



Religious Education in Public Schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Towards a Model Supporting Coexistence and Mutual Understanding

Ahmet Alibašić

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
I. Introduction	3
I.a. Statement of Intent	4
I.b. Methodology and Limitations	5
II. Problem description	5
III. Policy Options	12
III.a. Possible Options	12
III.b. Framework of Analysis	13
III.c. Non-Preferred Options	14
III.d. Preferred Policy Option	17
IV. Conclusion and Recommendations	20
IV.a. Recommendations to Government	21
IV.b. Recommendations to Religious Communities	22
IV.c. Recommendations to Parents	22
IV.d. OSCE & Other International Organizations	22
V. Bibliography	23



Ahmet Alibašić, M.A., is a lecturer at the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo teaching Islamic culture and civilization courses and the director of the Center for Advanced Studies in Sarajevo. He is actively involved in inter-religious dialogue and served as the first director of the Interreligious Institute in Sarajevo (2007-2008) jointly established by the Islamic Community, Serbian Orthodox Church, Catholic Church and Jewish Community in B&H. From 2003-2007 he served as Deputy President of the Association of Islamic Scholars in B&H. He has authored and translated articles and books dealing with Islam and politics, Islamic movements, Islam in the Balkans, democratization of the Muslim World, opposition legitimization in Islam, church-state relations in Europe and USA, human rights in Islam and Muslim world, and Islamic history and civilization. He was quoted by *WSJ Europe*, *Boston Globe*, *Al-Mujtama'*, *Radio Free Europe*, *Reuters*, *BBC Scotland*, *TV France 3*, *AFP*, *CBC*, *TV Egypt*, etc.

Executive Summary

This paper is an attempt to define the status of religion in public schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina (heretofore, BH) that will be compatible with relevant international Human Rights documents and that will enable religion to contribute to the successful management of pluralistic democratic BH society. The paper puts forward a formula through which religion might cease to be a problem and rather become a part of the solution by helping children or young people build inter-religious competence while preserving their particular identities. It takes a road less traveled in this area. It argues that *despite present deficiencies of confessional religious education (heretofore, CRE) in the BH public school system, such education plays a strong and important corrective role in relation to much more exclusive religious messages that are taught inside some religious communities.* CRE in schools is seen as a window of opportunity for alternative opinions from the same religious tradition that might act as an antidote to powerful though at times exclusivist messages coming from within some religious communities.

To test this hypothesis the author conducted content analysis of the textbooks and materials used in religious instruction inside religious communities; analyzed CRE textbooks that were in use when CRE was first introduced into public schooling system in 1990s; compared those findings with the available expert assessments, reviews, and content analyses of CRE textbooks used currently in public schools; spoke to stakeholders, and did extensive literature review.

It was found that current CRE model enjoys very high rates of approval, satisfies the demands of religious communities, and is aligned with national laws and international obligations of BH. However the way it is implemented raises legitimate concerns about its negative impact on general social cohesion, discrimination of minorities and at times, age inappropriateness of the materials fed to pupils.

Taking into consideration the high levels of CRE attendance, the high CRE approval rates among parents and pupils as shown by poll opinions and surveys, as well as the existing legislation and international agreements with the Vatican and the Serbian Orthodox Church respectively, it seems that the only feasible and socially acceptable option for correcting the deficiencies of the current CRE model is its fine-tuning.

Radical changes in this policy area do not seem to be feasible. On the other hand, an upgrading of the current policy carries the promise of success. Such fine-tuning would include: 1) revision of CRE curricula, textbooks and teaching methods, and continuous CRE teacher training in order to make it more dialogically predisposed, 2) development of an alternative course, and 3) introduction of a mandatory religious studies course in one year of primary and/or one year of secondary school, as well as strengthening of the partnership with parents and religious communities.

The advantages of this combined approach are its social feasibility, wresting of the powerful religious message from the hands of often exclusivist clerics and parents and contribution to social healing and cohesion. The author believes that with the support of public educational authorities, school principals and pedagogues, the CRE teachers can be reasonably expected to do a better job than either religious officials or parents in explaining religious differences to young generations and in preparing them to manage religious diversity in their lives. By integrating religious communities and religious people into the mainstream, society pressures them to be more socially responsible.

The suggested model also aims to improve the performance of the current model by making CRE truly optional. That could be achieved by introducing an alternative course for pupils not attending CRE. Other interventions need to be directed at content (curricula), means (textbooks and didactic accessories), human resources (teacher training), management (organization),



and pedagogies (didactics and methodology) so that CRE become conducive to the development of civil society and social cohesion, and start working for the achievement of the goals set out by the BH Framework law on education.

In addition, CRE should be supplemented by a one year mandatory Religious Studies or Culture of Religions (heretofore, RS) course at a certain stage during the primary and/or secondary education. Intensive cooperation and strong partnership between education authorities and religious communities is vital in this option. In those circumstances we could hope that CRE in schools will very soon start working towards citizenship education. The RS or Culture of Religions course should be an excellent supplement but not a substitute. These two are not mutually exclusive but complementary. This analysis proves that by having CRE and RS courses simultaneously we can have the best of both worlds. It would be a win-win situation for all.

I. Introduction

“Mum, who wrote the Qur’an?; Father, when are we going to do what Teletubbies do (i.e., ring church bells)?; What’s that (pointing towards a minaret and a church tower)?; Why don’t we ever buy those (wines)?; Why don’t we ever say ‘Jesus God!’ as my teacher does?; (almost crying): Is it true that my teacher eats pork?; Why do some women cover their heads and others do not?; Does Toše Proeski (popular late Macedonian singer) pray?; Why aren’t we Christians?; Why don’t we celebrate Christmas?”

These are among the questions that I and my wife began hearing from our two young children long before they started going to school. As I am a theologian and my wife a teacher, we often had ready, convincing answers. At other times, we were caught by surprise or simply could not find the right words to explain what we knew to our children, then a four-year old and a five-year old. Realizing my struggle to answer him recently, my now seven-year old son encouraged me: “Papa, try to explain it to me. If I do not understand this time you will try again when I grow up like Enes (his older friend).” While I and my wife have never encouraged our children to think along these directions, we do not avoid these questions when they persist. What I wondered was how other parents who do not have the benefit of my educational background deal with these questions. I asked and I was disappointed. The most frequently given answer was: “That’s not our way!” Sometimes the answer was much worse: “That’s what and how Vlasi (pejorative for Serbs and Croats) or Balije (pejorative for Muslims) do!”

What are the chances of a common future in a society where parents teach these things to their children? Who should provide answers to those questions? When and where should these questions be answered: in public schools, in private schools, inside religious institutions? Families obviously are not up to the challenge. But what if religious communities are equally ill-prepared to answer these inquiries? Alternatively, if we are going to do this in public schools, how should that be done? If we choose collective education in one classroom, we risk accusations of trying to eradicate separate identities, and of trying to create one supra BH identity based on a false, artificial civic religion? Or should we choose separate class rooms and risk playing into the hands of forces of segregation and division?

These are the questions upon which senior policy-makers and leaders of BH society have failed to reach a consensus. The majority supports confessional religious education (CRE) in public schools. But a vocal and influential minority has been warning thinking men and women in the society that ultimately this policy is cementing already deep running divisions along the ethnic lines. Besides, those few pupils who for whatever reason refuse to participate in CRE are systemati-

cally discriminated against under the current arrangement. Intellectuals, religious communities, concerned parents, international organizations, human rights groups, civil society have all spoken but the debate has not increased understanding among those groups. On the contrary, mistrust has grown. Although not the most important issue facing young BH democracy, the question of the appropriate place of religion in public schools has become another bone of contention among various value and interest groups in this divided society. Speaking broadly, BH citizens and politicians are obviously still searching for the effective solutions to the challenges of common living in a pluralist BH. The position of religion in public schools is just an aspect of that wider context.

I.a. Statement of Intent.

This paper aims to answer the above questions in a manner compatible with relevant international Human Rights documents; as well as in a manner that will enable religion to contribute to the successful management of pluralistic, democratic society. Towards that end, this paper:

- Argues for the simultaneous inclusion of improved and revised CRE, its alternative, and RS courses into the public schools curricula;
- Identifies the key areas for policy intervention, such as the revision of curricula and textbooks, improvement of teaching methods, teacher training, and cooperation with parents and religious communities in all of that;
- Proposes measures to reduce or eliminate deficiencies in the current CRE model and create a better model that will satisfy both, the evident eagerness of religious communities to preserve the particular identities and the general aim of the public education system to build an open, pluralistic, and democratic society of equal, and mutually respecting citizens and communities.

In other words, the paper sets forth a formula through which religion might cease to be a problem and hopefully become a part of the solution (Gearon 2004: 1) by helping young people build their inter-religious competence while preserving their particular identities. So far religion has often been seen as a cause of problems in multicultural societies. However its positive potential for social cohesion and promotion of inter-cultural understanding has been understated and understudied. Here I would like to take a road less traveled. Putting the whole discussion into the wider social and comparative perspective, I propose the following hypothesis to guide this research: *despite present deficiencies of CRE in the BH public school system, such education plays a strong and important corrective role in relation to much more exclusive religious messages that are taught inside some religious communities.* That contribution of CRE to social cohesion is rarely acknowledged and therefore largely underutilized. The reason might be that general public is not aware of what is taught in religious instruction (RI) inside religious communities. Not seeing CRE from this perspective, many have failed to notice that CRE provides an excellent platform for inducing desirable change and developments inside religious communities and traditions. These communities are heavyweight actors in BH society but under the shield of religious autonomy, they have sometimes been able to hold on to attitudes and practices that contravene the goals of pluralistic society. This has especially been true in the post-Dayton Bosnia where politicians threatened by banishment from public life refrained from openly anti-pluralistic statements. On the other hand, religious officials free from such a fear have therefore often filled the vacuum left by previously extremist nationalistic politicians. The source of their power is the monopoly over religious message that they have. CRE in schools provides a forum and a channel for alternative opinions within a given religious tradition that might act as an antidote to exclusivist messages stemming from the core of some religious communities.



I.b. Methodology and limitations.

This analysis of the issue at hand takes into account the following contextual factors (*situational variables*) that will be very difficult to change in the short and mid-term timeframe: national legislation, various international conventions to which BH is signatory, international agreements between BH on the one hand, and the Vatican and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) on the other hand, social weight of religious communities, bitter collective memories of aggressive atheism during the socialist Yugoslavia, and an atmosphere of extreme, ethnic nationalism reinforced by overlapping religious cleavages, and the almost outright rejection by at least some communities in BH to build a supra-ethnic BH identity. In addition, the following aspects of the religious education policy (*policy variables*) have been considered: Religious education content (curriculum and textbooks), people involved (teachers and their education), management (implementation, organization and governance of CRE), and teaching methods. How these other factors bear on the religious education will be examined in the policy options section. Textbooks were the primary focus of my research and analysis. To test my hypothesis, I undertook the following:

- Conducted content-analysis of the textbooks and materials used in religious instruction inside religious communities, i.e., in mosques and parishes in order to establish extent to which they promote respect for different cultures and beliefs.
- Analyzed textbooks that were in use when CRE was first introduced into public schooling system in 1990s, i.e., before their revision under the auspices of the entity of ministries of education.
- Compared these findings with the available expert assessments, reviews, and content analyses of CRE textbooks currently used in public schools.
- To supplement this data and clarify and test preliminary conclusions, conducted interviews with a number of religious education supervisors, teachers and instructors who have taught in both environments: schools and inside religious communities.
- Reviewed relevant literature, legislation, documents, speeches, official statements, media coverage, international reports, and similar material in order to set the stage for the discussion and put the issues into perspective.

We now proceed to look into the ways in which current policy has failed, the causes of this failure, the social implications of it as well as the stakeholders involved. Subsequent to this, policy options are defined and discussed within the analytical framework outlined. An effort has been made to account for advantages and disadvantages of each policy option, with the selected option being justified in detail. Upon this basis, conclusions have been drawn and recommendations made for each of the major actors, including government, religious authorities, civil society and parents.

II. Problem description

During the last two decades BH society has radically changed its position on religion. Only two decades ago, religion was widely considered a private matter that had no relevance whatsoever to public life. Public perception viewed it as a source of retrograde, reactionary, and counter-revolutionary social tendencies. Although formally separate from state, religious communities were closely watched by government. Legally, believers were equal to other citizens but in actuality, observing members of religious communities were prevented from pursuing political

and business, academic and social careers. The prevailing public education system was rendered immune against any religious influence. In the few avenues outside this system, such as the few remaining religious schools training clergy for Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim religious communities, parish and mosque children religious education was stifled and closely controlled. The general expectation was that religion would soon fade away from private lives of members of socialist society the way it was expelled from the public arena. Several generations grew up convinced that this development was a matter of time but certainly beyond any doubt. However, things changed dramatically in the late 1980s. Religion made a big comeback almost overnight. This change affected the educational system as well. Introduction of CRE into public schools was considered immediately after the collapse of Communism. A few years later, confessional or denominational religious education became part of curriculums in primary and many secondary schools. Despite its different and changing status in various parts of the country, over a decade and a half CRE has gained the stature of a well established subject (Kuburić & Moe 2006). Comprehensive legal framework followed later in 2003 and 2004 when Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education and Law on Religious Freedom were passed in BH parliament. Subsequently BH signed similar basic 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 Islamic Community in BH is preparing to sign a similar agreement (Zapisnik sa 7. redovne sjednice Rijaseta 2009: 128). Because of the importance of these agreements, it is worth quoting the article summarizing the way in which religious education in BH public schools is generally envisaged. As they are similar in their provisions, it is sufficient to cite one of them. The article 16 of the Basic Agreement between The Holy See and Bosnia and Herzegovina reads:

1. Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the light of the principle of freedom of religion, recognizes the fundamental right of parents to see to the religious education of their children; and it guarantees within the framework of the academic programme and in conformity with the wishes of parents or guardians, the teaching of the Catholic religion in all public schools, elementary, middle and higher, and in pre-school centres, as a required subject for those who choose it, under the same conditions as other required subjects.
2. In collaboration with the competent Church authorities, the educational authorities will allow parents and adult students the possibility to avail themselves freely of such teaching at the time of registration for the academic year, in such a way that their decision does not give rise to any form of academic discrimination.
3. The teaching of the Catholic religion will be carried out by teachers who are suitable, with the canonical mandate of the local diocesan Bishop, and in possession of the qualifications required for the particular level of school by the laws in force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with respect for all the rights and duties pertaining thereto. In the case of withdrawal of the canonical mandate by the diocesan Bishop, the teacher will not be able to continue teaching the Catholic religion.
4. Teachers of religion are full members of the teaching staff of the educational institutions mentioned in section 1 of this Article.
5. The programmes and the content of the teaching of the Catholic religion, as well as the textbooks and didactic material must be prepared and approved by the Episcopal Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ways in which the teaching of the Catholic religion is conducted will be object of a particular agreement between the competent authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Episcopal Conference.



Here we have several questions surrounding religious education (heretofore, RE) in any country answered in clear terms: It is CRE (Catholic in this case); the legal and moral basis for teaching CRE in public schools is “the fundamental right of parents”; it is to be taught at all levels, from pre-school to high school; its status will be elective-obligatory, meaning required for those who choose it at the beginning of the schooling year in a non-discriminatory manner; the relevant religious community will have a decisive say in training and (de)licensing teachers, preparing programs, content, textbooks, and didactic materials; and finally CRE teachers shall be equal in rights and obligations to their other colleagues.

To facilitate further discussion and avoid some common misunderstandings in the debates about religion in schools, I would like here to briefly sketch out other possible models of RE in schooling. The confessional, denominational or “faith-based” RE or “religious instruction” or “learning religion” approach describes the situation where a single religion is taught in a prescriptive manner, from the inside, as the true religion. “The defining feature of this type of RE is its assumption that the goal of the subject is to transmit or nurture faith” (Jackson and Steele 2004). It can be based on traditional and conservative or more liberal interpretations of that particular tradition. In many east European countries, religious communities are in charge of CRE in public schools. Main exceptions are Slovenia and Albania. On the other hand, in Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland and many other European countries, state and religious communities cooperate in the running of CRE in public schools. We shall refer to this model as confessional religious education (CRE) model.

In addition, there is at least one more model in which religion is present in public schools. This is the “religious studies” approach variously called “education in comparative religion”, “learning about religion”, “culture of religions”, “religious cultures”, “history of religions”, “integrative religious education”, etc. In some countries (e.g. Great Britain) the state cooperates with religious communities in preparing and executing this course which is therefore sometimes referred to as the “non-confessional cooperative” model. In other countries (e.g. Denmark) the state does it alone without involving religious communities. Both ways this model adopts mainly a descriptive and historical approach. Religion is taught from outside (Schreiner 2002b; Hull 2001). “The aims are to develop knowledge and understanding, as well as to reflect on that understanding and to explore fundamental human experiences and questions. The neutrality of the state and the right of religious freedom are guaranteed with this approach” (Jackson and Steele 2004). We shall refer to this model as the Religious Studies (RS) model.

Which approach a country will select depends on several factors: 1) The religious affiliation of the society, whether mono-religious or multi-religious; 2) The relation between the religious and secular spheres within each country; 3) The historical tradition of each country; and, 4) Conceptions about the nature and purpose of state school religious education (Hull 2001; Schreiner 2002a and 2002b). During the 1990s, BH stakeholders chose the CRE model with religious communities in charge of most of its aspects. The complex and fragmented educational system, particularly in the Federation of BH, accounts for a very uneven implementation of the now legal right to RE despite the existence of a common state Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education (June 2003). The article 9 of the Law stipulates that “the school will promote and protect religious freedoms, tolerance and the culture of dialogue. Bearing in mind the diversity of beliefs in BH, pupils will attend classes of religious education (*vjeronauka*) only if these are in accordance with their convictions or the convictions of their parents. The school may not undertake any measures or activities that would limit the freedom of expressing one’s own religious beliefs or learning about other and different religious beliefs. Pupils who do not wish to attend religious instruction will in no way be put in an unfair position in relation to other pupils”. The law specifies that religious education is not a compulsory but elective subject and equal to other subjects of the curriculum.

The first steps towards the introduction of CRE in state schools were taken in the wake of first multiparty elections when in the school year of 1991/92 CRE was introduced in some Sarajevo schools (Hašimbegović 2003). In 1994, the BH Ministry of Education introduced CRE in primary and secondary schools as an elective subject for which a prior parental consent was required. That decision envisaged five separate curricula: Islamic, Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish and Adventist. Under this arrangement, religious communities were responsible for selecting and paying CRE teachers whereas the school provided premises for teaching the subject. In 1996, this arrangement was changed: religious communities continued to draw up CRE curricula in public schools and write textbooks which require approval of the ministry of education but CRE teachers were to be paid and hired by the school. Religious communities continued to issue certificates to CRE teachers confirming their qualifications and suitability.

This general arrangement is still in place although the status of CRE varied over time, from canton to canton and in the Federation of BH and the Republic of Srpska. The number of hours taught per week to a class also varied over time but the general tendency was to limit it to one hour per week in first two grades of the secondary school and one or two hours weekly in primary schools. In the Republic of Srpska and Brčko District, there is no religious education in secondary schools. In Sarajevo Canton, CRE was introduced into secondary schools only in 2007-2008. The absence of an alternative course for those opting out of CRE is one of the main problems of the current system. Only some schools in Tuzla Canton offer an alternative to CRE in the form of Religious Studies course (*Religijska kultura, Historija religija*) both in primary and secondary schools. About 10% of all elementary school pupils in that Canton opted for Religious Studies course in 2003/2004, the last year for which there are available data (Bekir Šabić, interview). Elsewhere pupil attendance of CRE hours has always been high. For instance, in Sarajevo Canton during the school year 2006/2007 95.55% of elementary school pupils attended CRE, up from 89.29% in 1998/1999 (Pleh 2007: 55).

Since 2000 the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) together with a number of other international organizations (Goethe Institute in BH, the Office of High Representative (OHR) has supported a pilot project of introducing an RS course (called Religious Culture or *Kultura religija*) as a mandatory course in the last grade of primary or first year of secondary schools throughout Bosnia. The subject is meant to acquaint students with the teachings of the world's major religions and help foster tolerance and respect for religious diversity. OSCE has provided initial impetus by preparing curriculum, textbooks and training some teachers. However, religious communities have been generally reserved and even against the idea amid concerns that it might weaken the position of CRE, if not replace it. OSCE hopes that eventually the subject will be introduced in most schools. In the second semester of the schooling year 2008/2009 the Republic of Srpska decided to introduce the course for one semester in all secondary schools but it remains to be seen how this experiment will deliver. The Serbian Orthodox Church has repeatedly voiced its opposition and promised to invite the parents to boycott it (Pravoslavna crkva će pozvati... 2009). The introduction of the CRE model in BH initially raised little public controversy although the resistance from some international and local quarters was always strong. However, lately CRE has been publicly challenged on several accounts. Two years ago when the Islamic Community requested that CRE be introduced into the secondary schools of Sarajevo Canton and in the early 2008 on the accession of introduction of CRE in Sarajevo kindergartens, the current CRE system came under heavy fire. The first to object were the Social Democratic Party (SDP), some parents, journalists, intellectuals, and a group of affiliated non-governmental organizations (Alumni of the Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies - ACIPS and others). On the other side were informal groups of citizens, the school management of Sarajevo kindergartens, the Islamic Community and the leadership of the Catholic Church. The international



community in BH soon joined the debate. Without denying the right to CRE at pre-school level, the OSCE mission in the country questioned the initiative on two grounds. First, given the numerical strength of Muslims in the Sarajevo Canton, introduction of CRE was deemed unfair towards non-Muslim children who would probably be unable to attend CRE in their own faith due to their small numbers. Second, the initiative was questioned from the point of need to cultivate among the youngest generation a sense of belonging to Bosnia instead of to a particular religious or ethnic group (OSCE 2007). The OSCE and SDP statements prompted the Islamic Community to issue strongly-worded counter-statements ("Osuda satanizacije islama" 2008: 11). Some voices within the Islamic Community also spoke against the introduction of CRE in kindergartens (Silajdžić 2008; Spahić 2008). In the ensuing months, the media wrote about CRE, public debates were held, petitions signed, and political parties issued statements about the issue. Even the then High Representative Miroslav Lajčak issued comments siding with opponents of CRE in kindergartens. It became evident that religion continues to be a very divisive issue in BH society and that few are ready to discuss it in a rational manner (Hodžić 2008).

During the debate, CRE was criticized for 1) reinforcing segregation and ethnic divisions, 2) discriminating against minorities, 3) burdening children with inadequate content, and 4) infringing on the principle of secularity, among other things. The concern over segregation and further division of BH society is by far the most common complaint against the current CRE model (Trbić 2007: 11-12). The petition calling for the prevention of introduction of CRE into Sarajevo kindergartens and signed by five thousands people was entitled "Stop religious segregation in Sarajevo kindergartens". It also stated that "Nobody has the right to separate children (Zaustavite religijsku segregaciju... 2008)". Precisely this theme was emphasized in the statements of almost all the opponents of CRE. The point was also brought up in the public statements of the SDP and the OSCE. Generally the opponents of CRE perceive it as a threat to social cohesion and ultimately to the future of the Bosnian state.

The second most common criticism leveled against CRE is that it is discriminating against minorities. This issue arises in school environments where CRE is not offered for all student groups. Reasons for such a practice may vary but usually it is due to there being too small a number of pupils from a particular group or lack of adequate teaching staff in the area. This certainly has far reaching implications and potentially infringes on the rights of minorities according to both national and international laws. The most frequently affected groups are children of refugee returnees and atheists and those who for other reasons refuse to attend CRE. Few are the schools where all the conditions for offering alternative courses are met. The absence of alternative courses puts additional pressure on pupils and parents to choose whatever CRE is on the table. According to some critics, this effectively makes CRE a compulsory school subject. In similar cases found in other parts of Europe, the Italian highest court has ruled that the state must provide an alternative course. Similarly, the Principal Deputy of the High Representative and Brčko Supervisor, Raffy Gregorian, has imposed several restrictions on CRE in the Brčko district until the time when some alternative course is offered. These restrictions are: 1) exclusion of marks for classes of CRE from students' CGPA and 2) CRE hours shall be scheduled only as the first or the last class in a shift (OHR 2008).

Burdening of children with age-inadequate content at an early stage is the next criticism leveled particularly against CRE in pre-school institutions (Nurikić 2008a). Journalists, pedagogues, psychologists, and even some theologians have insisted that it is premature to teach religion to three to five year old children. Claims were made that "religious education in kindergartens fosters scared and insecure children" (Kruša 2008: 24). Interestingly enough none of those who made these declarations came up with any supporting scientific evidence. The audience was expected to accept their claims on the basis of the authority of the speaker.

Finally, probably the weakest but none the less quite common criticism was that CRE in public schools contravened the principle of secular state or the separation of state and church/religious communities. The SDP condemned CRE as the beginning of “radical Islamization” (SDP, *Oslobođenje*, 7 February 2008: 4.), a statement which provoked accusation of Islamophobia from the Islamic Community. The abovementioned petition signed by many prominent citizens of Sarajevo also reminded the public that BH is a secular state. The author went on to conclude that religion is a “private affair” which again initiated accusations of nostalgia for the Communist anti-religious state which suppressed religion and effectively discriminated against all believers (Zaustavite religijsku segregaciju... 2008).

Supporters of denominational RE in public schools have put forward several counter-arguments and pointed out flaws in the arguments of their opponents. Their most frequent argument is that CRE is an inalienable, individual human right of parents as well as a collective right of religious communities (“Da za izborni predmet... 2008). Upon closer scrutiny, this argument does not turn out to be as decisive as some may think. The cumulative human rights tradition in Europe is that the right of parents to raise their children in their own belief system is a negative obligation on the state, meaning that the state is not obliged to sponsor religious education but simply must not prevent parents from doing it (Moe 2005). However the European parliament has taken a different position (Kodelja and Bassler 2004: 26).

Much stronger is the legal argument that simply states the obvious: CRE is a legal right enshrined in several national laws and international agreements that BH has signed (Mahmutović 2008: 7). From this point of view, all voices opposing CRE are actually calling for the disrespect of existing laws that were passed after wide public debate. Laws are not a Swedish buffet table from which you can pick what you like, say the proponents of CRE. Otherwise, we risk falling into the trap of legal nihilism (Prof. Fikret Karčić, personal communication) under which this country suffered for decades. The rule of law should be upheld even when we do not like the outcome.

Responding to the accusation of segregation, it must be pointed out that a pluralistic society such as BH cannot and should not hide its pluralistic nature from its youth. Otherwise, we risk calls for banning religion itself since religion as such segregates people, a point actually made during one of the public debates (Jukić 2008: 7). On the contrary, BH society has to make every effort to teach its young generations how to accept and learn to live with differences without obliterating them or assimilating any of the groups. Construction of Bosnian national identity should not and does not have to be detrimental to the particular identities of various BH peoples. In fact, a four-decade long effort to suppress particular identities in BH has utterly failed. And it failed precisely because of the inability or refusal of the Communist regime to allow both particular and overarching identities to grow simultaneously. The lesson, according to the CRE advocates, is that suppression of religious identities in the public square will not work in a democratic society when it did not work in an authoritarian one. Children should be taught to respect religious differences the way we teach them to respect racial, linguistic, gender and other differences (Hodžić 2008). CRE implies not segregation but freedom and liberty. Finally, it must be contended that teachers in public schools are sometimes better at introducing children into the world of differences than their own parents (Jukić 2008: 8).

As for the discrimination argument, while it is undeniable that some pupils will effectively be prevented from exercising their legal right to CRE or similar sorts of training mainly because of small subgroup population or lack of teaching staff, the situation cannot be corrected by making the majority suffer through denying rights to all for the sake of presumed equality. Both majority and minority tyrannies are unacceptable. The way to resolve the matter is not to ban CRE from public schools. Where an aspect of law is not observed, as is the case here with



respect to minorities, the solution is not to stop applying the law in its entirety. Were we to follow that logic, we would have to cancel all laws. The solution is in putting additional effort to apply the law (Jukić 2008: 8). In the words of the *European Court of Human Rights*, when tensions result from pluralism “the role of the authorities . . . is not to remove the cause of tension by eliminating pluralism, but to ensure that competing groups tolerate each other” (OSCE/ODIHR 2007: 32).

Regarding the concerns over infringement on the principle of secularity, the answer is indirect and focuses on the practice in other European countries, many of which do actually have CRE in spite of their multireligious nature (Germany, Austria, Spain, Italy etc.). In these countries, certain religious groups, including Muslims, for a variety of reasons do not have their own CRE but the system is not brought down because of this (Aslan 2009). The strangest and most enigmatic of responses to this “European” argument was the one given by the Franciscan priest and professor Luka Markešić saying that the “European model is not recommendable for BH” (“Evropski model” 2008: 3).

Responding to the claim that CRE burdens children with age-inadequate materials, the editor of an Islamic newspaper noted that if kids are too young for metaphysics, they certainly are not too young for acquiring new habits, following good examples, memorizing basic religious texts or songs, etc. (Kadribegović 2008: 5). Besides, both the Islamic and the Catholic communities clarified that CRE in pre-school educational institutions does not consist of regular hours found in primary schools. Its implementation is more of an aspect of daily work with children than a new subject that is taught to them (Alibašić and Zubčević 2009; Jukić 2008: 7-8).

In the wake of street violence and increased juvenile delinquency in Sarajevo in 2008, CRE advocates also made a “moral argument”. It was suggested repeatedly that CRE can and does contribute to moral development of children (Štulanović 2008: 24; Omerdić in “Islam je lijek za drogu” 2008: 24; private communication with a number of religious education teachers).¹ However, these claims were not backed up by any statistics or research. Most probably, it will take another few years before we will get the first evaluation studies assessing impact of the CRE in public schools on the behavior of children. Until then, many speculations about the moral value of CRE will be made and it will be difficult to accept or reject these opinions with much confidence.

In general, many of these debates are ill-informed, unsubstantiated, often dogmatic and ill-argued (see, for example, Kazaz 2008: 25). Participants in the debate have at times demonstrated elementary ignorance of relevant national and international legislation as well as unawareness of the rich EU practice in the area that opens so many possibilities for RE (Kodelja & Bassler 2004; Yapi 2006). The lack of insight into current CRE practice in BH schools also became evident. There were few policy-relevant outcomes of the debate, such as the observation of SDP that the state has failed to enact legally required “special implementing regulation” regarding CRE (*Oslobođenje* 18. 2. 2008: 4). So while some potentially negative consequences of CRE for social cohesion have rightfully been highlighted, any feasible proposals for improving the situation have been completely missing. One side in the debate suggests radical departure from the current confessional education model while the opponents argue for the status quo or even more CRE in public schooling. The result is a sort of a stalemate. This paper proposes a different perspective on the whole RE issue. It searches for a less ambitious but more socially acceptable and politically feasible solution. We now look at available policy alternatives and their merits.

¹ „DA za izborni predmet vjeronauke u vrtićima i svim drugim obrazovnim ustanovama“, <http://www.petitiononline.com/zad-jecu/petition.html>.

III. Policy options

III.a. Possible policy options

As noted earlier, in the public debate and political negotiations there were few policy-relevant and clearly stated proposals. Yet based on what was said and written, as well as taking into consideration the comparative experience in other European countries the following three options seem to be distinguishable.

Confessional Religious education approach (CRE) is the status quo policy whereby the state is in charge of finances, employment, management/organization and pedagogies while religious communities are in charge of curricula, teacher training and licensing. This arrangement is widely accepted despite all its deficiencies and loud protests from certain quarters. Opinion polls and levels of pupils' CRE attendance confirm this conclusion that renders the continuation of the current policy arrangement very feasible in the foreseeable future. For instance, of all the Muslim pupils in BH primary schools in 2006-2007, 96.24% attended CRE. In the Banja Luka region, 99% of Muslims pupils attended it. In Sarajevo Canton, during the school year 2006-2007, 95.55% of all Muslim pupils in primary schools attended CRE, up from 89.29% in 1998/1999.² Comparative figures for Catholic pupils suggest that that community is even more in favor of CRE.

In addition to parents and pupils, religious communities and many political parties are also supportive of the status quo. There have actually been some voices asking for even more of the same: CRE at all levels, which means its introduction in all pre-school educational institutions and high schools, plus more hours of CRE per week (two instead of one). Since the first demand is legally feasible in some parts of the country (Sarajevo Canton), the last two years have witnessed movement in this direction. There was also a proposal from SOC to make the CRE a compulsory school subject. Such a proposal was rejected by the BH Presidency (Komšić's blog).

Religious studies approach (RS) is the second policy option which demands a radical change and departure from the current practice whereby CRE would be completely removed from the public school classrooms and replaced by a non-denominational RE subject i.e., RS course. The proposal has been implicit in all the criticisms of CRE that branded CRE as a private matter, parents' job, breach of the secular state principle, or invoked inadmissibility of CRE into public funding, etc.

Simultaneous teaching of optional CRE and mandatory RS courses is the third option envisaging the mixing of the two models in a way that will maximize its positive outcomes and minimize the negative ones. While perhaps the most feasible in the short run, so far nobody has put together a set of clear measures that could lead to the implementation of such a solution. The previously mentioned Brčko District's supervisory order on protection of religious freedom comes closest to what we have in mind. The aims of this policy would be to improve the performance of the current model by making CRE truly optional and more dialogically oriented. That could be achieved by introducing an alternative course for pupils not attending CRE, which could be given in the form of individualized independent study classes. But probably even more importantly other interventions need to be directed at content (curricula), means (textbooks and didactic accessories), human resources (teacher training), management (organization), and pedagogies (didactics and methodology) of the CRE so that it might become conducive to the development of civil society and social cohesion, and start working for the achievement of the goals set out by the Framework law on education. In addition, CRE would be supplemented by a mandatory one year RS course at a certain stage during the primary and/or secondary education. Intensive cooperation and strong partnership between education authorities and

² In Bihać 99,39%, in Goražde 99,96%, in Mostar 96,00%, in Sarajevo 94,50%, in Travnik 99,28%, in Tuzla 94,80% and in Zenica 96,91%. In the secondary schools outside Sarajevo Canton the percentage stood at 85%. (Izvodi iz statistike o islamskoj vjeronauki u Bosni i Hercegovini, http://www.rijaset.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1725&Itemid=191, 13. 1. 2009). See also Mina Pleh, "Analiza praćenja nastave vjeronauke," *Novi Muallim* 31 (2007), 55.



religious communities is vital in this option. In such circumstances, we could hope that CRE in schools will very soon start working in favor of citizenship education. Religious studies course should be an excellent supplement but not a substitute for the CRE. These two are not mutually exclusive but complementary.

III. b. Framework of Analysis

The following criteria are proposed as a framework of analysis for evaluation of the three policy options: 1) contribution to social cohesion (*effectiveness*), 2) opportunity to learn about one's own tradition and culture (*human rights*), and 3) non-discrimination against minorities (*equity*). The following three constraints were identified: 1) political feasibility, 2) cost, and 3) capacity. The above goals were identified based on the Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education in BH (2003) and the Framework Law on Preschool Care and Education in BH (2007). Article 3 of the Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education in BH among the general objectives of education enumerates the following:

1. Developing awareness of commitment to the State of BiH, to one's own cultural identity, language and tradition, in a way appropriate to the legacy of the civilization, and learning about others by respecting the differences and cultivating mutual understanding and solidarity among all people, ethnic groups and communities in BiH and in the world;
2. Ensuring equal possibilities for education and the possibility for choice in all levels of education, regardless of gender, race, nationality, social and cultural background and status, family status, religion, psycho-physical and other personal characteristics.

Similarly Article 6 of the Framework Law on Preschool Care and Education in BH (Oct. 2007) prohibits discrimination on any ground and proclaims that:

1. Each child shall have equal right of access and equal opportunities to participate in an appropriate care and education system without discrimination on any ground.
2. Equal access and equal opportunities shall mean providing equal conditions and opportunities for all, to begin and continue further care and education.

Article 8 reads: "General aims of care and education shall arise from generally accepted, universal values of democratic society, and one's own value systems based on specifics of national, historical, cultural and religious tradition of peoples and ethnic minorities living in Bosnia and Herzegovina". The same goals are to be found in various other local and international legal documents. Similar criteria have been used in other analyses of BH education system performance (Trbić 2007: 20). They were also invoked as main ideals of education in public debates about RE.

As for constraints, political and social feasibility seem to be the main ones. The costs and capacity have been mentioned from time to time in public debates but do not appear to be the main concerns of the interested parties. It remains to be seen whether the current financial crisis might make these latter issues more pressing.

	Policy Options		
	1	2	3
Goals/criteria	CRE approach	RS approach	CRE + RS
<i>Effectiveness</i> Social cohesion	Divisive +--	Inclusive ++-	Inclusive +++
<i>Right to one's own identity</i> Learning about one's own culture	Guaranteed +++	Assimilation ---	Guaranteed +++
<i>Equity</i> Non-discrimination of minorities	Discriminatory ---	Inclusive +++	Equal opportunity +++
<i>Political and social feasibility</i> 1. Social acceptance 2. Political acceptance	Widely accepted +++	Support is lacking +--	Wide support +++
<i>Costs</i>	Current level + +-	Intro. of new course, layoff of CRE teachers ---	Training, revision, new course introd. + +-
<i>Capacity</i> 1) Teachers of optional and RS courses, 2) Permanent education	Very Good + +-	More teachers needed +--	More teachers needed + +-

Table I:
The Framework of Analysis

III.c. Non-Preferred Options

Current policy appears to enjoy wide social and political acceptance. As such in a country where everything is politicized and where any change is difficult, it is naturally the strongest contender for (continued) implementation. 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. Similarly, religious communities are more or less content with the current arrangement although there have been demands for more hours and better CRE teachers status as well as some dissenting voices from at least two religious communities, namely the Islamic community and the Catholic Church. Most politicians also seem to favor the current option. And taking into consideration the amount of energy that they will have to spend on reaching consensus as regards a whole list of issues important to the reforms necessary for EU inclusion, as well as the fact that legislation in this area is relatively recent, things are poised to stay as they are.

Overall, then, the status quo scores very high on the political feasibility scale. The costs are there, but they seem to be acceptable. In terms of capacity, the situation has improved tremendously over the last ten years. Today most of the CRE teachers are formally qualified and one could comfortably argue that, on average, they are equal to their other colleagues in terms of competence and teaching skills, given the fact that most of them are young, fresh graduates who were exposed to some of the latest pedagogies and didactics.

The current arrangement also caters to the individual legal right of children to be educated in the values of their own culture and tradition as well as for the collective right of the community to preserve and transmit those values to the new generations. In a country where at least two communities are afraid that their particular identities will be suppressed by development of a



supranational BH identity, the importance of this goal looms large. It is of special importance to the Catholic community which feels numerically threatened and is very keen on protecting its religious and ethnic identity. On the other hand, the majority of the Orthodox community follows the general Bosnian Serb policy of negating the BH national identity and as such favors each and every political measure that will increase separation and division in the BH society. Any talk of a policy aimed at development of a common BH identity is alleged as an effort to build a unitary BH. However, while the CRE model seems to be alright on paper, the way it is sometimes implemented raises legitimate concerns about its negative effects on the social cohesion and discrimination against minorities. This is not a blanket approval of all the vehement criticism directed against CRE on these two grounds. Still, the situation seems to warrant serious examination. In most schools, no alternative subject was ever introduced, creating a sense of exclusion in the children belonging to minority religious and faith communities, and putting significant pressure on pupils to enroll in courses they would otherwise avoid. In such a way, the current model, while protecting religious freedom of the majority, neglects the rights of minorities. Religious communities in BH often blame school authorities for not doing enough. However, it would not harm their cause to take some proactive measures that would facilitate the solution of the problem. In fact, it is in their interest to do so in order to have a check on their own teachers and themselves, which eventually will ensure CRE quality. Otherwise they run a risk of turning CRE into another despised indoctrinating-type course that will be doomed to failure. Reasonable people from religious communities actually demonstrate this understanding.

Even more detrimental is the accusation that CRE is undermining the causes of multiculturalism and pluralism in BH. Again, this author is not convinced that CRE is necessarily divisive. Differences in our society do exist and they cannot be pushed under the carpet or erased. The only way BH can hold together is through recognition and acceptance of these differences and learning how to deal with them. Given the current importance of the religious component in various BH cultural identities, it appears to me that genuine acceptance can be cultivated on the basis of one's own system of values. Effort to ground such a respect in half-heartedly accepted civic values might be too early given the fact that civic culture in this country is not strong enough yet to stand on its own feet let alone provide a basis for something else. That being said, the concern remains that CRE if taught in a traditional way can deepen already existing cleavages in the society. Such an outcome may be avoided by undertaking several measures which would make CRE more dialogically predisposed. We will return to this in the section on preferred policy option.

Finally, one of the strongest arguments for the current model is the strong level of public approval. However a closer scrutiny reveals a less assuring picture. According to the most recent survey of attitudes of students and parents, the single most preferred option is CRE supplemented by an 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. This percentage is especially high among Bosniak pupils and parents - 42.1 and 41.1 % respectively. About two thirds of those approving of CRE think that it should be optional course (Trbić 2007: 93).

For the combination of the above reasons it sounds reasonable to look at ways and means to rectify deficiencies in the current CRE model. That is exactly what our preferred solution promises to offer.

Religious studies approach is a radical cure suggested for amelioration of the situation described above. Its advocates claim that this approach would avoid the pitfalls of segregation and discrimination. Depending on the exact manner in which that is done, this claim might be true, but the slightest mistakes in calibrating the curricula or teaching methods regularly provoke complaints from all directions. If the

statements and attitudes of the current advocates of this approach in Bosnia are any indicators, then one can safely assume that such a course would often be used to propagate against religion in general. This then would discriminate and effectively alienate all those taking their religion seriously irrespective of their particular religious background. Actually this has already happened. Religious communities are deeply suspicious of the intentions of such a course even when it is offered as a supplementary and/or complementary course to CRE (communications with Messrs. Petar Jukić and Muharem Omerdić). The statements and actions of proponents of the RS approach show a deep-seated suspicion of religion, thereby demonstrating that there is mutual mistrust. Much of this is perhaps a legacy of the 45 years of Communist history when religious people were systematically discriminated against. Those bitter memories are still too fresh to be neglected. They evoke strong emotions especially among the religious and the clergy who are often vehemently against any alteration of the CRE status. To them, such requests are manifestations of fundamentalist secularism or “fundamentalistic enlightenment” trying to marginalize and suppress religion once again (Westermann 2006).

Despite its decisiveness, this is not the only source of opposition to the RS approach. Probably even stronger opposition is provided by the atmosphere of extreme, ethnic nationalism reinforced by overlapping religious cleavages and almost outright rejection of any attempt at building supra-ethnic BH identity from at least some communities in BH. This seems to be an insurmountable obstacle confronting the RS approach. A common accusation against RS is that it is yet another attempt at subverting the particular identities of BH peoples and as such, is against the law which guarantees the education in one’s own tradition and culture. It is assimilation in disguise, the opponents claim and therefore unacceptable.

The opponents of the RS approach have also suggested that secularists confuse freedom with segregation (Jukić 2008: 8). They argue that secularists have put too much emphasis on the segregating tendencies of CRE and that they have run away from confronting children with the differences among us. Opponents of the RS approach argue that, in fact, this implies that religious diversity is recognized as a problem, not as an advantage or source of richness (Hodžić 2008). Indeed, what the RS approach seems to be suggesting is an avoidance of the problem, not its solution. If history is a source of wisdom, then one may safely conclude that non-denominational RE or complete banning of RE from public schools would not do the trick. The Socialist Yugoslavia systematically expelled religion from schools, suppressed particular identities, and promoted the brotherhood and unity policy (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*). Still, after 45 years of such systematic brainwashing, people who went through such a process readily killed and massacred their neighbors (Nurikić 2008b: 25). The war criminal Ratko Mladić, was the product of an atheistic upbringing and education. Despite this, when he entered Srebrenica on July 11, 1995, he justified the genocide that his forces committed on so-called religious grounds - as “revenge against Turks” i.e. Muslims. For that reason, to blame CRE for endangering the future of the country and its pluralism is simply to falsify history. Coexistence based on suppression of particular identities did not work in BH despite decades of concerted efforts. Only authentic pluralism or multiculturalism affirming simultaneously particularized identities and the spirit of patriotism through the promotion of a supra-BH identity seems to have a chance.

However, the biggest deficiency of this approach is the lack of popular and political support. The most prominent supporters of this option are to be found in the international community and left-wing parties and NGOs, who are for better or worse still a minority. According to the survey mentioned above, only a minority of Bosnian pupils and parents support the idea of banning CRE from schools and introducing RS alone. (Trbić and Hasanagić 2007: 93). One could only question such results as biased against CRE given the fact that previously quoted current levels of CRE attendance contradict such findings.

Furthermore, the RS approach, too, has been confronted with the problems of discrimination.



Norway is the most recent example (Moe 2005). In reality, then, instead of ameliorating the situation, this approach could aggravate the situation by creating or rather deepening yet another divide in BH society - the one between religious and non-religious citizens. I do not see how this could help to create social cohesion and harmony.

Yet another argument against radical measures such as CRE banishment from public schools is the fact that in most states where there is no CRE in public schools, there are many state-supported community, private, and faith-based schools in which children are separated throughout (Kodelja and Bassler 2004: 26). This author maintains that it is better that children be separated during one school subject or class, rather than in all classes as is the case in some private schools often chosen by parents because public schools are thought not to cater enough for the separate identities of their children. Total segregation of large numbers of children is the last thing BH patriots would like to see especially when we know that future elites tend to be educated in such schools.

III.d. Preferred policy option

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 would include improved CRE, an alternative course, and a one year compulsory religious studies course for all.* CRE would be improved through revision of the curricula and textbooks, continuous training of teachers, better CRE management, upgraded pedagogies, and closer cooperation between education authorities and religious communities. We find the following reasons for arguing this position.

First of all, this is very feasible approach. All the available data lead to the conclusion that this would be widely accepted. We have already cited the percentage of pupils attending CRE. Recent surveys show that "Most students and parents polled (ca 67% of them - AA) think that schools should offer subjects relating to religious education: both religious instruction (denominational instruction) and a subject teaching about all religions (e.g. culture of religions), or that schools should offer only religious instruction. The rest of the respondents (6-10%) think that schools should not offer religious instruction but a subject teaching all religions, or that neither of these subjects should be taught in school (2-12%)" (Trbić and Hasanagić 2007: 92-94). Religious communities have made it clear that they will not object to the introduction of an alternative course and that they would under certain conditions accept or even support introduction of a complementary RS course (Interreligious Council 2008). Therefore, there is every reason to believe that a model combining CRE and RS would be widely welcomed which is a condition *sine quo none* for any change in the BH context.

Second, and to me the main positive argument for the preservation of CRE in public schools is the wrestling of powerful religious messages from exclusivist theologians and parents. This probably requires some introduction. We have repeatedly noted that religion has become very politically and socially relevant in BH for many reasons. When sacred books are quoted and clerics speak, people listen and many follow the religious message they hear from these religious leaders. According to a recent survey, the religious communities in BH enjoy the highest levels of social trust (Šalaj 2009: 52). Although the situation varies from one community to another, in the Balkans, these potent, religious messages tend to be very exclusivist. However, as long as these are transmitted and interpreted within the walls of religious institutions, state and society have limited opportunity to influence them or to demand evolution and change. It is exactly here that CRE in public schools provides the public with a unique opportunity to influence the content of these exceptionally powerful religious messages and the manner in which they are inculcated in younger generations.

CRE teachers acting in cooperation with relevant ministries, headmasters and pedagogues are expected to do a better job in adequately explaining religious differences to young generations than either religious leaders or even parents, who very often hold stereotypes and prejudices against the religious and cultural "other." After we finished this study the Grand Mufti of BH Dr. Mustafa Cerić met Islamic CRE teachers in Srebrenica on 11 April 2009 where he warned opponents of the CRE: „Through gradual religious education we will avoid religious extremism which is facing today's world. If we do not offer our children solutions and answers to questions that lately have religious dimension too and if leave others to respond to our children, then we will be responsible for their future deviations that will be in the name of religion. Therefore, those who are against religion in pre-school institutions, elementary and secondary schools unconsciously support religious extremism for which they should be held responsible" (Mustafić 2009: 8).

To gain an insight into the matter, we will have a look at the CRE textbooks that were prepared by religious communities alone and that were in use before the state initiated the first round of textbook revisions (2001-2003). While current textbooks have been an object of scrutiny and justified criticism (eg. Smajić 2008, Trbić 2007), it seems that everybody has forgotten their form before revision. Those previous textbooks are a genuine mirror of the religious messages spread around within religious communities. Let us look at examples of material that were removed in the revision process.

In the previous Islamic CRE textbook for the second grade of primary school (p. 41), children were instructed to thank God for not being named Spasoje (a non-Muslim name in Bosnian context). Only Muslims are said to be capable of being genuine friends (p. 49). The 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 textbook for the seventh grade attributed to Jesus a false statement (p. 73).

The former Orthodox textbook for the fifth grade (published in 2001) instead of Islam used the pejorative term "Muhammedanism" (p. 30, 43, 55). Islam is depicted as a fatalistic religion (p. 30). Unlike Christianity, Islam is said to have substituted love for God for the fear of Him (p. 31). The text is full of factual mistakes such as that Muslims fast on Bajram (holiday) which is not true (p. 31). Examples abound. The textbook for the sixth grade of Orthodox CRE published also in 2001 nourishes "the consciousness of the need to avenge Kosovo..." (p. 35). On p. 50, it is said that Muslims have "Roasted live people, broken bones with axes and huge hammers and tortured them in various other ways..." The textbook for the seventh grade repeats the allegation of Islamic fatalism (p. 20).

As for the textbooks and materials used for religious instruction or catechesis inside the religious communities, their main feature, in the context of this discussion, is that they address their believers as if they were living in a purely Muslim or Christian environment. Mutual understanding, religious pluralism and coexistence are not issues in a non-pluralistic setting. For example, the new textbooks for children Islamic education in mosques (*Ilmihal I-V*) do not treat the issue of the other at all. This to an extent might be understandable in most cases. However, it does seem to be a serious oversight when dealing with certain topics as greeting (*salam*). In two lessons on "greetings", Muslim children are not told that it is inappropriate to greet with *salaam* at least half of their countrymen and women. The textbook simply says that "I say *salaam* when I enter home, classroom, *mekteb*, office, shop etc. When I meet someone in the street I give him a smile and say *salaam*... When I make a phone call... I say *salaam*..." (Begović 2008: 68). No hint at all that this might not be applicable in many real world situations.

Similarly Serbian Orthodox Catechesis materials mostly avoid talking about the religious other, especially Muslims. When they do, Muslims are called "muhamedanci" (Krstić and Radović 2000: 6). Members of all other Christian Churches are branded as heretics (Ibid, 60). Read-



ers are also reminded that Turks killed leading members of the SOC in the most dreadful of ways – by impalement as late as 1814 (Ibid, 70). In another commonly used book, readers are advised not to compare Orthodox Christianity with other religions. Such practice is labeled as a ‘dangerous experiment’ (Velimirović 2008: 11-12). In another text, Christians are advised not to visit mosques and other non-Orthodox religious sites and not to engage ‘sectarians’ unless approached by them and not to befriend them (Pantelić, n. d.: 164, 167). Turks are alleged to have tried for five centuries to impose Islam on Serbs and the same is the case with numerous Christian sects today which are “unfortunately” by constitution allowed to register and organize easily (Dušanić 2008: 188, 224). Similarly the Catholic Church catechesis inside parishes envisages only lessons on inter-Christian ecumenical relations (Hrvatska biskupska konferencija 2000: 119).

Therefore irrespective of how dissatisfied one might be with the CRE it does play an important positive and transformative role we often fail to notice. It is in some cases the only window through which winds of change can reach inner circles of the religious communities. Instead of shutting this window of opportunity we should widen or at least maintain it. CRE will simply put pressure on religious authorities in this country to address the issues they can comfortably ignore inside their communities such as mutual respect and common living.

Respected British educationists Robert Jackson and Karen Steele recently observed: “Conservative confessional approaches to RE tend to present a view of citizenship that is on the ‘minimal’ end of McLaughlin’s citizenship spectrum. At the extreme, they could be seen to promote a single unified national, cultural and religious identity, which clearly raises ethical and political issues. However, liberal approaches to religious education within confessional contexts can contribute very positively to ‘maximal’ forms of citizenship education that are concerned with issues of plurality and globalisation. For example, the contextual and dialogical approaches proposed by writers of a Christian Protestant background such as Heimbrock (2001), Schweitzer and Boschi (2004) and Streib (2001) from Germany or Bakker (2001) and Wardekker and Miedema (2001) from the Netherlands or the pluralistic approach from the German Catholic educator Hans Georg Ziebertz (2003), deal directly and deeply with issues of plurality at local and global levels” (Jackson and Steele 2004).

In other words, religion is too important today to be left to the theologians and clerics alone. Religion plays too significant a role in our lives to be neglected and marginalized. Some of the biggest challenges to democracy, human rights and tolerance come from exclusivist and fundamentalist interpretations of religion (Gearon 46-47). We are here in agreement with the respected English educator John Keast who several years ago wrote: “Whatever some may say, 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 (Keast 2000: 32).” We also share with philosopher Warren Nord and Stephen Prothero the conviction that inattention to religious education is a failure of the highest order; that education which refuses to take religion seriously is profoundly illiberal (Prothero 2007: 8).

We may also add here parents as another source of exclusivist religious upbringing. No survey of parental influence on attitudes of tolerance and social distance in BH are known to me, but my first hand experience leads me to the conclusion that families often transmit much more exclusivist values than the schools. There are reports to this end from Germany (Weisse 2003). Here, too, the school could play the role of a corrective influence for the ‘mis-education’ received in the family. It could function as the mediator between the private domain (i.e., the family) and the public domain (i.e., the plural society) (Westerman 2006).

Third, by adopting the proposed measures, all major complaints about CRE (segregation, discrimination and age-inappropriate content) would be sufficiently addressed. Minorities would

have an alternative to pursue. There would be less pressure to opt for CRE when pupil or parent is unhappy about it. The divisive effect of CRE would be greatly reduced, while age inappropriate content would be expected to fade away as a consequence of close cooperation between CRE teachers and other education experts. Furthermore, instead of being an obstacle, CRE that is improved and enhanced and complemented by RS could be expected to make a significant contribution towards social cohesion, harmony and healing. So, the dilemma does not seem to be over whether or not CRE should be maintained, but rather over what kind of CRE to implement. Fourth, this mixed approach would contribute to social healing, bridging the gap between religious and non-religious segments of the society and holistic education. Everybody in BH seems to be preoccupied by ethnic divisions. However, the gap between religious and non-religious segments seems to be equally wide though perhaps less visible. In fact, it is one of the reasons for which non-nationalistic, left wing parties are unable to win over the majority of votes. Since strong, pluralist parties are the glue holding this country together, it only makes it more urgent to speed up the process of healing bitter memories of the Communist treatment of religion in the past. In a way, the proposed RE model is a sort of corrective justice, an affirmative action aimed at compensating religious individuals and communities for decades of oppression of religion. CRE opponents often contend that parents and families are responsible for the religious upbringing of their children. However, the reality is that parents and families themselves had little opportunity to learn about their religion during the Communist era. Perhaps, they are now compensating that lost opportunity by sending their children to CRE classes in public schools. Contrary to what some commentators say (Silajdžić 2008), we find nothing hypocritical in this trend. Having said this, it is probably now time to mention negative aspects of this option. They mainly have to do with logistics, with the problems of introducing another school subject in terms of scheduling, curriculum planning and teacher training. The ultimate solution could be removal of CRE from one grade in order to create some space for an RS course. Simply, where there is a will, there is a way.

To conclude this section, this analysis proves that by simultaneously offering CRE and RS courses, we can have the best of both worlds. It would be a win-win situation for all. Religious communities would not have to worry about their youth being seduced by what they view as the relativism and agnosticism of RS approach, since evidence shows that the RS approach does not affect negatively the religiosity of the attending students. BH patriots would be relieved as the potential of CRE to contribute to inclusive citizenship education has been noted by several other international authorities on the matter. To our mind, even the minority that is totally against the introduction of CRE in public schools could accept this compromise solution as the best one on the table at this moment.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

At the end of this paper and in the light of the above discussion, the following conclusions suggest themselves:

- Current CRE model enjoys very high rates of approval, satisfies the demands of religious communities, and is to a large extent aligned with national laws and international obligations of BH. However the way it is implemented raises legitimate concerns about its negative impact on social cohesion, discrimination against minorities and at times age inappropriateness of the materials taught to pupils.
- Taking into consideration the high levels of CRE attendance, the high CRE approval rates among parents and pupils as shown by poll opinions and surveys, including those of Open



Society Fund as well as the existing legislation and international agreements with Vatican and SOC, it seems that the only feasible and socially acceptable option for correcting the deficiencies of the current CRE model is its fine-tuning.

- Radical changes in this policy area do not seem to be feasible in the short and medium terms. On the other hand, fine-tuning of the current policy carries with it the promise of success. That fine-tuning would include revision of CRE curricula, textbooks and teaching methods, continuous CRE teacher training, plus the development of an alternative course and introduction of a mandatory religious studies course in one year of primary and/or secondary school.
- The advantages of this combined approach are its social feasibility, wresting of powerful, religious messages from the hands of often exclusivist clerics and parents, as well as its contribution to social healing and cohesion. The main disadvantage is the cost of the development and introduction of a new course.
- Supported by public educational authorities, school headmasters and pedagogues, the proposed approach 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 than either religious officials or parents can do so, many of whom very often hold strong stereotypes and prejudices against the religious and cultural other. By integrating religious communities and religious people into the mainstream, society will be able to put them under pressure to be more socially responsible.
- The curricula and textbook improvement, teacher training, school management and governance, and relationships with parents and religious communities are critical areas in RE that require urgent attention of public authorities and religious communities.
- Finally, some of the criticism leveled against the current CRE model in BH schools is justified. However, there seems to be overall public interest in preserving CRE within the public school system. Taking it as a given, public authorities and other interested parties would be well-advised to keep in mind that intolerance is taught and therefore can be untaught (See Annan, and Krneta, 38-9). The RE model, this paper suggests is one way to do it.

(a) Recommendations to Government

- Renew immediately efforts to build cooperation and partnership with religious communities especially in the area of curriculum and textbook development and teacher training. An Inter-religious Institute would be an excellent counterpart;
- In cooperation with religious communities, start working immediately on the preparation and introduction of an alternative course for CRE at least in the form of an individualized independent study and make sure it is offered without discrimination;
- In cooperation with OSCE and religious communities, make the necessary final push for the introduction of RS into all public schools by September 2010;
- Take necessary organizational measure to ensure both the rights of those who want CRE and those who would like to enroll in an alternative course;
- Build effective partnership with parents and encourage their involvement through discussion forums;
- Through on-the-job training, ensure that CRE and RS teachers do not fall behind their colleagues in acquiring new skills and attitudes. Instruct all pedagogical institutes to prepare and execute training programs;
- Evaluate existing CRE curricula and textbooks with a view to determining whether they promote respect for human rights and whether they are age appropriate, free of bias and meet professional standards;

- Assess the process that leads to the development of CRE and RS curricula to make sure that this process is sensitive to the needs of various religious and faith communities and that all relevant stakeholders have an opportunity to be heard;
- Examine to what extent existing teacher-training institutions are capable of providing the necessary professional training for teaching CRE and RS in a way that promotes respect for human rights, an understanding of the diversity of views in society, and a firm grasp of various teaching methodologies;
- Facilitate the organization of processes that provide input to authors, editors and publishers who publish textbooks on CRE and RS so that they can be optimally respectful of international standards and best practices in the field.

(b) Recommendations to Religious Communities

- Strengthen cooperation and partnership with public authorities, international organizations, and parents;
- Assist education authorities in developing and introducing an alternative course for CRE and make the necessary concessions;
- Assist education authorities in developing and introducing the RS course and make necessary concessions;
- Keep up with the latest international best practices in the field of CRE and RS pedagogies in public schools through regular seminars and workshops;
- Pay special attention to the soft skills of CRE teachers;
- Ensure that CRE is conducive to coexistence, mutual understanding, and solidarity by employing dialogical approach/pedagogy to CRE. Start with a critical evaluation of existing textbooks as there are still many problematic passages and/or texts in them.

(c) Recommendations to Parents

- Get engaged by following up on what your child is taught in the class room and take action if you are not satisfied by writing to public authorities and religious communities, and if necessary by creating an NGO;
- Participate in formal and informal discussions and consultations about curricula and other aspects of RE in the school.

(d) OSCE & Other International Organizations

- Shift the focus from negative aspects of CRE to the means and ways of putting it at the service of social cohesion;
- Take all the necessary measures to build trust with religious communities including the assurance to them that the aim is not to displace CRE from public schools and ensure that OSCE statements and activities are consistent with such an assurance;
- Continue to garner support for the RS course in all schools;
- Assist religious communities and education authorities in introducing an alternative course for CRE;
- Support the execution of an impact assessment study of CRE and RS so far.



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Persons met/interviewed:

- Petar Jukić, Head, Catechetical Office of the Sarajevo Archdiocese, Catholic Church in B&H, Sarajevo
- Šefko Sulejmanović, Professor, Behrambegova medresa - Tuzla, Muslim member of Textbook Revision Committee
- Muharem Omerdić, Head, Imam and Education Affairs Department, Islamic Community
- Shabbir Mansuri, Director, Institute on religion and Civic Values, Washington DC
- Mehmedalija Imamović, CRE teacher
- Meliha Alibašić, CRE teacher
- Mitar Tanasić, secretary of Sarajevo Metropolitan, Serbian Orthodox Church
- Bekir Šabić, RE assistant, Tuzla Muftiate



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