**Religion at school. Help or Threat to Education?**

*Mirosław Stanislaw Wierzbicki, Warsaw (Poland)*

**Religion and its meaning in a multicultural and multireligious society**

Religion (Latin: Religio) is a term that is found in European as well as American culture. Religion portrays the emergent personal faith and the human bond with God (deity). It manifests itself in worship, doctrine, morality and also social organisations. We can also present religion in the phenomenological sense as man's experiential encounter with the 'sacred', which is expressed in the form of inner acts, i.e. faith, hope and love.

We note, however, that there are many definitions of religion. This multiplicity makes it difficult for scholars to define it, mainly for reasons of the actual multiplicity of existing religions in the historical sense, but also for reasons of understanding the religious object or forms of religious activity. An important difference in religions is also the nature of the experiences lived, which take place mainly in the interior of the human being and are therefore unique and unrepeatable. In addition, it is important to point out the connection between religion and other areas of life, bringing complexity to the cultural phenomenon. Important here is the fact that it is possible to study the phenomenon of religion from different points of view, e.g. empirical, philosophical, theological. They point to the possibility of different research methods, as evidenced by the diversity of religious sciences. Despite the various difficulties in defining religion, we need an in-depth study of it in order to be able to accurately distinguish certain transcendent phenomena as the subject of our research. The study of religion also aims at comparing religions among themselves and at critically evaluating religious phenomena. Thus, we note the need for considerations pointing to the role of religion in the lives of individuals and entire communities.

**Religious pedagogy in the educational process**

The religious instruction incorporated into the educational system in Western and Central European countries has contributed to defining the area of interest in the upbringing and formation of children and adolescents. The teaching of religion refers to the Pedagogy of Religion, which deals with religious upbringing as well as the conditions of evangelization in the perspective of the challenges of the 21st century. Therefore, contemporary teaching of religion is based on experiential learning according to curriculum theory where cognitive and emotional elements are combined. In this way, the teaching of religion becomes even more accessible and effective. Curriculum makes it possible to consciously move away from content-oriented teaching by paying attention to the person and his or her comprehensive relationships. This approach stems from the fact that it is not possible to convey all the content that today's science and culture provide. The task, therefore, of teaching religion at school is that, without neglecting the content or the problems, to develop in the pupils the ability to critically evaluate the changing world and life. Furthermore, the possibility of freely choosing religious values and living according to them should be emphasised.

In recent years, there has been a development of pedagogical-religious thought in Poland, which notes the teaching of religion in the optics of language, didactics, symbols, the universal Church and ecumenism. One should also emphasize the interdisciplinary dimension in the relationship between systematic theology and pedagogy of religion, which support the transmission of faith in school religion lessons or parish catechesis. An important task of the pedagogy of religion is thus to develop an awareness of the historical-social and historical-Christian conditionality of becoming Christians in a world full of axiological and cultural problems. There is also the need for research in the field of pedagogy of religion that goes in a comparative direction. We note that in recent years, empirical research in the pedagogy of religion or the sociology of religion has been very valuable. They deal with the religiousness of children and adolescents internationally. On the example of these studies, we can see rapid changes in Europe and worldwide, which show that the problems of youth religiosity are very similar in all countries. This phenomenon is shown by institutes and scientific journals established in Poland at the turn of the last 20 years (Toruń-UMK: Institute of Pedagogy - "Pedagogia Christiana", Cracow-Ignatianum: "Rocznik Sekcji Pedagogiki religijnej", "Horyzonty wychowania"; Olsztyn-UWM: "Keryks. The study of the pedagogy of religion thus allows for the development of religious education in culture and science in an interdisciplinary dimension. One sees here a valuable perspective of the connections of the scientific disciplines of theology with pedagogy, psychology, sociology, sociology of religion, cultural sciences or religiosity.

**Does teaching religion at school help or threaten?**

Reflecting on the essence of the teaching of religion in Poland, it is necessary to direct our reflection to religious education in order to answer the question whether, in the contemporary world, religion is helpful to education or, as some believe, is becoming a threat to it. There is no doubt that the times in which we live are characterised by the superficiality of human existence. We are noticing a deepening ethical relativism, which affects the education and religiousness of the young person and the relationship and reference to God. The superficiality mentioned affects not only believers, but also those who consider themselves atheists or agnostics. The perceived superficiality that has become a contrast to spiritual life and religious reference affects almost everyone.

Addressing the topic of religious education allows us to reflect on the diverse spaces of life, not only for young people, but also for adults who continue their religious education throughout their lives. In answering the question posed in the title, we have delved into two disciplines, theology and pedagogy. Through these sciences, religious education tries to explain the nature of man in an accessible way and to show the meaning of his life. These issues in religious education have a profound justification if only by answering basic existential questions. Therefore, religion in the educational process allows the young person to have a broader view of everyday reality and to link the human being with transcendence, which shows other dimensions of human life and protects against relativism. We can therefore see that the young generation requires a solid upbringing, based on absolute, permanent and unchanging values.

Introducing students to issues of religion, religiosity, upbringing, education allows us to emphasise the interdisciplinarity of the theological-humanities. It is noted that contemporary societies are gradually changing their attitudes towards religion. Many cultural historians argue that there are increasing indications of the inseparability of religion from human life. It has its reference in the history of philosophical thought, as well as in contemporary theories, especially the personalist current, which is considered against the background of the category of subjectivity-subjectivity and the pedagogical context, in the educator-pupil relationship.

The pedagogy of religion points to the role that religion plays in the educational process, as it is able to give man the motivation to act. One such source of religious education is the Bible, which becomes a book that is a "pedagogue". It presents a number of "pedagogical and didactic indications that reach people in the form of messages and examples worth following". To explore education more broadly, it is worth reflecting on the anthropological foundations of religious education. Education points to the dignity of the person, which is expressed in his or her absoluteness, completeness, freedom, spirituality and reasonableness. It must be emphasised here that the highest reason for the dignity of the human being will be his origin from God the Creator.

Unfortunately, there is also an aversion or opposition to religion. This attitude stems from an attempt to ascribe to religion a dominant role and a large scope of competence in the social environment. Hence, many reject the links between religion and education because of unproven information about religion itself. Therefore, such a situation demands that the proper place and role of religion in scientific research and human life be dedicated.

**The place of religion in education**

Reflecting on the place of religion in education, it is important to emphasise that nothing helps as much as religion in resolving conflicts or relaying common projects. It supports in border situations, where one is unable to help oneself.

Differing beliefs can be observed, mainly stemming from the worldviews presented. The Report for UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century, chaired by Jacques Delors, points to education in a global context, it emphasises the need for lifelong learning, noting four basic pillars in the educational process: "learning to know, i.e. to acquire the tools of understanding; learning to act, in order to be able to interact with one's environment; learning to live together, in order to participate and cooperate with others at all levels of human activity; learning to be; an aspiration that is related to the previous three". This multifaceted educational action should foster the multifaceted inner and outer development of the young person.

In the educational aspect of the teaching of religion at school, the ability to influence one's own decisions independently and responsibly, reflected in moral attitudes and behaviour, seems to play an important role. This practice calls for a substantive dialogue on the interdependence resulting from human tasks and goals, and not just an emphasis on secular education in school education, often characterised by negative attitudes towards religion.

The necessity to include religious issues in education is evidenced by research, conducted on secondary school students, on interest in religious issues, religious beliefs, prayer, religious experiences, worship. The process of religious education is thus aimed at helping young people to be able to respond to God's calls and to be able to live with Him in community, in faith. It is also important to state that human experience plays an important role in pedagogy, through which thought-provoking questions are posed, and thus intelligence and imagination and feelings are formed. Therefore, the four elements of pedagogy are important in the teaching of religion: experience, reflection, action and evaluation.

**Conclusion**

Summing up our reflection, we can say that the question we have posed: Religion at school - a help or a threat to education? makes it possible to see the essence of religion in the educational process and points out the points of contact between education and religion, which broaden young people's perspectives on the world. The teaching of religion should therefore become a clear communication of the relevant problems revealed in secular society and the Church. It should therefore be borne in mind that religion for education is also an opportunity to explain matters of existence by means other than rational cognition.