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Religious Education in Latvia. Current Situation.

Church and Religious Context

The market and public opinion research centre "SKDS" implemented public opinion research about the question: do you believe in God? (2009, March). The results were that 42, 3% of people believe in God and consider themselves Christians, 31, 5% - believe in God but do not consider themselves as a Christians, 18, 5% of respondents do not believe in God and 7,7% cannot answer this question. If we look at these results we can say that Latvians are more religious than atheistic people as we could have expected from a post- Soviet country.

For better interpretation it is possible to compare these results with statistics about religious communities in Latvia.

Here is a table of dynamics of religious organization on the territory of Latvia. Statistics accounted by Central Statistical Bureau (CSB)¹:

Religions registered by the state	Number of parishes 1990	Number of parishes 1995	Number of parishes 2000	Number of parishes 2005	Number of parishes 2009
Lutheran	252	297	302	305	297
Roman Catholic	187	197	247	251	_ ²
Orthodox	89	108	114	118	119
Baptist	61	79	87	92	93
Pentecostal	7	51	81	48	52
Old Believers	65	55	66	67	68
Adventists	28	43	46	50	51
Evangelicals	-	-	-	33	41
New Generation	-	9	16	15	17
National paganism	-	-	13	11	11

¹ PR14. REGISTERED RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS BY DENOMINATION. -

<http://data.csb.gov.lv/DATABASEEN/visp/Annual%20statistical%20data/24.%20Politics%20and%20religion/24.%20Politics%20and%20religion.asp>

² Roman Catholic Church did not submit their statistics about the year 2009

Methodists	-	6	10	13	13
New Apostolic	-	1	11	11	11
Jehovah Witnesses	-	-	10	13	14
Vishnavites	-	1	10	11	11
Jewish	4	6	7	13	12
Islam	-	3	6	14	15
Buddhists	-	5	3	4	3
Mormon	-	-	3	4	4
other	-	2	17	37	47
Total	693	864	1058	1120	887

If we look at the first group of respondents who answer that they believe in God and consider themselves Christians, it includes mostly Lutherans, Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, Baptists and Old Believers and some smaller Christian groups like Methodists, Pentecostals, Adventists etc.

Another research of SKDS shows us proportions between the dominant Christian denominations. Respondents answered the question: Which faith do you affiliate yourself with? The following table shows us the dynamics of people's views:

Denomination	2000	2001	2003	2005
Orthodox	21,8 %	18,9 %	25,1 %	24,1 %
Roman Catholic	18,8 %	22,3 %	21,2 %	20,7 %
Lutheran	27,6 %	23,8 %	24,7 %	20,0 %
Old Believer	-	2,7 %	2,7 %	4,4 %
Baptist	1,4 %	0,8 %	2,1 %	1,0 %
Adventist	0,2 %	0,4 %	0,3 %	0,5 %
Jewish	0,6 %	0,1 %	0,1 %	0,0 %
I consider myself to be a believer, but am not affiliated to any denomination	9,7 %	12,8 %	9,3 %	10,6 %
Non believer	17,5 %	17,7 %	11,9 %	15,8 %
Other	2,0 %	0,5 %	0,3 %	1,0 %
Do not have an answer	0,5 %	0,0 %	2,3 %	1,7 %

We could say that three dominant Christian denominations are Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran. It is a radically different situation from other Baltic countries, and it is not possible compare this three states in regard to the religious context.

Such a complicated religious context has caused difficulties in decision-making in every sphere of life of the society, but the most difficult situation is in the field of education where all denominations and religions have their own interests.

School: Normative base

The same public research organization SKDS conducted research about the public attitudes toward Christian Education and Ethics in March, 2004. 67 % of parents answered that they would choose Ethics as subject for their children. 23 % of parents said that they would like to choose Christian Education. This research was done because of the reform in values education.

Since 2004 every 1st grade student's parent must choose (compulsory choice) between Christian Education (24,3% in 2004) and Ethics. There was about 18% who choose Christian education in 2009. Christian Education here is understood as ecumenical (non-confessional) Christian teaching based on a dogmatic content. Here is a logical and theological contradiction – ecumenical education where all denominations and their dogmas, traditions are equally taught. During observations in the classrooms it is possible to see that teachers present mostly their own traditions by teaching what is important in their own denomination. National curriculum and syllabi was developed by representatives of 5 main denominations – Orthodox, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Baptist and Old Believers – by one pastor/priest and one teacher from each tradition.

In addition, according to the Law, it is possible to teach Christian Faith Teaching (confessional approach) if 10 students or their representatives (parents) will require to have this subject in the school. The same rule is used in the minorities' schools with their own religious teaching.

Even we have the national curriculum in Christian education, Ministry of Education doesn't like to take responsibility about religious education in general. The Ministry delegates responsibilities to the churches, and it means that the broader debates about RE model in public schools does not include all groups of interests – other religious communities, parents, non-believers, academics, etc.

Church and school

Churches have strong lobbies in the government, including the Ministry of Education, through lay people. This makes decision-making process in religious education more political and economical than theological. Relations between the Faculty of Theology at the University of Latvia and churches became problematic because the Faculty was implementing an ecumenical policy in regard to the sense of belonging. Here come Christian students and students with different denominational and religious backgrounds, even non-

religious ones. It is the reason why the expertise of the Faculty in the field of religious education is often ignored by the churches. Sometimes the Ministry of Education asks for some comments about the values education in general. For example, there was a plan to reduce Ethics as a subject in favour of the English language beginning with the 1st grade. This would have influence on Christian Education in the current form in regard to the time management aspect in the schools.

The Faculty of Theology has its own vision about the directions of work in religious education:

1. To work with society in general toward developing religious competence, especially in the situation of the post-Atheistic worldview of the society, even in the segments that are considered religious;
2. To work on modelling religious education in public school system together with different experts in all levels from all groups of interest;
3. To continue to support Christian Education teachers with teaching materials and further education programs.