



## Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Education from the Slovak perspective

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### Main points:

- Thankfulness for freedoms according to the current legislation (since 1991)
- Reality of freedom of religion and of education as societal values in post-Marxist era
- Challenges how to use the freedoms and taking full advantages of them

### 1. Slovak Legislation guarantees freedom of religion and education

According to the Constitution and other legislation of the Slovak Republic, Slovakia - established on 1 January 1993 - is a sovereign, democratic, ideologically neutral state where:

- Basic rights and freedoms are guaranteed to all disregarding gender, race, religion and belief (including freedom of conscience, religion, faith, public expression of own view).
- Everyone has the freedom of religion - the right to study (free in elementary and secondary schools, and in case of a full-time study, also in universities).
- Churches have freedom to provide religious education in state schools and to establish their own religious institutions (including denominational schools)<sup>1</sup>.
- Parents and other educating persons have the right to bring up their children in accordance with the worldview and moral principles of their own/their registered Church and religious society.

In the event of non-observance or a sign of violation of these freedoms, every citizen may bring his/her issue before the court, and appeal legislatively to these freedoms. The courts of the Slovak Republic - which became the member of EU in 2004, respect the rights and freedoms of their citizens

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<sup>1</sup> Since 1993, the education in denominational schools in Slovakia is subsidised by the state budget. They are under the same rules and the same State Educational Programme (SVP). If there is a collision with SVP or if the number of students is higher than the number stated by the Ministry or if the professionalism of teaching in the denominational school is under 70%, the school budget can be reduced by 15%. The number of all kinds of denominational kindergartens, similarly to all other types, has been growing. They presented 1.61% in 2009, 1.69% in 2010 and 1.98% in 2011 out of all kindergartens. The number of primary schools in Slovakia generally has been declining since the 1990s by about 14.000 each year (in 2011 only 40% from the number in the early 1990s). But the number of denominational schools has been growing from 4.89% of schools in 2008 to 5.1% in 2011. From 2008 to 2011 their number grew from 113 to 115 denominational schools and back to 2012 in June 2013. The number of students in denominational grammar schools culminated in 2008 (15,723), then it dropped and in 2011 it was about 13,623 (similar to stagnation in numbers in private grammar schools and decline in state grammar schools).

(also according to the EU standards). One comment: There is no strict separation of the church from the state in Slovakia. On the one hand, it is encouraging, that after 40 years of totalitarianism even the smaller-size church communities have a potential chance to establish their own denominational schools, as these are almost completely subsidized from the state budget. On the other hand, it follows from my observation that the issue of incomplete separation of the church from the state constantly produces tensions in the matter of the application of freedom of religion and education. The State creates the state curriculum which has to be fulfilled also in the denominational schools (only 30% is flexible curriculum content). Right wing political liberal parties have been pointing to the unfairness that non-believing citizens have to contribute from their taxes to the functioning of church schools. E.g. their election slogan was: "English into schools - religion out of (state) schools."

I listed the legislative guarantees of the freedom of religion and education in Slovakia. However, the question is: What is their application into real-life practice, including practice in schools? How do we, teachers and other citizens of Slovakia, deal with freedom of religion and education? My argument (and report) is that treatment of both freedoms could be described by two sets of approaches: a) an approach specific to post-Marxist countries; b) a currently global, common approach.

Let me explain in a few points what I mean here.

## **2. Freedom of religion and of education in reality of post-communist Slovakia**

### **2.1 Marxist residual lies still challenging the reality of implementation of human freedoms in society**

To understand the current situation, let us remind us some characteristics of the Marxist educational system<sup>2</sup>:

- Human rights (freedoms) were guaranteed at the proclamation - not reality - level, similarly were the educational aims. People got used to this dichotomy, to lies.
- The state had an official anti-religious ideology (religious ideology was described as being incompatible with progress, science, or the well-being of humanity, maybe good for morals. The freedom of education: the right and duty to have basic education, but in the case of high-quality secondary or tertiary education there were very limited possibilities for Christians to study at universities (especially teaching science as well as other social/human sciences).
- Consequence from the above-written: A narrow scope for Christian participation in civic life – focusing on one's own „sandpit“.
- The pressure was to present only one „politically-correct“ perspective in the public, with any discussion of personal beliefs kept in private. Christian teachers were expected to keep their personal convictions to themselves or to openly deny them which caused they were laid off and otherwise persecuted. Incompatibility of teaching according to the state requirements with the Christian worldview.
- Distorted anthropology – the value of each human being lied in a centralized planned economy: The party / collective / masses' decisions / view was important, not paying attention to individual people.

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<sup>2</sup> Hanesová, D., Hanes, P. - Understanding and Nourishing Christian Vocation to Higher Education in a Post-Communist Society. In *Christian Higher Education*, 2017, Vol. 16, No. 1-2, pp. 67-78

To sum up, it was an era of the power of lie, not truth (including lying about freedom of religion and education).

Why have I started with reminding something that finished 25 years ago? The Polish philosopher Kolakowski summarized the dichotomy of life under communism in the following words: “The lie is the immortal soul of communism” (p. 190).<sup>3</sup>

What happened with that strong power of lie when communism fell in 1989? Pavel Hanes<sup>4</sup> and others argue that although the communist party was abolished and the country was claimed democratic, this spirit of lie is still waiting to be properly revealed and substituted by real truth and freedom and, in case of Christian teachers, by a Christian counter-culture (using the words of John R. W. Stott<sup>5</sup>).

Of course, our prayer and everyday strive in our teaching position is for the Kingdom of God to come to our schools and society to the highest possible extent. Another practical step towards this highest calling in life and teaching profession is to continue in observing and identifying the hindrances or distortion of how freedom of religion and education might really work in the society. Here are some of such ideas:

What are the Marxist residual lies still challenging the reality of implementation of human freedoms in society?

- A strong **influence of secular education system and ubiquitous propaganda** (middle-aged and older generations are still used to listen and not to criticise/comment on/“react” to “slogans“, slowing down the process of applying programs of critical thinking into reality of school (*lack of evaluation/reflection how they work in reality*))
- Consequence of “**state fetishism**” - dependence on the activity of government, state, somebody “in power” to initiate change/to invest/to decide, resulting in inner resistance and outward **passivity** of Christians, including teachers. Examples:
  - o It remains easier, if not natural, to guard one’s true opinions and to refrain from publically communicating unpopular thoughts or facts.<sup>6</sup>
  - o Evident lack of motivation to pursue vocations where it is necessary to express/ to defend one’s own Christian values/ worldview (in politics, sociology, public life)
    - o Slovakia is a typical example of how the state with its centralized top-down school legislation and excessive administration has discouraged the creative bottom-up initiatives of educators
    - o Slantcheva and Levy (2007) observing the current educational system: “The state can affect the institutional standing and legitimacy through multiple related actors, e.g., accreditation bodies of higher education institutions” (p. 5). Even private universities must obtain official state accreditation. This process also destabilizes the educational environment as accreditation requirements change as often as the ruling parties—that is, practically with each election (Kohoutek, 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> as quoted in Tismaneanu, V. (2012). The devil in history. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>4</sup> Hanes, P. Residual Marxism or the need for demarxification in Eastern. In Journal of European Baptist Studies. - Praha : International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008. - ISSN 1213-1520. - Roč. 8, č. 3 (2008), s. 21-34.

<sup>5</sup> Stott, J. R.W. Christian counter-culture. Inter-Varsity Press, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> In a preliminary international research project constructing a measuring instrument of religious tolerance (2016 - Nico Broer, Driestar Educatief), Slovak respondents - future teachers - did not seem to exercise a great openness toward other people as well as toward the government. Despite their high level of respectfulness and empathy towards other people, it seems that they want to live their own lives. But this assumption is not based on a very high esteem of the value of the own religion

- Limited freedom of a university researcher to choose a research topic set by governmental grant agencies, motivated primarily by neo-liberal competence- and standards-based education challenges). to be successful in higher education, one still must repeat the accepted formulas of the politically correct discourse. Whereas the discourse in the past focused on materialism and communism, today it encompasses humanism and tolerance

## 2.2 The challenges of global cultural trends on the freedoms of Christian educators in Slovakia:

The global Zeitgeist has also very strong influence on how the freedom of religion and education are being applied. This influence is mainly mediated by various social media (thanks to I.C.T. boom) spread in the informal as well as formal educational environment.

- **Problem of increasing (philosophical) anthropocentrism** (mankind-centred instead of God-centred): The influence of humanist paradigm in education: “Traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species.”<sup>7</sup> (Humanist Manifesto). *Christian teachers see its contrast with the Christian worldview - pressure on the freedom to confess God’s rights (Ps 24:1) as that of the Ultimate Lord of Lords, creation Ps 139:13.*
- **Secularized (ethical) individualism**: “Individualism is a cultural syndrome organized around the importance of individuals in social life.”<sup>8</sup> → selfism<sup>9</sup>, narcizmus; → resentment: The human individual is the centre of his/her world. ROUSSEAU *Confessions*: “I have entered upon a performance which is without example, whose accomplishment **will have no imitator**. I mean to present my fellow- mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself.”<sup>10</sup> *Christian teachers, believing in God’s word, may confess with CALVIN: “Wherefore let us submit ourselves to him, and be ready to receive whatever is taught us truly in his name. Thus you see what we have to remember under the word ‘mystery’. ...let us reverence that which is hidden from us as yet...<sup>11</sup> Pressure on freedom to revere and obey God as the centre of the education/upbringing process.*
- **Scientism** - exclusive faith/trust in the science - a term of abuse: “The view that science is the only knowledge and that scientific methodology is the only proper method for obtaining knowledge. Everything should be understood and explained by the employment of scientific theories.”<sup>12</sup> Scientism says everything is determined by some “natural” rules, quantitative measuring of success/primacy of educational standards instead of values. Present also in strong neoliberalistic approaches to educational processes and products (knowledge is a product, not a valuable results of complex educational/formatting process along the child’s development. But the Bible sees the power behind them, their Creator. Even though things happen on a regular basis (eg gravitation, chemical processes), we still need to see that God is doing it, it's his

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<sup>7</sup> *Humanist Manifesto II*,1. (1933; 1973; 2003)

<sup>8</sup> *Encyclopedia of Psychology 03*, p. 176.

<sup>9</sup> Harrison, G. *The Big Ego Trip: Finding True Significance in a Culture of Self-esteem*. Inter-Varsity, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Rousseau, J. J. *Confessions*. <http://jacquesmottier.online.fr/pages/preambule2.html>

<sup>11</sup> CALVIN, J. *Sermons on Ephesians*, p. 237-238.

<sup>12</sup> *Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, p. 624 [631/772]

way of regular action. Scientism believes that when we, humans, discover scientific laws, they are ultimate. It does not believe in intelligent design, neither in a person behind it, nor in miracles. Today in Slovak schools - no alternatives given to children via state curriculum - only the evolutionary/ natural/Darwinistic worldview (the same in media/films on Slovak TV programmes). *Christian teachers confess the Lord to be the Creator and Sustainer and Author of all natural laws - e.g. Psalm 115:3*

- **Secularized eschatology:** "In Christianity, however, eschatology plays such an essential role that, without the eschatological dimension, Christianity loses its meaning."<sup>13</sup> (unbalanced focus on prosperity, on other "callings" besides the call to be God's servants - e.g. on rescuing the Earth: We have more and more Christians fighting the front of ecology, sustainable development, saving the whales). Even if our theologies of eschatology might differ, it is a sad fact that in our country fewer and fewer Christians think of the summit of their joy which is to meet Christ (see God - visio beatifica). (This thought was so vivid and life-sustaining for Christians during the suffering in the Communist times.) *Christian are not ashamed for belief in afterlife - pressure on how they lead the children (how to spend their life/life vocation - omitting God? Freedom of religion - to confess Christ - the desire to be with Christ, to lay one's life for Christ.*

### 3. How do we cultivate our external and internal freedoms in order to serve God and the community?

Up-bringing/teaching/preaching/writing in such a way as to:

- To continue detecting the (post-Marxist's as well as current) lies, including half-truths and distortions of truth about God's existence, sovereignty and supremacy to avoid compromising in the Christian lives and be able to put into practise the belief that God really expect His children to be ambassadors of His invisible kingdom – to stand for God's truth knowledge, to start our daily-life, ordinary practice/job performance always with God (*Without me, you cannot do anything (J 15:5)*):
  - o Truthful knowledge is in the *whole* of truth - not just focusing on "hypes".
  - o Truthful knowledge is not just in its *content* but also in our *attitude* toward truth.
  - o Truthful knowledge surpasses the world as we know it now.
- To redeem the substantial meaning of these freedoms (Nowadays everybody in Slovakia takes freedom for religion and education for granted. However, we need to redeem their complex meaning as of values - taking in view God, individual, society, environment and their relationship. Practically: talk about it, reflect, filter our views on them through God's word, discover their real meaning, pray for those who do not have them.)
- By Christian teachers' re-focusing from ego-centred society (including its education process) to building an alternative - Christian counter-culture based on agape love (John 13:35).

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<sup>13</sup> *Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Theology*, p. 107.