

## Freedom Of Conscience And Religion in Schools PL

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### **ANALYSIS OF LETTERS, EVIDENCE AND PRESS INFORMATION**

Analysis of letters, evidence and documents being in „Neutrum's" possession serves as an addition to the partial sociological survey carried out under „Freedom of conscience and religion in public school" program. These are the materials signalling some abnormalities that occurred during the period 1990-1995, i.e. after when religion classes had been introduced to public schools as well as opinions and feeling of people considering themselves victimized.

Additionally, for the years 1994-95 we have analyzed 110 press clippings related to the issue, in order to throw more light on the situation. These are mainly the stories from country-wide press (Gazeta Wyborcza, Polityka, Rzeczpospolita, Słowo, Sztandar Młodych, Trybuna, Wprost, Życie Warszawy) and some stories from local press.

### **Letters and evidence**

The biggest wave of letters, from the years 1990-92, was a direct reaction to introducing religion to public schools and to instruction (1990) and the order (1992) issued by the Education Ministry. The lists and protests related to: the fact that the decisions were not consulted with anybody, that means subjective and non democratic approach towards parents, children and teachers; necessity to declare that a child is not going to attend religion; place, time and frequency of religion classes; that a school's conditions and an opinion of majority were not taken into account; that religion grades are on school certificates; that religious symbols and practices are present in school; the way how religion is conducted by catechists; cases of discrimination and intolerance towards those of different views; lack of proper care of children who do not attend religion. The main motives of the letters were violation of freedom of conscience and religion, what many people consider the way how religion was introduced to schools. However, the current letters and evidence prove that the problems didn't disappear, that they were turned into a sort of habit and very often there is a lack of confidence that anything can be changed. We still receive information that some schools and kindergartens require written declaration that a child will not attend religion, protests against two hours of religion per week with one hour of history, and about parents' helplessness to influence the situation. There are continuous protests against a black line instead of a grade on certificates, against hanging crucifixes in classrooms, although neither pupils nor parents ask for it. There are also some signals that children who do not attend religion lack proper care, and about persecution of other religions than Roman-Catholic.

### **And some new problems have appeared.**

Parents who are non-believers, who decide to send their child for religion classes not to make it feel different and unhappy, complain that the way of teaching turns the child against them (for instance, the child is told to be a sinner, because who do not attend masses is a sinner; the child's father is presented as an example for prodigal son), because in Polish schools religion teaching is inseparably related to regular Church-going and religious practices.

On the other hand, parents-believers complain about low pedagogical level of the catechists, that the children have to memorize formulas they don't understand and that it is impossible to change the catechist without changing the school. Children lose heart for religion and school principals can do little about bad catechists. The situation that very often the general mark for behaviour is lowered because of missing religion, classes is perceived by secondary school students as ideological pressure. Missing 20 classes can mean cancelation from students' list. Students from one of secondary schools in Gdańsk say that nobody has even asked them whether they want to attend religion. There was also such a case when a school refused to take into account 17-years old student who refused to attend religion and whose parents did not express any opinion.

We have also some signals that a child is forced to attend religion in a kindergarten, in spite of clear statements of its parents. There are cases when children who do not attend religion are bothered by catechists, who persuade them to come. School principals do not introduce ethics, although the required number of seven people willing to attend exists, try to discourage students to ethics and even warn candidates' parents that non believers are not welcome and there is no intention to organize ethics. We have signals about secondary school students who are forced by their parents to attend religion, and about a case when 8-year old child was not sent to school because of crucifixes in classrooms. The child has private tutors. There are also cases when catechists give „morality" lectures to other teachers, („why do you have only one child?"). In Jelenia Góra a teacher, who is non believer was asked to carry out religion classes as a replacement.

Representatives of minority churches complain about their discrimination by state administration. Orthodox youth from the areas where this religion prevails have days off because of Orthodox Christmas that last shorter than in case of Catholic Christmas. There are problems with getting a grade from religion if children attend the classes outside school. Participation of catechists of other religions in school councils is almost impossible. Some representatives of minority religions state that each child should have a right to its own religion, even being the only one in school. They also think that local solutions between the Catholic Church and parents, without looking up to the Education Ministry, would solve the problem.

### **Press information**

The analysis covers not only press clippings directly dealing with the threats for freedom of conscience and religion and related issues, like a right to information and parents' right to upbringing their children according to their own beliefs, but also those related to some elements of the Education Ministry policy, general situation in schools and polls on the issue in question.

#### **1. Sexual education in schools**

The biggest number of clippings related to sexual education in schools. We added this issue to our program, for the disputes resulting from the issue clearly have ideological character: protests against sexual education base on the argument that freedom of conscience and religion of Catholics have to be respected.

The described controversies related to the program by W.E. Papis „Life and love", especially to her book „Growing up to wisdom", the Ministry's project to propagate responsible parenthood and to the book by Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz and Kazmierz Szczerba „Modern sexual education". The disputes reflect overpowering conflict between two concepts of sexual education: to inform according to the latest scientific results or to teach according to Roman-Catholic Church doctrine. For instance, the fact that Lew-Starowicz book shows different types of contraception, with their positives and negatives, without any evaluations, was decided by the reviewer to be its main shortcoming, because of relativity of values. On the other hand, the reviewers of the manual close to Church idea, as its main fault list the fact that the book informs only about natural methods, without mentioning their negative sides.

Both sides of the conflict, „Church side" and „liberal side" agree on general idea that it is necessary to discuss the subject in schools. However the Ministry states in its publications that the first move should be done by parents, and bishop Tadeusz Pieronek prefers "awkwardness of parents that irresponsibility of teachers. The problem is that, according to all polls, the parents do not realize their tasks: more than half of young people does not discuss the issue with their parents; 86% of Poles thinks that school should be responsible. The Education Minister seems to treat the views of Catholic bishops and very conservative Catholic circles as representative for Catholic parents, although has no grounds to do so. In result, in spite of the legal duty to introduce such a subject to schools and clear will of both parents and students, is reluctant to do so.

Critical words from a bishop was enough for the Education Ministry to reject already accepted manual „Modern sexual education". On the other hand, non-religious organizations' arguments are not enough to reject widely criticized book „Growing up to wisdom".

In result of engaging education into ideological disputes, young people are deprived of a right to information on such important issues like reproductivity and all sexual issues, including information on AIDS. Every fourth pupil did not have any sexual education in school.

#### **2. Students' views are not respected, the views of others are imposed**

The above mentioned book by W.E. Papis, recommended by the Education Ministry, is the best example of indoctrinating manual. Except of sexual education, it also deals with general education issues. For 37 teachers from Warsaw suburb, 26 stated that the book is manipulative. The author even proves the existence of God, although the book is not to be used for religion classes, but for tutorials.

The decision of one school principal to hang up crucifixes in classrooms, made without taking into consideration the students' opinion, was a reason of conflict in one of Warsaw suburb schools.

A reaction of another school principal in Warsaw to Aleksander Kwaśniewski's victory in trial presidential election among students can also serve as an example of forcing somebody's own views: Father, how could they do it to us?

### **3. A right of parents and students to participate in school-related decision making**

School councils, in theory, give such a possibility (one third -teachers, one third — parents and one third — students) as well as parents' councils. In practice, the parents' councils can not do anything in terms of religion. Taking schools over by local self-governments gives some hopes. The education law, adopted in October 1995 by Warsaw-Centre local self-government, assumes gradual widening of parents rights. In Holland, for instance, the education minister can not issue any order without the consent of the central parents' council. The establishment of the organization was inspired by the minister.

Parents in polls: one of three is willing to take into account child's opinion on religion in primary school; more than a half -in a secondary school. 70.9% of Poles want to teach their children moral value; only 43.1% want to teach them that family is of the highest importance; 70% thinks that young people should have free access to books; 58% — that young people can make their own decisions about attending or not attending church; 44% — that they can chose other religion. But there are also parents (and teachers) supporting neo-fascist organizations and parents who defend a teacher who beat his pupil. That is why the extent and principles of parents' influence on school should be precised.

### **4. Discrimination**

Members of a free-thinkers association after asking the Education Minister why ethics is being discriminated against in schools, received the answer that their association is not a religious organization.

There are protests against „black line" instead of grade on religion/ethics and no alternative classes for children who do not attend religion: I spend this hour in a cloak room; a librarian told me she didn't want „such" help. There are also no alternative classes during pre-Easter period of retreat. One school in Warsaw would not like such classes to be a competition to religion.

### **5. Violation of other children's rights, privileged situation of catechists**

Violation of children's rights by teachers by violating the freedom of conscience and humiliating children is another serious threat: physical force is used, as well as psychical terror. A lot of examples show that it is difficult for a child or parents to win over a school or teachers, and even more difficult — over a catechists. Here even school principals are helpless. In three described cases when children were beaten, and one case of sexual harassment, catechists took no responsibility, first three are still teachers and the fourth one was moved to other parish.

In addition, we have heard about cases when school bulletins were closed down because they „hurt religious feelings" and cases when students were expelled from the school because they did not vote for a „right" candidate during presidential election.

### **6. Civic education, democratic education**

Relatively numerous texts discussed civic education issues, experiments with new methods of education. Covering with civic education children, teachers and even parents is one of the best guarantees that pluralism will be respected, including freedom of conscience and religion. But even here there is some resistance form conservative circles, because of too much of freedom given to young people. Young people, when asked during civic education classes, answered that they would like to decide by themselves whether to attend religion or

not. About an experimental school with no grades, a priest said during a mass that a child of a good Christian should not attend such school. His argument: I am not sure that such school prepares young people to real life. The Ministry's representative has also expressed his doubts: would not such a situation when students are treated like partners during one classes and like subordinates during the others, be schizophrenical?

## **7. Critical opinions of the Church side on religion in school**

There are some critical thought on this side, too. Marek Pieńkowski: „All people I spoke to, people who are "conscious believers", expressed very negative opinions on religion in schools". There is no right climate, no right atmosphere. The distance between young people and parish becomes longer. There is a need for outside-school religion classes for students from these few schools where there is no religion or for those having bad relationship with catechists, but have no choice. A student: 60% of the class does everything to disturb religion. An organizer of parish youth groups: They attend religion, because their parents order them. An anonymous priest: The Church overdid it organizing retreat in place of school classes. The results: half of children do not come to church, choosing three days off instead. In addition, part of them would prefer retreat in a parish close to their home, not to their schools.

### **Conclusions and suggestions:**

Judging by the letters, evidence and press information, three main areas of conflict can be noticed: One of them is related to detailed, individual cases of discrimination in schools (and kindergartens) against non-believers, religiously indifferent children or those who belong to other churches.

Organizational changes could be a big help, like cancellation of the religion grade on school certificates, alternative classes for those who do not attend religion, retreat during afternoons. It would be useful to cover as many teachers as possible with education on basic human rights. In the future this knowledge should become a necessary element to be qualified as a teacher.

It would be necessary to widen young people's rights to decide on some their problems earlier than after being 18-years old. The second group of problems relates to how religion is taught, to catechists' qualifications and to how they report to school authorities. The consequences are equally painful for Catholics and for those who attend religion because of conformity or fear of discrimination. Also for the children's parents.

The best solution for both sides of the conflict would be re-opening some class-rooms in parishes. Believers would have a choice where to attend — in school or in parish. On the other hand, the absence would not mean resignation from religion. Non believers or students from other churches would not be under the pressure that makes them attend religion. The third group of conflicts relates to the whole concept of education, i.e. two competitive models of education: Catholic and liberal. After analysing the statements made by the Church representatives and polls' results we can see some discrepancy: the Church, demanding more parents' influence over their children's education, makes such statements on their behalf and considers itself to be their representative; but sociological surveys show that in many issues it represents the views of minority. Most of parents seem to favour liberal educational model.

Some representatives of the Church see the situation more realistically. Bishop Kazimierz Nycz said during one meeting: „In large cities less than 1/2 of religion classes are children from religious families. There are also such children, who come only because they were not brave enough to leave. How many people walks the way of inertia and tradition?" But even the conclusions made by these Church representatives, or in relation to the above situation, or in relation to „the unusual wave of anti-clericalism that passes through schools" (priest Jerzy Bagrowicz), are aimed at „more integration of religion with school and education in general" — it seems that the Church's pressure on education will increase. It creates a threat to the pluralistic model of school education, being the best guarantee of freedom of religion and conscience as well as the right of minorities and majorities will be respected and that the open society principles will be implemented in practice. The threat becomes even bigger for the Education Ministry has not treated all religion in a similar way and did not show equal readiness for positive thinking.

The related problems should become a subject of social and parliamentary debate. In result, the character of school should be defined, as well as degree of parents' influence, way of manuals' qualifying, school responsibility for catechists' behaviour, etc. Many of pathological phenomena could be limited if school authorities on different levels showed more good will. It

is not an argument to reject postulates brought by Free-thinkers' Association because it is not a religious association. The same relates to Christmas holidays for Orthodox children.

The problem of cancelling grading religion on final school certificates is also a matter of good will on the Education Ministry side, according to the postulates of religious minorities and representatives of organizations of non-believers. Under the situation when it is a symbolical issue for one side while the other perceives it as a threat — there are no doubts which solution would be better.

Reduction of some negative phenomena is also a matter of good will on the Roman Catholic authorities' side, for it is up to them to re-open some catechesis centers in parishes and to organize retreat during afternoons. There is also a problem of children — non-believers or of other religions who attend religion. Because their participation is not mandatory, it is up to the Church again to make catechists more sensitive to their situation; not to hurt their feelings and not to antagonize them and their parents.

## **SUMMARY**

In the individual parts of the report we presented the results of the survey how freedom of conscience and religion is respected in public schools. In this part we will try to summarize the most important points.

The survey shows that religious motivation, in all types of schools and regions covered by the survey, is the most important one that makes children participate in religion classes. The survey revealed some mechanisms of conformity and social pressure related to religion. Although the phenomena are expressed in few percent of declarations, it should be remembered that the percents give quite large real numbers.

2a. The first dimension of conformity and pressure relates to a family. The situation of children from the last grades of primary schools is the most difficult — according to the legal regulations they still can not make their decision themselves. The situation of secondary school students seems to be better, but only theoretically — until they are mature (18) the decision should be made together, by students and parents. But at the same time every fifth respondent declares that the decision was made without his/her participation and every fourteenth — that his/her participation in religion classes is forced by parents.

2b. The results of the questions related to teachers' activity are less worrying. It relates mainly to the fact how they respect the freedom of conscience and religion in school. But although teachers try to keep their views for themselves, the same can not be told about the way how schools organize religion classes.

2c. School functioning. Our information shows that in about half of the schools organizes religion classes are organized in the middle of the day. Those who do not attend religion, either stay in the classroom, or stay outside: corridor, library or even outside the school building.

The situation causes problems. In case of smaller children such practice can generate negative processes: children feel to be „different" or „strange".

Organizing religion in the middle of the day agenda arises some doubts from the pedagogical point of view: schools do not provide effective and valuable pedagogical care.

Nevertheless the results of the survey do not give us the right to state that both school and teachers purposefully force children to participate in religion classes. However, the mere situation in schools, irrespectively to school personnel intentions, creates some pressure.

2d. Irrespectively to the influence of the family, teachers and education system, participation in religion classes is also caused by „cultural conformity". The fact that religion became a part of state institution caused, among its opponents, not only protests, but — more often — adaptation processes. Although one third of students think that religion should be taught outside school (in parishes), at the same time majority of them attend religion. They are led by conformity towards their parents, school, but mainly towards unmeasurable, but well-felt climate of „people on the street" opinions. Religion, becoming a part of school curriculum, is perceived as a condition for smooth functioning in the adult world.

Fear of discrimination or troubles that might be caused in the future by not-attending religion is declared by every fourth person who attends religion. It means that catechesis is a very important school subject from the future biography point of view. It is not important whether it is true or not, but what matters is a cultural climate that creates such beliefs. For many students — as questionnaires and interviews show — grading religion on final certificates

forces, to some degree, their participation in religion classes. From this point of view it is not always easy to contest religion in school.

2e. Conformity towards peers is probably the weakest of pressures. „Friendly indifference" is dominating attitude. It should be stressed, however, that it relates to older students. The attitudes of younger children were not measured. Although conformity that results from a feeling of threat from the peers is not an important motivation from statistical point of view, different statements about cases of intolerance are worrying. As the interviews show, the situation of children in primary schools is more difficult.

3. Alternative possibilities for students who do not attend religion were to be a guarantee that freedom of conscience and religion would be respected. The survey shows that in practice there is no such alternative. Only 0.9% of respondents declared participation in such activities.

On the other hand, students do not show any initiative to organize such activities, and school authorities do not provide such offers.

4. Right manuals are a condition for school free from indoctrination. Although the term „indoctrination" is not very clear, the reviews of school manuals show that many of them do not meet the standards. Part of the manuals recommended for philosophy and tutorials can be used only with limitations, part of them was decided to be used „only during Catholic religion classes or for tutorials in Catholic schools".

5. Conflicts around religion in school were at first related to the whole idea of education system in democratic state, meaning where religious and ideological values should be placed in school system. It was a dispute on separation between the state and the Church. The dispute was well seen in press publications and statements made by different groups involved. During last two, three years the number of protests against religion in schools decreased and their contents relate mainly to violation of the regulations than the regulations themselves.

The mentioned letters, evidence and press information can be divided into three groups of conflicts: Individual cases of discrimination of children who are non-believers or who are of religions other than Roman-Catholic. The way how religion is taught, qualifications of catechists, unclear system of reporting within schools.

The main group of conflicts relates to the whole concept of school: Catholic or liberal. The analysis of statements made by the Church authorities and of polls results show that sociological legitimation of the Church to represent the interests of Catholic part of the society can be easily questioned.

The interviews show that school conflicts around religion seldom become public. The sides of the conflict are interested in hushing them down and their informal settlement. The reason why parents and young people give up is usually a fear that the conflict might have negative impact on the child. The child's sake is the main argument as well as conviction that „nobody can win over the school". The situation of agnostics, atheists and people of other religion is especially difficult. Sending their children to religion classes (to save them stresses related to not attending), they have a feeling that this is not their autonomous choice and that their right to bring up their children according to their own beliefs have been violated.

The answers given by the respondents show insufficient knowledge of legal regulations, both by teachers and school principals as well as by the respondents themselves. In result, the Ombudsman office has no information about such phenomena (in spite of few cases), same the plenipotentiary for students' rights. Local school authorities, churches and religious organizations do not collect such information either. The fact how freedom of conscience and religion is respected in schools is not officially monitored.

## **PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS**

Human rights issues, because of their nature, cannot be directly resulting from statistical data (although these data, in some areas of school and family life, clearly showed that some threats to the freedom of conscience and religion exist). In Polish schools and Polish families there are cases of overt — and as the survey showed — covert forms of pressure and conflicts related to religion in public schools. It justifies search for solutions to improve the situation. Now we will try to define the proposals, supported by empirical research.

Many of the mentioned pathological phenomena could be easily reduced if education authorities at all levels have more good will, treating all views in the same way and show more positive thinking regarding their representatives.

The proposed changes are pragmatic ones, it means they do not take into account the whole issue of religion presence in public schools. The majority of the proposed solutions can

be introduced without changing the existing regulations. Part of them stays within a scope of education and Church authorities' competencies, the other part depends on school principals and catechists. Their aim is to minimize conflict situations related to religion classes in public schools. The changes would reduce — as we hope — a number of difficult situations and at the same time would be beneficial to all interested parties (for the problem relates to Catholic students as well).

### **I. We suggest, within a scope of education authorities competencies:**

1. To cancel religion grade on the final school certificate. The postulate meets the expectations of religious minorities and representatives of non-believers, for whom „the black line" instead of the grade means a violation of the right not to declare somebody's religion. It is even perceived as a threat to a child's future. The change would weaken a pressure that imposes, in some cases, participation in religion classes. We also think that if the conformity indicators declared in the questionnaire reflect actual data, it would be useful to diminish such pressure. It would be according to the principle, so often announced by education and Church authorities, that the choice to attend or not to attend religion is fully autonomous.
2. To comply with the principle that religion is organized as the first or the last class. Such a solution — as statistical analyses show — would have no influence on the religion attendance, and would solve many problems of those who do not attend religion.
3. To introduce a lecture „religious knowledge" as an alternative subject into school curricula (at the level of secondary schools), according to young people preferences.
4. To provide students with good, attractive offer and to inform them, in the beginning of a school year, about alternative possibilities.
5. To make school authorities, tutors and catechists familiar with the existing legal regulations related to religion in public schools.
6. In the beginning of the school year to inform both parents and children about the legal regulations related to attendance or not attendance of religion classes.
7. To execute the order to provide proper pedagogical care for those students who do not attend religion.
8. To cancel, the following items from the list of recommended manuals:
  - for ethics and philosophy: „Ethics" by P. Jaroszyński
  - auxiliary book for Polish language in primary schools „Children can be seen, but not heard. Your voice on God, religion and ghosts" by J. Tarnowski and another auxiliary book by W.E. Papis „Growing up to wisdom"
  - auxiliary books for sexual education: „In search of true love", by M. Ombach and „I am going to mature love" by T. Król.
9. To introduce new methods of qualifying books to be used by schools. To define basic, clear principles the books should meet.
10. To define school's responsibility for its catechists behaviour.
11. Because lack of children's rights awareness is very often the reason why these rights are violated, it would be recommended to provide as large number of teachers as possible, especially school principals, with basic training on human rights.

### **II. Proposals addressed to the Parliament**

1. To clearly define that school education is based on pluralism that does not favour any ideology.
2. To widen children's and young people's rights to decide about some issues earlier than they are officially mature (18 years old). A withdrawal of Poland's declaration attached to the documents ratifying the Convention of children's rights would be the first step (declaration refers some children's rights to their parents will). Whether some negative phenomena will be reduced depends also on a good will of the Catholic Church authorities. To re-open some catechetical centers in parishes and to organize religion in afternoons, according to some postulates heard within the Church itself, would be beneficial to both sides of the conflict.

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