

Eastern and Western European RE: similarities, differences and learning from each other

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Introduction

It is debatable to be asserted that religious education (RE) can be »western« or »eastern«, even if we mean the western part of Europe and the eastern part: RE is simply the teaching of religion to pupils and students of different ages, and differing features of this school subject relate to the different approaches to teaching RE and not as much to the territorial difference between the various types of RE..

However, while observing the different approaches to RE in Europe, we could also speak of western and eastern European types of RE. The difference comes first of all because of the decades of persecutions of any religion in the eastern European countries in the 20-th century up to 1989 when changes took place and these countries got their freedom. Then came the struggle of introducing RE at school where in most of the eastern European countries we first saw a return of the old catechetical RE instruction and then the subject started to obtain more and more open and tolerant toward the other faiths approach. Even today the eastern European RE still seeks its proper forms and content while in the western part of the continent teaching RE has not been interrupted.

On the other hand we need to say that RE in the two European parts cannot be called »western« or »eastern« because today this school subject has adopted similar characteristics and features under the influence of the new democratic developments and the context of the multicultural and multireligious composition across Europe. The processes of globalisation and restructuring of societies take place in all countries of the world, and especially in Europe, and these brought some tendencies of unification of the ways in which religion and secularism are currently perceived.

Yet, we are still observing differences between the eastern and the western European countries in terms of economics, social cohesion, political developments, etc. In the same way, we can see differences in the approaches to teaching RE: generally, the facts show that the more democratic and economically and socially cohesive a country is, the more the approach to teaching RE is open and tolerant, and the more ethnic-based and less developed a country is, the more the approach to RE is exclusive and not tolerant.

In this way, as we can observe both differences and similarities between the western type of RE and the approaches used in Eastern Europe, let us briefly discuss which are the main of them. And not only looking at the differences and similarities but also thinking of the ways in which we could learn from each other.

1. Eastern Europe: brief overview

In nowadays “google-societies” there is less and less need for specific geographical (or any other) descriptions of countries and world’s regions: the details of all these are out there, just at a one-click distance. However, sometimes we need to have a clear picture of facts and evidences without which it would be difficult for us to properly grasp the scope of current status or the changes that take place in one or another world’s region. In the same way, it is

always helpful to point out what we exactly mean when we say “Eastern Europe” (at least, in its opposition, or its addition, to the western part of the continent).

Eastern Europe used to include some 25 countries, where about 366 million people live representing some 50% of Europe’s total population and occupying about 50% of Europe’s overall territory. Historically and socially these countries have always been different from each other, this is why in fact we speak of four main eastern European regions:

a) Proper Eastern European countries: *Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova.*

b) Baltic countries: *Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania.*

c) Central European countries: *Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia.*

d) South-East European countries: *Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus.*

When speaking of RE in Eastern Europe, often Greece is also added to the south-east European group of countries, and we also need to take account of the former German Democratic Republic as well. The only country where RE in its “European” disguise is not represented is Azerbaijan where some 95% of the population are Muslims. And Turkey, which in political terms is often considered while talking European issues, has not been included in this research as well.



Even in the times of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, there have been considerable differences between these countries: the Baltic and the central European countries have been influenced by the West much more than the eastern and southeast European countries. This fact was confirmed by the “Hungarian revolution” of 1956, the “Prague Spring” of 1968, the Polish “Solidarity” trade union movement in the 1980s, and the “Baltic Chain of Freedom” and the “Singing Revolution” of 1987-1989. Such “more democratic tendencies” can now be observed even in the approaches to RE in these countries (that is, an RE which is more open and inclusive) in comparison to that of the other eastern European countries where RE continues to be generally traditionally confessional (with a couple of exceptions) and not as much inclusive.

Before going further with describing the different approaches to teaching RE, we need to say that in this article we mainly focus on eastern European Orthodox RE rather than the other types of RE, such as the Catholic or the Protestant or the Muslim. Out of the 366 million eastern Europeans, some 210 million consider themselves Orthodox (in 12 eastern European countries, including Russia, more than 80% of the population define themselves as Orthodox Christians), some 47 million feel they are Catholic, some 18 million are Protestant Christians and some 91 million belong to other faiths or are secular people. This statistics shows that the importance of Orthodoxy is big when speaking of eastern European RE.

2. Approaches to teaching religion at school

A. What differences can we observe in RE teaching in western and eastern Europe?

While comparing the approaches to RE teaching in the two parts of Europe, it seems that we can see much more differences than similarities. Often these differences may appear as opposing to each other RE features. Let us briefly mention some of them.

1) Western European approaches to teaching religion at school

While the countries of eastern Europe have been struggling for more than 20 years to define whether or not to introduce RE in their state schools, western Europe has a long and established tradition in RE teaching. The changes in society and the changed religious landscape and demographic tendencies, however, brought open (sometime hot) debates as to what type of RE is most suitable for the state (public) schools. This bore a multitude of approaches to RE based on various pedagogical, psychological, sociological, theological, etc., premises (such as *descriptive, hermeneutical, experiential, critical, constructive, narrative, interpretive, integrative, etc.* approaches, to mention some of them). The main characteristics of the “western” type of RE as developed in the last three to four decades can be defined as follows.

- a) Both confessional and non-confessional type of RE.
- b) Both obligatory and optional school subject.
- c) Generally, an alternative to RE school subject is offered (ethics, or similar).
- d) Good didactic basis of RE teaching and its textbooks.
- e) Various pedagogical, psychological, sociological, etc. approaches to teaching religion and secular worldviews.
- f) Inclusive RE teaching.
- g) Tendencies to secularisation of RE.

2) Eastern European approaches to teaching religion at school

Since the political changes in 1989/1990, in some of the eastern European countries RE was introduced as an optional school subject, and - only in two of them – as an obligatory one. The communist heritage and the level of social developments in these countries however made it possible that the type of RE, which we currently observe in this part of the continent, has somewhat different characteristics in comparison to what we find in the western part of Europe. In fact, we often find opposing features between the two approaches to teaching RE when we compare eastern with western European RE. Here are the main characteristics of the eastern European approaches to teaching RE as compared to the western ones.

- a) Confessional type of RE (except Estonia; Russia as a special case).
- b) Optional, not obligatory RE (except Greece and Romania).
- c) No alternative (parallel subject) to RE is offered (except Serbia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia; Russia as a special case).
- d) No adequate didactic basis for RE textbooks and teaching aids (except Greece).
- e) Close connections between RE and family, and between religion and culture.
- f) Generally exclusive RE teaching (with some exceptions).
- g) Keeping clear contrast between religious and secular.

B. What similarities can we observe in RE teaching in the two parts of Europe?

Although we can observe some differences in the approach of RE teaching between the two large parts of Europe, there are many more similarities. These are mostly defined by the general characteristics of RE as a school subject where the students, the teacher and the textbooks (the governmental requirements) relevantly correspond to each other. Here are only a few of the common approaches to teaching RE in the whole of Europe.

- a) RE started as confessional (faith-instruction) and then changed to more open, inclusive and tolerant school subject.
- b) RE teachers are eager to pass on to the children the values they share (or the values as found in the textbooks).
- c) RE keeps a balance between tradition and modern developments.
- d) Still RE is not fully established in the schools and its place and role is often debated and challenged.
- e) RE equally struggles to find its own “face” among the other school subjects and to adequately “respond” to the teachings of the other school disciplines, especially where they express purely secular or antireligious opinions and views.

3. Learning from each other

People often learn from their past experiences. In the past, we learned from our mistakes and also from our positive experience. The postmodern development of today’s Europe not always allows us to see the lessons of the past and to learn from them, and most societies are much more concerned with their current situation, with the view of the future, rather than with the past and the lessons we can learn from it.

On the other hand, the period of communist rule and of severe persecutions against religious people in eastern Europe made it also impossible for these societies to learn from the mistakes (as well as from the positive developments) of the western European societies; after the changes of 1989 the eastern European RE experts (including the ministries of education of the respective countries) and RE teachers had to learn a lot from their western counterparts. Here are the most significant lessons which they learned in the last twenty years.

- a) Teaching RE in a fair, tolerant and respectful way (not always “respectful” characterises RE in Greece, Romania, Macedonia, Serbia, Georgia, Poland, Belarus).
- b) Teaching RE based on solid didactic principles (not always good didactics are found in RE in Serbia, Bulgaria, Albania, Belarus, Ukraine, Macedonia, Romania).
- c) Preparing and publishing good RE textbooks and teachers’ aids.
- d) Achieving better interaction between the RE specialists and the churches, on one part, and the other religions and the government, on the other. Almost in all eastern European countries such an interaction is either missing or on a very low level (with some exceptions).
- e) Improving RE teacher training.
- f) Ensuring a better position for the RE teachers: in many of the eastern European countries the RE teachers are tremendously underpaid, and their work is underestimated, in comparison with the teachers of other school subjects.

The facts of functioning of the “eastern European type of RE” in the last twenty years showed that some experience has been gained which has specific features different from those of the western type of RE where in many of the countries we can observe a clear detachment between RE and the family, RE and the local cultural expressions and so on. In this way we

could also note some points of consideration which could be offered to the western RE experts and teachers as possible points of learning. Below are some of the lessons which can be learned from the eastern European RE.

- a) Keeping closer contacts between RE teaching and the families of the children (closer links between the schools and the families, whenever RE teaching is concerned).
- b) Putting emphasis on tradition and traditional values while considering modern developments in society.
- c) Developing approaches to teaching RE in closer connection with the religious organisations.
- e) Identifying what local cultural manifestations can be included in the RE content, thus serving the needs of the local community.
- f) Trying to put not so much emphasis on psychology and developmental (and behaviourist) theories but on simple moral and cultural values of the society/the community.

4. Points of consideration

While counting all pros and cons in RE teaching, it may be worth considering what we can do and achieve in RE, and what difficulties are there in our aspirations to conform to the requirements of governments and the state in general. We can think whether it is possible that:

- we teach RE in a fair, tolerant and respectful way and at the same time teach one's own tradition and the values of this tradition?
- we achieve a good balance between religious and non-religious (including secular) views on life in RE teaching?
- we reach equal and fair RE teaching for all the children in a country in the way we reach equal attitude of citizens towards the rule of law?
- we teach RE on the same national (nationwide) RE curriculum and RE standards while acknowledging local manifestations of religious and secular plurality?
- we teach RE according to European standards of RE teaching?

These are difficult questions and in many European countries churches, specialists and governmental and NGOs experts struggle with identifying relevant answers. No European country has found the best solution to teaching RE in the best possible way as to observing the rights and the freedoms of everyone in the classroom on an equal basis. This in fact applies not only to RE but also to other school subjects but RE is under special observation on the part of governments, NGOs and the society in general because of its ideological character which may greatly influence child's identity.

5. Two case studies

To be more concrete in our consideration of the issue of RE in eastern Europe, let us briefly present two case studies which reveal the difficult relations between religions and government (educational authorities) in establishing RE as a regular school subject in the state (public) schools. The two case studies have been seeking the answer to the question: "Is it the church or is it the government that failed to find common ground for introducing RE at the eastern European schools as an obligatory subject?" We can find that in some countries the church was irrelevant as to the social demand, and in other countries it was the government that never agreed to allow RE at its schools.

Let us take the examples of Bulgaria and Russia, and follow the main steps which were undertaken when the issue of introduction of RE at the state schools was raised.

Step 1: The Church insists on obligatory Orthodox RE teaching, the government doesn't agree.

Since early 1990s, the church in Bulgaria has always insisted that Orthodox RE should be introduced at the state schools as an obligatory school subject for every school child in the country. This claim has never been seriously considered by the governments because Bulgarian society is multireligious (Christians, Muslims, Jews and other believers live there) and multicultural.

Step 2: The Church has changed her stance and agreed with the other religions on the approach to RE.

Between 1998 and 2006, the church, together with the theologians, continued to develop materials for RE and over the years her stance changed, and the religious organisations in the country reached agreement as to introducing RE at school.

Step 3: The Government takes the issue in its own hands but fails to produce appropriate RE syllabuses.

In 2007, the then government agreed to consider the issue and they appointed their own RE Committee to the ministry of education to develop a concept and syllabuses for all school grades. In end-2007 it appeared that the Committee's theologians and historians produced quite inappropriate concept and syllabuses, and this was hotly debated in the public area and the media (including the TV).

Step 4: The Church and the other religions agreed on the best possible approach to RE teaching and proposed it to the Government.

The failure of the government urged the church to produce their own concept and syllabuses and to offer them to the education authorities. The church's approach envisaged an obligatory subject "Religion/Ethics" to be introduced for all school children where students could choose between their own religion (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) and ethics: a choice which the governmental Committee has not allowed the children.

Step 5: Government humiliated, takes decision to never again deal with the issue of RE in Bulgaria.

The government felt quite humiliated because of their failure and so they rejected any RE at school to be further discussed. In the next 2009 (after the parliamentary elections of July 2009) it became evident that the government will never again consider the issue of RE as introduced at the state school system. This is confirmed even by the current government which repeatedly promised to consider the issue and repeatedly remained silent when asked for practical action.

In this way, in Bulgaria we can see an able church (and able other religious bodies) and a too weak government that continues to reject any discussion about RE at school.

Quite the opposite was the attitude to the issue of RE in Russia.

Step 1: The Church insists on obligatory Orthodox RE teaching, the government doesn't agree.

The Russian Orthodox Church ROC has always insisted on introduction of an Orthodox Christian RE for all children in Russia, and the governments never agreed to such a claim. This opposition started in 1990 and continued up to 2008.

Step 2: New Patriarch, new hopes, but failure again.

Only with the coming of the new Patriarch in January 2008, the church seemed to have made some concessions but failed to develop an appropriate approach to RE at the state schools. The subject “Foundations of the Orthodox culture” has been introduced in many Russia’s regions and the church was convinced that there is no other alternative to it for the Russian children. Even such a subject like “Worldview” appeared but again the “worldview” was only considered to be Orthodox Christian worldview.

Step 3: Religions disagree, the government takes the issue of RE in its own hands.

Various meetings between the leaders of different religious organisations took place in 2007 and 2008 but they could not reach any agreement concerning the approach to RE teaching. This made the government take the issue in their own hands: by a presidential order of October 2009, a Committee of experts was formed and they developed a concept and syllabuses for RE at the state schools.

Step 4: The government gives the children a choice.

The approach the government took was similar to that of Bulgaria – religion or ethics to be chosen by the school children (or their parents) – while the Russian Orthodox church has never considered such a possibility for the children.

Step 5: The government, together with the religions, introduces an obligatory RE at the state schools.

In 2009/2010 school year, the government, in agreement with the religious organisations, introduced an obligatory RE for the children at the state schools: initially as an experiment, and since the autumn of 2012 – as a regular school subject, which is secular in character.

In this way in Russia we can observe a church which is incapable of engaging with proper religious-pedagogical (religious-educational) issues and a strong government which seemed to have found the best possible (so far) approach to RE at the state schools for such multicultural and multireligious society as the Russian society is.

6. The “Russian case” in the European RE teaching

Russia presents an interesting case in the European RE teaching. The brief history of establishing RE as a regular (obligatory) school subject, presented above, does not tell us what type of RE it is, and in what way it has been implemented in the schools. Here we present the main elements of the structure and content of the “Russian RE”.

a) Name of the RE school subject.

The school subject has been named “Foundations of religious cultures and of secular ethics”, or FRCSE. There is another equally popular name: “Foundations of the religious-moral culture of the peoples of Russia”.

b) Main characteristics.

- Introducing RE step by step: every year, two school grades will be included in RE, and by 2015/2016 all school grades will be embraced by the scheme (currently RE has been introduced only for grade 4, age 10-11).
- Cultural approach to teaching religion and secular outlooks of life.
- RE is a secular, not religious, school subject.
- RE is a moral-defining school subject.

- RE is only taught in closest connection with the child's family (or legal carers/representatives).
- RE is taught only by pedagogues and qualified teachers; no clergy or representatives of any religion are allowed to teach at the state schools.

c) Components of the RE.

Two main subjects: Religion and Ethics, with Religion being further specified: Foundations of *World religions* and Foundations of *Orthodox/Islamic/Jewish/Buddhist culture*. The subject of ethics is called *Secular Ethics*.

d) Structure of the RE syllabus and the lessons: three main modules (34 teaching lessons, 1 lesson a week).

The RE syllabus includes three main structural elements of the lessons:

- Introduction dealing with the religious/spiritual values and moral ideals in human life and in society (1 lesson).
- Main Course, consisting of: (a) Foundations of religious culture/of secular ethics: part 1 (16 lessons), and (b) Foundations of religious culture/of secular ethics: part 2 (12 lessons).
- Concluding Course: Religious traditions of the multinational peoples of Russia (5 lessons).

Two notes need to be made here:

- The actual number of teaching lessons is 30, while 4 others are left for summary, creative work and presentations during the final lesson.
- Lessons (a) of the Main Course teach the children about the general characteristics of culture, religion and secular ethics, and lessons (b) – about the specific religious expressions and cultural heritage of the region where the child lives.

e) Organisation, methodology and aims of RE teaching.

- All lessons are based on the same structural, methodological and didactic requirements/prerequisites (notwithstanding to which RE component they relate).
- The lessons of the Introductory Course and the Concluding Course (6 lessons altogether) are carried out with the whole class (that is, the children not divided by RE preference groups), which means that 18% of the time of RE teaching is spent together while the children share their experiences in learning their “own subject” during the other 82% of the teaching time (through presentations done by all the children in a team work).
- The contents of the three modules is based on three basic national values: *Motherland, Family, Cultural tradition*.
- The aim is to educate and bring up children as citizens of Russia who have adopted and are able to implement in their lives the moral and the worldview values of the Russian society (of its peoples).
- Children get general knowledge about the historical and cultural foundations of the different religions and/or the ethical secular systems.
- Children learn not only about their own religion and culture but also about the religion and the culture of all the other major religions and cultural expressions in the country.
- On the final lesson, children make presentations on the theme “Dialogue between cultures in the name of peace and social cohesion” where they all share experiences and knowledge gained in the course of learning their own type of RE.

f) Main principles of understanding RE as a cultural and moral-educating school subject.

- The traditional religions of Russia are viewed not so much as inherently religious (worldview's) systems as to being a cultural environment and a way of life.

- Children and young people need to know and to respect each other's cultural expressions (which include both their religious and secular worldviews).
- Teaching this type of RE aims to help children acquire (and put into practice) conscientious moral behaviour based on knowledge and respect of the cultural and the religious traditions of the peoples of Russia.
- Teaching RE is closely connected with the child's family and its cultural values: every lesson requires homework which is done together with the parents; parents may attend RE classes if they wish; parents are especially invited at the final lesson where the children as one class (not divided in groups, according to the RE component they have chosen to learn) make presentations on the main outcomes/findings of their knowledge/experiences about their own and the others' culture and worldviews.

The Orthodox understanding of salvation as a path and a process to spiritual perfection (theosis), and not as an act of faith or illumination, has been reflected in the understanding of the religions and their influence both on the individuals and the religious community in general. This understanding is reflected in the approach to teaching religion not as inherently religious system (or worldview perceptions) but as a cultural environment and a way of life.

g) Statistics.

In 2010 and 2011, some 42% of the children/parents chose ethics, some 30% - Orthodox culture, 18% - World religions, 9% - Islamic culture, 1% - Buddhist culture, less than 1% - Jewish culture.

In fact, such a choice is not representative as to the number/percentage of followers of the different religions or to the outcomes of children's learning these religions or secular ethics: often the choice is made under the influence of various circumstances, such as educational environment (type of school, participation in additional school activities, learning problems, etc.), parents' own inclinations/hesitations, the attitude to religion in general, belonging to specific ethnic group, etc. This statistics is not representative also because of the close inter-relationships between the six main components of the "Russian" RE and its general secular orientation where sometimes children would chose any type of RE because they are obliged to do so and not because of internal necessity.

The three major conferences (also called scholarly-practical conventions) of 18 October in Novosibirsk, 23 October in Rostov on Don, and 30 October in Moscow are going to show some of the successes and the challenges to this continuing testing period for the Russian approach to teaching RE at the state schools. More symposia are going to be held by the summer of 2013 when RE will be introduced also in other school grades and will become a "common" school subject on a par with all the other school subjects.

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