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How Students Assess the Contribution of Certain Elements of Religious Teaching to Their Moral Development

Extended summary

In two decades of religious education in the school system of the Republic of Serbia, there has been little research, even information on its scope, in terms of its essential effect - the impact on spiritual maturity and moral development of young people. Morality is an area of human behavior that basically contains attitudes about what is right or wrong, good or bad, about what to do or avoid, how to treat others if their actions affect the feelings or interests of others. As a spiritual phenomenon, morality is understood as a norm (set of meanings), as a psychological phenomenon it is a set of psychological processes of thought and feelings, and as a social phenomenon it is a social process of “communicating” the relevant norms (Pedagogical Dictionary 1, 1967). Theological definition emphasizes that “Morality is not only about observing external rules - God’s and the Church’s commandments, but primarily it is about a person becoming what he/she really is - an image of God” (Janaras, 2007). After many years, religious education was introduced as an elective subject in primary and secondary schools in the Republic of Serbia in 2001, and it opened a new possibility for the science of Christ to enter modern society, specifically in one very important segment – the school. The goal of religious education is to present and testify the content of faith and spiritual experience, to enable students to freely adopt the spiritual and life values of Christ’s teaching, and through it to preserve, nurture, and build personal religious and cultural identity, to teach youth the basic principles of morality, solidarity, and tolerance (Directive on the Organization and Realization of Religious Education and Alternative Subject Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools, 2001).

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The paper presents the findings related to the opinions of Serbian students attending the religious education classes of Eastern Orthodox faith (the sample comprised 446 respondents attending the 7th and 8th grades of elementary school, and the 3rd and 4th grades of secondary school). They gave their opinion on the contribution of the elements of religious education to moral development. This paper itself is a part of a broader research on the impact of religious classes on the morality of the young generation in Serbia. The conclusions of the previous research show that children and young people who attend religious classes at school have a deep and conscious relationship with God, religion, and other people, and there is no significant difference between high school students and elementary school students. By believing in God, they satisfy some basic psychological needs, such as the need for protection and security, the need for love, but they also satisfy the need for support in everything they do, to persevere and succeed, and the need for personal and moral development. The aim of the research was to investigate students' opinions on how the elements of religious education contribute to their moral development. It was assumed that the students have a positive opinion about the contribution of religious education to moral development, as well as that the ways of conducting religious education, the personality and approach in communication of religious education teachers (religious teachers) are important factors of moral development, and that religious education is a significant factor of moral development. The method applied in this study is a systematic non-experimental observation and correlation analysis, used for the evaluation and interpretation of the data collected via a questionnaire created for this occasion - students expressed their opinion on what contributed the most to their moral formation in terms of faith. Some important results are as follows: The personality of a religious teacher is of great importance and his/her contribution depends on their knowledge of the content conveyed to students, interesting ways of teaching such as visiting churches and participation in church worship, while information and communication technologies are less significant. Paying due attention to a good selection of religious teachers is a practical pedagogical implication of these results. The results provide a motive for an intensive further work on achieving the necessary goals and tasks of religious education because of the possibility of developing moral education through religious education in public schools in Serbia. By means of religious instruction in state schools in the Republic of Serbia the Church builds and improves the religious consciousness of young people, educating them in terms of ethics and guiding them to live morally.

Keywords: religious teacher, religious education, factors of moral development

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