

## **THE FORMATIVE VALENCES' UTILIZATION OF THE LEARNING CONTENT FROM THE RELIGION EDUCATION CURRICULUM**

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**Abstract:** Defining the purposes of Religious Education is a complex process through the learning content is associated in an explicit way with pedagogical formulations agreed in a particular historical stage. The intention of these actions is to facilitate the utilization of the learning formative character of the religious content in different educational contexts. This study proposes an examination of the Religion syllabus elaborated after 1989, particularly at the content of learning. Formative level of learning content - which in Christianity is a unitary structure and it is centered on the Person and teachings of Jesus Christ - know different stages: some of its components are formative themselves and others become formative through the educational process proceeding with the aim to attain their knowledge and through the intellectual, emotional, volitional and action structures that are developing. Religious living may represent only the result of a set of feelings and personal experiences, possible by covering situations of life by educating the emotional component of students within the meaning of religious feeling superior, by learning and living the word. All this requires a curriculum that includes immutable values of Christianity in a structure as close to life changing experiences of new generations.

**Keywords:** religion, religious education, learning content.

### **1. The contemporary pedagogy and the formative-informative approach**

Defining the purposes of Religious Education is a complex process through the learning content is associated in an explicit way with pedagogical formulations agreed in a particular historical stage. The intention of these actions is to facilitate the utilization of the formative character of the learning content from religious content in different educational contexts.

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in themselves and others become formative through the educational process proceeding with the aim to attain their knowledge and through the intellectual, emotional, volitional and action structures that are developing (D. Opriș, M. Opriș, 2006, p. 9).

Periodically, with an intensity depending by the school year's period in which we are, the problem of changing school curriculum, especially in the sense of modernization and simplification, is returned to society through the media. For our part, we consider too convenient and scientifically unsupported the idea that a simplification solves such an important problem.

Since the early 20th century, John Dewey has pointed out the tend to overload the school syllabus with the information provided at the time of development of science. In his sense, the school subjects have a dual approach: one from the perspective of the scientist, the researcher developing field using specific methodology and the other from the perspective of teachers who implement the body of knowledge in a field in the children's life experience, providing opportunity to use their own potentialities for development.

The relation between the two approaches is not antagonistic, but neither a superposition one: *"As he presents to the scientist, the subject has not a direct relation to the children's actual experience. This is besides it. Here the danger is not just theoretical. We are threatened from all directions. The teacher and the pupil's book are competing to present the subject as presented to an expert"* (J. Dewey, 1977, p. 79).

The shortcomings of an approach that does not transpose the learning content in terms of life is reflected in three parts, which are closely related: the formalization of its content and its understanding as something to have to be stored to the prejudice of discovery and understanding, which leads to lack of motivation for study and to the atrophy of child logic (Ibid).

The same situation is found in the present, perhaps more acute, as a reflex to the information's explosion in all areas, actually makes more difficult the selection of learning content in all disciplines. In view of the distinguished professor Miron Ionescu, *"pedagogy of learning must always select the essentials and avoid what is fleeting and perishable in human knowledge, not to immerse the student's physical memory with what is available in public memory, in documentation centers and libraries, printed publications or videos that can be viewed"* (M. Ionescu, 2001, p. 28).

## **2. The relation finalities-contents in the Religion curriculum, after 1989**

If we analyze the content of the curriculum of Religious learning occurred after 1989, we find the same tendency to lead students to become *scholars*, to conversion them into specialists in theology, without a strong and explicit connection to real life and their learning experiences. Among the causes may be, at least for the beginning development of curricula in the post-December period, the lack of experience and the lack of specialists able to overcome the teaching theology in favor of the religion of the speculation and theorizing into the living and skills spiritual. It can also be considered as a *pardonable* activity, that from the beginning of '90s years, in the context of inability's training the teachers of Religion, action brutally interrupted in 1948 by the education reform.

To form a vision of how the religion learning content selection evolved in the next period, we present a brief analysis of school curriculum after 1989 that have changed gradually and simultaneously with the defining of the status of religion.

The syllabus for teaching Religion in school from 1990-1991 (Romanian Patriarchy, 1990) had a temporary character and aimed to familiarize the students from Ist to XIIth classes with the fundamental elements of Christian faith, so almost to every class we found through the contents of learning: the Cross, Prayers (into and out of class, Our Father), contents related by the creation of the world and human being, preparing the chosen people for the coming in the world of the promised Savior, His Birth, His Activity, His Sacrifice on the cross and His Resurrection. Since VIIth grade, we notice the introduction of some specific contents areas of theology.

It is the first syllabus for the entire school; its structure is articulated on the following basis:

a) Familiarize all students with the basics of Orthodox Christian faith in moral and spiritual view to improving our people

b) General data of the Old and New Testament, taught in relation to the possibilities of understanding and perception of students per class

c) Basic data of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Universal Church History (grades VIIth-VIIIth)

d) Deepening the general truths of the faith (Class IXth)

e) Presenting nuanced truths of Christian morals and standards (grade Xth)

f) The presentation of elements of philosophy and history of Christian religions (classes XIth-XIIth) (Ibid, p. 3).

This curriculum was intended to be - in each class - an introduction to religious content and prepared the following stages in the development of programs with more pronounced degree of differentiation.

The syllabus for the teaching of moral-religious education in primary and secondary school (Romanian Patriarchy, 1991) was the basis for curriculum that was valid until 1999. The differences between the first school syllabus - secondary and high school level - increased in the next analytical programs that reached the deeper themes and increase their theology each of the areas mentioned above, in each class. In Vth class, the learning contents were selected from the Old Testament, in VIth grade, the New Testament, to Class VIIth of the Universal Church History and History of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and the VIIIth grade from the Catechism and Christian morality.

Regarding the study of religion in high school, particularly in vocational education, the curriculum aimed at teaching graduates of pedagogical high schools, colleges and normal schools have subsequently received and approved for teaching religion in the primary school, after an internship and study methodology of teaching religion. Learning contents were prefigured in the Curriculum of 1990 from certain fields.

### **3. The new Religion student books and the relation with the new curricula, in formative approach of contents**

This period is marked by the publication of the first pupil's books of Religion for Ith to IVth classes. Frequent changes in curriculum, although not significant, led to the lack of full concordance between learning content in school curriculum and the content of textbooks used in schools.

A summary of the contents of these programs reveals that they were based on curriculum documents used in the interwar period and the dominance of this curriculum was the focus on content in the fields of theology by takeover model curricular structure of theological education (theological high school and universities): Old Testament, New Testament Church, Christian morality, history of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Universal Church History, Dogmatic. This

curriculum is presented as some lists of topics in these areas, which was proposed in most classes, studying almost exclusively one area. As an exception to the rule above, the primary learning content can be found in the field of Christian morality and Church from all four classes.

Such an approach was very easy for the teacher by presenting content that was familiar during his theological studies, being closer to the meaning content of catechesis learning discipline than religion. Learning contents were represented by symbolic concepts, abstract, less suited to school age which led mainly to a reproductive learning type (Ministry of Education, 1998).

Since school year 1997-1998 has outlined the education reform which necessarily involved curriculum reform, shifting to a defined and focused education on the end, which led to changes in curricula at all grades. For Religious, the curriculum for I<sup>st</sup> to VIII<sup>th</sup> grades were designed in specialized commissions of creeds, with the support of experts from the National Council for Curriculum and published in the fall of 1999 and in 2000 for the high school.

The purposes followed by the new curriculum have referred to *"the Christian moral formation of character from which to start a new conception of the God-man relationship, man-sow and, last but not least, a moral and objective attitude towards his own person"* (Ministry of Education, 1999). A simple "reading" of the objectives subordinated to the same general aim show a spiritual journey of the students from I<sup>st</sup> class to VIII<sup>th</sup> / IX<sup>th</sup> class.<sup>1</sup> The same considerations are valid for specific skills subordinated to the general ones for the X<sup>th</sup> - XII<sup>th</sup> classes (for IX<sup>th</sup> - XII<sup>th</sup> classes since the school year 2004-2005). Also, the introduction of some general interest topics for students from all grades has been appreciated in a positive manner and it has meant a great step forward towards a curriculum that really *"has to come to meet the desire of students of knowledge and the ideals of our Church in the education of youth in the spirit of the Orthodox faith"* (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 5).

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<sup>1</sup> IX<sup>th</sup> and X<sup>th</sup> classes had a special status with regard to compulsory membership. Since 1999, ninth grade is part of compulsory education (9 years, according to Law 151/1999) and aims were expressed in terms of objectives (as opposed to X<sup>th</sup> - XII<sup>th</sup> classes of whose finality were expressed in terms of skills). Since 2003, the tenth grade was included in compulsory education (10 years, according to Law 268/13.06.2003), the time at which classes IX - X are called junior high school, part both of the lower secondary education and compulsory, with finality centered skills.

In the absence of continuous training of teachers (not just religion) on curriculum issues and a broad set of teaching materials that would ensure the achievement the purposes in different educational contexts, it has been imposed the practice to limit the new curriculum approach to learning content perspective. This practice has significantly reduced the qualitative leap that could support this new curriculum approach (G. Holbea, D. Opreș, M. Opreș, G. Jambore, 2010, p. 71-75).

The main limits of these curriculum have been established, as discussed previously, by the structuring and harmonization of the contents, whose approach need professional competence in theological training<sup>2</sup> with obvious effects in religious formation of students, and the lack of a continuity between the more remote areas epistemological theology, studied in a school year, although the new structure of the syllabus provides freedom in choosing the sequence of topics with the aim to achieve the educational purposes, to respect the necessity of liturgical appointment and an internal logic of the education discipline.

Because of the lack of textbooks in most classes, for some teachers - especially debutants or with a small seniority in education – the transfer from the field of theology in the religious one, mainly with formative-educational character, has been proved particularly difficult. This transfer is very important for the notions studied to be perceived and assimilated by students as crucial for their own religious becoming.

#### **4. Outlines for a necessary re-consideration of the formative aspects in the religious education**

The mentioned situation led us to identify a structure to make content more accessible to achieving the aims set. The study of curriculum in countries with tradition of teaching Religion and

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<sup>2</sup> Names of units of learning and learning content subsumed them were taken from works of theology: Getting the catechism, the Old Testament, New Testament, Christian moral notions, notions of liturgy, ministry and mission (Ist- IVth grades), Getting the catechism, the Christian moral concepts, getting liturgical universal Church History, History of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Apostle and Spirituality (Vth - VIIIth classes ); Getting catechism, the Christian moral notions, notions of liturgical spirituality and mission, Christianity and world religions, Christianity and the youth (IXth grade). The Xth - XIIth classes of the areas were: dogmatic, Christian morality, Christian art, spirituality and mission, Orthodox and national culture, Christianity and the youth. At the level of contents, changes since 2004 have considered changing the names of the fields of religion and redistribution of content learning classes' dogmatic, Christian morality, liturgical and art, spirituality and mission in the history of religions, Orthodoxy and national culture, Christianity and contemporary world issues.

discussions with theologians and with experts in science education, with teachers of religion, teachers, parents and students have opened the prospect of a new approach to content, to facilitate exploitation of a higher level of formative valences of religion as school subject. All these have resulted in a curriculum for use in Sunday parochial schools, for Romanian children of European diaspora, developed in collaboration with pr. univ. lect. dr. Dorin Opriș and implemented since 2007<sup>3</sup> in countries which belong canonically to the two Romanian dioceses, the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan of Western and Southern Europe and the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan of Germany, Central and North Europe.

Regarding the last significant revision of the curriculum of Religion at the content level, performed as we previously stated in the 2007-2008 school year, the feature element was the decision of the Ministry of Education and Research to eliminate 25-30% of the contents of curricula, leading to changes in the case of religion which led to simplification and renaming certain areas (units of learning)<sup>4</sup>, transfer some content at a lower or higher level than the previous form of the program, steps followed by entry into its plan to use synchronous throughout secondary education, starting with the 2008-2009 school year.

We don't want to realize a punctual analysis of the new forms of curriculum; we just want to remember the learning effects transfer of vertical content and its implementation in the synchronic level, the entire pre-university education: there is no logical continuity in addressing some content, does not provide an informative and formative-educational continuum (the contents transferred to a higher class were treated twice, and the contents transferred to a lower class were omitted in some classes); existing textbooks for Ist - IVth grades,

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<sup>3</sup> The philosophy of writing curriculum, presented at the symposium "religious status and school instruction" held in October 2008 the Orthodox Theological Faculty "Justinian Patriarch" of Bucharest, was considered as an important milestone for the necessary improvement of religion in school curricula country (L. Vasilescu, 2009, p. 11).

<sup>4</sup> Units of learning were renamed to express a less theological position, using identical wording in certain classes or different from one class to another. From the large number of units of learning are some examples: About Christian Faith (Ist to IVth grades), Faith Christian (Vth to VIIIth classes), Foundations of Faith (IXth -XIIth grades), The Prayer, The way to God (Ist class), Models of behavior (IInd grade), Biblical Personalities (IIIth grade), Models of faith in the Old Testament (IVth grade), The saints, children's friends (Ist - IVth grades), etc.

respectively IXth - XIth has remained only partially valid, a situation unprecedented in any discipline of education, where they were operated only some content reductions, the steps in the plan horizontally. Most important positive aspect of this program is related to finding a new way of understanding the necessity of learning content approach to religion, even if his concern that form a limited program to rename their.

Curriculum for grades - the eighth suffered a new adjustment in the autumn of 2009 as a result of the decision to generalize the focus on skills to the all school education system.

From the pedagogical point of view, this new approach would lead curricular changes in all other parts of the curricula, including the learning content, as happened in most curriculum changes after 1999.

Leaving the existing content to fit the purpose of teaching final that gives you Keneth Rochmond expression "*putting the cart before the horse*": "*In planning of the curriculum, the selection of targets have to be performed before selecting content [...] The contents are of course important, but to derive educational purposes derived from a given body of knowledge means to put the cart before the horse. In other words the question "What are the desired results?" Necessarily precedes the question "What do we teach?"*".

### **Conclusions**

The religious living may represent only the result of a set of feelings and personal experiences, possible by covering some certain situations of life, by educating the emotional component of students within the meaning of religious feeling superior, by learning and living the word. All this assumes, however, designed a course on formal curriculum including immutable values of Christianity in a structure as close to life changing experiences of new generations, identified by some studies and a complex research.

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