

## EDUCATION IN THE SPIRIT OF ECUMENICAL VALUES

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**ABSTRACT.** The education of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should respond to societal changes, as well as to challenges occurring in line with the unprecedented development of technology, mass migration and globalisation. The principles underlying the current educational policies support the need to promote an axiological education, in harmony with human and social values which should lead to a good co-existence, acceptance and respect between different civilisations and cultures. In this respect, the ecumenical education promotes pro-social attitudes, openness to people, peace and social justice. Near the family, the main agents shaping the children moral character are school and church. The religious education in the Romanian schools aims at the holistic development of the individuals, their spirituality and morality, but also at forming a harmonious personality of a person capable to cohabit, communicate and positively relate to his or her peers. This paper focuses on revealing the formative aspects of the religious education provided to secondary school students, the way they relate to the values and principles of ecumenical education and how specific elements to ecumenical education are applied in particular contexts.

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**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. *Bildung im Geist der ökumenischen Werte.*** Die Bildung des 21. Jahrhunderts sollte sowohl auf gesellschaftliche Veränderungen, als auch auf Herausforderungen reagieren, die zusammen mit der ohnegleichen Entwicklung von Technologie, Massenmigration und Globalisierung stattfinden. Die Prinzipien, die der gegenwärtigen Bildungspolitik zugrunde liegen, unterstützen die Notwendigkeit, eine axiologische Erziehung im Einklang mit menschlichen und sozialen Werten zu fördern, die zu einer guten Koexistenz, Akzeptanz und Respekt zwischen verschiedenen Zivilisationen und Kulturen führen sollte. In dieser Hinsicht fördert die ökumenische Erziehung prosoziale Einstellungen, Offenheit für Menschen, Frieden und soziale Gerechtigkeit. In der Nähe der Familie sind die Hauptagenten, Schule und Kirche, die den moralischen Charakter der Kinder formen. Die religiöse Erziehung in den rumänischen Schulen zielt auf die ganzheitliche Entwicklung der Individuen, ihrer Spiritualität und Moral ab, aber auch auf die Bildung einer harmonischen Persönlichkeit einer Person, die in der Lage ist, mit Gleichaltrigen zusammenzuleben, zu kommunizieren und sich positiv zu verhalten. Dieser Beitrag konzentriert sich darauf, die formativen Aspekte des Religionsunterrichts für Sekundarschüler aufzuzeigen, wie sie mit den Werten und Prinzipien der ökumenischen Bildung in Beziehung stehen und wie spezifische Elemente der ökumenischen Bildung in bestimmten Kontexten angewandt werden.

***Schlüsselwörter:*** ökumenische Erziehung, religiöse Erziehung, ökumenische Prinzipien und Werte.

## Introduction

The evolution of the human society entails some significant changes both at social, collective level, but also at personal, individual level. Those changes are characterized, among others, by a profound need to search the own identity and sense, as a psychological, social, cultural, spiritual and national existence. The identity construction represents a psychological process, closely interdependent on several factors such: heredity, environment, education, as well as the individual life experiences. Today, almost everybody can have access to worldwide information anytime, can reach any place, can communicate using multiple technological means. People today live a reality which is different from what two or three generations in the past used to live. In this context, the construction of the individual's personality starts considerably earlier and has a unique, different, difficult itinerary, as the selection of information, the variety of stimuli, the lived experiences, the educational and social context, irremediably mark certain structural dimensions of the psychical and social self.

In Romania, education has always had a religious component, being strongly shaped with an important Christian valence. As early as the first schools emerged under the wings of the Church, the first writings, religious printings, traditions, ethos, culture - all have a strong religious nature. Coming to the actual days, the society witnesses a loss of authentic values, having a strong feeling of disorientation, so that those who try to find landmarks and life models appeal to many elements met in the past, when *the first seven years of early childhood* meant the foundation of the life, the basis on which a beautiful harmonious character was built. The traditional family used to convey the spiritual endowment or treasure to their successors, while the school carried on working in fertile land and therefore embedded genuine and real values of mankind into the children mind. But for more and more people, the material values come first in line, *having* becomes more important than *being*, the indifference

and the selfishness replace the good co-existence which relies on respect and acceptance. In this context, education may be the solution for a society in which authentic values should be kept alive and functional.

### **Education and Globalization**

Globalization should be understood as a large phenomenon that requires major changes in the actual education, being defined as a paradigm that imposes the *re-thinking of beliefs and structures in traditional consciousness* (Misra, 2012). In concrete terms, education redefines its frontiers, directions of action, objectives, goals and actors, in strong relation to social demands and changes. The challenge faced up by the education is to lay emphasis mainly on developing of internationally recognized key-skills which help the individuals to succeed in their field of action. Among those possibilities and challenges, temptations and mirages, each person has to remain unique and therefore different from the rest, as globalization may have certain consequences at personal level, such as depersonalization or loss of identity and uniqueness.

In addition to its general and ordinary elements, the education has a series of exceptional features that are linked to the national and cultural specificity, to the local and religious/spiritual ethos and to the perennial values coming from generations. Each country is defined by a thesaurus of particular elements. The phenomenon of globalization has imposed the restructuring of physical country borders and the establishment of an universal standard made up of sets of values which acquire such intensity that tends to go beyond the national boundaries and be therefore recognized on a larger scale (Niculescu & Norel, 2013).

## **Ecumenical Education and Religious Education**

To understand the ecumenical education, it is necessary to explain the meaning of the word: *ecumenism*. The ecumenism comes from the Greek word *oikoumenē*, of which basis are the terms *oikéō* and *oikía*, meaning in the ancient Greek: *land on earth inhabited by humans*, as compared to the uninhabited regions of the earth. Consequently, in a general sense, it means the entire world, but, in a religious sense, it refers to *the Christian world, united under a single church*.

After the *Great Schism* (1054), the division which destroyed the Christian world, the term *ecumenism* designated everything and anything that brought Christians of all churches together, in an increasingly bigger unity of faith, worship, mission and action, towards building the Kingdom of God (Kunuba, 2015). At present, ecumenism means working in cooperation and mutual understanding between different churches and Christian denominations.

The education in the spirit of ecumenical values provides people with vast opportunities to express their model of thinking, which may be achieved in the context of exploration and mutual openness as well as listening to others. Ecumenical education is the education which supports a dialogue-oriented environment, mutual respect, exchange of ideas as enriching the co-existence. One of the principles of the ecumenical education refers to interconnection of knowledge and unity of the diversity of knowledge. Ecumenical educational promotes education for peace by creating some opportunities to overcome religious and ethnical prejudices, in an environment of authentic dialogue, openness and attitudes which are favorable to interaction.

Among the ecumenical education principles, one may find (Kunuba, 2015): (a) tolerance; (b) love for others; (c) acceptance of different thinking and opinions; (d) collaboration; (e) promoting moral values; (f) peace and respect for the environment; (g) promoting social justice and people development.

Through its values, attitudes and paradigms, ecumenical education tries to shape the individual, who should co-exist in a balanced and peaceful manner with his/her peers, accept and respect various ideas, expressions, customs and traditions. Ecumenical education contributes to form attitudes of tolerance for people of different religions and ethnicities, encourages co-existence in diversity, harmony between cultures and people, dialogue and communication between people. In the spirit of the ecumenical values, the religious education develops a series of skills, as follows (Niculescu & Norel, 2013): (a) understanding and further acceptance of specific aspects of different religions and forms of worship; (b) positively analyzing, comparing and valorizing basic concepts, rules and traditions of different religions; (c) tolerant attitude; (d) real capacity to love the human being; (e) positively valorizing the cultural values based on different religions or forms of worships.

All those values, specific to ecumenical education, are promoted with the help of religious education, in reference to which Cucuș (2009) stated that *it is fundamental and necessary for the modern person*. In fact, the religious education was reintroduced as a distinguish discipline in the Romanian national curriculum (part of the common core) in 1990, after a long period when the education was deprived of this dimension. The Christian-orthodox religion is taught in primary and secondary education, and also in high schools and vocational schools, although there are 18 religious forms of worship recognized across the country.

## **Methodology**

The age of adolescence is, by definition, a difficult period, characterized by significant psychological and physical changes, by existential questions that contribute to the crystallization of the *self*, and to the building of the teen-ager identity, including the exploration of the religious dimension seen as part of the individual's spirituality.

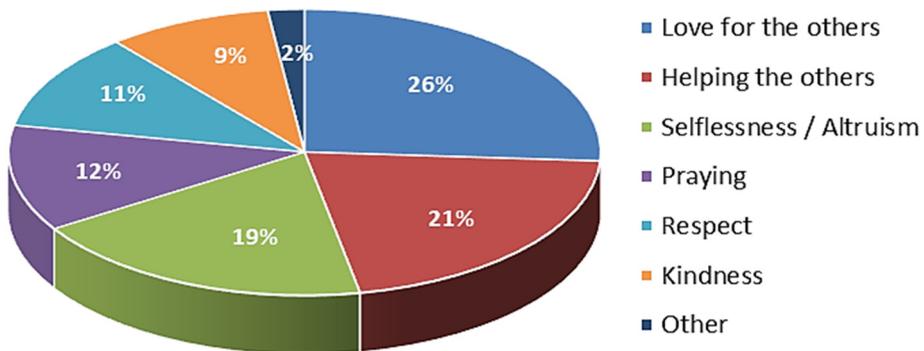
In this respect, we tried to highlight on the formative influence of religious education - concerning its principles and ecumenical values - in the process of formation of the ethical and moral dimension of human personality, by performing a research which was conducted involving high-school students, who are at the delicate age of adolescence, in the period of their psychological and social development stage, generally characterized by the appearance of different problems. The research methodology was based on the administration of a questionnaire with *open items*, from which several items have been selected to be illustrated in this paper. 200 students from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades participated to this research (questioned students). Out of the participating students, 50 were enrolled in the Theological Seminar, and 150 in the “Ienăchiță Văcărescu” National College. All of them attended specific classes of Religious Education.

The designed questionnaire is just an instrument of a broader research that aims to explore more dimensions of the students' religious life: their perceptions, emotions, feelings and attitudes, religious representations, but also the specificity concerning the understanding of religious dimension at the age of adolescence, together with the individual and social implications of religious manifestations. The selected items considered in this paper relate both dimensions of religiosity (internal and external), the last one being applied in social contexts.

## **Results and Discussion**

One of the first issue under research was defined by the individual perceptions of the students concerning what represents being a good Christian, more precisely, the way students internalise and mentally build the psychological portrait of a real Christian. Figure 1 illustrates the results, in which the major options - love for the others (26%), helping the others (21%) and selflessness/altruism (19%) - refer to the social dimension of being religious, in the respect of Scriptural teachings (the

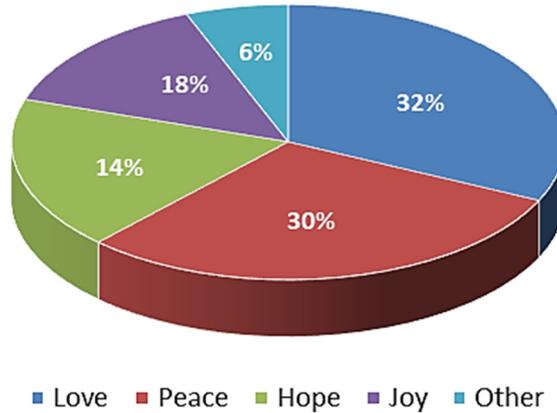
commandment on love - *love your neighbor as you love yourself*), one of the basic Christian precepts, also promoted by the ecumenical education. Other options were: praying (12%) - namely the discussion between the human and God, proof of religious practice; respect (11%); kindness (9%); and others (2%). The students associate religion and its teachings to interhuman, pro-social behaviors, considering that a Christian (a believer) has to have behaviors for the benefit of the others.



**Fig. 1.** Students' individual perceptions concerning the meaning of being a good Christian

Figure 2 illustrates the students' emotions, feelings and experiences in relation to their attendance of the Holy Services of the Church (Divine Liturgy). Thus, love (32%) and peace (30%) are the most frequent emotional states of the students, who go to religious services and pinpoint the therapeutic effects at emotional level. Other feelings were hope (18%) and joy (14%), 6% mentioned admiration, fear, finding oneself, amazement, communion, confidence (grouped as *other answers*). It is important to recognize the emotions generated by attending the religious services, because religion, similar to life, means experiences, emotions, feelings. It is worth mentioning that all emotions that students spoke about are positive, which leads to the conclusion that participation

to the religious life of the community may represent for the young generation a healthy alternative to the chaotic lifestyle, sedentary and excessively technologized life. Young people should be more involved in the life of their parishes, because the effects - at psychological level - can be beneficial for their harmonious development.

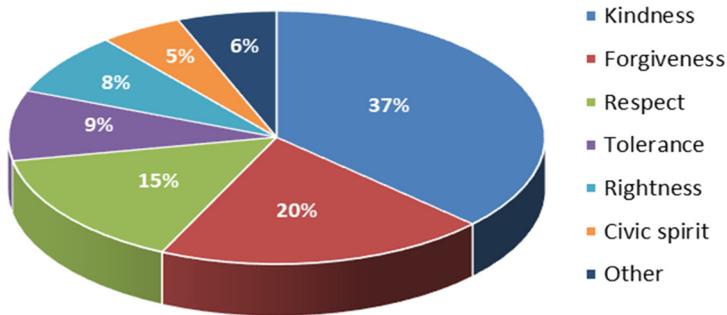


**Fig. 2.** *Students' emotions and feelings related to their participation in the Church Holy Service*

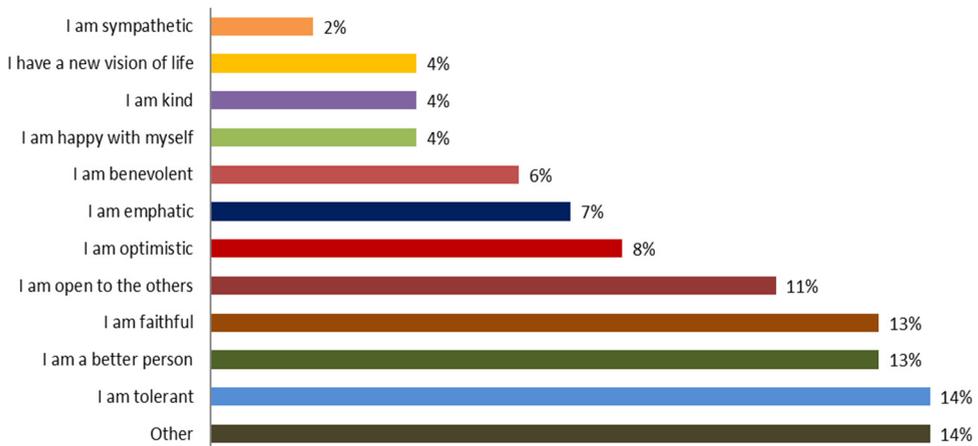
Figure 3 illustrates students' perceptions in relation to the moral qualities of a good Christian. Kindness is again present to a very great extent (37%), which indicates the awareness of being good and kind to other people. Forgiveness (20%) represents another moral feature that a good Christian should have, followed by respect (15%) and tolerance (9%). All those are values promoted and supported by the education in the ecumenical spirit.

To highlight the moral and social values promoted and developed by the religious education in terms of students' personality, the participants completed the responses to the enunciation *Due to the religious education, ...,* synthesized in Figure 4. Here, it can be seen that the students are aware of being tolerant (14%), being better and with more faith (13%), more open to others (11%), more optimistic (8%), more emphatic (7%) and kinder (6%) - all those being found in the principles and

values of the ecumenical education, which balances human relations and facilitates the intercultural dialogue, conditions which are essential in the current social context. In addition, the students appreciate that religious education has positive effects on how they perceive life: they are happier about themselves, accept themselves and consider easier to find the scope of their life, aspects which are very important at this age, when teen-agers go through the age crisis. Other given answers were: I am wise, responsible, free, I find easier to make decisions, I grow. No negative responses were offered and no student avoided to answer.



**Fig. 3.** *Students' individual perceptions concerning the main moral quality of a good Christian*



**Fig. 4.** *Students' individual considerations concerning the character traits developed by the religious education*

The final results may constitute the solution to the issue that many teachers and parents are struggling to solve: *How can one help adolescents to overcome this critical period of their life?* The religious education is highly important for the shaping of each moral character, to becoming tolerant, pro-social, moral and to having an ethical behavior, to being open to dialogue, starting with early ages and especially throughout the adolescence period.

### Conclusion

The results of the research highlight that students understand the impact of religious education on their personality and acknowledge the importance of such impact for living in the actual society, pleading for a good co-existence. The resulted data present a gladdening character, but nevertheless, this research has a limit: the participant students are coming from schools considered by the community as of high quality, schools where teachers are clearly devoted to their job. However, another element which indicates how important the religious education is for the development of the students' conscience of local traditions is represented by the *Religion discipline* itself. Despite the fact that, in order for the discipline to be attended by the students, a written expression of interest issued by the students' parents is required, at the national level, out of a total of over 2 million students (in 2015), a percentage of 91.39% made a written request for Religion to be studied in school. In this respect, a study conducted in Dâmbovița County (in 2014) illustrates that to a very great extent (more than 95%), the parents of pre-primary students wanted expressly the introduction of *Religious education* in kindergartens (Santi & Santi, 2014), being aware of its educative significance in relation to shape their children personality.

It is clear that *Religious education* in schools offers *an integrating of the spiritual horizon, a bond which relates and integrates the knowledge acquired in other disciplines, towards building a spiritual landmark which*

*is bright and probative for life, living so in the communion of love and co-responsibility for the common welfare* (Message of His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, March 2015).

In conclusion, we can mention the opinion of a Christian pedagogue - Professor Constantin Cucuș (2009) - who expressed the necessity of a religious education from early ages, taking into account the characteristics of those ages, and further on, during the period of younger development stages, as the benefits of this education are found in the development of the authentic values, in the structuring of one's own personal and social identity, in the setting of some landmarks and life models, in the personal development and in the process of building of relations based on solidarity, communion and responsibility.

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