

Dr. Iana Polykova at the round table IV ICCS Conference Prague June/July 2011 about the situation of Religious Education in Ukraine

Ukraine is one of the post-Soviet republics in Europe, where there is no religious education in state schools. I think it is a common problem for all post-Soviet space.

In Ukraine we are observing a lot of discussion concerning the implementation of certain elements of religious education in state educational institutions.

I'll try to reveal modern tendencies in religious education and possible ways of its development in Ukraine.

It is important to mention that in this country the recent years can be characterized by a growing interest of educationalists and the whole society on the cooperation between the state and religious organizations in the field of education.

There are a number of governmental and non-governmental organizations closely connected with the problem headed by the Committee of Ukraine on religious matters, All-Ukrainian council of churches and religious organizations.

But the question now is still open and teaching /or non-teaching the foundations of religious knowledge mainly depends on preferences, and sometimes financial possibilities of local or school administrations.

Multifaith and polyconfessional nature of Ukrainian society demands solving the problems caused by the growing religious and secular education opposition. It should be noticed that according to the data of All-Ukrainian Population Census (2001), more than 130 nationalities are represented in the country. For example, total number of population in Donetsk region (the largest and most densely populated industrial region in the Eastern Ukraine) was about 5 million, among them: Ukrainians 57 %, Russians 38%, Greeks 2 %, Bielorrussians 1%, Tatars 0,4%, Armenians 0.3%, Jews 0.2 % and other nationalities less than 0.2%. The All-Ukrainian Census of 2001 did not include the question of religion.

I should note that the problem of immigration is quite different from the European countries. All these people mostly came to Ukraine when it was the part of the Soviet Union, after October Revolution and after the Second World War, to work in the heavy industries (coal mining and metallurgy), which were necessary for the country's revival and development.

This multiculturality of Ukrainian society triggers attempts of comparative research in religious education, because many countries in different periods of their history faced the similar problems and had found successful ways of their solving.

Legal Foundations

To our great regret, there is no exact legislative foundation for it. The Constitution of Ukraine and Law on Education reject the possibility of integration of religious and secular state compulsory education.

The Law of Ukraine “On Education” was adopted almost at the same time (May 1991) as the Law of Ukraine “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” (April 1991), in the year of proclaiming Ukraine as an independent state. Due to it, educational process must be free from the influence of any religious organizations; the pupils or students must not be drawn in any religious activities during the educational process. Due to the current legislation, religious organizations can only teach religion in Sunday schools.

The system of non-state confessional religious education is also in the process of its formation, at present there are about 180 religious educational institutions, 12000 Sunday schools, representing different churches and religious organizations.

As for the state schools, the process is only in its beginning.

In modern-day Ukraine the urgent duty of state is to organize religious education in various forms and ways not only due to the realization of common European standards of human rights but to the interests of stability and progress of the independent country. These arguments made the Ministry of Education and Science undertake some steps towards religious education beginning from 2002 (Decision of 8 July, 2002, #1-1/607). Special Commission which included educational theorists, teachers, and representatives of different religions began its work in order to develop new sets of educational courses aimed at moral and religious education.

The work of the Commission resulted in Conceptual Foundations of moral and religious education in general compulsory education. This document defined aims and objectives of new subjects, principles of their organization and providing the teacher training.

The so-called subjects of moral and religious orientation are already being implemented in general compulsory education system as experimental programs in some of Western regions (Lvov, Ternopol, Ivano-Frankovsk, Rovno and others). Such subjects as “Christian Ethics”, “Christian Culture”, “Ethics: moral foundations”, “Foundations of the Orthodox Culture”, “Foundations of the Muslim Culture” are taught in one quarter of all public schools.

One of experimental programmes, Christian Ethics, developed by Lvov Regional educational authorities and Ostrozhskaya Academy, is strongly criticized in mass media and by many academic researches for its low scientific level and lack of adequate methods and techniques.

According to the Framework Curricula approved by the Ministry of Education and Science (September 2005) the pupils of 5-6 grades (years of education) began learning “Ethics” and / or other subjects of moral and religious orientation, up to his / her parents’ choice.

But it should be noted that the programme of the subject Foundations of Christian Ethics for years 5-6 of secondary school is in fact teaching catechism, it is not really ethics, but learning and promoting the foundations of religion.

Analysis of the first results of teaching Christian ethics in Western regions (Lvov, Ternopol, Rovno, Ivano-Frankovks) confirms the fact that this process not only contradicts the current legislation, but provokes negative reaction of parents, belonging to other religious preferences, representatives of other confessions.

The sociological research of Razumkov centre shows that public opinion concerning teaching religious ethics at state secondary schools strongly correlates to general religious situation in different regions. In western regions 60% of respondents approve compulsory learning of Christian ethics, however the other regions support optional, voluntary learning of Christian ethics (central regions – 47%, southern – 53 %, eastern – 43 %).

So we can say that teaching of Christian ethics demands additional consulting and agreeing with normative documents, concerning compulsory secondary education. Because National Curriculum (state standards) already includes such subjects as ethics (5-6 year), Man and environment, Man and society for 10-11 years, foundations of philosophy.

The subjects of moral and religious orientation on the whole correspond to the basic documents of European Council, OSCE and other intergovernmental organizations. However, we should admit that Ukrainian educational policy-makers, not to mention school teachers, who implement state policy in the field of religious education, are not able in full measure to use European documents, achievements and experience in the field of religious education.

To implement the cooperation of secular and religious education declared by the state in public schools, it is necessary to:

- develop curricula for religious education; based on the ground of religious tolerance and not obligatory (optional); with their subsequent implementation in the system of secondary and higher education;
- join and coordinate efforts of educators and representatives of religious organizations within the research field;
- develop the system of teacher training for religious education through organization of seminars, conferences and publishing of educational materials.
- promote the study of European experience in religious education.