



# Towards Holistic and Integrative Religious Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Religious education became part of the Bosnian public schools system in complete silence. No public debate ever took place and neither parents nor students were given the opportunity to openly discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the current model of mono-religious learning. Apart from the absence of public debate there was little research conducted within the area. Six policy studies within the *Policy Development Fellowship Program* organized by The Open Society Fund For Bosnia and Herzegovina constitute a major contribution to this very important issue. The content of this policy brief is primarily based on the empirical research results presented in the policy study *Rethinking Religious Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina*<sup>1</sup>.

The current model of confessional religious education must be reconsidered and critically debated. Other possible models must be discussed and presented in order to find the best possible solutions appropriate for the Bosnian context characterized by plurality of beliefs and lifestyles. All relevant stakeholders such as parents, students, teachers, politicians and NGOs must be included in the debate and listened to. This Policy Brief aims to contribute to that debate and introduce a selection of ideas for an integrative and holistic religious education for all students in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## Integration or division?

*"I now live in Banja Luka, but what if I want to move to Cazin, my pre-war home? How can I bring my daughter there when I know that the school will not provide religious education for her or that she will be the only child not attending it?"*

*"When I was a child I went to the Church . . . we went there with love, we had fellowship,*

*and religious communities were much more active . . . today we have too much of it. After my child has received all the sacraments he stopped going to the Church, I could not force him to go because he did not want to, and nothing attracted him there."*

*"I think that it (religious education) creates walls in negative sense"*

*"They (religious communities) support divisions, interfere in politics and social developments. Attending religious education is conditioned with the confirmation in the Church. It is not sufficient to go to the Church, but also to attend religious education and I think that is a pressure."*

*"It is more than obvious that children do not know anything about other religions and I do not think that is good. Why? Because we live in multiethnic and multireligious society and children need to be taught that the beauty lies in our differences, and to acquire more knowledge. For instance, a student had sworn about God and said: Teacher, I did not swear God, I swore Allah. Is it not sad that after 70 classes of RE a child does not know that God is the same as Allah?" \**

Providing religious education from the purely confessional perspective presents a number of challenges. One of the main concerns is related to the issue of integration, peace and co-existence. The question at stake here is whether the current model, which is exclusionist in its nature, contributes to integration or to the division of students and the peoples in the country. Taking into consideration the recent conflict in the country this question seems to be one of utmost importance. Knowing the fact that religious affiliation constitutes the major line of difference between the peoples I wish to argue that confessional religious education is one of the major disintegrative forces embedded in the public education system. Why is this so?

## Summary

A Confessional model of religious education in the Bosnian public schools constitutes one of the major disintegrative forces in the education system. Is such a system religion education appropriate for the circumstance of Bosnia and Herzegovina? I believe not. As recommended in this brief the current model must be reconsidered and new solutions and perspectives sought. Religious education must be based on holistic approaches and foster integration and peace. This might be a difficult task to execute but is crucial for the future of the country.

## \* What do parents think

<sup>1</sup> Abrahamsdotter, Emina, *Preispitivanje modela religijskog obrazovanja u Bosni i Hercegovini*, 2009.

Firstly, confessional religious education prevents encounter and relationship. These two main notions are well articulated in the works of John Paul Lederach, a prominent peace-builder, as the focal points in dialogue and reconciliation<sup>2</sup>. When it comes time for religious education class, students are separated along religious lines. Those who do not confess themselves to any of major religious traditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina stay outside the classroom. Public schools must provide all students with the opportunity and space to express their views and feelings as well as to get to know the world of religious diversity present in the country and the world. Encounter is crucial for building relationships as a basis for long-term peace. It is in the relationships that people develop true understanding and tolerance for each other. The school curriculum, including religious education, must create space that will encourage encounter and relationship building as the basis for sustainable peace and integration.

Secondly, the current model of religious education is based on teaching particular religious doctrines and truths, and explicitly or implicitly (re)constructs the image of the Other. Just as

the atheistic viewpoints were imposed on students in former Yugoslavia, so religious education is imposed on students today. Such an approach does not take into the account the diversity and complexity in which we all live, and the plurality of our identities. The public schools must provide students with the opportunity to explore this plurality and develop the sense of their own identity. As Robert Jackson argues, religious education must not be seen as “defined by a fixed body of knowledge, but as a series of existential and social debates in which pupils are encouraged to participate.”<sup>3</sup>

Religious education is organized differently in different countries. United States have non-confessional model of teaching about religion, while Germany has confessional one. What model is the most suitable for a specific society will highly depend on its political and social context. Bosnia and Herzegovina has been historically multi-religious society, and in the light of recent conflict it is crucial to develop a model that will reinforce the long tradition of co-existence, understanding and tolerance of each other. How religion is taught is therefore of vital importance.

<sup>2</sup> Ledearch, John Paul, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, 1997

<sup>3</sup> Jackson, Robert, *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in diversity and pedagogy*, 2004

**Table 1:**  
**Four basic pillars of education as formulated by UNESCO<sup>5</sup>.**

| Basic pillar of education        | Explanation  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <b>Learning to know</b>          | Learning <i>to know</i> is not about acquiring a certain amount of specific information, but it is about gaining skills to master the instruments of knowledge.  |
| <b>Learning to do</b>            | Learning <i>to do</i> refers to the development of life skills such as communication skills, ability to work in teams, problem solving skills, and conflict management skills.   |
| <b>Learning to live together</b> | Learning <i>to live together</i> encompasses discovering other, and working towards common objectives. This means that that to be able to understand others, one must first know oneself, but in the same way, understanding others strongly contributes to one’s own development.                             |
| <b>Learning to be</b>            | Learning <i>to be</i> means that education should encourage individual, critical thinking and help students to form their own judgment. Only in this way will an individual be able to determine what right thing to do in specific circumstances is. This also applies for our relationship to the community. |

<sup>5</sup> Delors, Jacques, *Learning: The Treasure Within: Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*, 1996.



## Holistic Religious Education

As pointed out, the current model of mono-religious teaching is exclusionist, reductionist and doctrinal in its nature. Instead what is needed is a holistic perspective, i.e. "an alternative, critical worldview that sees all phenomena, all existence, as intrinsically interrelated."<sup>4</sup> Knowledge about religion is frequently treated as disconnected from the other forms of knowledge. It does not encourage dialogue and wholeness of perspectives.

Four basic pillars of education as proposed by UNESCO in *Learning: The Treasure Within* constitute the ground on which religious education should stand. These pillars are *learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be*.

On the whole we could say that none of pillars of education are applied in religious education. This must be changed as good religious education constitutes a way to tolerance, peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Holistic education also includes pedagogical skills of teachers that will organize religious education in a way so as to practically apply the four pillars. At the moment, teaching skills of religious teachers are very mixed and beyond the control and influence of school management. Such a solution constitutes a big problem as it is not possible to strive for common standards applicable for all teachers, including teacher of religious education. So called *Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religion and beliefs in public schools*<sup>6</sup> could be useful in this case. They were developed so as "to contribute to an improved understanding of the world's increasing religious diversity and the growing presence of religion in the public sphere. Their rationale is based on two core principles: first, that there is positive value in teaching that emphasizes respect for *everyone's* right to freedom of religion and belief, and second, that teaching about religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstanding and stereotypes" (Toledo guiding principles 2007, p. 2).

## Free choice or imposition?

*"He (the parent) gets a form that needs to be filled in and signed. You can imagine how difficult it must be for a parent who does not have prior experience (with the RE) and who has no opportunity to discuss the issue. All the parents take the form and sign it in silence, without even asking the child . . . This is not fair to parents. And, the most parents ask themselves the main question: "Will my child be alone if I do not give my consent?"*

*"Schools do not organize alternative activities for children not attending RE classes, and the schools are always trying to escape . . . Social inclusion is important, that all children are included."*

*"They (religious communities) support divisions, interfere in politics and social developments. Attending religious education is conditioned with the confirmation in the Church. It is not sufficient to go to the Church, but also to attend religious education and I think that is a pressure." \**

The issue of choice related to religious education is highly problematic. In Republika Srpska religious education is obligatory for all Orthodox students throughout the primary school. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina the subject is optional-obligatory, which means once a parent gives her or his consent the student must attend till the end of the primary education. My policy research shows that parents' choice is strictly restricted in several ways.

Four problems have been identified: (1) students are not provided with a meaningful alternative, (2) parents are not provided with any information about the substance of religious education, (3) parents have no or limited influence over the subject, and (4) parents are exposed to the pressure from their social environment when opting for religious education. In the RS parents are not given the possibility to choose and all interviewees strongly opposed such an approach. The parents in FBiH formal decision is taken by filling in and signing a form, and thus giving his or her consent for the child to attend religious education classes.

<sup>4</sup> Schreiner, Peter, *Contributions to Holistic Education from Different Theories in Holistic Education Resource Book: Learning and Teaching in an Ecumenical Context*, 2005

<sup>6</sup> ODIHR Advisory Council of experts on freedom of religion or belief, *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, 2007



A "Policy Development Fellowship Program" has been launched by the Open Society Fund BiH in early 2004 with the aim to improve BiH policy research and dialogue and to contribute to the development of a sound policy-making culture based on informative and empirically grounded policy options.

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All policy studies are available at [www.soros.org.ba](http://www.soros.org.ba)



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### Culture of Religion: Towards Integrative Religious Education

*"... It would not be bad to learn about other religions... you never know where he (the child) can end up... it is positive to have knowledge."*

*"I would support it (culture of religion). So that children know and learn, the school is a place for learning, isn't it... I would support it for the sake of knowledge, and that he (the child) has religious education in his own religious community, and for the sake of peace in the country."*

*"... It (Culture of Religion) is a good thing, look, if you want multiethnic Bosnia than that is important. I would be the happiest person if the children knew everything." \**

Many of the above mentioned arguments suggest that policy makers must reconsider the current model of religious education. A public debate must be opened and all stakeholders must be involved. When considering new perspectives on how to teach religion the policy makers should take into account the following: the parents' views, the principles of holistic education and the future of peace and stability in the country. The empirical results of my policy study show all interviewed parents are supportive of introducing Culture of Religion, an inclusive religious education syllabus, which would enable students to learn about all religious traditions from a variety of perspectives. In parents' view such approach to religious education would foster democracy, peace and co-existence in a pluralistic society and reduce religious/ethnic conflicts and segregation. However, strong opposition to introducing Culture of Religion in the schools comes not from the parents but from the religious communities.

In reconsidering religious education in Bosnia and Herzegovina policy makers should include the following guidelines:

- **Initiate and open public debate.** Good decisions are always based on being able to access and consider a wide range of perspectives and opinions. It is of vital importance to listen to parents' and students' views. Involving relevant NGOs and religious communities would be fruitful as well.

- **Provide support to more in-depth research and analysis in the area.** As suggested earlier there is a lack of research and analysis on religious education in the country. More empirical results would facilitate development of strategies and decision-making on the issue of religious education.
- **Do not let religious communities take control over the issue of religious education.** Although it is important to listen to the point of view of religious communities, full responsibility and accountability must stay with the policy-makers. This means that decisions on how to organize religious education must take into the account the interests of the citizens, not only the interests of religious communities.
- **Make decisions that will strengthen integration of the country, and counter segregation and division.** The current religious education constitutes one of the major disintegrative forces in the public education system. All political decisions must strive to achieve higher level of integration of its citizens in the country. Such an inclusive approach will foster understanding and tolerance.
- **Initiate the changes in the current legislation on the religious education.** It is necessary to review the legislation so as to see what changes are needed so as to introduce something such as Culture of Religion in the schools. Make sure that such changes have sufficient political support in the parliaments. This might require some advocacy activities and organizing of conferences and seminars.