**Religious education in Slovenia**

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The foundations of education in the Republic of Slovenia are based on values that regularly refer to human rights and the democratic order of the entire community. In this context, tolerance is one of the key concepts emphasized in all educational documents.

On the other hand, this principled openness to diversity and the guarantee of pluralism in Slovenia are increasingly leading to the exclusion of religious beliefs from the public sphere. The public sphere should be protected from the dominance of a particular religious belief. Religion belongs in the private life of the individual and has no place in institutions where the state is the founder. In the case of the school as a public institution, it is interesting to find a number of views that are integrated into the school space in one way or another, which few find disturbing, and any activity associated with Christianity, or rather Catholicism, must be condemned as an encroachment on the individual's right to his or her own beliefs. The majority refers to the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia, which states in Article 7: 'The state and religious communities are separate from each other. Religious communities have equal rights; their activities are free."[[1]](#footnote-1) For most of the time, the interpretation of this article has focused on the separation of religious communities and the state. The free exercise of religion must follow the first part of this article: Only if the religious community does not enter the public space can this right be fulfilled. Since many people were bothered by the fact that religious education (parish catechesis) was held in certain school buildings outside of school hours, where there were no suitable facilities, and since religious education in Catholic schools with a concession was provided, a constitutional complaint was filed. The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia ruled on this in 2001 in the context of protecting the neutrality of the public sphere. In their reasoning in paragraph 11, the constitutional judges argued: "The Constitution does not explicitly regulate denominational activity in (public and licensed) schools, which means that it neither prohibits nor orders it. Article 7 only contains the general principle of the separation of state and religious communities, according to which the state is obliged to be neutral, tolerant and non-missionary. In the field of education, this means that religious content may not be part of public education, i.e. neither part of the teaching at a public school nor part of the teaching in the public service of a school that has received a concession from the state. Since the concession constitutes an authorization to exercise an activity whose permanent and uninterrupted exercise is guaranteed by the State in the public interest, and since the exercise of this concessionary public service is entirely financed by the State, its exercise must be subject to the same conditions as if it were exercised by a public school established directly by the State (or by a local authority or municipality)."[[2]](#footnote-2) With this argument, under the guise of neutrality and tolerance, a word is used for the first time to refer to the fear of so-called missionary activity.

The focus on protection from any missionary activity means that any religious activity in the public sphere and especially in schools is increasingly problematic. Even if people and local leaders voluntarily allow the blessing of a school or other public building, this is quickly condemned. According to Article 41(2) of the Constitution, "citizens have the right to be free from religious beliefs and free from any coercive confrontation by the state with a religious belief." The decision of the Constitutional Court here clearly refers to so-called negative freedom. Despite declaratory pluralism, it is becoming increasingly difficult to guarantee this. It is precisely because of this pronounced negative image of religious beliefs as an impairment of individual freedom that it is impossible to introduce lessons in the school environment that introduce pupils to the subject of religions. Confessional instruction is already fundamentally excluded from the public sphere. However, any other religious instruction that is to be introduced into the public school system in one way or another must first ensure that it is not suspect in the sense that it conveys the beliefs of a particular religion.

Since the Basic Law on Education, which is still in force today with some amendments, mentioned as early as 1996 the need to introduce certain content into public education that would introduce religious themes, a kind of 'Solomonic solution' slowly took shape. Since the Act on the Organization and Financing of Education and Training in its Article 72 prohibits confessional religious education in Slovenian public schools, and since the school teaches pupils religious topics, at least according to official educators, within the framework of general subjects such as Slovene, history, etc., many feel that such teaching of knowledge about religion is incomplete and scattered. In the school year 2002/2003, a special subject Religion and Ethics was introduced in the last three years of elementary school. It was designed as a compulsory elective subject (to be offered by all schools as part of the social studies curriculum and implemented by those schools where a sufficient number of pupils opt for it) that introduces pupils to the historical role of religion and contemporary religious issues as they are expressed in society and culture in an informative, non-denominational, neutral and religiously objective way.[[3]](#footnote-3) As it is an elective subject, it can be chosen from year to year. For this reason, we have three subjects, Religion and Ethics I, II and III. The curriculum states that it is best to choose the whole range, as this is the only way to cover the whole curriculum and provide some basic knowledge of religion. However, it is also possible to choose only one class, which unfortunately happens too often.

The course is intended for everyone, believers and unbelievers alike. It should also be accessible to those who are not part of any tradition and have no experience of faith. "For the former and the latter, it enables them to put their religious tradition and religious education into a new context and to look at it from a new perspective, that is inherent in a "neutral" school approach to the world of religions and world views. This, of course, differs from the approach of individual religions, but it is not opposed or contradict them."[[4]](#footnote-4) This makes it clear that we are dealing with non-denominational teaching, and even more so that the official curriculum explains how every school subject must be 'neutral'. This is a blatant non-alignment that is advocated in our country by experts who are not from the majority religious communities. This group has also gained the upper hand in shaping the subject and is supported by public opinion, which is shaped by the mainstream media. We therefore understand that parents of children from both religious and non-religious groups, for whom the subject is intended, are skeptical. The religious fear that the 'neutrality' of the teacher will undermine religious education. Those with a non-religious background fear that the children will be subjected to a certain catechesis, as religiosity is repeatedly portrayed in public as something backward, dangerous and unnecessary. For this reason, there are very few schools (up to a maximum of 10 per year) that offer this subject throughout the whole three-year cycle. The failure of this subject, which is chosen by very few and even fewer pupils each year, is mainly due to the alleged position of the Catholic Church, as mentioned above by a group of non-denominational experts. They accuse the Catholic Church of being clearly against this subject, as it has always wanted to come into schools as an institution. At the same time, they also aptly express the skepticism of the liberal part of the population.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, they forget to say that one of the most important representatives of the same Church, who for many years was the head of its largest catholic educational institution, the St. Stanislaus’s Institution in Ljubljana, Dr. Roman Globokar, is in favor of this subject and publicly supports it.[[6]](#footnote-6) Together with him, many are of the opinion that the subject should be made compulsory for everyone and should have a larger scope than other subjects already have. "In the context of the escalation of migration flows and the current refugee problem, the acute lack of general knowledge about other cultures and religions is particularly evident (both in society and in the school system itself)."[[7]](#footnote-7) They forget that most children do not even have a basic, unencumbered knowledge of what religion is, let alone the religion that has shaped a nation's identity.

Only four Catholic high schools in Slovenia offer religious education at secondary school level. It takes place in all four years and is institutionally confessional but pedagogically non-confessional. The subject of Religion and Culture is primarily based on concrete experiences and does not shy away from experiential learning in the didactic process, as it does not see religiosity as a threat but as an opportunity for holistic development. At the same time, it remains open to all different perspectives and integrates them organically into the curriculum. Surveys conducted a few years ago show a high level of satisfaction among the vast majority of former students.

The fear of and about religion, which is clearly noticeable in Slovenia, and on the other hand the awareness that we are increasingly confronted with people of other faiths who take their religiosity seriously, also call for solutions in Slovenia. We have examples of good practice in the KATIS trainings (general annual trainings for in-service teachers), which have a national character. When we presented the EDUC project[[8]](#footnote-8) to the teachers, where the staff of the Faculty of Theology was the main responsible for the implementation, the teachers were impressed by the modern approach based on the idea that the better we know our own religion, the better we understand the religion of others. It is a metaphor of the globe of the Earth: the deeper we go, the closer we are to each other. Following this logic, basic modules have been developed that are compulsory for all students, and in-depth modules for their own religion (Judaism, Catholicism, Islam, Orthodoxy, Protestantism and Ethics). Unfortunately, it is only a proposal to develop basic and in-depth models of religious education in high schools based on an in-depth knowledge of one's own religiosity.

In the preparation of future teachers at the Faculty of Theology at UL for courses in Slovenian education that touch on religious topics, we are based on an approach that takes the individual and their beliefs seriously. The so-called model of learning from religion comes close to a solution that respects pluralism and does not disregard the individual perspective. However, the mood in society is not yet good enough to take general religious education seriously.

1. *Ustava Republike Slovenije*, Ljubljana, Državni zbor Republike Slovenije, 2011, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ODLU443> (8. 2. 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Aleš Črnič – Anja Pogačnik, Pouk religije v javni šoli: analiza slovenske ureditve v evropskem kontekstu, in: *Sodobna pedagogika/Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies,* 71 (137) 3, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kerševan M. – Barle Lakota A. – Gerjol S. – Jeriha Gregorič M. – Hribar T. – Jošar L. – Kodelja Z. – Ocvirk D. – Pohar J. – Smrke M. – Šverc A., *Učni načrt za izbirni predmet (program osnovnošolskega izobraževanja): Verstva in etika, druga izdaja,* p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Aleš Črnič – Anja Pogačnik, Pouk religije v javni šoli: analiza slovenske ureditve v evropskem kontekstu, in: *Sodobna pedagogika/Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies,* p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Roman Globokar, *Vzgojni izzivi šole v digitalni dobi*, Teološka fakulteta, 2019, p. 141-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Roman Globokar, *Vzgojni izzivi šole v digitalni dobi*, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://reduc8.eu/> (9. 2. 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)