

## Religious Education in Slovakia – the new challenges

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the new challenges in RE in Slovakia. Religious Education in Slovakia is confessional and it is compulsory school subject. In 2008 has started the five-year reform of the Slovak educational system, which is expressed in the new State Educational Program. In this program RE is a part of curriculum domain “Human being and values” and the content of RE is fully in the competence of particular Churches and religious societies. The competence-based education and creating of new curriculum bring the RE teachers lots of problems and they face new challenges in the teaching process itself. There is strong effort of Slovak Ministry of Education to transform the traditional teacher-centred education into child-centred education, which should bring more creativity into classrooms. RE is open to new trends in teaching-learning process and using various teaching methods.

**Keyword:** *religious education (RE), challenge, RE teacher, competencies, transformation, educational system.*

## **Introduction**

Slovakia is the democratic state and EU member. It has got about 5.5 million inhabitants and it is predominantly Roman Catholic territory. According to the survey, to the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2004 there were 16 registered Churches and religious denominations in Slovakia. Their number is increasing and until the year 2009 there are already 21 registered Churches and religious denominations. The religious majority is created by the Roman Catholic Church. The Ecumenical Council of Churches in Slovakia (ECCSR) began its activity in April 1993. The full members are Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession, the Reformed Christian Church, the Orthodox Church, the Brethren Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church of Slovak District, the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, the Baptist Union and the Old Catholic Church. The observers are the Roman Catholic and Uniats (they call themselves Greek-Catholic Church), the Apostolic Church and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

The relations between the state and Churches in Slovakia are generally positive and have been strengthened in the recent period and are overseen by the Church Department of the Ministry of Culture. The Slovak Republic guarantees religious freedom by its supreme law – the Constitution, but also by its Constitutional Act No. 460/1992 (Book of statutes) by which the Charter of Fundamental Human Rights was adopted. The main tasks of relationship between the state and Church are amended by the Act No. 308/1991 (Book of statutes) about the freedom of religious faith and about the status of churches and religious denominations. On the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1997 was established the Institute for State-Church Relations (UVSC).

## **Problem status – the present-day situation**

Council of Europe provides a set of principles<sup>1</sup> that can be used by all 47 member states. Religion is at least a “cultural fact” that contributes, along with language, historical and cultural traditions to social and individual life. In education should be encouraged an integrated approach to religious, moral and civic values. These principles should be drawn by the governments of member states on the principles in their current or future educational reforms, in order to promote tolerance and the development of a culture of “living together” and should bring these to the attention of relevant public and private bodies<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe. *Draft Recommendations on the Religious Dimension of Intercultural Education: Principles, Objectives and Teaching Approaches*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See JACKSON, R.: *Teaching about religions in the Public Sphere: European Policy Initiatives and the Interpretive Approach*. In: *Numen* 55/2008, p. 159 – 160.

School is a “major component of education, of forming a critical spirit in future citizens and therefore of intercultural dialogue. It lays the foundations for tolerant behaviour, founded on respect for the dignity of each human being”<sup>3</sup>. M. Tomka in his article *Balancing between religion and education in modernity* writes: “Religion is, of course, not simply teaching. It is not even purely a cognitive phenomenon... Religion is not restricted to a teaching. It has yet a specific understanding of reality, a distinct kind of culture... The relation of religion and education is, though, dependent on historical circumstances”<sup>4</sup>

There is a whole complex of factors determining the shape of religious education in Slovakia<sup>5</sup>. At first, we have to say that Religious Education in Slovakia is confessional (denominational) and it always has been confessional. It means that religious bodies have responsibility for religious education. RE is one of the compulsory subjects at Slovak church schools and so called “compulsory optional” at Slovak state schools, because RE alternates with Ethical Education (Ethics). So, children can choose between RE or Ethics. Formally it is organized by the Slovak Ministry of Education according the new State Educational Program<sup>6</sup>. In 2008 has started the five-year reform of the Slovak educational system and it brings lots of changes. The main idea is develop the child-centred education as an opposition to the traditional teacher-centred education. In this program RE is a part of curriculum domain “Human being and values” together with Ethical Education, but the content of RE is fully in the competence of particular Churches and religious societies.

RE is taught from the first grade (primary level) of primary schools and in the first and second grade of secondary schools. RE is not graded at state schools. At Slovak church schools RE is evaluated like other subjects. In the secondary church schools RE can be a subject of the final exams (at the age of 19). The church school curriculum requires two lessons of RE per week, whereas in the state schools is only one lesson per week. According to the surveys most of children at state schools choose Ethics, almost 100% of pupils at church schools choose RE and only 4% of pupils at private schools choose RE.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 1720/2005 Recommendation of the European Union, entitled „Education and religion“ (art. 7)

<sup>4</sup> TOMKA, M.: *Balancing between religion and education in modernity*. In: Education and Church in Central – and Eastern – Europe at first glance. University of Debrecen 2008, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> For research results see e.g. SCHREINER, P.: *Religious education in Europe*. Munster: Comenius Institute 2000.

<sup>6</sup> According the International Standard Classification of Education – ISCED 1, ISCED 2, ISCED 3

<sup>7</sup> See HANESOVA, D.: *Religious education in Slovakia*. In: KUYK, E., JENSEN, R., LANKSHEAR, D., MANNA, E.: L., SCHREINER, P. (eds) *Religious Education in Europe. Situations and current trends in schools*. ICCS and IKO Publ. House, Oslo 2007, s. 173 – 177.

Completely new information is that the Slovak Episcopal Conference (Roman-Catholic Church and Uniats<sup>8</sup>) approved in March 2010 the program of religious education in the kindergartens (nursery schools). Religious education was allowed by Slovak Parliament in other than Church kindergartens in 2008. It is determined only by the agreement of parents. RE in the state or private kindergartens could be organized also by all registered Churches and religious organizations in Slovakia, if parents of children attending the particular kindergarten would like to have RE. The lessons are allowed in the afternoon as an extra activity for children. The problem is that the majority of teachers in kindergartens do not have appropriate education for RE. Therefore representatives of the Slovak Episcopal Conference suggest that RE in kindergartens could be taught by professional pedagogues, who will have secondary–school degree from the catholic religion. They can complete their education at Church secondary schools. Next possibility is, that RE in kindergartens will teach catechets, who will supplement their pedagogical education.

### **Numbers of Pupils and Students That Attend the RE**

The paradox is that Slovak Ministry of Education collects every school year the information about the numbers of the RE pupils and students according to their religion at all state basic and secondary schools. But finally the Slovak Institution of information and prognosis of education, which collects different statistics, does not keep this information and it does not select pupils and students according particular religion. The Institution of information and prognosis of education keeps the records only about the church basic (primary) and secondary schools. So, it enables us to get total number of pupils and students that attend RE at all basic and secondary schools in Slovakia.

According to the statistics of the Statistic Office to 15<sup>th</sup> September 2009 the number of pupils at church basic schools divided according their religion:

Total number of <b>basic church schools:</b>	112
Roman – Catholic Church	96
Greek – Catholic Church (Uniats)	6
Reformed Christian Church	5
Brethren Church	2
Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession	3

<sup>8</sup> See official webpage of Catholic Church in Slovakia [www.kbs.sk](http://www.kbs.sk)

Total number of pupils at basic church schools according their religion:	22 499
Roman – Catholic Church	20 778
Greek – Catholic Church (Uniats)	267
Reformed Christian Church	535
Brethren Church	376
Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession	543

Total number of <b>secondary church schools:</b>	86
Roman – Catholic Church	71
Greek – Catholic Church (Uniats)	3
Orthodox Church	1
Brethren Church	1
Reformed Christian Church	4
Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession	6

Total number of students at secondary church schools according their religion:	18 898
Roman – Catholic Church	15 877
Greek – Catholic Church (Uniats)	142
Orthodox Church	13
Brethren Church	236
Reformed Christian Church	136
Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession	2 494

## The RE teachers in Slovakia

Officially, RE in Slovakia can teach RE teachers with the both – the Bachelor and Master Degree and priests with the master-degree diploma. The RE teachers achieve the same level of professional training as the other teachers. According the Regulation of Slovak Ministry of Education No. 437/2009 (Acts)<sup>9</sup> the school subject called Religion Education (or Religion) can be taught by the graduates of the Master degree program in theology (denominational requirement) at one of the Theological faculties in Slovakia with the pedagogical and psychological supplemental studies and they have to have permission of their Church authorities as well (Usually the Bishop of particular Church gives the permission for the catechetical mission).

## Methods

When we are talking about the research in the field of education, it is necessary to say that “in *interpretative research* the main role for theory lies in deepening and broadening understanding of “everyday” interpretations and experiences, while the primary interest of *critical theory* lies in exposing how hidden power structures influence and distort such interpretations and experiences. All this suggests that educational research cannot do without theory. What is needed, however, is a better understanding of the nature and roles of theory in education research and practice... One of the defining characteristics of educational research is that it aims to contribute to the improvement of educational practice.”<sup>10</sup>

At present “almost all of existing RE curriculum are in the process of transformation. Churches are preparing their own curriculum, based on the need analysis, theological starting points and pedagogical-psychological principles.”<sup>11</sup> In our research analysis, which has been done at our Department of Christian Pedagogy and Psychology at the Orthodox Theological Faculty of Presov University in Presov, we wanted to contribute to the improvement of religious educational practice. We analysed the main problems that the RE teachers have to face after the involving of the new State educational program in May 2008 that influenced also RE teaching. As we mentioned, in the course of five years the whole school reform in Slovakia should be done. The major changes are connected with the competence-based learning, which is absolutely new for Slovak educational system, and with stressing the balanced development of pupils and students personalities as well as focusing on the

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<sup>9</sup> See the official internet page of Slovak Ministry of Education [www.minedu.sk](http://www.minedu.sk)

<sup>10</sup> BIESTA, G., ALLAN, J., EDWARDS, R.: *Theorising Education: The Laboratory for Educational Theory*. In: Research Intelligence. British Educational Research Association, winter 2009/10, Issue 109, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> HANESOVA, D.: *The educational role of Church-maintained education in Slovakia after 1989*. In: Education and Church in Central and Eastern Europe at first glance. University of Debrecen 2008, p. 68.

syllabus in which 70% of topics are set by Church and 30% are flexible. In the practice Churches should individually discuss the form of their curriculum with the representatives of the National Institute for Education and finally send the new curriculum to the Slovak Ministry of Education to be approved. The new curriculum must be proved also by the Church authorities (usually by the local Bishop or Archbishop). All Churches in Slovakia have to publish new students and teachers book for RE that correspond with the principles of school reform.

To examine how the RE practice can be improved we personally contacted RE teachers from Roman-Catholic Church, Evangelical Church, Greek-Catholic Church (Uniats) and Orthodox Church. The problem was that RE teachers are willing to cooperate with Ministry of Education (if they must), but there is a real problem to motivate them to attend the university research, especially when it is realised by other Church denomination. We have met with not quite positive attitude to mutual cooperation. The problems lies in the relationship among Churches in Slovakia and despite of various proclamations about helpful cooperation, problems still exist (we have met with quite strong negative attitude of Uniats). They go back to the history and they are not overcome yet. Therefore, we decided to use in our analysis the results from the working discussions with the representatives of the Section of Religious Education of the National Institute for Education, in which we are official members. It enables us to provide relevant and objective information about the major problematic tasks connected with the creation of new curricula.

## **Results and Interpretation**

We can say that the RE teachers of different Church denominations have got very similar problems. In our analysis we have defined three main groups of tasks that should be solved in the near future.

The most important tasks are connected with the creating of new model of RE curriculum structure for primary and secondary schools based on competence-based learning. The RE teachers of all denominations have to implement into the new RE curriculum new educational content and educational standards for each particular RE lesson. In practice it looks like they teach RE in so called “reform classes” (this school year it is first and second grade and fifth and six grade of primary school and the first and second grade of secondary school) that follow new curricula and at the same time they teach other grades, which are not “reform classes” and follow the “old” curriculum.

The second problem is setting the RE lessons in the school timetable. According to the Instructions of Slovak Ministry of Education for the school year 2009/2010 the school head-master has to arrange the RE lessons if there is at least one pupil of particular denomination. The teachers of the majority Roman-Catholic Church have no problems to form the groups of about 12 children or more.

The problem starts when there is lack of pupils of one Church denomination to create one group (minimum 12 children). But the head masters do not want to pay the teachers of RE in such small groups. The best solution for the teachers of minority denominations is having the RE lessons in the afternoon, when the pupils from other schools can gather in one school and attend the RE lessons. This is why some RE teachers agree to have mixed common groups of children (pupils are of different age, so RE teachers have to develop their own strategy and syllabus for each age). Other smaller denominations prefer to teach RE as Sunday schools.

The third group of tasks is connected with the teaching methods. It seems that some RE teachers are not really sure about the teaching methods they use in their classroom lessons. There are still tendencies to follow strictly old, not very creative methods. Some teachers like to use the teacher's books, but they do not really think about the methods they use in the classroom. There are especially young RE teachers, who prefer to prepare their own classroom materials and like to use different active methods of teaching. They are quite creative and open to use role-playing (mainly with small children), drama teaching, experience-based teaching – e.g. dialogues, discussions. Projects and heuristic methods are slowly introduced to classrooms. RE teachers agree that they need more teacher's training and workshops, where they can get more information about various teaching methods that can be used on RE lessons.

## **The Conclusion – The Main Ideas and Recommendations**

### **The new challenges in Religious Education in Slovakia**

1. School education is basically orientated on a child personal development<sup>12</sup>. It means that a child has become not only the object of education, but especially creative subject – meaningful education.
2. Competence-based learning of RE: develop teachers competencies and children competencies – develop social competencies leading to tolerance, responsibility, prepare children and young people to respect the religious diversity by respecting their own religious traditions, reject prejudices and accept the necessity of a peaceful social and religious cohabitation in the world.
3. Create a new correlate model of RE curriculum structure for primary and secondary schools based on competence-based learning, “cross” curriculum approaches. Curriculum model defines the main topic of each lesson, educational content, educational standard and basic competencies, that a teacher is developing in this lesson. Discuss the individual plans for the

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<sup>12</sup> See e.g. KREJČOVÁ, V.: *Aktuální témata výchovy a vzdělávání ve škole. Texty pro studijní disciplínu Teorie výchovy*. Hradec Králové, 2005.



children with special needs and health problems (integrated children, who suffer from dyslexia, dysgrafia, dysortografia, ADHD etc.).

4. Use individual approach to children according their age, knowledge, abilities and skills.
5. Develop “learning to learn” skills and self-evaluation approaches.
6. Use methods of active teaching different from the traditional way: teaching as a dialogue<sup>13</sup> - especially take into consider how the way of asking questions contributes to the dialogue in the classroom and examine the willingness of pupils or students to engage in dialogue. “Use more productive teaching methods, based on experiential learning – project method, heuristic method, role – play method, application of critical thinking (according to Bloom’s taxonomy)”<sup>14</sup> according to children age. This opens the question of advanced teacher training and more practice at the Theological faculties that prepare future RE teachers.
7. Explore the facts affecting learning and teaching process in RE.
8. Develop new methods in studying RE, focusing on e.g. emotional intelligence, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence as a part of social competencies (very interesting can be using the Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences. The theory is only the tool for creative teaching and learning, not the aim<sup>15</sup>).
9. Use some methods of comparative religious education such as inter-religious, inter-confessional approach when talking about the history of religions<sup>16</sup>.
10. Publish new, modern students textbooks and teachers books of RE.
11. In schools with different ethnics groups try to introduce the methods inspired by responsive approach<sup>17</sup> and interpretive approach<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> See e.g. SCHIHALEJEV, O.: *Dialogue in religious education lessons – possibilities and hindrances in the Estonian context*. In: British Journal of Religious Education, volume 31, issue 3, Sept. 2009, p. 277 – 288. KOLÁŘ, Z., ŠIKULOVÁ, R.: *Vyučování jako dialóg*. Praha 2007.

<sup>14</sup> HANESOVA, D.: *Religious education in Slovakia*. In: KUYK, E., JENSEN, R., LANKSHEAR, D., MANNA, E.: L., SCHREINER, P. (eds) *Religious Education in Europe. Situations and current trends in schools*. ICCS and IKO Publ. House, Oslo 2007, s. 176.

<sup>15</sup> See GRANDIS, C.: *Teaching and Learning in RE using Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, [www.farmington.ac.uk](http://www.farmington.ac.uk). (Farmington Fellowship 2005 – 2006).

<sup>16</sup> For Comparative religious education see KARAMOUZIS, P.: *Religions, Education and democracy the necessity of inter-religious education in the modern public schol system*. In: Politics and Religion – Politologie des religions, No. 1/2009, vol. III, p. 111 – 125.

*The interpretive approach* was developed by the professor Robert Jackson and “had its origin in the existence of developing a methodology for researching the religious lives of children. Ideas from ethnography were applied to questions of learning and teaching, and books for children and teachers were published applying the method. The key concepts of the interpretive approach were then utilised in various research context – including studies of children’s dialogue in primary schools and a classroom study of student motivation”<sup>19</sup>. The development of the interpretive approach “shows the influence of a particular methodology within religious studies (an ethnographic one) on the development of an open and impartial pedagogy for studying religious diversity in schools... The pedagogical dimension developed from reflecting on the theory and method in a research context and applying the ideas to children’s learning. Thus, a fundamental aim for religious education was to develop an understanding of the grammar – the language and wider symbolic patterns – of religions and the interpretive skills necessary to gain the understanding”<sup>20</sup>.

*The responsive approach* deals with the idea that the school responds to its surroundings in a distinctive way. The contact hypothesis comes from the conviction that “inter-personal contact across

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<sup>17</sup> See BREEN, D.: *Religious diversity, inter-ethnic relations and the Catholic school: introducing the responsive approach to single faith schooling*. In: *British Journal of Religious Education*, volume 31, issue 2, March 2009, p.103 – 115.

The responsive single faith schooling is the approach “whereby, as a means of challenging the notion that faith schools are socially divisive, a single faith school attempts to engage with aspects of its surroundings (i.e. other schools, local communities, etc.) which are not characterised by the faith of the school as a means of promoting dialogue... Dialogical RE has its roots in the interpretive approach and dialogical approaches have been developed and discussed by many scholars in recent years”. Sociologically relevant literature concerning faith schools is taken into consider. Breen offers an interesting case study of the ways in which a local Catholic primary school in Leicester, UK, responds to its surroundings. A neighbouring school has a majority intake of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh children. Both schools are engaged in shared activities.

<sup>18</sup> This approach became the theoretical stimulus for the European Commission (Framework 6 initiative) – funded REDCo project (2006 – 2009, involving universities from 8 European countries: England, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Estonia, France and Spain) and also for the Warwick REDCo Community of Practice which provide research studies related to religious education.

See e.g. JACKSON, R.: *The Emergence and Development of the Interpretive Approach*. In: *Lived Religion Conceptual, Empirical and Practical-Theological Approaches Essays in Honor of Hans-Gunter Heimrock*. Leiden – Boston 2008, p. 309 – 322. and JACKSON, R.: *Teaching about religions in the Public Sphere: European Policy Initiatives and the Interpretive Approach*. In: *Numen* 55/2008, p. 151 – 182.

<sup>19</sup> JACKSON, R.: *The Emergence and Development of the Interpretive Approach*. In: *Lived Religion Conceptual, Empirical and Practical-Theological Approaches Essays in Honor of Hans-Gunter Heimrock*. Leiden – Boston 2008, p. 319. See also JACKSON, R.: *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy*. London 2004, chapter 6 and 7.

<sup>20</sup> JACKSON, R.: *Teaching about religions in the Public Sphere: European Policy Initiatives and the Interpretive Approach*. In: *Numen* 55/2008, p. 168 and 172. See also JACKSON, R.: *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach*. London 1997.

ethnic lines, in and of itself, brings about better ‚race‘ relations by attenuating individual racial prejudice”<sup>21</sup>.

### **Prompts for Discussion**

Using all suggested recommendations and methods should be the topic of future discussions among RE experts and teachers of particular Church denominations. Teachers are “free to choose their own educational methods and they are free to move within relatively broad curricular requirements. They choose the approach that best meets the needs of their students and their own philosophy of education”<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, our opinion is that RE teachers (catechets) should have additional special catechetical teaching-training course, which provides them more specialised and advanced understanding of psychological and pedagogical-didactical aspects of education, especially special pedagogy for children with special needs in education, together with the various aspects of theology.

Finally, it can be said, that religious education in Slovakia creates an important part of general educational system – from the kindergartens, through primary and secondary schools, up to university system of education (Theological faculties and Faculties of Art and Humanities, that provide study of theology and study of religions). But there is still lot what to do. The major challenge is to develop an interdisciplinary cooperation of theology and secular psychology, pedagogy and didactics, it means the theory of curriculum research and development as well as the theory of instruction and training. It will open more space for using various non-traditional teaching-learning methods. The basic aim is to involve children and young people into RE lessons by showing them how attractive RE lessons can be. The comparative approach, involving non-traditional explanation and critical understanding can create one of possible ways how to improve both educational theory and educational practice in religious education.

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1720/2005 *Recommendation of the European Union*, entitled „Education and religion“ (art. 7)

In: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/comparl/libe/elsj/charter/art14/default\\_en.htm](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/comparl/libe/elsj/charter/art14/default_en.htm),

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