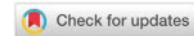


RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AMONG SERBS AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR PRESERVING NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract: The subject of our work is to point out the importance of religious education among Serbs, starting from the historical paradigm – the first half of the 18th century when Slavic and Latin schools were opened in Sremski Karlovci, thanks to the activities of the then Metropolitan of Belgrade, Mojsej Petrović, and later Vićentije Jovanović. Within these schools begins the education of Serbian students and the development of the school system in the Russo-Slavic language, the official language of the Serbian Orthodox Church and equivalent to the first Serbian literary language. It is indisputable that the Serbian people joined the community of civilized nations, with a clearly recognizable and strong national identity thanks to Orthodoxy. Serbian Orthodox Church played the essential role in the national integration and preservation of national consciousness and identity. Therefore, it becomes quite clear that any current “speech” on the renewal and development of the Serbian national identity cannot “put out of sight” its Orthodox component, nor declare it anachronistic and outdated. Further, the paper considers the need for higher quality religious education in the Republic of Serbia, as well as the assumptions (conditions) for their implementation. The provision of Religious Education in primary and secondary schools in the Republic of Serbia is of great importance for the improvement of educational system, mostly because it provides the insight of the connection between religion and science. Its introduction into the educational system has a significant impact on the evaluation, nurturing and preservation of national values. The provision of Religious Education in primary and secondary schools also provides students with a complete religious view of the world and enables the building and preservation of national and cultural identity. Also, the introduction of Religious Education has a great impact on the construction of a multi-ethnic and multicultural society within the community of European states.

Keywords: Persian language in Albania, Naim Frasheri's poems, structural analysis, linguistic deviations.

Field: Humanities

«If you want freedom, then you have to stand with God against yourself and against the world. First stand up against yourself, because the main battlefield against the world is in you».

Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović

1. INTRODUCTION

Socio-historical circumstances at the end of the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century marked a great cultural and national revival of Serbian existence. After the Great Migration under the leadership of Arsenije III Čarnojević, the Serbs found themselves in the areas of southern Hungary where their national identity had to be preserved. This was followed by intensive work on creating common cultural foundations with Russia, thanks to the initiative of Metropolitan Mojsije Petrović in the first place.

The arrival of Russian teachers (first the Synod translator Maksim Suvorov, and later Emanuil Kozačinski) and the transmission of the old Slavic language of the Moscow center, which was close to the Russian high style (cf. Tolstoy 2004: 56), led to changes in the history of the Serbian literary language, in the structure of genres, as well as their hierarchy. The opening of Suvorov's school marked the use of the Russian version of the Church Slavonic language, that was the counterpart of the Serbo-Slavic language, within the Serbian school system (cf. Ivić 2014: 117).

In the history of the Serbian people, the church played the most important role in building the national identity. “Christianization has an extremely important role in the constitution of national consciousness and identity in Serbs and with full right. Because the realization of the inestimable value of the newly acquired spiritual treasure thanks to Saint Sava grew into a Christian, actually a civilizational commitment,

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that became the very pivot in the acquisition of a unique spiritual identity" (Živković, 2010: 146).

2. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SERBIA

Faith is of exceptional importance as part of the culture of our civilization in the past, present and future, and as such must be the subject of constant study. The importance of religious upbringing and education is based on the following paradigms: (a) religion is one of the foundations of human civilization and culture; (b) science did not exactly prove that God does not exist, on the contrary, the most important scientists did not dispute the existence of God; (c) The Bible is one of the greatest and most significant works in the history of civilization, and its study continues (Stojanović-Đorđević, 2021: 513).

In the well-ordered political regimes of the 20th century, an astonishing amount of man-to-man violence was manifested. It was a defeat not only of politics but also of the pedagogical principles of the West humanist tradition. The world faced the consequences of the unrestrained exercise of power. This has pushed contemporary thinkers to search for new forms of affirmation, nurturing and protection of the human personality. The modern time takes the concept of sin into account much more seriously, although it expresses this awareness in scientific and philosophical terms that did not come from Christian theology. Today we talk more about alienation, distraction, solipsism and various psychological blockages that hinder human development rather than the sin. Today, all over the world, there is an undoubted and indisputable need for a renewed spiritual foundation of human relationships (Živković, 2020: 32).

Teaching the religious dimension does not only imply acquiring theoretical knowledge, but also providing assistance in searching for the purpose and meaning of life to the students. It is necessary to cultivate their opinion and develop their skills as well as knowledge. Students should be trained to develop interpretative skills and the ability to evaluate the manner in which knowledge is presented. We could agree that those forms of religious learning that do not only offer information about the great world religions but confront the challenging power of a concrete, qualitatively and authentically presented religion/faith are more suitable, because they enable students to build up their own mature attitude toward religious issues. (Razum et al., 2021: 607-608).

Besides the fact that religious studies have wide social significance, they also have significance for the individual. In fact, religious knowledge and understanding of religion assist in raising an individual, strengthening one's character (ethical aspect), releasing one from fear and other destructive emotions, strengthening self-belief and belief in God, achieving peace of mind and enlightenment. Religious education is aimed at the overall development of the personality. There is no person in this world who has never in their life, especially in their youth, honestly asked themselves these questions: who am I, where am I from, where am I going - at least once or often more than once. Therefore, religious education at school should help young people to know themselves, to understand what they want and what they strive for, to build their maturity and responsibility towards life, other people and towards themselves. The aims of religious education are: educational, social, pedagogical, psychological, moral, and ecological. The development of empathy and generosity is pointed out as the main goal of religious education; however, this should not be an imposition, but a suggestion. In this way, the possibility of indoctrination of dogma to children is reduced.

More comprehensive and high-quality Religious education should be established as soon as possible in Serbia, and this requires quality preparations (personnel, textbooks). The Republic of Serbia is well on its way to helping preserve all the values that are extremely important for our country through religious teaching, and above all to preserve the national identity. By devising a new concept of excellent religious education, the aforementioned occurrences could be significantly reduced and brought to a minimum.

3. SCHOOL AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATIO

Considering the educational ideals present in our school legislation on the one hand, and an insight into the regulations on religious education in our schools on the other hand - it is difficult not to notice the striking and strong tension they create. The inadequacy of confessional and doctrinal religious education is manifested not only by the stated conflict with educational ideals, but also by the potential extremeness of those educational goals that we would typically associate with religious education - for example, the development of tolerance, understanding and appreciation of diversity. (Jovanović, 2020: 74).

School plays a great role in overcoming psychological blockages and re-establishing a spiritual foundation. There is no doubt that school is a privileged place, where the dialogue and confrontation

between scientific and religious opinions should take place. It is a challenge for religion and religious education because, upon entering the new century that is probably doomed to the dominance of strong scientific and technological development, the need for a spiritual being is stronger than ever. Science alone cannot adequately cater for our spiritual needs. Any religion that refuses to embrace scientific discovery is unlikely to survive to the 22nd century. (Mandarić, 2015: 344-345).

The new concept of upbringing and education requires teaching on a higher level. Pupils and students should be trained to have an objective scientific understanding of religion and its importance for the social development. An objective interpretation of religion includes explaining the importance of religious learning to the students and introducing them to their faith, customs and traditions. In other words, the objective interpretation of religion implies that students need to understand what religion is and what it is not in the first place, and then to learn about the essence of every religious teaching. Religion is not: a) monotheism (belief in one God); b) religion should not be identified with moral rules that control believers' behavior; c) religion does not always have to deal with explaining the world as it is (eg. that humans come from Adam and Eve); d) religion cannot be equated with the supernatural. On the other hand, religion includes: a) the existence of a series of symbols that evoke feelings of respect and awe; b) rites or ceremonies in which religious community participates (Giddens 2001: 272-273). Thus, young people learn to cherish the most important national values, and therefore national identity, because without preserving national identity there can be no social progress.

4.RELIGIOUS TEACHING AS THE SOURCE OF TRADITIONAL VALUES

Religious education has a long tradition in the process of Serbian institutional education - since 1868, with an interruption from 1945 to 2001 (Nastić, 2020: 486). Religious education was introduced as an optional subject in Serbian public school system in 2001. That opened a new possibility for the science of Christ to enter into the modern society, specifically into one very important segment of it - school. The aim of religious education is to present and testify to the content of faith and spiritual experience, to enable students to freely adopt the spiritual and life values of Christ's teaching, and through it to preserve, nurture and build their own religious and cultural identity and to teach the youth the basic principles of morality, solidarity and tolerance. (Kačarić, 2021: 163). The goal is to nurture one's own religious identity that implies respect for the other and the different (Kuburić, Dačić 2004: 62). This is at the same time "an important step towards strengthening the pedagogical concept, which could most succinctly be presented as the concept of growing up, the concept of continuous improvement of both, students and educators" (cf. Kuburić 2003: 100-101). Therefore, religious teachers should understand that religious teaching is not an optional subject and that they are responsible for the extent to which the truths about religion have been correctly adopted. (Milin, 2022: 142).

The fact that young people want to gain as much knowledge as possible about their own culture and religion is especially encouraging. Young people want to be given a complete religious view of the world and life and to be enabled to freely adopt the spiritual and life values of the church or community to which they historically belong, that is, to preserve and nurture their own religious and cultural identity (cf. Kuburić, 2003: 100-101).

Considering the stated reasons, we believe that it is extremely important that the knowledge acquired through the educational system is as high-quality and comprehensive as possible. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to start building a new concept of religious education both in primary and secondary schools, as well as in higher educational institutions. We believe that a special emphasis should be on moral education by strengthening faith in moral virtues. The weakening of moral virtues and the negative social attitude towards them, leads to an increase in delinquent behavior along with aggression, alienation and destructive behavior among young people.

The introduction of religious education into Serbian primary and secondary schools is of great importance for the qualitative improvement of our educational system. If the aim of education is to develop a mature and wholesome personality, then a specified objective could be the development of those individual personal values, that is positive qualities of each person. (Zuković et al., 2013:160). There are few school subjects that enable holistic upbringing and education. However, it is possible to combine logic and intuition as two equal paths of knowledge through religious education. By building a religious spirit and a theistic view of the world, students open the door that lead them to science, art and morality, the main areas of study, where and through which a person is educated. The values they strive for are: truth, beauty, goodness and holiness (Kuburić, 2005:28). Religious education encourages students' intellectual development by introducing them to more serious areas of study – for example Theology, which can be

a real mental challenge that stimulates students' intellectual development. In today's school system, it is noticeable that children study from simplified, concise material and there is no need for them to exert themselves or develop critical thinking. Gradually, the essence of knowledge is being lost as well as knowledge as a value in itself. This is exactly why we believe that religious education could significantly contribute to promoting the worth of knowledge, developing critical thinking and keeping an open mind to new differences. When students study biblical texts, they expand their knowledge on history and geography; they discover theology, which introduces them to the world of social and humanistic sciences. Thus, they form a critical point of view and opinion about social phenomena and their differences. Each Religious education lesson is full of content that stimulate students' development. They learn how to feel and experience many abstract concepts through sound, colors and movement. Moreover, their vocabulary and experience are improved.

When it comes to the Religious education psychological influence, we should point out that it can be seen in students' increased responsibility towards obligations and towards life, and in the building of self-confidence, self-respect and self-belief. Its effect on the emotional development of students, the reduction of destructiveness, aggression, psychopathological problems, and violence among students is particularly emphasized. Religious education helps students to transform themselves and feel the energy of freedom and spiritual upliftment on their way of growing up, with the help of their teachers and religious teachers. That is the only correct way.

5.CONCLUSION

Considering the fact that we live in the time of spiritual and moral crisis that has strongly affected modern society and that the material life has led to the hardening of human emotions (Zuković, 2003), the need for religious teaching and religious education is more than obvious. Faith, hope and love, as the greatest Christian values, open the development process from a child to an adult who will be capable to face life's challenges. The most difficult thing is to overcome vanities and find the meaning. Religious education is a perfect example of a school subject that leads to self-discovery, which is the main objective in this world.

The concept of community is the central concept of the Orthodox Christian church and through religious education children can develop awareness of the fact that each person belongs to the community and exists in relation to another person. Without denying the individuality of each person, Orthodoxy unites people in the community of freedom, the community of equal. Personal ethics is the most precious gift that Orthodoxy has to offer to the modern world (Petrović Dragutinović, 2012: 99). Religious education teaches Love thy neighbor, and this can have a great impact on the development of empathy and shifting away from omnipresent egocentrism in children towards compassion and humanity. Students are taught to understand the importance and meaning of their uniqueness, to acknowledge the uniqueness of others and to understand the importance of creating the world as unity in diversity (Jović, 2012). This lays the foundation for tolerance and acceptance of diversity, extremely important values in modern life. Through comprehending the history of their religion, students create the sense of belonging to a wider community; they acquire specific knowledge and a rich personal emotional life (Kuburić, 2005). In other words, religious education is a subject whose study enables one to develop all the necessary virtues and values for being at peace with oneself and others and living in the twenty-first century.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that Religious Education should have the status of a compulsory subject at all levels and all types of educational institutions. The importance of religious education throughout history is evident in the circumstances of the first half of the 18th century, when, despite the difficult living conditions, the Serbian people managed to preserve their own identity, and thus create foundations for the further development of culture, literature and literacy in general – all thanks to the Sremski Karlovci Grammar School educational system.

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