Dobijeni rezultati su deo šireg socio-empirijskog istraživanja sprovedenog 1997. godine u više regiona na području SR Jugoslavije.*

Ključne reči: *veronauka, religiozno obrazovanje, mladi, crkva, škola, tolerancija*