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Religious Education in the European Educational Space: Social and Cultural Context

[Edukacja religijna w europejskiej przestrzeni edukacyjnej: kontekst społeczny i kulturalny]

Streszczenie: Autorki analizują cechy edukacji religijnej w kontekście aktualnych przemian we współczesnej europejskiej przestrzeni edukacyjnej. Na podstawie analizy zachodnioeuropejskich modeli edukacyjnych (bezwyznaniowych, wyznaniowych, wielowyznaniowych i mieszanych) określono główne problemy edukacji religijnej, które są wpisane w ukraiński system edukacyjny. W konkluzjach podkreślono, że choć ze względu na specyfikę historyczną, społeczną i religijno-kulturową nie ma ujednoczonych podejść do edukacji religijnej, to jednak celem w tego typu edukacji zawsze powinno być ukształtowanie w uczniach wartości duchowych, poszukiwanie światopoglądu opartego na dialogu i tolerancji. Natomiast wśród technologii edukacyjnych optymalne są ankiety, dyskusje i debaty z wykorzystaniem narzędzi analitycznych.

Summary: The article studies the features of religious education in the context of modern changes in the contemporary European educational space. Based on the analysis of Western European educational models – non-denominational, denominational, multi-denominational and mixed – the main problems of education about religions, which are inherent in the Ukrainian educational system, have been determined. The conclusions emphasize that although due to historical, social and religious-cultural peculiarities there are no unified approaches to the study of religions, the purpose should be the establishment of spiritual values, the search for worldviews based on dialogue and tolerance. Among educational technologies, the most optimal are surveys, discussions and debates involving analytical tools.

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Słowa kluczowe: edukacja religijna; edukacja wyznaniowa; edukacja bezwyznaniowa; edukacja wielowyznaniowa; edukacja religioznawcza.

Keywords: religious education; denominational education; non-denominational education; multi-denominational education; religious studies education.

Introduction

In modern conditions, the increasing globalization, migration and multiculturalism in various political, social and cultural arenas not only leads to changes in social landscapes, growth of cultural and religious diversity, but also contributes to changes in thinking, morals and lifestyles. In European countries with established democracy, the secular nature of the state, enshrined in law, its education and social upbringing, there is an awareness of the need to supplement the state education system with established moral and spiritual religious values, which raises the question of the place of education about religion in shaping worldviews of contemporary youth. The Ukrainian educational system seeks to move towards the establishment of European democratic values of freedom of conscience and religion and to find a reasonable compromise in the combination of secular and spiritual-religious components in order to build a tolerant multi-denominational society.

Presentation of the main research

Discussions on the content and essence of religious education in contemporary Western European scientific thought necessitate the analysis of this problem with an emphasis on the age characteristics of children and youth. Already in 1997, the UNESCO International Commission on Education for the 21st Century stressed the importance of teaching knowledge about religion as a guarantee of social harmony: “it is at school that junior, middle and senior schoolchildren should be explained the historical, cultural and religious foundations of different ideologies they encounter in the society, in the places where they live or in their classes” (Dudin M., Pogrebinskaya E., Sukhova E., Kirsanov A., 2019, p.135).

The project on religious diversity and dialogue in Europe was seen as a contribution to intercultural education and was linked, in particular, to the 1996 United Nations Report, which defined the content of education as “to know, to do, to live together and to be”. Among the general problems of education about religions, the following were identified: the ambiguity and

lack of clarity of terminology related to the study of religions; the need to understand the constituent elements of “competence” in the study of religions; the classroom as a “safe space” for discussing religious issues and seeking dialogue; the coverage of the content of religions in the media; the integration of research on religious and non-religious beliefs; human rights issues regarding religion and beliefs in the educational space; the communication between school and community organizations to increase pupils’ knowledge of religions and non-religious philosophy (O’Grady K., Jackson R., 2020, p.90).

Subsequently, the institutionalization of religious governance at the European level had a contradictory impact on the policies of member states. On the one hand, European policies, documents and recommendations, as well as European bodies such as the European Court of Human Rights, are developing a model of the secular-religious relationship that contributes to the convergence of Member States’ policies. However, on the other hand, Europeanization also strengthens established actors in the field of religious governance and gives new legitimacy to historical institutional structures, transforming them as expressions of national identities (Giorgi A., Annicchino P., 2019, p. S56).

The last few years have significantly increased the risk of terrorist acts, largely due to changes in the religious landscape in some Western European countries, and, as stated in the Report on the implementation of the action plan to combat violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism (Fight against violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism – Implementing the Action Plan Final Report of the Secretary General, 2018), this further demonstrates the need for decisive action against terrorism based on strong values. Action on root causes and long-term prevention, including through education and social activities, inclusion policy is equally important for sustainable success in this fight.

The Council of Europe takes the view that young people who have knowledge and understanding of religions and beliefs are more likely to be tolerant of difference within society, and be able to live together peacefully, than those presented only with stereotypical accounts (Jackson R., 2020), so in modern conditions, the main purpose of the Council of Europe’s work on religious diversity and education is to promote, at the school level, public understanding of religions and non-religious worldviews, justified by reference to the human right to freedom of religion or belief.

The legal framework for religious education has been included in the constitutions of Germany, Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, Greece, Italy and Portugal. In addition, all these constitutions explicitly state the right to freedom of religion (this is implicit in

Belgium). The only exception is the case of France, where the principle of secularism is observed. Only Germany, Austria, Belgium and Ireland refer to religious education in the school system. In all countries studied, except France, this education is included in school education. In France, it does not appear in the school curriculum, although it is compulsory in the Alsace region and the Moselle department (Llorent-Vaquero M., 2018, p. 161).

In general, attitudes towards religion and the Church have changed significantly over the last decade – survey results regularly show a high level of trust in them (compared to other social institutions). However, it should be noted that only a high level of trust does not completely prevent outbreaks of interreligious hostility (Dudin Mihail, Pogrebinskaya Ekaterina, Sukhova Elena, Kirsanov Alexey, 2019, p.135). The level of trust indicates that a certain stratum supports “their” religious movement and treats others at least neutrally, so issues related to equal cohesion of society and extremism have provoked heated debates about so-called denominational and non-denominational education, as well as public and religious schools (von Bromssen K., Ivkovits H., Nixon G., 2020).

In contemporary Western European educational space, Díaz L.D.E. identifies three main approaches to the study of religions – denominational teaching of religion within a particular religious organization; multi-denominational religious teaching, which studies different religions; transcourse non-denominational teaching of religious content, in which there is no specific religious subject (Díaz L.D.E., 2018, p. 50). In non-denominational education there are no subjects devoted to the study of religion, and the study of certain topics of religious orientation in the course of history or philosophy has only an informational direction. So-called “mixed” education systems (e.g. British) combine secular and denominational approaches: state-funded schools develop an open-minded attitude towards religion, but state-funded schools can teach the religions of a sponsoring body.

The term “religious education” can have an ambiguous interpretation, as it can be used both for “religious understanding”, i.e. religious mentoring or religious upbringing, carried out through religious practice and appropriate education, and for denoting general inclusive or integrative teaching of “understanding religion / s” (Шахнович М., 2017, с. 31). It is also worth distinguishing between teaching religion as opposed to teaching knowledge about religion (*teaching religion vs. teaching about religion*), as well as obtaining knowledge about religion as opposed to teaching religion (*learning about religion vs. learning from religion*) (Йенсен Т., 2017, с. 54). The term “religious education” is used by some researchers as

a synonym for religious upbringing or upbringing within a certain religious tradition (Горбань, 2017, с. 84–95). Their arguments are that the peculiarity of moral education, which is introduced in the framework of religious education, is the development of theological virtues that can support the motivation of pupils to care for their classmates (Horban O., Martych R., 2017, p. 93–103). Accordingly, “religious education can play an important role in moral education understood as supporting the development of moral virtues, when it is not limited only to the implementation of informational functions” (Horowski J., 2020, p.456).

However, the term “religious education” is also often used to refer to education on the content of religions, which is taught in such a way as to provide young people not only with general information but also with an understanding of the content of religious dogmas, language and symbols. Robert Jackson calls such religious education inclusive religious education (Jackson R., 2019, p.238) and considers this form of religious education suitable for children and youth of any religious or non-religious origin. The key principle focused on reflexivity relates to the development of the ability to both empathize with different religions and to distance oneself and critically analyze other people’s and one’s own beliefs. Developing the idea of inclusive religious education, Robert Jackson considers the need for knowledge and understanding of religions (and other worldviews) to be essential, but also considers the acquisition of this knowledge and understanding along with participation in dialogue and discussion, whereas it should promote both the personal and social development of young people, thereby promoting the ability to live together in society. Such religious education should recognize the right of families and individuals to upbringing in a position of faith, for example, in additional education related to a particular religion (Horban O., Havryliuk T., Martych R., Tymoshenko T., Shapoval A., 2020, p. 25–36). Inclusive religious education should complement such forms of education.

Some researchers (Freathy R., Davis A., 2019, p. 765) focus on multidisciplinary, multimethodological, reflective learning based on a survey, in the process of which it would be possible to find out why, how, where and by whom knowledge about religions and worldviews is generated. As a result, students holistically evaluate comprehensive, basic ideas within a topic, and theories help students understand the meaning, identify connections, and see general patterns.

Depending on personal convictions, values and the model of education about religions, established in society, researchers approach the assessment of their denominational or non-denominational orientation. On the one hand, non-denominational education about religions can be “an arena

where students, regardless of their personal beliefs or existential affiliations, may be offered objective analytical tools for understanding and developing a multidimensional concept of ethical competence” (Olof F., 2020). However, there are opposing views (Unstad L., Fjørtoft H., 2020) that non-denominational and multi-denominational religious education should be criticized for ignoring the existential dimension of religious life, and therefore a narrow conceptualization of religious literacy focused mainly on information transfer can hardly contribute to student curiosity. On the contrary, religious disciplinary literacy requires students to become acquainted with the content of the subject (for example, special concepts or great narratives about religions), as well as with various disciplines that contribute to the reflection on religious phenomena.

Globalization causes pluralism on two levels: religious pluralism and secular pluralism. In a society that develops on the basis of pluralism, the focus should be changed from secularisation and the decline of religion to the new forms that religions are assuming at the individual, group, and societal levels (Lipiainen T., Jantunen A., Kallioniemi A., 2020). Religious pluralism as a coexistence of various religious forms, practices, processes, types of religiosity within one local community or global society is closely related to religious freedom as a free self-determination of the individual in relation to their own religious beliefs and values, because in religious freedom, religious pluralism serves as a stimulus for activities religious organizations’ missionary practices. Religious pluralism ensures the right of everyone to search freely for the truth and meaning of life in the religious sphere, however, its existence is possible in the context of secular pluralism as a set of value systems in ideology, culture, politics etc.

The cosmopolitan nature of the societies in which the majority of the European population lives now presupposes cultural and religious pluralism, and cultural diversity includes the religious diversity of society. The need to understand the concepts of freedom of thought, ideology and conscience within the education on religions forms the preconditions for creating “dialogical pedagogy capable of opening Intercultural educational innovation that can be optimized in students’ knowledge and appreciation of religious pluralism in civil society” (Díaz L.D.E., 2018, p. 54). In this context, some researchers describe multi-denominational religious education as “a dialogic carnival of disciplinary, interpretative and methodological plurality, through which students are provided with a knowledge and critical awareness of a range of perspectives involved in the study of religion(s)” (Freathy R., Davis A., 2019, p. 765).

For young people seeking the meaning of existence, education about religions functions as a space for discovering meaning. Young people need to

be challenged by giving them the opportunity to explore other perspectives and time to reflect on ways of spiritual development with more knowledge (Casson A., Cooling T., 2020).

A correct understanding of the essence of the religious worldview determines its comparative analysis with the non-religious worldview, as a kind of antithesis, however, in studies of non-religious worldview (Everington J., 2019, p. 19) there is no unambiguous definition of this concept. Emphasis is placed on the way of understanding human existence, humanism, the assurance of beliefs and values that form the basis of moral and ethical decision-making, or, in a broader sense, the way of life. Some definitions included such concepts as atheism, agnosticism, secularism, rationalism, existentialism, utilitarianism and spiritual beliefs.

The study of religions requires a “critical-analytical, empathetic, and inquisitive approach – alongside an awareness of dynamic contexts” (Freaty R., Helen C.J., 2018). Accordingly, explanations, theories, and models in the study of religions and worldviews are those that are best suited to facts known at a given time, but should take into account spatial, temporal, cultural, and other variables.

A demographic study carried out by Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life (2011) in more than 200 countries, showed that a quarter of all Christians of the whole world (26%) live in Europe (Díaz L.D.E., 2018, p. 49), which determines the Christian dominance in the study of religions. However, the content of moral and ethical subjects taught in secondary schools is a controversial issue among experts, as the imposition of a religious ethic of a dominant religion violates the principles of religious pluralism.

The development of religious education in some European countries is conditioned by the religious and cultural specificities of their historical development. Norway introduced the general integration theme of religious education in 1997, replacing separate denominational religious education in response to the growing diversification of Norwegian society. However, political and social forces in Norway have fought and continue to fight to preserve and promote the Norwegian Christian and humanistic heritage within religious education (Korsvoll N., 2021). Therefore, the purpose of religious education should be to establish social dialogue and social harmony.

A critical understanding of education policy is of particular significance in the context of Northern Ireland as a divided, post-conflict society. In terms of policies and practices, schools, colleges and universities are able to discursively position themselves and operate explicitly or implicitly in ways which have the potential to produce, create and convey socio-cultural identity forming narratives which help define and redefine individu-

al and collective identities as well as the boundaries between communities (Bagley C., 2019).

The Austrian curriculum provides a context in which religious beliefs can be developed and substantiated through one's faith and relevant religious traditions together with other students of the same denomination. Religious competence primarily means perception and description, understanding and interpretation, formation and actions, communication, evaluation and judgment, participation and decisions based on one's faith, in order to be able to express one's opinion as a Catholic Christian. The Austrian curriculum of Catholic religious education for primary school emphasizes personal performance through the Christian Catholic faith and creates a mono-religious space for predominantly mono-religious literacy (von Bromssen K., Ivkovits H., Nixon G., 2020, p.143).

The Scottish subject of religious education is non-denominational in order to give all students the opportunity to consider and develop their own beliefs about a wide range of traditions, religions and worldviews. Religion is described here as a "human experience", and hence students should study both religious and non-religious views. However, Christianity is highlighted and mentioned first in the curriculum, pointing to its importance in the Scottish tradition. The contemporary Swedish curriculum stands out as academic rationalistic in order to develop a sufficiently distanced and analytical religious literacy to understand the world based on science (von Bromssen K., Ivkovits H., Nixon G., 2020, p.144). Neutrality on religious issues in the Swedish context means excluding the religious factor for the sake of objectivity. An action is deemed improper if it is seen as religious. In the Swedish context, religion is intellectualized and theorized (Niemi K., 2018, p. 289–290).

One of the significant problems of religious education in Spain is the problem of teaching the Islamic religion in the basic school curriculum as a prerequisite for the spread of religious and intercultural education. In particular, there is a lack of preparation regarding how to teach students to defy violent messages about Islam spread on the Internet and to advise families to protect their children from these ideologies (Llorent-Bedmar V., Palma V., Navarro-Granados M., 2020, p.10).

According to a recent study of the Ministry of the Interior of Finland (2019), religions are one of the targets and enablers of hate speech, and schools have a crucial role in encouraging pupils to be tolerant, respectful and caring, and to transmit values such as equality, justice, and diversity (Lipiainen T., Jantunen A., Kallioniemi A., 2020).

In Germany, religious education is denominational, and religious communities make decisions about both the curriculum and those who are al-

lowed to teach the subject. The main purpose of the German RE is to give students the opportunity to form a personal worldview in a religiously plural social environment. Within the denominational framework, students should understand religion as one real source of orientation in their lives, learn to respectfully do with the social pluralism of religions and create a personal worldview (Riegel U., Delling S., 2019, p. 404).

For religious education in Poland, the complementarity of religious lessons in school with home and parish catechesis is relevant, when religious lessons are needed to deepen religious knowledge, they help to shape the Gospel-inspired behavior, and to some extent also prepare for the Holy Mysteries (Bielinowicz A., 2017, p. 183). An effective means of studying religions is the means of Internet communication. The Internet contributes to the transformation of forms of expression of religiosity, through the possibility to participate in various online communities, a person receives a “second religious identity”, because a person is not only a member of a particular religious community, but also a member of the world community, which is in discussions on socio-religious issues, and virtual life in this case can be more informative and spiritually rich than real life (Lomachinska I., Grebenyuk P., 2020, p. 57). In particular, blogs are playing an increasingly important role in education, becoming not only a source of knowledge, but, above all, a tool that promotes the learning process and communication between teachers and students. Blogging is also “a particularly valuable tool used by many Christians to preach the Word of God. The blog is especially useful as a tool to facilitate the catechesis and communication of a religious teacher with students” (Bielinowicz Adam, 2016, p. 204).

Thus, in the Western European context, it is possible to distinguish four main approaches to the study of religion: the first one is the lack of religious education in public schools on the basis of a legally established separation of school from church; the second is denominational education or catechesis, which is conducted by the state delegating educational powers to study religions in public schools exclusively to representatives of religious associations; third is the religious education provided by the state; fourth is the study of religions in cooperation with state and religious institutions. Regardless of the adopted educational model, the study of religions should be aimed at establishing the worldview orientations of the individual, the search for dialogue, respect for other people regardless of their religious value system (Horban O., Martych R., 2020, p. 101–115). The main principle of formation of communication culture in the study of religions for both teachers and students should be tolerance and impartiality in the assessment of different ideas and views (Horban O., Martych R., 2018, p. 93–106).

With the establishment of independence in Ukraine, there is an active search for national-cultural and religious self-identification, which contributes to the revival of the religious factor in various spheres of social life, on the other hand, there is a tendency to desacralization of society. In the context of European worldview paradigms, Ukraine adheres to the principles of multi-dimensionality, Article 35 of the Constitution of Ukraine states that everyone has the right to freedom of worldview and religion; this right includes freedom to profess any religion or not to practice any religion. Thus, the Church and religious organizations in Ukraine are separated from the state, and the school is separated from the church; no religion can be recognized by the state as obligatory, so the development of a democratic society that recognizes freedom of conscience and religion requires the education of tolerance, respect for the bearers of other worldviews.

The term “religious education” in Ukraine is used in the definition of denominational – general (teaching religion in parish and Sunday schools, Bible courses, etc.) and professionally oriented (theological) education (Колодний А., 2000, p. 655, Gavrilova N., Fylypovych L., 2017, p. 383). In particular, L. Fylypovych adheres to the position that religious education in a secular state should be provided only in specialized educational institutions, it can be secondary schools and secular universities which are founded by religious organizations. It should be not “Religious Studies” or “Religious Knowledge”, but “Study of Religions” or better “Knowledge about Religion”. These two approaches – teaching religion and knowledge of religions – are fundamentally different.

In state or non-state secular educational institutions, non-denominational religious education is religious studies, and, unlike religious denominational education, is recognized as ideologically plural and denominationally unbiased; in particular, religious studies education should include the teaching of religious and ethical subjects in the system of general education (Ломачинська І., Ужва В., 2020, p. 71). Taking into account the decision of the UN Human Rights Committee on the teaching of religion and ethics in public schools, the teaching of the religious component was introduced in Ukraine in school history courses and within the subjects of spiritual and moral orientation which are optional subjects.

Among Ukrainian scholars, there are discussions about the religious dominance of spiritual and moral subjects, because their main tasks are not only to acquaint students with universal values and the formation of the student’s personality based on scientific, philosophical and Christian (Muslim, Jewish, etc.) spiritual, moral and cultural traditions, but also upbringing of a conscious, free and responsible personality, the creation of

appropriate conditions for deeper self-knowledge, disclosure and realization of creative abilities and talent (Horban O., Kuprii T., Martych R., Panasiuk L., 2020, p. 126–130). In addition, according to surveys conducted among 5th graders and their parents, “Almost half of students (48.3%) do not want to study religion at school, only 20.7% want it, and 31% are hesitant. Among the subjects of spiritual and moral orientation, the majority of parents (63%) would choose “Fundamentals of religious ethics” for their child (even from all optional subjects, 40.7% would choose it)” (Кришмарел Ю., 2014, p. 22), indicating an interest in the general course rather than in the theologically oriented “Christian ethics”, i.e., students and their parents are more interested in studying lesser-known religions from the standpoint of their historical significance rather than the essence of religious doctrines and religious practices.

The aggravation of the religious factor in the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine has led to an increase in the level of religiosity, which is typical of a society in stress, in particular, among adults this figure increased up to 76%, and among young people – up to 52%; however, the majority of citizens are convinced that religious faith does not provide for mandatory religious affiliation – 65% of respondents believe that “a person can be just a believer and not profess a particular religion” (Особливості релігійного і церковно-релігійного самовизначення громадян України: тенденції 2000–2020, p. 4), which leads to special attention to the content of religious information culture of both teachers and students. Religious information culture appears as a synthesis of information worldview, knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to fully meet personal information needs on religion as a historical and socio-cultural phenomenon (Ломачинська Ірина, Ломачинський Богдан, 2020, p. 10). In the system of religious education, the information culture of the teacher ensures the implementation of worldview, educational, upbringing, regulatory functions and the function of preserving social memory.

Conclusions

In the European educational space, there are no unified approaches to the study of religious processes and phenomena, depending on historical, social and religious-cultural features there are denominational, non-denominational and multi-denominational educational models. Ukraine, as part of the European community, has common problems with European education in establishing a tolerant democratic model of religious education: an ambiguity and lack of clarity of terminology related to the study of

religions; the need to understand the components of “competence” in the study of religions; the formation of a safe educational space with the possibility of equal dialogue; the respect for the rights to freedom of conscience and religion for all participants in the educational process; overcoming prejudices and religious stereotypes about other religions (including Islam). Regardless of the content and scope of the proposed educational material which is conditioned by the political and religious-cultural traditions of particular European countries, the study of certain aspects of the influence of religions on social life covers the entire period of human development – from kindergarten (acquaintance with religion through ethno-cultural features in the form of holidays, national epics, etc.), primary and secondary school (subjects of moral and spiritual orientation), high school (history of religions). In preschool and school education, the issue of freedom of religion in the study of religions is determined not only by the state with its system of democratic values, but largely by the worldview of parents. In the system of higher education, the study of religions is conducted by free choice of its forms and methods in accordance with one’s own worldviews. Surveys, discussions and debates involving analytical tools are considered the most optimal. The methodology of studying religions is based on a logical combination of information approach (the need to understand the concepts of freedom of thought, ideology and conscience within the education of religions), culturological approach (in studying the role of religions in the formation of cultural space), critical-analytical approach to analyze cause-effect events of religious processes and phenomena.

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