

Employability – Mobility – Flexibility

European demands challenging Religion and Education

Challenges for religious education in Romania.

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The debate on the future of education in the context of the European Union approaches both *theoretical purposes*, such as social cohesion, personal fulfilment and competences for living together in harmony, and *practical outputs*, like the skills and competencies that serve employability, mobility and flexibility. In other words, the European citizen must be adequately informed and well-trained, willing to work abroad and capable to adapt to the host society. This educational concept forms the basis for a future economical global system.

The first question is if the Romanian education system can fulfil such a challenging demand, considering the serious internal challenges. Without insisting upon these difficulties, they should still be mentioned, because they constitute severe obstacles in the attempt to meet the demands at European level.

After two decades of transition marked by inconsistency and incoherence, Romania is on the way to implement European standards in education. Both the Romanian state and the NGOs (including Churches) working in this field develop projects in order to improve the Romanian education system.

The main problem of the Romanian education system is still the **lack of financial resources**. This is reflected by the weak infrastructure and by the poor wages for teachers. The most capable University graduates refuse joining the education system as teachers or academics and prefer working abroad, sometimes as unqualified workers in other fields than that of their formation. This leads us to the second major problem of the education system in Romania: the **emigration phenomenon**. Besides the qualified teachers, there is a significant segment of the Romanian adult population employed as guest workers abroad, which leads to their children being brought up by other relatives, lacking therefore parental guidance. This situation has a decisively bad influence upon children education in Romania. The **lack of coherence characterising the education politics**, the **frequent changes occurring in the education law** and the **insufficiency of school**

projects (on local, national and international level) aggravate the situation. **Alternative sources of information** as the TV and the Internet are often used without discernment by children, or they even constitute their unique „educational” program.

The education level is lower nowadays. The desire to work abroad increased but, as I mentioned before, an important part of the Romanian emigrants assume jobs for which they are not qualified. Indeed, there are certain fields where the relatively good qualification acquired in Romania is acknowledged abroad. Particularly the medical and social services from Great Britain, France, Spain, Italy and Germany appreciate the presence of the Romanian qualified labour force. As for the adaptability to the cultural and social norms of the host country, it is noteworthy that the Romanian citizens already share the principles of coexistence and the cultural values of the host countries and are flexible enough to adopt the so-called best practices specific to the new social environment, even if they have not been previously familiarized with them.

Religious education is confronted with additional challenges. Churches in Romania were able to organise religious education in public schools only after 1990, therefore after 45 years of communism when religion was absent from the school curriculum. However, 22 years after the political turn, both the majority Orthodox Church and the smaller Christian denominations – despite their longer tradition in religious education in the ecclesiastical space – have difficulties in reaching the youth with their Christian message. This is due both to the deficient training of religion teachers and to the weak communication between teachers and priests, or the NGOs working in adjacent fields.

Since there is not a specific curriculum for future teachers of religion, but they are recruited from the graduates of Pastoral Theology, their training lacks modern methods and practical experience. Only recently has the Faculty for Orthodox Theology in Sibiu developed a Master course of studies dedicated to future religion teachers. The link between school and parish, between the theoretical knowledge delivered in the class and the living experience in the parish is almost inexistent. Only poor practical and infrastructural support is given to religion teachers. Some national projects initiated by the Romanian Patriarchate, like the one called „Christ shared to the children”, need thorough development and better adaptability to the spiritual and social needs of the pupils. Religious education in school is restricted often to catechetical information. Not enough attention is paid to spiritual formation and values or to social commitment. For instance, teachers are hardly prepared for living and working in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society.

The fact that the available positions in schools are outnumbered by the large number of graduates is another burning point of the Romanian education system. Even the best graduates rarely find a position in a school, so most of them look for a job in other fields or abroad, because the Churches have not yet and will hardly develop their structures in the next years in order to absorb all the graduates from their Theological Faculties. Theological education is too general and does not consider the specialisation in certain fields of great relevance for the requirements of the modern society. Therefore the preparation of Theology graduates is rather inappropriate for a flexible adjustment to the labour market and the Church remains the only institution that could offer them the possibility to work as qualified employees.

Certain fields like **social assistance** and **cultural heritage** have rather been neglected by the state and the Church should take responsibility for them. Apart from Pastoral Theology, the theological faculties used to have specific departments for Social Assistance, Christian Art and Cultural Heritage, or departments for double qualification like Theology and Romanian Philology, Theology and Foreign Languages, Theology and Classical Philology. This was a sign of openness towards the needs of the society and of real anticipation of the developments on the labour market. Since the main candidates in these fields were women, this was a sign of real open-mindedness on the part of the Church, which used to be rather hesitant in letting women involve in its activities. Unfortunately the Church did not have the funds to develop institutions able to absorb all this qualified graduates and the state manifested the same incoherence. Especially the field of social assistance suffered, because the state was not willing to create a partnership with the Churches and entrust them with this responsibility. The lack of jobs and the transformation of the university system according to the Bologna process led to the dissolution of these special theological departments. Only in the last couple of years have the Churches developed activities which prove a certain social and educational commitment (a large number of parishes support canteens for the poor, “after-school” programmes for children coming from underprivileged families or even retirement homes; all these initiatives should be further developed and professionalized). The coming law for the partnership between State and Churches concerning the social assistance should create a better framework for such involvement. If this situation will conduct to a revival of some specific theological fields and to the development of appropriate departments in the theological faculties cannot be foreseen. The Master's for training mediators initiated by the Faculty of Theology of Cluj in partnership with Neuendettelsau Diakonie Centre is also noteworthy.

The fact that Theological Faculties are rather reluctant to initiate Research Projects has negative consequences for the development of Church work and for its presence within society. There is not enough dialogue between Theology and science or between Theology and humanities in general. Thus, the contribution of theology to the consolidation of the Romanian society is still unclear and needs thorough consideration. A good example could be the debate on the environment, which is not primarily a technical, but a human issue. Theology could bring its contribution to the projects meant to create a certain positive attitude towards nature and environment. Such research projects could feed the long-life learning system for priests and religion teachers and would situate the Theological Faculties as well as the Churches in the middle of the key-events and key-issues for the Romanian and European society, and even for the whole world.