



Different Religions under One Roof: Towards Inclusionary Religious Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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With a small population of approximately four million citizens, BiH is one of the most diverse, as well as politically divided European countries. The existing education system in many ways reflects the internal divisions, which, to a large extent, also exist in religious education.

Despite the fact that religious education in BiH is based on Constitution guaranteed rights, there is a recognized need for a review of existing BiH approaches to defining the relationship between religion and schooling. Inclusionary education about religions would contribute to social, religious and political tolerance and informed understanding, and would serve as a tool in overcoming the divisions in the education system, as well as in society at large.

Culture of Religions in BiH

The Culture of Religions initiative in Bosnia and Herzegovina has designed a school subject that teaches students about the four major religions practiced in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Different than the traditional, confessional religious classes which provide a doctrinal point of view, the Culture of Religions course teaches all students to explore the four religions, with an emphasis on their history, culture and society.

Culture of Religions provides education complementary to the existing confessional religious education, without challenging and/or affecting the existing practice or right to confessional religious education. This pilot, and donor community driven initiative, support for which was provided by international donors, was initially introduced in 21 schools in both BiH entities.

According to the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, **"This approach is inclusive and it serves as a confidence-building measure that seeks to advance inter-religious toler-**

ance and understanding. Its aim is to reduce potential misunderstandings and conflicts arising from a lack of knowledge of other peoples' faiths and cultures by providing the next generation with a basic knowledge of the culture and history of the religions of others."

The Goethe-Institute maintains that this school course **"places a special emphasis on the development and encouragement of tolerant coexistence of all people in BiH, pointing out the similarities among the four main religions in Bosnia and Herzegovina."** However, it is this aspect that that was met with the resistance by those who assumed that the Course will generalize the religious truths of individual religions, with its neutral, scientific approach. At the same time, teachers and religious authorities, such as Reverend Mario Cosic, who teaches History of Religions at the Sarajevo *Katolički školski centar* (Catholic School Center - CSC), and Islamic theologian Nermina Baljevic, who teaches the Culture of Religions course at the *Prva bošnjačka gimnazija* (First Bosniak Gymnasium - FBG), point out that the Culture of Religions actually builds on to the knowledge gained in confessional religious classes.

The Catholic School Center and First Bosniak Gymnasium serve as best practice examples of a successful implementation of Culture of Religions, to the satisfaction of students, parents, teachers and religious communities.

As a part of its curriculum, CSC has a mandatory History of Religions course during the first and second years of high school. According to Reverend Mario Cosic, the experience with teaching this particular course has been overwhelmingly positive and has even attracted international attention. Reverend Cosic points

Summary

Inter-religious intolerance and prejudices continue to be a significant, if not a major obstacle to reconciliation in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The education system reflects this situation with the internal divisions along the lines of language and religion.

Throughout most of BiH, religious education is organized only for the students of the majority religion, who are learning primarily, if not exclusively about their own confessions. There are, however, exceptions to this practice throughout BiH, in the form of mandatory non-confessional education about religions, complementary to the existing confessional religious education. Placed in the European context and based on the Austrian model, the Culture of Religions course should be formally introduced in BiH, with the oversight of ministries of education, thus creating an inclusionary education system.

"Interaction between non-confessional and confessional religious education can only be a positive one as the knowledge gained in the History of Religions course builds on to the knowledge that students gain in their confessional religious classes organized in schools or outside of them."

- Reverend Mario Cosic

"In essence, the (course) content promotes universal religious values, aiming to accentuate, through learning about others and those different from us, the common ground of religions, while putting less focus on the differences... I believe that the subject has fully justified the place it has been given in the system of education in BiH, and that it can contribute greatly to better understanding of other people, especially the ones who find religion an important part of their life and identity."

- Nermina Baljevic, Islamic Theologian

out that students of all confessions, as well as students who declare themselves as atheists express, above-average interest in this course, where they are encouraged to explore the religions of their peers. Former CSC student, Gorana Zagovec, who is currently doing her postgraduate studies in Public International Law at the University of Oslo, says that she was initially skeptical regarding the History of Religion course. **"I now realize that in an environment such as BiH, where we aim to preserve a multicultural oasis with as many nationalities and ethnicities, it is important to offer such a neutral approach, where students are introduced to traditions and customs of all religions, and religiosity is seen as individual's personal and intimate belief."**

A similar approach is employed at the First Bosniak Gymnasium in Sarajevo where the Culture of Religions course was first introduced in 1995. Nermina Baljevic, who has been the Culture of Religions course instructor in FBG for the past 13 years, points out that the course has met the expectations of both parents and students. This is confirmed by a survey conducted among 75 students of the course. In response to the question, **"Do you find that learning about and knowing about the cultures and religions of others and those different than you is important for your education?"**, 72 students answered "Yes", two students answered "I cannot estimate at this moment", one student answered "I could live without it" and no students choose "No" as their answer.

Former FBG student Amila Karacic, who was subsequently a top student at the Sarajevo School of Science and Technology, and is currently working at the State Ministry of Civil Affairs, believes that the Culture of Religions course has been of exceptional educational value for her and her peers. **"In addition to the four major religions in our country, Culture of Religions has also taught us about the world beyond BiH, Balkans and even Europe, by introducing us to the religions of the world. It has broadened my horizons and made me more aware of diversity in a global context."**

Challenges

One of the primary problems with the implementation of the Culture of Religions course in BiH is the lack of state, local or even school-level ownership. As the Project was seen as primarily donor-driven, and on a trial basis, "there is currently no domestic "go to" source of information about its current or future implementation. Even the country's education officials appear to have little information of how successful Culture of Religions is within their areas of responsibility."¹ In the Republic of Srpska, the Ministry of Education has instituted the pilot project, which will last from February till the end of the school year in July 2009, in all of 87 Republic of Srpska high schools. The project is not considered to be permanent, but rather experimental. Sociologist Ivan Siljakovic expects positive results from this experimental phase of the project, while at the same time emphasizing that the final results will depend on the teachers and their approach to teaching this course, adding that it is very important that no religion is given privileged status during the teaching process, and that there be no theological discussions, but rather a familiarization with different religions and their meaning. At the same time, the experience with the Federal Ministry of Education has been a different one. Although the Project has been formally presented to the Ministry, there has been no official response, nor recommendation for its implementation.

European Experience

In developing an appropriate approach to defining the role of religion in schools, BiH finds itself in a diverse European context, which is why it is necessary to examine European models, with an emphasis on those which are comparable to BiH. Most European countries have some form of religious education while, at the same time, their religious and cultural plurality is on the rise. Therefore, the dilemmas and challenges that BiH policymakers are facing are to a large extent shared by many European countries.

In Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and Germany, where there are various options for confessional religious education, there is an opportunity to choose additional or alternative subjects, such as ethics or philosophy, on an equal basis.² At the same time, in countries such as Denmark,

¹ Schreiner, Peter. Models of Religious Education in schools in Europe, How Can Existing Models contribute to tolerance and non-discrimination with regard to freedom of religion and belief? Statement for the Strategy Development Seminar of the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief Oslo, 7 – 9 December 2002.

² Ibid.



Sweden, Norway, Scotland, education about religions is strictly non-confessional, and religious studies are under the sole authority of the state. These two models tend to be seen as mutually exclusive, but are not necessarily such. **There can be successful cooperation between the state and religious communities. Under the label of Cooperative models between religious communities and state agencies e.g. in matters of content, teacher training, curriculum etc. we find confessional and non-confessional models.**³

Country which is suitable to serve as an example in inclusionary practice is Austria, because it successfully encompasses the above discussed approach: compulsory confessional religious education for various state recognized religious communities in both elementary and secondary schools, as well as the inclusionary education about religions. "In Austria, students can't complain of lack of choice, with Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, New Apostolic, Jewish, Islam and Buddhist classes available."⁴ Religion is a compulsory subject in schools, while an alternative, non-confessional education about religions has been also available since 1997. In Austrian classrooms various methods of teaching about religion are employed: case study, problem solving and decision making exercises, games, role play, presentation and interpretation of information, self-assessment, discussion, group work, activity based learning. The stress is on integrated learning.⁵ The aim of confessional and non-confessional religious education in Austrian schools is to contribute to "preparing students for life, to developing their identity in the pluralist culture they live in... and to understanding and developing tolerance towards people with different world views."⁶ The positive interaction between confessional and non-confessional religious education seen in Austria can and should be employed in BiH as well.

Recommendations

Relationship between religion and schooling in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains controversial, to a large extent decentralized and, particularly in the case of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina almost beyond the scope and control of relevant government bodies.

Policy options should be examined based on the criteria of political will, feasibility, sustainability and human rights. Exclusion of confessional religious classes from BiH's primary and secondary schools would require considerable constitutional changes for which there is very little to almost no political will. Availability of religious education itself meets little opposition from the general public, but the lack of choice and discriminatory practices are recognized as a problem which needs to be addressed. Feasibility of such measure is highly questionable, considering the status of religious authorities in BiH and public support that they enjoy. Freedom of organizing religious education in public schools is considered to be Constitution guaranteed human right, seen as a positive and democratic development from the communist system which drew an impenetrable line between religion and state.

When it comes to the status quo, it is evident that the NGO and donor community driven initiatives are limited in scope and durability. The highly decentralized government system, particularly in Federation of BiH allows for individualized approach to establishing a relationship between religion and schooling which, in some instances produces cases of exceptional success. At the same time, more than half of the Federation's cantons have either actively or passively rejected Culture of Religions course citing the lack of formal recommendations or instructions from the relevant government bodies. The Federal Ministry has expressed vague interest in the course but has failed to follow up with any identifiable measure. The Republic of Srpska, will start with the implementation of the Culture of Religions course as an experimental, seven-month project, from which further institutionalization will depend.

The primary concern should be how to involve the relevant authorities and centralize the system of teaching Culture of Religions in BiH. The responsibility cannot be placed on the Federal Ministry of Education alone, as even in the case that it fully supports the Project and issues the recommendation for the implementation of the course, the competence remains on the cantonal level, where educational policies

³ Ibid.

There are several approaches to defying the relationship between religion and schooling, varying from complete secularization of the education system based on the separation of "Church and State" on one side of the spectrum, to mandatory introduction of confessional religious education in all levels of the education system, on the other. Somewhat ambiguous status quo finds itself in the middle of this spectrum.

⁴ Teaching Religion the European Way, Deutsche Welle, Available from: <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,1564,1552191,00.html>.

⁵ Bobinac, Ankima Marinkovic, Comparative Analysis of Curricula for Religious Education: Examples of Four Catholic Countries. Metodika 15 (2007), 425-443.

⁶ Ibid.

There is a considerable political will and interest for the Culture of Religions course in BiH as whole. The primary question therefore is how to successfully institutionalize this process and ensure its sustainability.



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are being adopted. This means that the efforts need to be made towards both levels of ministries.

- **Cooperation with religious authorities** should be established, based on the already opened channels of communication, and convincing arguments offered by some of the representatives of the religious authorities that the interaction between confessional and non-confessional religious education can only be a positive one. This should be a primary tool of cooperation with those actors who have rejected the Culture of Religions course on the ground of the existing mandatory confessional religious classes.
- **The relevant ministries need to be made aware** that various forms of Culture of Religions course already exists within their domains, that the political will for it is evident and that the capacities for teaching this course have been and/or can be developed within the existing members of the faculty.
- **Education of new Culture of Religions teachers** needs to be organized under the state authority, and in cooperation with the existing BiH universities and teachers of Culture of Religions course who have undergone formal and specialized trainings. The Ministries of Education should be responsible for organizing training and certifying teachers of Culture of Religions course, which will be implemented on the Entity level, creating a foundation for modern, inclusionary, European education system.
- **Support Network for a Culture of Religions course** consisted of the senior Culture of Religions course instructors, representatives from the Religious Communities, International Community and Entity and Cantonal Ministries of Education should be established.
- Culture of Religions course **teaching materials and methodology need to be harmonized.**
- **Public relations campaign** which will inform the public, parents, students as well as the religious communities of the positive interaction between the confessional

religious education and Culture of Religions based on the best practice examples domestically and abroad.

Sustainability of the Culture of Religions will be achieved through local ownership and educational ministries' support and commitment.

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