



# A Problem that Does Not Have to Be Religious Education in Public Schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>1</sup>

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During the last two decades, BH society has radically changed its position on religion. Part of the new consensus was introduction of confessional religious education (CRE) into public schools. Despite its changing status across the country, CRE, as opposed to “religious studies” education (RS), has gained the stature of a well established school subject over the last fifteen years. A comprehensive legal framework followed in 2003 and 2004. Subsequently BH signed agreements with the Catholic and Serbian Orthodox churches. Both agreements are international treaties superseding local legislation and both provide for CRE in public educational institutions at all levels. The CRE model initially raised little public controversy. However lately CRE has been publicly challenged for 1) reinforcing segregation and ethnic divisions and hence threatening social cohesion, and ultimately the future of the BH state, and 2) discriminating against minorities, among other things (Trbić 2007: 11-12).

The CRE approach involves the teaching of a single religion in a prescriptive manner as the true religion. CRE is present in public schools in most of Eastern Europe, Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland, etc. The RS approach also variously called “culture of religions” or “history of religions” by contrast is descriptive and historical but not necessarily neutral. It is prevalent in UK, Denmark and some other European countries.

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In the heated public debate on religion in BH schools the following three options were proposed: 1. CRE is the status quo policy whereby the state is in charge of finances, employment, management and pedagogies while religious communities handle curricula, teachers training and licensing. 2. RS is the second policy option which demands a radical change and departure from the current practice whereby CRE would be removed from the public school classrooms and replaced by non-denominational RE subject (*Kultura religija*). 3. The third option presented in this paper is the simultaneous offering of a more ecumenically-orientated CRE course together with its alternative and one-time mandatory RS course. In this last option, intensive cooperation and strong partnership between education authorities and religious communities is vital.

## Policy Options That Really Are Not

Current policy enjoys wide social and political acceptance. The levels of CRE attendance and approval both among the pupils and their parents are very high, probably among the highest for any single policy in the country. The percentage is even rising. For instance, of all the Muslim pupils in BH primary schools in 2006-2007, 96.24% attended CRE. In Banja Luka region, 99% of Muslims pupils attended it. In Sarajevo Canton in the school year 2006-2007, 95.55% of all Muslim pupils in primary schools attended CRE, up from 89.29% in 1998-1999 (Pleh 2007: 55). Comparative figures for Catholic pupils are even higher. In addition to parents and pupils, religious communities and many political parties are supportive of the status quo. The current arrangement also respects the individual legal right of children to be educated according to their own traditional values as well as recognizes collective communal rights to preserve and transmit those values to new generations.

## Summary

Current confessional religious education (CRE) model enjoys very high rates of approval, satisfies the demands of religious communities, and is largely aligned with domestic laws and international obligations of BH. However its implementation raises legitimate concerns about its negative impact on the social cohesion and discrimination of minorities. Radical changes in this policy area are not feasible. The solution lies in improvement of CRE and introduction of an alternative course for pupils not attending it together with a one-time mandatory comparative religious studies course for all. This approach would wrestle powerful religious messages from the hands of sometimes exclusivist clerics and parents, and could contribute to social healing and cohesion.

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However, CRE's implementation raises legitimate concerns about its negative effects on the social cohesion and treatment of minorities. Even more detrimental is the accusation that CRE is undermining multicultural, pluralistic BH society by deepening existing cleavages.

As noted, overall, the status quo seems to score very high on the political feasibility scale. Yet, scrutiny reveals a less assuring picture. The most recent survey of student and parental attitudes demonstrates that the single most preferred option is CRE supplemented by a RS course that would expose students to other religious traditions as well. This option enjoys the support of 36.5% of BH pupils and 34.3% of BH parents compared to 31.1% and 32.1% support for CRE taught alone. Therefore, it seems reasonable to address the deficiencies in the current CRE model.

RS without CRE is the panacea for this situation. Its advocates claim this approach would avoid the pitfalls of segregation and discrimination. However, such an approach may lend itself to being anti-religious. It may discriminate and effectively alienate those taking their religion seriously. Hence, religious communities are deeply suspicious of such a course. They view it as a manifestation of fundamentalist secularism or "fundamentalistic enlightenment" trying to marginalize and suppress religion once again. Still, this approach's biggest deficiency is that it lacks support. According to the survey mentioned above, only a minority of Bosnian pupils support the idea of banning CRE from schools and introducing RS alone (Trbić and Hasanagić 2007: 93).

#### **A Way Forward: A Road Less Traveled**

If the status quo is unsatisfactory and if radical solution is impossible, then incremental change and the fine-tuning of the existing model must be the way forward. That way forward includes development of a dialogically predisposed CRE, an alternative course, and a one-time compulsory religious studies course. CRE would be improved through revision of the curricula and textbooks, continuous training of teachers, bet-

ter CRE management, upgraded pedagogies, and closer cooperation between education authorities and religious communities. In our policy study, arguments for this option are presented at length, but here, we mention a few of them.

First, CRE is a legal right enshrined in several national laws and international agreements signed recently by BH that would be difficult to change any time soon. Second, this approach is feasible. Recent surveys show that most students and parents polled think that schools should offer subjects relating to religious education, preferably both CRE and a subject teaching world religions. Only a small minority (6-10%) think that schools should offer a subject dealing with all religions, and not CRE. Even less (2-12%) think neither of these subjects should be taught (Trbić and Hasanagić 2007: 92).

Third, BH cannot and should not conceal its pluralistic nature from its youth. On the contrary, BH society has to make every effort to teach its young generations how to accept pluralism without obliterating differences or being assimilationist. Differences exist and they cannot be hidden or erased. What the RS approach suggests is avoidance of the problem, not its solution. It implies our perceiving religious diversity as a problem, not as an advantage or source of richness. Coexistence based on suppression of particular identities did not work in BH despite forty-five years of concerted efforts. BH will cohere through recognition and acceptance of these differences and through dealing with them. Building of a Bosnian national identity ought not to be detrimental to particular identities of various BH peoples. Children should be taught to respect religious differences the way we teach them to respect racial, linguistic, gender and other differences.

Fourth, assuming that clergy of some religious communities are negatively impacting the development of pluralistic BH society, CRE in public schools is a unique opportunity to wrestle powerful religious messages from such exclusivist theologians and parental figures. A recent survey reveals religious communities in BH en-

If current model is segregating and discriminating, and if radical change is not feasible, then the only way forward is the development of a dialogically predisposed CRE offered together with an alternative course, and a one-time compulsory religious studies course for all.



joy high levels of trust (Šalaj 2009: 52). When clerics speak and quote scriptures, people listen and many follow the religious message. Although the situation varies from one community to another in the Balkans, such messages tend to be exclusivist. Introduction of CRE in public schools provides the public with a unique opportunity to temper such powerful religious messages and their inculcation in youth. Supported by public educational authorities, CRE teachers can be reasonably expected to do a better job in explaining religious differences to young generations and in preparing them to manage religious diversity in their lives.

While current textbooks have been an object of scrutiny and criticism, everybody has forgotten how they looked before revision when they were prepared solely by religious communities. For instance, the old Islamic CRE textbook for the third grade had a picture featuring a child reading a book with a gun leaning on the wall next to him (p. 100). The old Orthodox textbook for the sixth grade (2001) nourished “the consciousness of the need to avenge Kosovo...” (p. 35). On p. 50, it says that Muslims have “Roasted live people, broken bones with axes and huge hammers and tortured them in various other ways...” Textbooks and materials used for religious instruction or catechesis within religious communities address their believers as if they were living in either an insular Muslim or Christian environment. Achievement of mutual understanding, religious pluralism and coexistence do not inform them. (For references see the full policy paper).

In a nutshell, religion is too important today to be left to the theologians and clerics alone. CRE plays an important transformative role we often fail to notice. In some case, it is the only window through which winds of change can reach inner circles of the religious communities. Instead of shutting this window of opportunity, let us swing it wide open. CRE pressures religious authorities to address issues they can comfortably ignore inside their communities. By integrating religious communities and people into the mainstream, society will encourage them to be socially responsible.

## **Key Recommendations: Intolerance Is Taught and Therefore Can Be Untaught**

### **(a) Government**

- Strengthen cooperation and partnership with religious communities regarding curriculum and textbook revision and development, as well as teacher training;
- Work to prepare and introduce an alternative course for CRE;
- Push for the introduction of RS into all public schools by September 2010;
- Facilitate provision of input to authors and publishers of CRE and RS textbooks so they can be optimally respectful of international standards and best practice.

### **(b) Religious Communities**

- Make your position regarding CRE clear but improve cooperation and partnership with public authorities, international organizations, and parents in ensuring that it supports coexistence, mutual understanding and solidarity;
- Assist education authorities in developing and introducing a CRE alternative and an RS course along with making necessary concessions.

### **(c) OSCE & Other International Organizations**

- Shift focus from negative aspects of CRE to ways of putting it at the service of social cohesion;
- Garner support for RS course in schools by, *inter alia*, undertaking trust-building measures with religious communities including assuring them that aim is not to displace CRE from public schools;
- Assist religious communities and education authorities in introducing an alternative course for CRE;
- Support execution of an impact assessment study of CRE.

What the religious studies approach suggests is avoidance of the problem, not its solution. It implies our perceiving religious diversity as a problem, not as an advantage or source of richness. Coexistence based on suppression of particular identities did not work in BH despite forty-five years of concerted efforts. Building of a Bosnian national identity ought not to be detrimental to particular identities of various BH peoples.

Confessional religious education plays an important transformative role we often fail to notice. In some case, it is the only window through which winds of change can reach inner circles of the religious communities. Instead of shutting this window of opportunity, let us swing it wide open.

### **What experts say?**

Inattention to religious education is a failure of the highest order. Education which refuses to take religion seriously is profoundly illiberal (Prothero 2007: 8).

Beliefs, values and practices cannot be ignored, nor their study suppressed without distorting the nature of education. Citizenship actually requires such study if it is to be effective in schools (John Keast 2000: 32).



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