**Ana Thea Filipović**

**The Contribution of Religious Education to Conveying Hope and Resilience in Times of Crisis**

1. *The Times of Crisis, Vulnerability, and the Need for Hope*

Since the beginning of the new millennium, and especially in the last few years, the world has perceived itself as threatened by various types of crises that are catching up with each other. From the European perspective, it is the global financial crisis and economic recession (of 2008 and 2022-2023), the ongoing migrant crisis which began in 2015, global health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the war crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the Israeli-Palestinian war conflict started in 2023, the energy crisis and food shortages as a result of wars, the ongoing environmental crisis, etc. Ultimately, all crises are interconnected (cf. Filipović, de Byl, and Murić 2023, 7). For example, globalization, which was led by financial interests, accelerated the fast traffic connection and many people available travel possibilities between countries and continents, resulting in constant movement of people around the world, due to which the global spread of the virus has been lightning-fast (cf. Kharas 2020). The world generally seems to be in crisis today.

Crises bring to light the vulnerability, weaknesses, and wounds of man, society, and humanity. At the same time, they require resilience and the discovery of resources. In his extraordinary moment of prayer on March 27, 2020, Pope Francis said that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of the world, its false priorities, and superficial security. Just as natural disasters like as earthquakes reveal the state of houses and buildings, so the pandemic crisis has revealed the state of societies and humanity. It showed how seriously sick the world is, full of planetary injustices caused by an exclusively profit-oriented economy (cf. Francis 27 March 2020). Pope Francis repeated it on August 19, 2020, by stating: „The pandemic has exposed the plight of the poor and the great inequalitythat reigns in the world.“ (Francis 19 August 2020) Crises bring to light and at the same time widen the gap between the poor, marginalized, and victims of conflict and the rich countries and people, those who enjoy the goods. They show and deepen the gap between the zones of peace, progress, and environmental justice and the zones of conflict, scarcity, and environmental devastation.

The challenges we are witnessing today show that everyone's lives are globally interconnected. Therefore, for millions of people around the world, all aspects of their daily lives are directly affected by the consequences of crises. „These challenges have, in many communities, created a sense of despair and hopelessness.“ (Bourn 2021, 66) Global crises produce in people fear about the future, fear for existence, and a sense of powerlessness. Accelerated globalization causes in people a need for identity, while the existential anxiety that follows quick changes causes an increased need for spirituality. The sense of threat and powerlessness that many people feel today is connected with the dizzying speed of change we are witnessing (cf. Maalouf 2002, 86).

From a psychological point of view, a crisis as a long-term and intense exposure to negative influences can be interpreted as stress. Whether people can overcome stressful situations without major consequences depends on the way they react to stress, how they cognitively evaluate it, and what their resilience is concerning the assessment of resources. People perceive resources as opportunities available to them in dealing with stressful situations. These can be social resources, i.e. people from the environment who can provide them with help, material resources available to them, and personal resources that help them cope with the newly created situation (previous knowledge and experience, psychological balance, etc). Coping with a stressful situation can be focused on the problem that the person is trying to analyze and solve, and it can be focused on emotions in order to reduce the emotional tension caused by the stressful event. Emotional tension is reduced by openly expressing emotions, suppressing emotions, minimizing situational effects, seeking emotional support from others, noticing the positive sides of the situation, etc. (cf. Medak 2023).

1. *Biblical and Theological Reflections on Hope and Resilience in Times of Crisis*

Although resilience is not a concept that explicitly belongs to the theological discourse, it is certainly contained in biblical faith. We find it both in the order of creation and the order of salvation. From the point of view of creation, resilience, and hope is constitutive for human life. Hope is the trust that the future is open. Therefore, from a psychological point of view hope is the strongest impetus for the search for meaning and the motive for life (cf. Böschemeyer 2014, 25). Furthermore, resilience is linked to the biblical experience that God is always with man and for man, especially in times of trouble and trial. The biblical concept of hope embraces both everyday and transcendent hope and is linked to the idea that overcomes the ambiguity of life. It understands life as a fragment of the promised future of God as the goal of all hope. Hope in the biblical sense is confidence that God will keep his promise and provide for the future. As a Christian theological virtue hope has its origin in faith, and its fulfilment in love. Hope keeps faith alive in times of crisis, in times of a blurred vision of God and God's presence (cf. Abraham, s. a.).

Based on biblical faith people’s religiosity plays an important role in times of crisis; it shapes their beliefs and behaviour. “Whether it is a natural disaster, war, pandemic, or economic crisis, people tend to turn to their faith for comfort, guidance, and strength. Religion is viewed as a source of hope and meaning during difficult times. Individuals search for comfort in prayer and spiritual practices. Many studies have shown that people with a strong religious faith tend to experience less anxiety, stress, and depression during times of crisis.” (Filipović, de Byl, and Murić 2023, 8) My research among Croatian adolescents (from 13 to 19 years old) conducted during the coronavirus pandemic from December 2020 to February 2021 (N =857) has shown „that the faith of religious adolescents became more personal and that it had a positive effect on psycho-social resilience and personal growth, but in combination with family cohesion, which on the one hand was stimulated by religiosity, and on the other, influenced personal growth.“ (Filipović, and Rihtar 2023, 123)

Theology plays a significant role in helping to interpret and understand crises. “It provides a framework for understanding the experiences and helps make sense of crises, especially of the suffering and tragedies that occur. In such scenarios, theology faces specific challenges in trying to provide meaningful and satisfactory answers to the questions that arise. However, theology must (know) respond to the specific challenges of different crises, engaging in dialogue and partnerships with other fields, such as psychology, science, and public policy, to develop comprehensive answers. This challenge requires theologians to engage in dialogue with experts not only in science and academy but also in Church communities and civil society.” (Filipović, de Byl, and Murić 2023, 8)

In the history of education and pedagogy, suffering was always perceived as problematic, as the suffering caused by human will or guilt i.e. by moral evil, so the suffering caused by what philosophers of religion call physical and metaphysical evil (cf. Šimić 2005, 33) that results from natural disasters or is a consequence of the frailty and transience of man and the imperfection of everything created. The religious-philosophical question of the “where from” and “why” of evil and suffering is answered differently in different religions and philosophies. In Christianity, those questions turn into the question “Where is God in human suffering?”, as Juergen Moltmann pointed out (cf. Moltmann 1972, 262). This question is ultimately answered by the love of God for humanity and creation shown in Jesus Christ who took on the suffering to his being, becoming vulnerable himself, to overcome pain and transform death into resurrection and eternal life. In religious education, skewed interpretations of God’s relation to the suffering of humans and other creatures lead to skewed images of God and can cause new suffering, while right theological answers and images can become a source of hope and strength helping to overcome evil and suffering (cf. Filipović 2013, 65).

1. *The Contribution of Education, School, and Religious Education in Conveying Hope and Resilience*

“Educators and educationalists have always believed that children's tender souls should be protected from suffering; not only from enduring suffering, but also from having to look at suffering. At the same time, they are aware that no one, not even the youngest members of the human community, can be protected from suffering. Therefore, children and young people should be helped to understand the inevitable suffering as something that is part of life, to accept it, and to process the experiences of suffering. Children and young people should be strengthened with the motives of hope and confidence that good will ultimately win so that they can face suffering in the best possible way and overcome the suffering that cannot be avoided.

All cultures have stories and fairy tales that pass on to new generations the truth about life and death, suffering and hope, sorrow, and joy. So are children from an early age confronted with thoughts about life and its questions, especially the question of suffering caused by the blows of fate, loss, injustice, humiliation, and fear, all these questions are wrapped up in the garb of fairy tales. But children also come across thoughts about what we can and should hope for, which help them to cope with the suffering and hope for a good end. Since the perception of reality is largely shaped by culture and therefore depends on how we co-construct and experience it, human society tries to help its young members cope with life and remove the obstacles on the path of life.

School, as a prominent educational institution in society, promotes reflection on suffering and hope as a fundamental human and religious experience. It initiates discussion of these topics through many school subjects and extracurricular activities and content. Dealing with the topic of suffering and overcoming it, opening the horizons of hope, and building trust in the victory of good are taught to students in language and literature teaching, the visual arts, music, and film arts, history, philosophy, Ethics, psychology, sociology, and religion. Confessional religious education contributes to achieving the school's goals by addressing these questions from the perspective of a specific religion or Christian denomination.” (Filipović 2013, 65-66) Dealing with the topic of suffering, experience of anxiety, and reasons for hope and resilience in Religious Education includes both cognitive and emotional levels, and can therefore help to overcome stress.

In my analysis of the textbooks for Catholic religious education in primary and secondary schools in Croatia from the point of view of representation of suffering and hope, it was evident that the textbooks have shown that suffering had different causes and many faces. Religious pedagogical discourse about suffering and hope follows the possibilities and developmental questions, problems, and needs of the students of the respective age group. They try to establish the correlation between human experience and the experience of faith. “The students are helped to come to terms with suffering and to gain motivation for hope. Viewed from a theological perspective, suffering is largely viewed in the light of God's plan of salvation and Christ's paschal mystery, whereby even in the suffering the hope for the victory of life comes into effect. It is recognizable that Christian hope is not the same as optimism or positive thinking. Hope is anchored in the love of God, which became visible in Jesus Christ and was experienced by people. Trust in God, who will ultimately direct everything for the good, allows us to see the goal and inspires appropriate behavior. (…In textbooks for high school there is) a stronger connection of the themes with contemporary social life and a more pronounced meta-reflection on the topics of suffering and hope in the Christian faith as well as in general human and religious experience.” (Filipović 2013, 73)

The great Brazilian educational thinker Paulo Freire (1921-1997) promoted in his numerous writings, and especially in his *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994)*,* the political dimension of education. He requested an education that turns away from a “banking concept” in which learners are understood as receivers of information to an educational approach that is connected to the lives of learners and grounded in an understanding of the current social and political situation in a certain society (cf. Freire 1994, 9). Since neoliberalism still dominates not only economies but also much of policymaking and practices around the world, Douglas Bourn noted the continuing topicality of Freire’s reminder about the danger that hope could be “caught by neoliberal ideals, of individualism, self-improvement and ‘private notions of getting ahead’” (Bourn 2021, 69; referring to Freire and Shor 1987, 110). Freire’s follower Henry Giroux “speaks about ‘educated hope’ that engages the imagination and includes civic engagement. 'Educated hope … combines the pedagogical and the political in ways that stress the contextual nature of learning, emphasizing that different contexts give rise to diverse questions, problems and possibilities'“ (Giroux 2002, 102; according to Bourn 2021, 68). Dave Hicks suggests several steps on how to make hope practical in education and learning. These steps are: *Sharing* that means „creating spaces where young people can share their feelings“ about an issue or problem; *listening* which means „really listening to what students wish to say“ about an issue; *understanding* the nature of the problem, „its origins, impacts, and consequences as well as the action being taken“ to help or change the situation; and *acting* (Hicks 2018, 85). This way learning can become transformative. Education needs new narratives, that can help social, political, and economic forces around the world to „support each other, and work together rather than competing with each other“ (Bourn 2021, 68). In religious education, the ideas of the pedagogy of hope and its socio-political dimension can be productively connected to the theology of communion and transmitted into a spirituality of communion and social engagement from faith, that generates hope.

February 19, 2024