

Religious education in the north of the European Union – approaches in the Swedish model*

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Abstract:

The Nordic countries are associated to Lutheran Churches that have had a very important role in the organization of the religion class, and in its content and finalities. Thus, when talking about Lutheran religious education it is necessary to know the fact that this has been renamed into knowledge about Christianity and perspectives on life (Lied 2009, 263), more precisely it is about learning about religion and from religion (Slotte 2016, 236). The northern states members of the European Union are historically called and defined mono-religious, which over time due to the increase in migration (Lied 2009, 263) have experienced religious diversity, pluralism and multiculturalism. These determined that the attitude would be an open one, wishes for religious activity, or more specifically said, the purpose was to cover the needs of children and during the changes, the class of religion was perceived through cultural meaning or of religious competence. This combination of factors led to religious education being renamed as Ethics.

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Introduction

In order to understand the system of providing the religion class to the countries from the northern part of the European Union, it is necessary to know first of all that it has undergone changes and has been reorganized due to the socio-political agenda. The Nordic countries are associated to Lutheran Churches that have had a very important role in the organization of the religion class, and in its content and finalities. Thus, when talking about Lutheran religious education it is necessary to know the fact that this has been renamed into knowledge about Christianity and perspectives on life (Lied 2009, 263), more precisely it is about learning about religion and from religion (Slotte 2016, 236). The northern states members of the European Union are historically called and defined mono-religious, which over time due to the increase in migration (Lied 2009, 263) have experienced religious diversity, pluralism and multiculturalism. These determined that the attitude would be an open one, wishes for religious activity, or more specifically said, the purpose was to cover the needs of children and during the changes, the class of religion was perceived through cultural meaning or of religious competence. This combination of factors led to religious education being renamed as Ethics, as well (Slotte 2016, 237).

If a common point of the nordic model of Europe is given by the fact that Lutheranism is the majority, we also have a difference, such as: Sweden, Norway [Even though Norway is not a member state of the European Union, it is a model for aspects related to the presence of religion classes in the public schools of the European Union. It is for this reason that I have chosen to make some clarifications and concordance between the Norwegian model of teaching religion and the other Nordic models] and Denmark - states that have chosen the religion class to be transformed and integrated into public schools as a nondenominational class. So it is about teaching about religion and not learning from religion.

At the opposite pole is Finland, a country where the teaching of religion is done according to the confessional model, a model that includes in the school curriculum aspects related to the history of religions and notions of morals and philosophy are approached.

In the northern part of the European Union there is a system that is modeled after the precepts of the Evangelical Lutheran faith and is based on the religious affiliation of students and parents. This reality is a vulnerable point, because it is a factor that creates problems in the organization and teaching of the religion class. It is common that adherents of certain faiths do not register or declare their religious affiliation, factors that cause the vulnerability of the status of the religion class to be permanently accompanied by tensions. A viable solution to this situation is offered by organizations or associations that are concerned with the necessary steps for organizing the study of religion in public schools, while also involving parents or legal guardians of children to apply for participation in class (Slotte 2016, 242-255).

We can turn to the Norwegian model of religious education, because it is a resort and a landmark for the models of approach and for the organization and teaching of religion classes in the member states of the European Union. The Norwegian model of religious education is an adogmatic one, it is a non-confessional model. It promotes learning about other religions and not learning from religion. In Norway, the status of religion class is mandatory, from first grade to tenth grade for all students. Although the role of the Lutheran Church is recognized in Norway, the diverse cultural mosaic and the continuing dynamics of cultural and religious diversity has made the religion class called Knowledge of Christianity, Religions and Philosophies of Life (Hammer and Schanke 2018, 151).

Since 1889, religion classes have been held without the church being involved, and confirmation of students' participation in the Sacred Mysteries no longer requires it to be reported (About the years, stages and transformations that the Norwegian system of teaching religion has had see at: Lied 2009, 264-274; and Haeshaher and Sandsmark 2006, 275-278). In 1997 the name of religious education was changed to

Knowledge of Christianity, religion and philosophy about life – KRL ('Knowledge of Christianity, Religions and Philosophies of Life'; KRL is the Norwegian abbreviation), due to some controversy sparked by parents (Lied 2009, 263), who made complaints to the Government of Norway, stating their dissatisfaction. Eight years later, in 2005 the European Court of Human Rights made changes, gave an amendment highlighting that teaching religion does not involve preaching or favoring a particular philosophy of life or religious worship. Two years later, in 2007 the same European Court states that the way religious education is done in Norway does not violate religious rights and freedoms.

Before the above was mentioned, the Government of Norway chose not to allow the class exemption, although it was required by parents on personal grounds and beliefs (Hammer and Schanke 2018, 152). In 2008 another name was adopted, that of Religion, Philosophies of life and Ethics ('Religion, Philosophies of Life and Ethics, RLE is the Norwegian abbreviation). The year 2015 brought new changes following debates on religious education, the name being changed to Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of life and Ethics ('Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of Life and Ethics', KRLE is the Norwegian abbreviation). For these reasons today in the Norwegian system dominates an analytical view on the teaching of religion in the sense of presenting a link between religion, science and philosophy (Hammer and Schanke 2018, 152).

The political documents about the teaching of Religion, philosophy for life and ethics classes emphasize that students are close to the approach of the class according to the model of learning about and from religion and that it gives them the opportunity to think critically and to be aware of the problems of the world to which they belong:

...schools must promote democratic values and attitudes that do not provide a discriminatory context (...) That is why all students in schools need to develop and discover knowledge about religious minorities and majorities, to be able to participate in debates and dialogues and to have peaceful relations with those who have different religious identity (Hammer and Schanke 2018, 152).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was also signed by Norway, which refers, among other things, to the responsibility of

parents, but also to the freedom and right of the child to benefit from religious education (Hagesafer and Sandsmark 2006, 276). The way of teaching in Norway is centered on the development of secular thinking, analytical and critical thinking on issues about life that involve students to listen to and understand religion as a cultural phenomenon. This type of teaching has drawn upon itself a series of changes, that is, intercultural competences are being developed, which are actually part of the Council of Europe agenda (The Council of Europe consists of 47 member states and its mission is to focus on intercultural citizen activities and human rights, including education, see Hammer and Schanke 2018, 153-158).

The Swedish model

In the member states of the European Union there is a lot of emphasis on religious freedom, religious affiliation and on belonging to a particular religious cult (Slotte 2016, 242-23).

Sweden is a Nordic country that has, like Norway, a non-confessional educational system for the study of religion, religious education being under the exclusive care of the state (Şelaru and Vâlcu s.a., 66), although we know that most of the Swedes are of Lutheran affiliation. In Sweden, religion class is mandatory for all students, precisely because it does not refer only to a certain faith, nor does it favor only certain opinions (Naeslund 2009, 227). This country is like all the others in Northern Europe, secular, moreover, it was called the most secular country in the world, joining France and the concept of secularity (Niemi 2018, 182-183). And although Lutheran Protestantism had an overwhelming role in the Swedish model of the study of religion, the Swedish model of religious education is perceived through beliefs, values and facts, through thinking split by the phenomenon of secularization that does not allow confessional elements to be presented in the classroom, so it is desired that they would be excluded and replaced by information about different religions (Niemi 2018, 183). The Swedish system becomes multireligious in just a few decades. Thus, in 2000 (Naeslund 2009, 227), when the separation of Church and State 9 The Church of Sweden can be viewed as a national church rather than a state-recognized church: Saiz *et*

alii 2013, 29) took place, it was one of the stages that led to the decrease of interest in everything that means faith, religious values and implicitly the religion class. As in the other Nordic European countries, the case of Norway, that of Finland and Sweden, the acceleration of migration (Naeslund 2009, 227) was a factor that led to religious diversity, to secularization, religious pluralism and especially led to the formation of a policy of pluralism.

Between 2011 and 2016 there were public debates about the Swedish context, highlighting the line between religious and secular (Niemi 2018, 183). Sweden was a traditional Protestant country, but in which Christianity was taught confessionally in Swedish schools (Niemi 2018, 184). Next I will describe some defining stages for the Swedish system of religious education. Thus, until 1882 the curriculum was formed by the historical biblical precepts, but with the passage of time there was a decrease in interest in Christianity in general and so, in 1919, 37 years later it is changed with learning about religion, About Christianity in general (Niemi 2018, 184), as in the case of Norway about which I have talked above.

In 1962, 43 years later, the main objectives were introduced, thus resembling the situation of France. The concept of laity was accepted and adopted, which refers to the total separation of the State from the Church. This stage is the main one for setting goals and outcomes in schools, in fact wanting to avoid links that would refer to a religious content (Niemi 2018, 184). Almost five decades later, in 2010, the goals for the study of religion were not only part of the schools' recommendations, but were introduced into law. For this, in 2009, a government proposal was accepted so that the teaching of religion should be done through the nondenominational model and this does not actually mean teaching "without religious content" (Niemi 2018, 184), but was recommended to be a scientific basis of the teaching act.

We can see that the study of religion becomes something more related to intellect and theory, religion is studied from the outside and not from the inside, there is a talk about several religions, there are theories that do not take into consideration the formative dimension of classroom

teaching. In fact we see that all these changes tend to describe an exclusively atheistic speech. In this sense we can offer examples by which the line between the sacred and the profane is clearly drawn. It is about a tradition in Northern Europe, which we also meet in the case of Finland, the morning meeting at church. As in the case of Finland, in Sweden there have been sensitive discussions regarding this religious tradition and not only, in addition to this, the practice of yoga in school (For more information on these situations that have sparked controversy dissatisfactions with parents and higher fora see at: Niemi 2018, 184-186).

Nowadays, the status of the religion class is passed through the filter of the vision of students, who have a hard say on various issues about faith (Naeslund 2009, 227). Similar to Finland, in Sweden, the ethics class is present in the high school students' timetable, through a local program that provides them the opportunity to have classroom activities and open debates (Naeslund 2009, 227-228). From what has been presented so far, we can see very clearly that Sweden is a secular country, dominated by neutrality in relation to religious education in public schools (Niemi 2018, 189).

The perception that religion is a constitutive of society and must be addressed within the general education system seems to discover a growing political agreement in Europe. This is due to religious plurality at European level. The Council of Europe points out the importance of the role of religion in facilitating an intercultural dialogue on "... safety and promotion of human rights, democracy and the role of law" (Council of Europe 2008, 8).

The Council mentioned above organizes meetings attended by representatives of cults with the aim of exchanging ideas regarding education, peace and Human Rights. In *The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, the Council of Europe emphasizes the role of intercultural dialogue: "...It allows the prevention of ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural division. It allows us to deal with our different identities constructively and democratically based on shared universal values". The same council demonstrates that religious education at primary and

secondary levels has a substantial contribution in understanding religions, their history and in avoiding prejudices (Klutz 2016, 24).

For more than a decade, the European Education Ministers have signaled the importance of measures in order to improve understanding between cultural or religious communities through school education, on the basis of common principles of ethics and democratic citizenship. Regardless of which religious education system dominates, education must take into account religious pluralism and cultural diversity (Klutz 2016, 24-25; Council of Europe 2008, 30-31). We note that religion is seen as a cultural act that favors intercultural dialogue between students, people living in a society that is in a permanent growth of religious pluralism.

The presence of RE in European Public Schools is a strong indicator of how Church – State and Church-School relations are built within a national framework (Willaime 2007, 57). To this are added other factors such as: demographic trends, religious affiliation of the population and the educational system (Klutz 2016, 29). In countries where national identity is closely linked to a confession (Willaime 2007, 57) (e.g. Greece – Orthodoxy, Italy – Catholicism, Denmark – Lutheranism, Finland - Lutheranism and Orthodoxy) repercussions can be observed in the way education is defined and understood, particularly religious education. In this regard, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe mentions that religious knowledge is needed in public school education (Willaime 2007, 59).

Conclusions

During the research about the models of approach in religious education, I became more and more aware that it was wanted to go in the direction of religious education classes to be taught in a purely descriptive, non-confessional, ideological manner. The distinctions between the approaches and models of teaching religion are highlighted in each member state of the European Union through particular contexts. Contexts that take into account other aspects that are closely related to educational values: the relationship between religious cults and the State,

social, political, economic and cultural factors, the non-confessional model of teaching religion is also found in France, a country where education is perceived only at the level of information and does not have a religious specific. The non-denominational model and approach is also found in other member states of the European Union: Estonia, Ireland, The Netherlands, Sweden. As we have seen, the non-denominational model of organizing the religion class is supported and promoted by the state, and the curriculum, the training of teachers, the materials are made under exclusively secular tutelage. Thus the non-denominational model of teaching religion is at the opposite pole of the confessional model. The denominational or confessional model implies a Christian religious education, a model of education that centers on God, The Model and Source of holiness and moral values.

The presence of the religion class in the European education system highlights a progress both in terms of model or approach and in the fact that religion has found its perfection through the Son of God embodied out of love for men: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life". (John 3, 16).

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