

# COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CURRICULA FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: EXAMPLES OF FOUR CATHOLIC COUNTRIES

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*Summary* – This text is the result of extensive work on the project Evaluation of curricula for compulsory education in Croatia, which included the analysis of the curricula of 11 European countries: Finland, Norway, Sweden, England, Scotland, Ireland, Netherlands, Hungary, Germany, Austria and Slovenia. For the purpose of this article, Ireland, Austria and Slovenia have been chosen besides Croatia. The criterion for these choices was confessional: all four countries have predominantly Catholic population. The aim of this paper is to establish differences in the teaching of religious contents in the analysed Catholic countries, and to determine, in view of the postulated subject goals, the differences in competences predominantly developed by individual syllabi. The curricula for religious education in all four countries have been analysed.

Confessional religious education is a constituent part of the school curriculum in Ireland, Austria and Croatia whereas the non-confessional approach is present in Slovenia.

Results have shown that in Austria and Croatia religious themes are taught in a traditional, confessional way. Both curricula explicitly connect educational goals with catechetical, pastoral and evangelizational goals. In Ireland, the approach to the phenomenon of religion in religious education is primarily cultural and less doctrinal normative, thus coming closer to non-confessional religious education. Attending religious education classes is not related to attending religious services in church. Non-confessional religious education in Slovenia places emphasis on the educational aspect of religious themes with particular reference to the transfer of tradition, to human rights and intercultural teaching.

**Key words:** religious education, confessional/non-confessional religious education, Ireland, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, indicators of religiosity

## **Introduction**

Religion and religiosity as a person's attitude towards the world and a possible answer to key questions of human existence and practical and value orientation in life are an integral and active part of culture. As other forms of human spirit, religion too is an active factor in every socio-cultural milieu and, therefore, has an active role in the development of spiritual and material culture. There are a great number of practical implications of religion to behaviour, both of religious people and members of a particular religious community, and those outside of it.

Research has shown that, contrary to the identified downward trend in Church religiosity in the West (Berger, 1999; Davie, 2005; Hervieu-Leger, 2000), transition countries display a process of growing traditional church religiosity of the collective type, including a certain evident socio-cultural and national identification and a growing connection of people with religion and church (Aračić, Črpić, Nikodem, 2003; Marinović Jerolimov, 2005; Vrcan 2001). There is a general increase in the significance and the influence of religion and church in social life.

A common characteristic shared by transition countries and the West is an increasing plurality of beliefs, values and lifestyles (the spread of new religious movements and different forms and experiences of holiness) (Barker, 1999; Bainbridge, 1995).

Nevertheless, it can still be said that belonging to a confession is still a rule for most citizens of Europe, although the degree of confessional affiliation, religiosity, belief in particular religious dogmas, and, particularly, religious practices in various European countries differ (Aračić, Črpić, Nikodem, 2003; Črpić, Zrinščak, 2005).

## **Religious education**

School is one of the main agents of socialization. It exists in an specific social and historical context that significantly designates it. Educational programs in schools are determined not only by general results of development of basic human knowledge but also by the tradition and culture of a particular society. Every state ensures that school transfers values and norms that are fundamental for social life. Other institutions can also influence the work of schools. An example of this is the significant influence of churches/religious communities in different areas of social life (particularly education) in some European, particularly transition countries (Marinović Bobinac; Marinović Jerolimov, 2006; Kuburić; Vukomanović, 2006; Popov, Ofstad, 2006).

There are a number of factors, including education, affecting the level of social influence of dominant religious communities in European countries, some of which are the existence of a state church (England, Finland, Norway,

Denmark...), the relation of religion and national identity (in most post-communist countries), the role of religious institutions and their leaders in past and contemporary life, the rise in religious pluralism, rights claims of religious minorities, contracts between Catholic countries and the Holy See (Italy, Austria, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Croatia...), constitutional and legal provisions regulating the relationship of state and church, the interpretation of the law and state legislation, etc. (Kodelja; Bassler, 2004).

Most European countries provide some kind of religious education. Mediation of religious content in schools is implemented in the following ways: as confessional religious education<sup>1</sup> and as non-confessional religious education – as a separate subject<sup>2</sup> or as part of other subjects.<sup>3</sup>

It is the aim of confessional religious education to promote the obligation towards a particular religion. In most developed European countries in state schools (when confessional religious education is concerned) there is an awareness of the difference between religious education as part of education in schools and religious education in church. In accordance with this awareness, there has been a shift in the goals of the confessional approach to religious education in many countries: from the catechetical (growing in faith), formative, pastoral and evangelic aims towards educational and intercultural aims, civic education and education for peace and tolerance.

The aim of non-confessional religious education is to transfer information about religion/religions, for the purpose of developing social tolerance and enabling students to obtain a view of different religions and worldviews to be able to eventually make a conscious choice (Skledar, 2001) and to be able to live in a pluralist society. Ideally, religions are discussed neutrally, objectively and harmoniously.

In the post-communist era, most transition countries opted for confessional religious education with elements of traditional religious instruction in state schools (which represented a continuation of the kind of religious education that existed before 1945). Their aim was to indicate the affiliation to Christian Europe, where, in the meantime, conflicting trends had become a reality, and in this context confessional religious education, in accordance with social and religious changes, had acquired elements of a non-confessional approach to the phenomenon of religion (Kodelja; Basler, 2004).

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- 1 European educational systems use the following terms for confessional religious education: religious education, religious instruction, religion, Christian knowledge and religious and ethical education, catechism...
  - 2 Different names are also used for non-confessional religious education: religious culture, science of religions, ethics, religion and ethics, history of religions.
  - 3 The two approaches differ greatly – regarding where and when they take place, who teaches them, what is their place in the school curriculum and what methods are used for teaching and evaluation.

## Methodological observations

This text is the result of extensive work on the project *Evaluation of curricula for compulsory education in Croatia*, which included the analysis of the curricula of 11 European countries: Finland, Norway, Sweden, England, Scotland, Ireland, Netherlands, Hungary, Germany, Austria and Slovenia. The above-mentioned extensive work analysed different approaches to the phenomenon of religion in primary education. In the light of the basic trends in religious education, the Croatian curriculum for religious education is placed in the European context. For the purpose of this article, Ireland, Austria and Slovenia have been chosen besides Croatia. The criterion for these choices was confessional: all four countries have predominantly Catholic population<sup>4</sup>.

The aim of this work is to establish differences in the teaching of religious contents in the analysed Catholic countries, and to determine, in view of the postulated subject goals, the differences in competences predominantly developed by individual syllabi.

We have analysed the curricula for religious education in all four countries.

### Some indicators of religiosity in the analysed countries

In all four analysed countries, the majority of the population is of Catholic provenance. Two of them are developed West European countries – Ireland and Austria, and the other two are post-socialist Central European countries – Croatia and Slovenia.

The following Tables present some indicators of religiosity in the analysed countries: confessional affiliation<sup>5</sup> and affiliation to the Catholic Church<sup>6</sup>, religious self-identification<sup>7</sup>, attendance of religious services<sup>8</sup> and the belief in some fundamental Christian transcendental realities, according to the results of the research *European Values Study* (1999/2000).

4 The criteria for identifying Catholic countries were taken from the study *Looking for Identity* founded on the results of the research entitled *European Values Study 1999/2000* (2005), according to which Catholic countries are those where over 70% of citizens have declared themselves Catholic. Apart from the countries analysed, these are also Italy, Spain, Portugal, Northern Ireland, Poland and Malta.

5 The question was: Do you belong to any religious denomination? The provided answers were “yes” and “no”.

6 The next question was: Which one? Five answers were provided: Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Eastern Orthodox, other. This question was aimed at those who provided an affirmative answer to the previous question.

7 The question was: Regardless of whether you go to church, could you say that you are: Religious, not religious, a convinced atheist?

8 The question was: Besides weddings, funerals and baptisms, how often to you attend religious services? The provided answers were: More than once a month, on special occasions, never.

Table 1 – Some indicators of religiosity (in %)

Country	Confessional affiliation	Affiliation to the Catholic church	Religious self-identification	Mass Attendance of religious service (once a month or more frequently)
Austria	88.1	91.5	79.5	42.5
Croatia	86.8	97.8	83.7	50.2
Ireland	90.7	95.9	74.0	67.4
Slovenia	70.0	94.9	70.2	30.7

The “no” answers make up the difference to 100%.

The table shows that in all four countries a high percentage of respondents have declared religious affiliation and that most declared themselves to be Catholics. There is also a high degree of religiosity among the respondents in relation to other European countries, and a high percentage of liturgy attendance. The data also show that religiosity indicators are lowest in Slovenia. Other indicators are equally high in the other three countries (Ireland stands out specifically with a high percentage of liturgy attendance).

The next table shows the distribution of fundamental religious beliefs: In God, life after death, hell, heaven and sin.

Table 2 – Beliefs (in %)

	Belief in:				
	God	Life after death	Hell	Heaven	Sin
<b>Austria</b>	86.8	59.0	18.3	41.5	61.3
<b>Ireland</b>	95.5	79.2	53.3	85.3	85.7
<b>Croatia</b>	91.6	67.7	55.2	61.3	75.2
<b>Slovenia</b>	65.2	32.1	20.3	27.6	43.2

The “no” answers make up the difference to 100%.

Church beliefs in all four countries are hierarchically structured (the belief in God taking the top position, followed by the belief in the existence of sin, life after death, heaven, and, in the lowest position, the belief in the existence of hell), fragmented, and the most frequent one is the belief in God, which coincides with most research results.<sup>9</sup> The highest percentage of respondents who believe in God has been registered in Ireland and Croatia, whereas the lowest percentage has been registered in Slovenia. Believing in hell and sin is least present, namely, the lowest percentage in Slovenia (there are even fewer of those who believe in hell in

<sup>9</sup> Results of the European Values Study show that in extremely secularized European countries (where indicators of faith and attendance of religious services are very low), the religious self-identification of respondents was relatively high, pointing to a conclusion that respondents have drifted away from the church and traditional beliefs, however, they have not drifted away from God, whom they perceive in a more personalized manner.

Austria), and the highest in Ireland and Croatia. Although different degrees of acceptance of particular beliefs in all four countries clearly show that the process of dissolution of the dogmatic system is in place, these percentages are still relatively high in Ireland, Austria and Croatia in relation to Slovenia, which, according to belief indicators, is close to the most secularized European countries (Denmark, Sweden, France and the Czech Republic).

Almost all analyses of European societies stress the fact that countries with a larger number of Catholics are in principle less secularized, which can be attributed to the doctrine and organizational system of the Catholic Church (Črpić, Zrinščak, 2005). This short analysis leads us to the conclusion that Slovenia is the most secularized among the countries analysed, which is evident from the indicators of Mass attendance and beliefs<sup>10</sup>.

### **Analysis of the curriculum with regard to the differences in teaching religious contents and the postulated objectives of the subject**

#### *Ireland*

For additional information concerning the use of appropriate terminology see *Junior cycle Syllabus*, Department of Education and Science, Republic of Northern Ireland, Dublin, <http://www.education.ie/>, February 2005.

The Irish curriculum is based on two broader concepts – the celebration of the uniqueness of the child and the development of the child's full potential.<sup>11</sup> It is represented in seven curricular areas. One of them is *Religious Education*, which is the name of the curricular area and of the subject.

In attempting to develop the individual's full potential, the curriculum for religious education takes into account the pupil's affective, aesthetic, spiritual, moral and religious needs. The spiritual dimension is a fundamental aspect of individual experience and its religious and cultural expressions are constitutive parts of Irish culture and history. Religious education enables the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to acquire knowledge of God. The subject is confessionally-oriented and is part of the regular school timetable. Designing the curriculum for religious education is the responsibility of the church authorities and it is not part of the school curriculum. The duty of the Church is to supervise the implementation of teaching.

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10 The lowest percentage of liturgy attendance was registered in Russia, Sweden, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Denmark and France (between 9 and 12%).

11 The Irish curriculum is based on the philosophy of education that assumes the following five principles: a holistic and harmonious development of the child, the importance of respecting individual differences, the importance of active methods and discovery, the integrative nature of the curriculum and the importance of learning based on the environment.

Religious contents are mediated through the following subjects, i.e. curricular areas: as part of the *Irish Language and Literature*, within the curricular area *Social, Environmental and Scientific Education*, within the subject of *History* and the curricular area of *Social, Personal and Health Education*. *Religious Education* is an elective subject, taught in all grades 2 hours and 30 minutes a week, or 5% of the total number of lessons in a school year, and is part of the regular school timetable.

The objectives of the subject *Religious Education* are listed in the document *Religious Education Syllabus*, referring only to pupils between 12 and 15 years of age.

Table 3 – Overall objectives of the subject *Religious Education*

<b>Overall objectives</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– To develop sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of life;</li> <li>– To develop the ability to make ethical judgements;</li> <li>– To develop knowledge and understanding of own religious tradition and beliefs, respecting religious traditions and beliefs of others;</li> <li>– To encourage the notion that the human quest for meaning is common to people of all ages and all times;</li> <li>– To investigate how this quest for meaning found, and keeps finding, its expression in religion;</li> <li>– To identify how understanding God, religious traditions and particularly Christian tradition, contributed to the culture we live in and continue to influence our personal lifestyle, interpersonal relations and relations between individuals and their communities;</li> <li>– To respect the richness of religious traditions and accept the non-religious interpretation of life;</li> <li>– To contribute to the spiritual and moral development of students.</li> </ul>

The specific objectives of the subject are divided in two parts, each of which contains three themes. In the first part student choose two out of three themes, while in the second part all three themes are compulsory.

Table 4 – Specific objectives of the subject

<b>Specific objectives of the subject</b>	
<b>First part</b>	
<b>Religious communities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– To research the nature and forms of human communities;</li> <li>– To identify the characteristics of religious communities/churches;</li> <li>– To investigate how these characteristics appear in religious communities/churches, with local, national and international examples;</li> </ul>
<b>Foundations of religion - Christianity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– To investigate the context in which Jesus was born;</li> <li>– To study the Gospel as a major source of knowledge about Jesus;</li> <li>– To examine the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus for its followers, then and now;</li> </ul>
<b>Foundations of religion – great religions of the world</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– To examine in detail the great religions of the world</li> <li>– To examine the influence of these religions on their followers today and on other individuals and communities;</li> </ul>

<b>Second part</b>	
<b>The issue of faith</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– To examine the situation of faith today;</li> <li>– To identify the origins of belief by posing questions and searching for answers;</li> <li>– To recognize expressions of human questioning in modern culture;</li> <li>– To identify characteristics of religious beliefs;</li> <li>– To examine the challenges of religious belief today;</li> <li>– To offer opportunity for research and reflection on one’s own faith;</li> </ul>
<b>Celebration of faith</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– To show that rituals and worship have always been part of the human answer to life and the mystery of God;</li> <li>– To identify how communities express their everyday tasks through different rituals;</li> <li>– To investigate the experience of worship;</li> </ul>
<b>Moral challenge</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– To examine the human need to regulate relations on the personal, social and global level;</li> <li>– To investigate different ways in which this need can be expressed;</li> <li>– To find out how this need is expressed in civil and other legal codes;</li> <li>– To show how religious belief is expressed in specific moral visions;</li> <li>– To examine moral visions of two great religions of the world, one of which is Christianity;</li> <li>– To analyse the influence of these visions on life of believers and non-believers in connection with contemporary moral issues.</li> </ul>

The tables clearly show that the objectives of the subject *Religious Education* are mostly targeted on developing competences of knowledge (knowledge being one dimension of religion) – primarily about Christianity, i.e. Catholicism. Besides a historical viewpoint, the emphasis is on the contemporary religious situation in the world. The dimension of knowledge also includes knowledge of other religions and non-religious world views. The consequences of religion (how religious beliefs influence everyday life of believers and the values they accept) are also inseparable from religion. Therefore, one of the aims is to develop value competences, including intercultural competences. The aspect of religious experience is also particularly stressed.<sup>12</sup> According to the analysed curriculum, the elements of religious instruction have almost completely disappeared. Catechetical efforts are not present as one of objectives, nor is pastoral activity, or the immanent endeavour of the catechism to testify to faith (evangelization).

### *Austria*

Religious contents in Austrian primary schools are mediated in two ways: through a separate subject entitled *Religion* and as part of some other subjects (mother tongue, history and social policy).

<sup>12</sup> In the subject *Religious Education* various methods of teaching are highlighted: case study, problem solving and decision making exercises, games, role play, presentation and interpretation of information, self-assessment, discussion, group work, activity-based learning. The stress is on integrated learning.

*Religion* is a confessionally-structured subject, and the content of its Catholic variant largely corresponds to Catholic religious instruction as it is taught in Croatian schools.<sup>13</sup> The teaching of this subject represents an encounter with religious history and with Christianity today, particularly but Catholicism, but also including other Christian denominations and religions. The subject contributes to preparing students for life, to developing their identity in the pluralist culture they live in, but which is “significantly impregnated with Christianity” and to understanding and developing tolerance towards people with different world views. The subject is oriented towards Biblical Revelation and church traditions. It starts from students’ experiences of life and the world. The church authorities determine the doctrinal content and the syllabi, they approve textbooks, prepare teachers and issue certificates of their competence to perform catechetical work.

The subject is compulsory<sup>14</sup> and is taught in all grades of compulsory primary education. The syllabus includes two teaching periods per week from 1<sup>st</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

The objectives are divided in two groups: as the objectives of the subject *Religion*, regardless of the confessional variant, and as the objectives of the Catholic and Evangelical-Lutheran variant of the subject.

Table 5 – The objectives of the syllabus of the subject of Religion

<b>Objectives</b>	
<b>General objectives of the subject regardless of the confessional variant</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– To provide holistic education (cognitive, affective, action-oriented) through the confrontation with different world views;</li> <li>– To sensitize students to the religious experience, open them for the deep secret of human existence and to practice the visual language of religion;</li> <li>– To enable them to make responsible decisions and to develop their sensitivity and respect towards people with different views;</li> <li>– To familiarize them with the culture they live in, which is significantly permeated with Christianity;</li> <li>– To reflect encouragement of life in the community, based on righteousness, freedom and the preservation of creation;</li> </ul>
<b>Objectives of the Catholic variant of the subject</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– To discern different images of God and to deal with one’s own perception of God and the Holy Trinity, in the way it appears in the liberating biblical message (the question of God);</li> <li>– To live consciously in a world of cultural and religious diversity, to become aware of different ways of living and belief, to practice tolerance and respect (for Religion/religions);</li> <li>– To raise awareness of the questionable quality of life in the light of social and individual borderline situations, and to learn about different paths of overcoming guilt, suffering and death (bliss/suffering, salvation);</li> </ul>

13 When Croatia introduced religious instruction in state schools in the 1990s, the syllabus and coursebooks were mostly based on Austrian experiences, particularly where syllabi and coursebooks for secondary school students were concerned.

14 Education is performed separately for Catholic, Evangelical, Old Catholic and Jewish attendants, with special, different syllabi.

<p><b>Objectives of the Catholic variant of the subject</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To find a way in a world that offers many life opportunities, but on the other hand, reduces life chances, to discover personal and other peoples' dignity, and explore possibilities of living and acting with solidarity (freedom - responsibility);</li> <li>- To take a stand in a world that uses and abuses its resources and the opportunities to spend and create, to leave open the issue of pursuing wealth, and gratefully and to responsibly perceive oneself as God's creature and the world as God's work (God's creation);</li> <li>- To live consciously in the world of images and media, and understand meaningful religious ways of expression (symbols - rituals; sacraments);</li> <li>- To discontinue the speeding up of the pace of life and quick forgetting, to discover through inner peace our Christian roots and the phenomenon of church in our culture, and to celebrate (religion/church).</li> </ul>
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The overall objective of the subject of *Religion* (regardless of the confessional variant) is to develop the confessional aspect, to teach about religion and to “cultivate faith” (Skledar, 2001), which is also the main objective of religious instruction when comprehended as catechism. The basic aim of this curriculum is religious, which includes an intervention into the dimension of the religious experience that is in the essence of every faith, by laying emphasis on the “sensitising the students to the religious experience” and “opening the deep secret of human existence”. The basic aim is clearly visible at the level of overall objectives of the subject, and it is even more visible at the confessional level, particularly in its Catholic variant. The importance of the transfer of Christian tradition and of “preserving what has been created” is emphasized, as the foundation of the community in which students live.

The following sentence is the introduction to the objectives of the subject *Religion* in the Catholic variant: “Life presents the authentic source of God’s blissful action”, which implies that the subject is teaching faith, or catechism. The basic aim of the subject growth and development in faith. In the Catholic light, emphasis is placed on the study of “transcendental realities” that are the only answer to social and individual borderline life situations (guilt, suffering, sickness, death), on religious experience, doctrinal subjects (basic Christian (Catholic beliefs)), the ritual dimension of religiosity, its consequential dimension (value competences) and the Catholic church as an institution existing in the world. Emphasis is also placed on the importance of intercultural competences (“to live consciously in a world of cultural and religious diversity”, by “practising tolerance and respect”).<sup>15</sup>

15 There are certain didactic principles for the subject of *Religion*. The approach should be systematic, the history of particular religion should be examined in the context of its space and time, and not on the basis of contemporary criteria. The comparative method should be used (to identify similarities and differences between individual religions and between different confessions within one religion). The basic religious terminology should be explained in accordance with the age of the students. Teaching should involve different media, conversations with members of different religions and their testimonies, excursions and visits to different places that have religious meaning. The skills and culture of dialogue and communicative competence should be developed.

*Slovenia*

Although the Roman-Catholic church is the biggest religious community in Slovenia, there is no Catholic religious instruction at school.

The Act on Organization and Financing of Education from 1996 established the “autonomy of schools”. The state assumed the obligation of neutrality and tolerance and of conducting activities that are non-indoctrinating and non-proselytizing. The law forbids religious activities in public schools, which, in practice, means that it is not allowed: 1. to perform confessional religious education, i.e. teaching in the classroom; 2. to have teaching contents or teachers appointed by religious communities and 3. to organize religious services.<sup>16</sup> In public schools non-confessional education on religion (religions) is part of the national curriculum. The syllabus for the subject was prepared by a team of expert philosophers, sociologists, theologians (Catholic and Evangelical) and educational experts.

A specific subject transferring religious contents is called *Religions and ethics* (Verstva in etika). Religious contents are integrated in other compulsory subjects such as history, Slovene language, ethics and society. The subject of *Religions and ethics* is a new subject introduced as part of the reform of primary education. It has the status of (compulsory) elective subject.<sup>17</sup> It is taught for three years, in the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade (age 13-15), and the program respects three fundamental principles:

1. religious contents are divided in three units, each of which is coherent in itself;
2. the approach used for religious issues in every grade is appropriate for the age and cognitive development of students;
3. the ethical and existential issues to be discussed in particular grades are chosen according to the needs of students of certain ages. The basic knowledge of religion which the students have acquired through the subjects of *History* and *Ethics and society* enables them to easily join in the subject of *Religion and ethics* in higher grades.

The themes, i.e. contents are chosen according to two criteria:

- a) Themes and contents relevant for both a holistic and analytic knowledge of religions are covered in such a way to connect to the experiences and questions from students’ physical and contemplative world, or are directed to them (“religiological themes”);

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16 All this is allowed in private schools, which can be founded by religious communities, but are not part of the public educational network.

17 The subject can be taught by teachers with university degrees in theology (laic), religious studies (when they are introduced), sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, psychology, history and Slovene language, provided they have acquired additional education in the subject, from an institution other than the one they graduated from.

- b) Themes that appear in students' physical and contemplative world, the elaboration of which requires and displays connections to the world of religions and non-religious world views ("life themes").

Students encounter both types of themes/contents in the subject of *Ethics and society*. The subject *Religions and ethics* deals with these themes/contents in more detail and analyses them from the aspect of their connection with other religions.

The subject of *Religions and ethics* does not always imply the exclusive connection of ethics with religion, nor does it reduce religion to ethical questions. The following are the overall objectives of the subject and the subject aims according to grades (besides the aims, the document includes the index of themes, basic terminology, cross-curricular links with other subjects and knowledge standards).

Table 6 – Objectives of the subject *Religions and ethics*

Objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To expand, complement, differentiate and problematise the knowledge students acquired about religions and ethics in compulsory subjects;</li> <li>- To acquire objective knowledge and broaden horizons in all areas;</li> <li>- To develop inclinations and the ability to develop the awareness of one's own identity, goals, possibilities and limitations;</li> <li>- To develop the ability to understand others, to cooperate with them, to show solidarity and be prepared to solve conflicts by reaching an agreement (through dialogue);</li> <li>- To develop abilities to confront the issues of meaning, to become acquainted with different religious and non-religious world views, to become acquainted with different traditions and perspectives which will serve as points of reference and incentives when directing and making sense of one's own life;</li> <li>- To develop the ability for ethical judgement and the readiness to assume responsibility for oneself and for other people and the nature;</li> <li>- To acquire a critical attitude to religious (and non-religious) traditions;</li> <li>- To learn about the role of religion in shaping different civilizations, particularly Christianity, in shaping the European culture and the Slovenian nation;</li> <li>- To enable students to be critical of negative phenomena related to religion and religions (disrespect of members of different religions, intolerance, fanaticism, ideological/religious monopoly)</li> <li>- To prepare students for a critical and constructive entrance in the plural society, particularly considering its religious and ethical pluralism.</li> </ul>

The main function of the subject is to educate students in the areas of religion and ethics in an objective, critical and pluralist manner, including a further deepening of the knowledge already acquired in other subjects. Ethics is understood as an "elaboration of the moral dimensions of inter-human relations and life issues", and not as a separate philosophical discipline. The main aim is to develop competences of knowledge, skills and values connected to different religious and non-religious world-views, i.e. to systematize and contextualize the knowledge students have already acquired in other subjects. The approach is religiologi-

cal, i.e. multidisciplinary, objective and value-neutral. The aim is to develop value competences that are particularly important for learning how to live in a plural, democratic, civil society, particularly where human rights are concerned. The development of intercultural competences is also connected to these values. Besides the role of tradition transfer (helping to shape the national and European identity of students), also important is the development of societal competences, and “the preparation of students for a critical and constructive entrance in a plural society, with particular reference to its religious and ethical pluralism”.<sup>18</sup>

### *Croatia*

With the international agreement on “Cooperation in the field of education and culture”, signed in 1996 between the Republic of Croatia and the Holy See, the Croatian state assumed the responsibility to implement Catholic instruction in primary and secondary schools, and preschool institutions. As a follow-up to this agreement, the implementational “Contract on Catholic instruction in state schools and religious education in public preschool institutions” was signed by the Croatian Episcopal Conference and the Government of the Republic of Croatia, which introduced the religious instruction in state schools. It was decided that Catholic religious instruction would be part of the curriculum, a compulsory subject (when selected) for two hours every week, under the same conditions as other compulsory subjects (especially considering the position within the timetable).<sup>19</sup>

Catholic religious instruction, according to the Program (1999), emphasizes the holistic education of man, bearing in mind the religious dimension and the promotion of personal, social, universal and religious values. The confessional characteristic of religious instruction is based on the universal educational and cultural meaning of religious facts for the person, culture and the society. The principles on which school religious instruction is based are the following: faith in

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18 The teacher should respect the following criteria (applicable to other subjects as well): teaching should be approached in a systematic way and should be relevant to students' lives, it should be appropriate for the cognitive stage of students, the contents should be selected according to students' experience and cater for their needs, problems should be analysed and all students should be actively included, the teaching process should aim at achieving cognitive, social, emotional, motivational, aesthetic and moral and ethical goals. When selecting forms and methods of work the preferred methods should be those encouraging students to acquire knowledge and to think and judge independently : conversation, work on the text, group work and project work. The teacher should frequently use visual material, audiovisual resources and graphic material.

19 After the Act on the Status of Religious Communities in Croatia (2002) was adopted, other religious communities were given the opportunity to make contracts with the state in order to regulate specific activities of their communities, including religious instruction schools. The state adopted the approach allowing confessional religious instruction in schools, in several confessional forms. The syllabuses were designed by 6 religious communities, and approved by the Ministry of Education and Sport of the Republic of Croatia in 1991, for the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Islamic, Jewish and Adventist religions as well as for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

God and man, ecumenical openness, open dialogue and correlation in catechetical education (cross-curricular teaching in accordance with the principles of holistic education) and an inter-cultural approach to religious education.

The purpose of Catholic religious instruction in primary school is to provide a systematic and harmonious theological-ecclesiastic and anthropological-pedagogic connection of God's revelation and church tradition with the experiences of students. Its aim is to familiarize students with the Catholic religion through systematic and holistic, ecumenical and open dialogue at different levels: the informative-cognitive, experiential and active levels, in order to reach the maturity of Christian faith and achieve holistic human and religious education of students. This compulsory-elective subject does not have any alternative in primary school. Besides religious instruction, religious contents are taught through some other subjects: history, geography, literature and art.

The following table presents the basic objectives of Catholic religious instruction in Croatia.

*Table 7 – Objectives of the subject Religion*

<b>Objectives</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To develop openness to latter issues (the meaning of human life and the world, the relation between temporary and eternal...);</li> <li>- To contribute to developing a mature human and religious personality, at the individual and social level, in all dimensions of human life: physical, spiritual and mental;</li> <li>- To obtain a human and Christian education of conscience in relation to oneself, others, society and the world in general, on the basis of God's revelation, Christian tradition and the teaching of the Church;</li> <li>- To comprehend Biblical messages and connect them with everyday personal and social life;</li> <li>- To understand and comprehend basic doctrinal issues of God, the Holy Ghost, the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Mystery of God's love, and the Church as the sacrament of salvation among people;</li> <li>- To learn about the strength of unity, togetherness and serving in Christ's church which is the sacrament of salvation among people and to enable students to live quality lives in fulfilling their life's purpose and serving the Church;</li> <li>- To understand the history of salvation and the history of the Church that fulfils Christ's task of evangelization and service in different areas of ecclesiastic and social life, both in the church and the Croatian people.</li> <li>- To develop the feeling and personal attitude of gratitude for God's endless love and goodness and to enable students to act like brothers and promote goodness, social justice, solidarity and help and the sense of gratitude for each other.</li> <li>- To learn and inspire their lives with Christian morality, Jesus' law of love and serving as a true way of Christian life;</li> <li>- To learn and experience the spiritual strength and salvation value of liturgical and ecclesiastical celebrations, sacraments, piety and religious life;</li> <li>- To get to know others and the different, and develop a sense of respect for other cultures, confessions and religions (ecumenical and dialogic dimension);</li> <li>- To discover the sources of conflict and misunderstandings between parents and children, between adults, among nations, and enable them to overcome conflicts and misunderstandings in order to build a secure personal and social life;</li> </ul>

- To learn the role of the family and develop a sense of responsibility for the family and the wider social community;
- To learn about the ways to resist negative temptations and problems, especially in the period of maturation and youth, in order to achieve full human and religious maturity;
- To develop spiritual and other creative abilities through a true “language of faith” and by using universal approaches to common work in order to bring about the holistic nature of religious education (in written, oral, visual, musical, theatrical expression and through pray.

The table shows that the title of the subject is its program. The basic objective is to develop competent knowledge, skills and values in connection with the Catholic confession. The nature of the objectives from the table is best illustrated by the following sentence from the Program (Syllabus): “Catholic religious instruction is not a simple transfer of information and knowledge, it encompasses the student in the totality his/her personality, striving to include all important educational aims thus enabling learning, adopting attitudes, celebration, personal achievement and testifying to faith in the personal and social lives of students” (Program, 2003:3). These objectives are similar to the objectives of religious education within the church community, the difference being that the latter “focuses on the personal experience of faith” (Program, 2003), which is best learnt, celebrated and lived in the actual religious community. However, as stated in the Program, since real life cannot be artificially divided into family, school, parish etc., church religious instruction and school religious instruction complement each other, which can be seen from the objectives in the table and from the catechetical practice in the last fifteen years. As the objectives from the table clearly show, besides confessional education, religious instruction also appears as catechesis (growth and development in faith) with a pastoral aim (connection with ecclesiastical practices and celebration)<sup>20</sup> and an evangelization aim (testifying to faith in one’s personal and social life). On the whole, it can be said that the syllabus has inner coherence. The targeted objectives are in accordance with all other components of the syllabus, the thematic areas and the expected attainments of students which are given not only for every year, but also for every teaching period.

### **Conclusion: trends of *religious education* in Catholic countries**

Confessional religious education is a constituent part of the school curriculum in Ireland, Austria and Croatia; the non-confessional approach is present only in Slovenia.

The analysed Catholic countries display several trends in teaching religious contents in school (valid for most European countries) on the basis of different criteria:

1<sup>st</sup> criterion: the way of teaching religious content in schools

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<sup>20</sup> The practice of Catholic catechism at school reveals that a certain number of religion teachers link school religious instruction with the obligation to attend Mass.

- a) as confessional education (different names are used – religious education, religion, catechism) - Ireland, Austria, Croatia;
- b) as non-confessional education (the terms *religion* and *ethics* are used) – Slovenia;
- c) religious contents are integrated in other subjects (mother tongue and literature, history, geography, art) – all analysed countries.

2<sup>nd</sup> criterion: the types of confessional, or non-confessional religious education

- a) The first type represents teaching religious contents in the traditional, confessional manner, or what we understand as catechism. Austria and Croatia (and most transition countries) belong to this trend. Both curricula explicitly relate educational contents to the catechetical, pastoral and evangelization ones;
- b) The second type also represents confessional religious education, but it is more of a confessional-cultural than a doctrinal and normative approach to the phenomenon of religion, which brings it closer to the non-confessional approach. Such an approach is characteristic of Ireland (and many other North and West European countries); school attendance is not connected to church attendance;
- c) The third type, non-confessional religious education, characterizes Slovenia.

3<sup>rd</sup> criterion: the status of the subject – compulsory or elective

- d) Confessional religious education as a compulsory subject is present in Austria;
- e) Confessional religious education as an elective subject is present in Ireland and Croatia;
- f) Non-confessional religious education as a compulsory/elective subject is present only in Slovenia.

4<sup>th</sup> criterion –the main objectives of the subject

All three analysed curricula for religious education plead for the realization of the following specific objectives:

- a) Developing the competences of knowledge, skills and values – at the level of general education, and, immediately after that, at the level of knowledge about one's own confession and religious tradition;
- b) Understanding spirituality as a phenomenon (investigating one's own religious positions, different ways of overcoming borderline situations, understanding the holy dimension);
- c) Transferring tradition and forming student's identity (understanding the present and the past of one's own religious tradition);
- d) Understanding other religious and non-religious world views.

Ireland particularly highlights as its objective civic education and education for peace and tolerance (detection and reduction of misunderstandings and preju-

dices, aspiration to ecumenical and intercultural understanding, life in the world of cultural and religious diversity), and some of the mentioned aspects are stated in both the Austrian and Croatian curriculum.

The Austrian and particularly the Croatian curriculum plead for the following objectives in the subject syllabus:

- a) Growing in faith (grateful and responsible perception of self as God's creature and the world as God's creation, Christian testimony seen as a challenge);
- b) Connecting teaching with catechesis, pastoral work and evangelization.

In Slovenia, the subject of *Religions and ethics* stresses the educational level of presenting religious contents, with the emphasis on the transfer of tradition (emphasizing Christianity as the predominant religion in both Slovenia and Europe) and advocating human rights. Besides this, the intercultural approach is emphasized.

At the end of this comparison, the analysed approaches to teaching religious contents could be placed, as Davie vividly states, in the European "comprehensive spectrum of religious education – from the almost undiluted confessional message to the conscious preparation of children for living in a world where a wide range of religious ideas makes a significant part of cultural exchange" (Davie, 2005). According to the results of this analysis, no purely "undiluted confessional teaching" could be identified in the analysed countries (at least at the level of subject curriculum), the closest to it being Croatia and Austria. Ireland is somewhere in the middle with a kind of "cultural religious education", and Slovenia, with its non-confessional regional education, is at the other end of the continuum.

Of course, we should be aware of the shortcomings of both the confessional and non-confessional concepts of religious education.

Confessional religious education, provides, as the only source of information about religion, a more or less reduced and confessional picture of historical forms of particular religions and religious movements in the contemporary world. As much as religion teachers and textbooks authors attempt to present other Christian religions, non-Christian religious and new religious movements in a serious and tolerant way, the confessional approach is inevitably limited by its definition. The ultimate objective of every evangelisation (and every catechism is, to a certain degree, evangelisation), regardless of how tolerantly performed, is to convert to the right faith. And every faith is the right one, from its own point of view. Teaching religious contents without a school subject alternative to religious instruction in state schools leaves an important part of educational contents to solely confessional views.

In an attempt to remain neutral and objective, non-confessional religious education may cause in children indifference towards religion, it may lead to the disregard of religions and underestimation of the whole concept of religion. Some

authors suggest that the concept of *learning about religions* be complemented with *learning from religion*, with the aim of understanding and discovering one's own relationship to faith (dedication or opposition). The concept (applied in England) is considered controversial: it can be interpreted as a form of disguised confessional education, but it can also motivate students to think more deeply and critically (Spinder, 2002, according to Kodelja, Bassler, 2004).

Finally, it should be stressed that there is an awareness of the probable existence of differences between the postulated objectives of curricula for religious education and their application in practice, where significant deviations may occur. Primarily, teaching religion as a school subject depends, more than other subjects, on the person of the teacher. That is why it is important to choose the appropriate methods of teaching and combine them with extensive knowledge and a high degree of empathy. As Davie points out (2005), there is a thin line between academic teaching and personal inclusion both for teachers and students. Empathy with the religious or spiritual inevitably requires a certain degree of emotional participation, particularly if teaching includes experiential methods.

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