

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: THE CASE OF SERBIA\*

### Verska nastava u Srbiji

*APSTRAKT* Konfesionalna verska nastava uvedena je u srbijanski javni školski sistem, najpre kao fakultativni predmet, vladinom uredbom objavljenom jula 2001. godine. Takvoj odluci prethodila je nepotpuna rasprava u javnosti koja je trajala od novembra 2000. do jula 2001. U ovom radu analizirani su glavni argumenti za i protiv verske nastave (veronauke) korišćeni u toj debati. Pored toga, razmatrane su i sledeće teme: religioznost u Srbiji; modeli religijskog obrazovanja i glavni akteri koji su učestvovali u raspravama i donošenju odluka; zakonski okvir, programi, udžbenici; ciljevi verske nastave; obrazovanje nastavnika; empirijski podaci o stavovima prema veronauci u školama, itd. Nakon četiri godine, moguće je proceniti ne samo pretpostavke odluke srbijanske vlade da se uvede veronauka, već i njene posledice koje se tiču prvih iskustava u osnovnim i srednjim školama, kao i opštijeg odnosa crkva-država (religijska prava i slobode). Uvođenje verske nastave u Srbiji postalo je i svojevrsan lakmus test za docniji zakon o crkvama i verskim zajednicama, kao i novu društvenu i političku ulogu verskih organizacija u Srbiji danas.

KLJUČNE REČI *verska nastava, Srbija, crkva, država*

*ABSTRACT* The confessional religious education was introduced, as an optional subject, in Serbian public school system by a governmental regulation published in July 2001. Such a decision was preceded by an incomplete public debate that lasted from November 2000 to July 2001. Major arguments for and against religious education are discussed in this paper. Other topics include: religiosity in Serbia; models of religious education and main actors

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*that participated in the debates and decision-making process; legislation, curricula, textbooks; goals of religious education; teacher training; some empirical data on the attitudes towards religious education in schools, etc. Four years later, it is possible to assess not only the preconditions of the Serbian government decision, but also the consequences regarding some initial experiences in the primary and secondary schools and church-state relations (religious rights and freedoms) in general. More precisely, the issue of public religious education in Serbia appeared to be a litmus test for the forthcoming legislation on religious organizations and for the new social and political role of religious communities in Serbia today.*

KEY WORDS *religious education, Serbia, church, state*

Confessional religious education was introduced in the Serbian public school system (but not in Montenegrin schools)<sup>1</sup> as a multi-denominational and optional subject by a governmental regulation published on July 27, 2001. This decision was preceded by an incomplete public debate that lasted from November 2000 to July 2001. Most of the relevant actors participated in this debate: official state and religious bodies (republic and federal ministries, church synods, etc.); political figures; religious representatives, theologians, teachers of catechism; public school teachers, university professors, sociologists, psychologists, pedagogues and other educational workers; NGO representatives, human rights activists; and various other individuals, including writers, academicians and other public figures. Some of their arguments and rhetoric will be discussed below in a separate section.

Four years later, it is possible to assess both the preconditions of the Serbian government decision and the consequences, related not only to initial experiences in the primary and secondary schools, but also to church-state relations (religious rights and freedoms) in general. More precisely, the issue of public religious education in Serbia appeared to be a litmus test for the forthcoming legislation on religious organizations and for the new social and political role of religious communities, especially the Orthodox Church, in Serbia today.

### **The Religious Context**

A specific characteristic of Serbian society, over the last fifty years, has been a significant variation of attitude towards religion: from its utter rejection, to its

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<sup>1</sup> Since 1997, the Republic of Montenegro has pursued its own policies largely independent of the Republic of Serbia and of the federal government they shared. Religious education has not been introduced in Montenegro, where public opinion is divided on the issue. One survey of public opinion in the 1990s showed that 64% were in favour of religious education in schools (Laušević 1997).

acceptance and revival. These variations were not only the result of changes in the religious system, but also of educational and political transformations. In the early 1990s, religious activities were renewed, first with an anti-sectarian discourse and process of stigmatization of religious sects, seen as the common threat that homogenized religious groups. Before the introduction of religious education, numerous lectures were held at schools on this topic. Religion also assumed a place in public life, the media and the educational system. Various studies conducted among the adult population and youth indicate that the revitalization of religion and religiosity resulted in a process of de-secularization (Đorđević, 1984; 1994; Blagojević, 1995; 2002; 2003; Blagojević and Đorđević, 1999; Kuburić, 1995; 1996; 1997; 1999; Jerotić, 2002; Kuburić and Stojković, 2004).

The classification of religious communities in Serbia comprises a dominant, domestic, national Serbian Orthodox Church, which tends to become the state religion; the traditionally present religious communities with national characteristics; and other religious communities, referred to as small religious communities, religious societies, or sects. The attitude towards the sects, in particular in the media and lectures organized at schools and universities over the past ten years, had a fairly strong negative connotation that even incited individual acts of violence (Kuburić, 2005b).

Table 1: Main confessions in Serbia and Montenegro

<i>Confession</i>	<i>Serbia and Montenegro (including Kosovo)</i>	<i>Serbia and Montenegro (excluding Kosovo)</i>
Orthodox	68%	83%
Roman Catholic	5%	5%
Protestant	2%	2%
Muslim	20%	5%
Other	5%	5%

(Estimated share of population)

Three main religious traditions are present today in Serbia and Montenegro: the Serbian Orthodox Church (prevalent throughout the country); the Roman Catholic Church (concentrated in the northern regions) and Islam (concentrated in the southern regions). The religious complexity of the region is further enriched by the growing presence of Protestantism. The Serbian Orthodox Church has significantly influenced the development of Serbian and Montenegrin history and national identity.

No census has been conducted on the entire territory of Serbia and Montenegro, but some estimates are given in Table 1.

According to the census in Serbia in 2002 (which did not include either Kosovo and Metohija or Montenegro), 83% of the inhabitants are of Serbian nationality. Nearly 85% of the inhabitants declare themselves Orthodox Christians. Catholics, the second largest religious community in Serbia, make up 5.48%. The percentage of Muslims in Serbia is 3.20%. There is only a small percentage of Jews in Serbia (0.01%). According to the census figures of 2002, the number of religious communities was roughly 68, half of them (34) Protestant, but these are small communities, and they make up just 2% of the population. There are ten religious organizations of Oriental origin (0.01%). Only 0.53% of citizens declared themselves non-religious, with 1.83% of unknown religious affiliation and 2.63% who refused to declare their confession in accordance with the Constitution's Article 43.

How religious are the citizens of Serbia and how do they demonstrate their religiosity? There is no simple answer to this question. The standard sociological studies employ religiosity indicators with predetermined modalities, among which the respondents choose one. Over the past sixty years, much research has been conducted on the changes in religiosity. In 1999, the Institute for Sociological Researches in Belgrade (Radisavljević-Ćiparizović, 2002: 223) found that 26.6% of respondents are convinced believers who believe everything their religion teaches, and 32.7% of respondents are religious, but do not accept everything that their religion teaches. The undecided add up to 14.5%, the indifferent ones to 6.8%. Another 17.6% are not religious, but have nothing against religion. Finally, those who do not believe and are against religion make up 1.4%.

This shows that the majority (one third) of respondents are believers who selectively accept religious teachings. Together with the convinced believers in Serbia, they add up to 60% (Radisavljević-Ćiparizović, 2002). Other studies were conducted in detail concerning the accuracy of the census figures and number of members of particular religious communities (Kuburić, 2002; 2003; 2005a, 2005b).

The study "Sociological aspects of multiculturalism and regionalization and their influence on the development of AP Vojvodina and the Republic of Serbia," conducted on a sample of 1,235 citizens of Vojvodina, separates the citizens of Vojvodina into two groups: the religious ones and the non-religious. In the first group, religiosity takes different forms, the dominant ones being the Orthodox confession, a critical relationship toward one's church, and believing without accepting everything that the church teaches (22%). Second in numbers are the "customary believers", i.e. those who express their belief by keeping customs, rather than theological teachings. Of course, there are also more dogmatic believers who accept everything their religion teaches. Finally, a certain number of believers believe in God, without belonging to any particular church or confession.

There are 18% who are not believers, but keep religious traditions and customs of their national religion, more out of conformism than religiosity. The non-believers who accept the religious affiliation of others make up 11%, those who are not interested in religion 3%, and those who are opposed to all religion only 1%.

In short, 61% of the respondents are religious. One third of respondents are not religious, but consider themselves tolerant toward those who are, and even join religious ceremonies, even though they do not attach any religious significance to them. Those who are not sure whether they are religious or not add up to 6%, while the percentage of those who are against all religions is almost insignificant – 1% of the respondents (Kuburić and Stojković, 2004).

Religiosity develops in the socialization process, based on the influences of the social environment, and realized primarily through the family, which selectively transfers the system of values to its descendants. However, it has to be emphasized that religiosity, as well as its absence, is not always a personal choice based on individual motivation, nor, again, a passive submission to the social influences. According to research (Ćimić, 1984; Kuburić, 1995; 1996) religiosity is primarily an outcome of family choice, which reproduces itself from generation to generation. The family is more powerful than school in religious socialization. The students are more inclined to align with their parents' wishes, than their school friends' inclinations in the matters of religious beliefs and values. On the other hand, religious families that, in their transmission of religious values, forget the emotional component of a child's personality and omit to associate religion with the satisfaction of child's needs, open the doors for the rejection of religion.

### **Models and Main Actors**

In 2001, Serbia opted for a confessional, segregated, multi-denominational model of religious education that may be conducted in public schools by seven "traditional" or "historical" religious communities: the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), the Roman Catholic Church, the Islamic Community, the Jewish Community, the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Christian Reformed Church and the Evangelical Christian Church in Serbia-Vojvodina. Religious Education was initially offered as an optional subject, with the alternative choice of either Civic Education, or neither of the two subjects, in the first grades of elementary and high schools. However, in 2002-2003, a new regulation made the choice of one of the two subjects compulsory. The decision was argued as a result of the unexpectedly low interest of school students in both subjects, and especially in Religious Education (Gredelj 2001–2002). Notwithstanding those arguments, it would be worthwhile to examine both the advantages and weaknesses of this model within the broader

context of religious pluralism, religious freedoms, education policy and church-state relations in Serbia. In other words, what are the political, legal and educational ramifications of this model?

Some of the questions that became acute or surfaced already during the debate that preceded the government decision were as follows: Who are the official partners in church-state relations? Which religious communities and what state (federal or republic)? What constitutional solutions are to be expected in the near future? Will the new, long-expected law on religious organizations be passed on the level of the state union of Serbia and Montenegro, or just on the republic level (Serbia only)?

The second set of concerns was related to the arbitrary selection of only seven religious communities that were permitted to offer confessional education in public schools. The selection criteria were based on the constitution and laws of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the period before World War II. But can the same criteria be applied today, in the 21st century, in a modern secular republic that recognizes the legal distinction between church and state? Is this the way in which the status of those communities will be defined in the forthcoming legislation on religious communities? If so, does this mean that Serbia, like Russia, has opted for the model of so-called "historically recognized religious communities"? And, most importantly, are other religious communities in Serbia still equal before the law? What would the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Serbia say about that?<sup>2</sup>

Aware of the potential problems, some organizations with experience in the area of academic religious studies, such as the Center for Religious Studies (CIREL) of the Belgrade Open School<sup>3</sup>, tried to mediate in this process. In 2000, CIREL had already launched its multi-disciplinary educational program Religious Studies whose aim was to prepare students – future lecturers in high schools and at the universities in Serbia – to thoroughly study (and later to teach) religion from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. At a later stage, this program would prepare high school and university professors for teaching courses such as: History of Religions, Religion and Culture, or Introduction to Religious Studies. The program itself was non-confessional and multi-disciplinary, based on several theoretical and methodological principles:

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<sup>2</sup> A public debate on this issue was indeed held at the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Serbia in Belgrade on June 24, 2003. One of the authors of this paper, Milan Vukomanović, participated, and this particular case, including the arguments used at the session, will be discussed below.

<sup>3</sup> CIREL was established in 1999, while the Belgrade Open School, its mother-organization, has operated as an alternative educational institution (a sort of "invisible college") since 1993. When the debate on religious education started, CIREL had opened communication and contact with the representatives of the Ministry of Education of Serbia, with the goal of discussing and pursuing the most appropriate model of religious education in public schools.

– The academic, non-theological study of religion does not necessarily imply that students, lecturers and researchers belong to any particular religious community or affiliation.

– Such an approach to religion implies sensitivity to religious pluralism.

– Methods of studying religion are comparative. In this program, students were given a chance not only to learn about various theoretical models and methods used in research on religion today, but also to study world religions in their different historical, cultural, and social settings and aspects.

Therefore, in order to have a complete view of the different aspects of religious phenomena, the program would enable the students to approach religion from at least three different perspectives: 1) *historical* – the study of the concrete, historically based religious traditions; 2) *theoretical* – philosophical, sociological, anthropological, psychological, geographical and other approaches to religious topics and problems; 3) *comparative* – a comparative study of at least two religions covered by this program.

According to its proponents, applying this model in the public school system would bring multiple advantages. The program itself was designed as a non-confessional study of religions open to students of all denominational and cultural, ethnic backgrounds. The students would learn about religions, instead of just receiving confessional religious instruction (catechism), which is already available within the religious communities. The CIREL program would, therefore, go beyond a standard catechism and offer a pluralistic and comparative approach to world religions, including the religions of the Balkans, with an idea that such a program was most appropriate for a multi-confessional society that had experienced a series of inter-ethnic conflicts and wars in the near past.

However, despite the CIREL proposal and the initial favorable reaction of the Ministry of Education, the government of Serbia opted for a confessional, multi-denominational model of religious education. The rationale for this governmental decision was primarily political and pragmatic. The decision was made by Dr. Zoran Đinđić, Prime Minister of Serbia, who consulted only religious representatives, while the Ministry of Education (the main institution in charge of education) was completely circumvented in the decisionmaking process. The Ministry of Religious Affairs – which, from the very outset, unreservedly sided with religious communities (and especially the SOC) in their effort to promote the confessional model – was pleased with the Prime Minister's decision, contributing, thus, to an unusual schism within the government itself. To make things even worse, the former vice-president of the Serbian government, Mr. Čedomir Jovanović, admitted that the decision itself was completely pragmatic in character, stemming from the

government's attempt to appease the SOC after the extradition of Milosevic to the Hague Tribunal!<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding this political-pragmatic view of the entire process, some authors argue that

(...) within the education reform of 2001, the parallel introduction of Religious Education and Civic Education could be seen as a political strategy of the then government to express its gratitude to the SOC, creating a 'symbolical distance' to the ideological heritage of the previous regime and thus securing the support of the electorate by referring to a set of 'traditional' values and confirming a modern, democratic, pro-European orientation. (Bačević, 2004: 1).

At any rate, when the agreement on Religious Education became official in July 2001 (with the publication of the aforementioned *Regulation*), two deputy ministers of education offered their resignations. Furthermore, no one was able to predict if enough teachers of catechism would be available for the beginning of the new school year in September 2001, or whether the government would be able to find additional funds for their salaries (the previously adopted budget did not cover that), or whether those teachers would have enough training and experience to conduct this kind of education in public schools.

### Arguments and Rhetoric

The main lobbyist in favor of confessional religious education was the SOC, the majority religious institution that pressed the government to make its hasty decision. It is apparent, on the other hand, that the government expected some fast-and-easy political benefits in return, especially considering the influence and credibility of the Serbian Church in the country.

Already in November 2000 (immediately after the fall of Milošević), the Church had stepped onto the public stage with its request that confessional religious education be introduced in public schools. Very soon, the SOC expressed its willingness to be an equal partner with the state in the education process. Furthermore, the Office for Religious Education of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate announced that "the state should protect its substance and nation: with this goal in mind, it should proclaim Orthodox Christianity as the state religion; i.e. our state should be verified as an Orthodox state" (Brkić, 2000: 8). Other religions and denominations would have the right to exist, but not in the same rank as Orthodoxy, and they would be registered only if, by the assessment of the Serbian Church, "they are not considered Satanist" (Brkić, 2000: 8).

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<sup>4</sup> TV interview with Čedomir Jovanović, *Insajder B 92*, April 13, 2005.



Since October 5, 2000, the Serbian Church has established direct lines of communication with the relevant state institutions and bodies, rejecting and condemning, at the same time, the civil society organizations and their initiatives to organize an in-depth public debate on religious education. For example, in its official press release, published on November 24, 2000, the Serbian Church reacted to the statement of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia that the initiative of the Serbian Orthodox Church and President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Vojislav Koštunica, to introduce religious education in the public school system is “a serious violation of the principles of the secular state.”<sup>5</sup> The Church’s reaction to this statement reflects its archaic, anti-modern language: it characterizes the arguments of the civil society organizations as “the fear of Satan and all his followers in the last six decades – manifested in each place under the sky of a country that only nominally expresses the concept of Serbia in a comprehensive sense.”<sup>6</sup>

As seen from the previous example, the arguments and rhetoric used in this debate reflect a rather heated public atmosphere and sharp divisions into two major camps – pro and con. Among the pros one finds various religious representatives and church bodies, conservative politicians, writers and other public figures.<sup>7</sup> They usually referred to the repression of religious institutions under communism, the positive experiences of other countries, the educational and moral significance of religious education, the new role of religion in post-communism, etc.

The strongest voices among the opponents were the NGO representatives and human rights activists who complained about the violation of the legal distinction between religious communities and the state, discrimination of the minority religious communities, threats of de-secularization and clericalization, etc.

Various experts (lawyers, sociologists, psychologists, pedagogues) often assumed a sort of “middle position”, trying to assess the potential advantages and disadvantages of such education, including legal, psychological, pedagogical, methodological and logistical concerns. The analysis of arguments and rhetoric used in the debate reveals a certain degree of over-simplification, reductionism, bogus arguments and politicization of the entire issue. On the one hand, views such as: “The communists forbade religious education, let’s return to the situation of 1945” completely neglected the difference between communist atheism and modern secularization and ignored the irreversibility of certain historical processes. On the

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<sup>5</sup> “Prihvatanje vere i veroispovesti – lični izbor svakog pojedinca”, *Politika*, November 22, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> *Novosti Informativne službe Srpske Pravoslavne Crkve*, November 24, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> As soon as the governmental Regulation was published, a group of academicians, writers, lawyers, scientists and priests, headed by the members of the Serbian Association of Writers, reacted very positively to the decision to introduce religious education in the public school system.

other hand, arguments such as: "Religion is only a private affair, it should not have its place in the public sphere" were contrary to the examples of other democratic and secular states that do have religious education in public schools (Vukomanović, 2002: 318-319).

Let us group and comment on the more articulate arguments for and against the proposed model of religious education.

#### *Arguments for*

1. *The issue is not about introducing, but about returning religious education to the public school system.* This was an argument often raised by the SOC representatives, who complained about the communist decision to ban religious education from public schools soon after the end of WW II. The fact that the circumstances in the year 2001 were not the same as the ones before WW II was largely ignored by the proponents of this thesis.

2. *Religious education is one of the fundamental human rights.* This argument, also raised by church representatives, was based on a misunderstanding. Freedom of religion is, indeed, a fundamental human right. It implies freedom of religious instruction and education within religious communities, but not necessarily in the public school system. Religious education was allowed within religious communities even during the Milošević's government.

3. *The positive experience of other European countries (Germany, Austria, Norway, etc.) with religious education argues for its introduction in the Serbian case.* These examples were often mentioned. As a rule, the different historical and constitutional traditions of those European countries were not the subject of any serious consideration.

4. *Religious education will have moral significance; it will "make better persons."* Again, the clergy of SOC often referred to this point. The representatives of the Office for Religious Education of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate quoted, without any elaboration, a "decrease in juvenile delinquency by 80% and abortions by 50% in Republika Srpska" where religious education had been introduced earlier (Brkić, 2000: 8).<sup>8</sup>

5. *Religious education in public schools reflects the new, positive role of religions in the post-communist period.* This is an argument put forth not only by SOC, but by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as well. It was often used in other East and Central European countries during their debates on religious education.

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<sup>8</sup> An interesting and inventive philosophical analysis of the argument 'religious education makes better persons' was offered by Tomisav Žigmanov in Kuburić (2002: 89-105).

6. *There are enough teachers for the confessional religious education model.* This was partly true as far as the numbers are concerned, but the quality of those teachers' education was rarely discussed. In fact, those teachers were educated at the Theological Seminary of the SOC, which has not been part of the university system since WW II. Their curricula and methods of instruction significantly differed from the training of other teachers who graduated from state universities.

#### *Arguments against*

1. *Religious education in public schools will violate the constitution and affect church-state relations in Serbia.* This objection was often raised by the members of NGOs, two of which (the Yugoslav Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights and FORUM IURIS) brought this entire case before the Constitutional Court of Serbia.<sup>9</sup>

2. *Religious education will violate human rights and rights of the child in the area of freedom of religion.* It is interesting that the Yugoslav Child's Rights Center, an NGO located in Belgrade, was the first to raise this concern and the first to launch the public debate on religious education in general.<sup>10</sup>

3. *There are positive examples of countries that do not have religious education in public schools.* Again, the historical and constitutional traditions of those countries (such as the United States or France) were rarely subject to any serious consideration.<sup>11</sup>

4. *Religious education in schools will only contribute to psychological problems of school students.* These problems, usually raised by psychologists and pedagogues, are related both to development psychology and identity concerns. For example, will elementary school children be able to grasp such complex theological concepts as the Holy Trinity? How will their segregation into different classes reflect on their identity (e.g. their divisions into denominational groups or believers and non-believers)?

5. *There are not enough funds for this project.* This was a serious objection, because the already adopted republic draft budget had not allowed for such a comprehensive project. According to the Minister of Education, it would have cost about 1.5 million euros.

6. *Minority rights and freedoms will be affected by introducing single-denominational or compulsory religious education.* This was another objection raised by the Yugoslav Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights — first in the press, and then before the Constitutional Court of Serbia. Early in the debate, some

<sup>9</sup> See the next section (Legislation).

<sup>10</sup> See "Protiv veronauke", *Danas*, November 5, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> A rare example of such a serious and rather comprehensive analysis is Maksimović (1998).

sociologists were also concerned about this issue (Vukomanović 2001: 11). This objection lost its relevance when a different model (confessional, optional and multi-denominational education) was finally adopted.

### Legislation

In this section, we will tackle the gradual changes in the legislation following the governmental Regulation on the organization and realization of Religious Education and an alternative subject in the elementary and high schools of July 2001.<sup>12</sup> This executive regulation defined some important elements of the future church-state relations before any proper law on religious organizations, or new constitution of Serbia, was even drafted.<sup>13</sup>

Some changes are also reflected in the republic laws on primary and secondary schools.<sup>14</sup> The Law on the changes and amendments to the high school act (2002) includes five articles concerning religious education (Articles 3, 4, 6, 10 and 11). Article 3 states that the Religious Education program is adopted by both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, upon the proposal of the traditional religious communities defined by the government Regulation. A special governmental commission will co-ordinate those proposals, as well as the textbook proposals. The textbooks are recommended by the traditional churches and religious communities and approved by the Ministry of Education (Article 4). In Article 6, Religious Education and an alternative subject are defined as optional, while Article 10 states that the grades for those subjects will be descriptive and not quantitative. Finally, Article 11 provides that the training of Religious Education teachers will be determined by the Ministry of Education upon the proposals made by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and traditional churches and religious communities.

The decision to introduce religious education in Serbian schools was challenged before the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Serbia on June 24, 2003. This constitutional debate was a sort of synthesis of the entire debate that

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<sup>12</sup> Uredba o organizovanju i ostvarivanju verske nastave i nastave alternativnog predmeta u osnovnoj i srednjoj školi (published in Službeni glasnik RS 46/2001). This Regulation was signed by the then vice-president of the Serbian government, Mr. Dušan Mihajlović.

<sup>13</sup> At the moment of the completion of this paper, no such law or constitution has been proposed for adoption at the Parliament of Serbia.

<sup>14</sup> Zakon o izmenama i dopunama Zakona o osnovnoj školi (Službeni glasnik RS 22/2002) and Zakon o izmenama i dopunama Zakona o srednjoj školi (Službeni glasnik RS 23/2002). Finally, the Law on the foundations of the system of education was passed on June 17, 2003. Concerning its reflections on religious education see Joksimović (2003: 25).

followed the governmental decision of July 2001. An assessment of the constitutionality of the governmental Regulation was requested by the following organizations: The Yugoslav Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights, the citizens' association Forum Iuris from Novi Sad, and a Belgrade attorney at law. According to them, the Regulation in question was not in accordance with the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and international conventions, because it placed citizens, national minorities and religious communities in an unequal position by allowing religious education for the 'traditional' religious communities only. Thus education in the elementary and high schools is not available to everyone under the same conditions (Popović and Vitorović-Umićević 2003: 1). The second objection referred to the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (Article 41, paragraph 2): only religious communities may establish religious schools, therefore the state may not engage in religious education. The third objection challenged the right of religious communities to conduct church mission in schools and pastoral care of school children. Religious communities are allowed to recruit believers, but not in the state schools. Finally, there was a problem with descriptive grading, because the extant Law on high schools did not allow for such a grading policy.

Derived from those and some other objections raised during the discussion, the actual subject of the constitutionality assessment were the following issues:

1. The possible violation of the constitutional distinction between religious communities and the state;
2. The equality of religious communities before the law and constitution;
3. The possible violation of the extant laws on elementary and high schools;
4. The possible violation of the freedom of religion of parents and custodians of the school children, because they have to choose between the two school subjects on offer;
5. The possible violation of the freedom of religion and equality of religious communities before the law in the cases when seven traditional religious communities, along with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Religious Affairs, determine the plans and curricula of Religious Education.

The final outcome of this entire debate was that the Constitutional Court of Serbia did not reject the governmental Regulation, but confirmed it as constitutional on November 4, 2003.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Veronauka", *Danas* online, November 5, 2003 (<http://www.danas.co.yu/20031105/frontpage1.html>); "Izbor odbranio ustavnost", *Dnevnik* online, November 6, 2003, (<http://www.dnevnik.co.yu/arhiva/06-11-2003/Strane/drustvo.htm>).

## Curriculum

In the autumn of 2001, Religious Education was introduced into our schools for the first time in almost half a century. Civic Education was introduced, for the first time, as an alternative subject to Religious Education. In 2001/2002, Religious Education and Civic Education were introduced only for the first grade students in the elementary and high schools. Their attendance was optional. In the following academic year, Religious Education and Civic Education were given the status of elective subjects at both levels of schooling, which implies the compulsory attendance of either of the two subjects once the selection is made. In 2002/2003 Religious Education and Civic Education were introduced for the first- and second-grade students of elementary and high schools. Today, if a student selects Religious Education, this means that this subject will be compulsory throughout their education. Religious Education is attended from the first to the fifth grades of elementary school and all grades in high school. Within the next three years, all students in elementary and high schools will have an opportunity to attend Religious Education.

The program of Religious Education for the elementary schools in Serbia is designed for one hour of classes per week, or 36 hours annually. There is a tendency, however, to have two hours per week, because the students tend to forget what they learned.<sup>16</sup>

Curricula and textbooks are proposed by the seven "traditional" religious communities. The tasks and contents of Religious Education are defined for each of these seven churches and religious communities. Since 2005/2006 this opportunity has been given to the Romanian Orthodox Church as well. However, the realization of Religious Education is logistically rather complicated, due to the many small groups that take those classes in the same schools at the same time.

Besides confessional Religious Education, as a separate subject for the seven traditional churches and religious communities; education about religion is also conducted within other subjects, especially Serbian language, History and Arts.

For example, the Sociology textbook for the third and fourth grade of high school includes a special chapter on the sociological definition of religion, magic, animism, mythology, and monotheistic religion. There are also sections on Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. The syllabus for Philosophy classes at the same level does not give preference to any single worldview or philosophy, but aims at

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<sup>16</sup> This argument is put forth by Sandra Dabić, secretary of the Council for Religious Education of the Belgrade-Karlovac Serbian Orthodox Metropolitanate.

general education. This includes sections on e. g. philosophy and Christianity, and the relationship between knowledge and faith.

The latter question, incidentally, became acute in 2004, when the then minister of education, Ljiljana Čolić, sought to to expel the theory of evolution from the education system. Čolić was soon replaced, but the “God’s will” vs. “natural selection” dilemma contributed to the conflict between Religious Education and Civic Education (not to mention Biology).

### **Aims and Goals of Religious Education**

The reform of the educational system in Serbia started with the introduction of religious and civic education. This was the result of a broader social change. The return to religion and rise of religiosity were some of the most important reasons for introducing religious education.

The aim of the Religious Education subject is to promote confessional religious beliefs, provide information on the students’ own religion, and to encourage and train students to perceive and to practice the Liturgy. While the specific contents of the subject are confessionally defined for each of the traditional churches and religious communities, the stated aims are largely the same for all.

It is significant that the goals of Religious Education have not changed since the outset. Those aims and tasks were identically formulated for the elementary and high schools (*Službeni glasnik RS – Prosvetni glasnik* 5/2001, 4/2003, and 6/2003).

The general goals of Religious Education in Serbia are to acquaint the students with the faith and spiritual experiences of their own church or religious community, to enable them to get an integrated religious view of the world and life, and to enable them to acquire the spiritual values of their church or religious community, as well as to preserve and cultivate their own religious and cultural identities. One might say that the goal of religious education is to develop a theistic world view, faith in God, and the capacity to practice religion in everyday life.

The goal of Orthodox catechism in the first grade of high school is to develop trust, love and unity with classmates and fellow students, and to cultivate solidarity and mutual assistance, and care for nature and the world. Another goal is to point out the basics of the faith and experience of the Church as a source and inspiration for personal and community development.

Talking about religious education in high schools, Orthodox bishop and textbook author Ignjatije Midić says that adolescence is actually the best period for making live contact with God and attending church. However, he thinks that religiosity is not established by the simple presentation of a certain worldview, or by

teaching a certain number of concepts and aspects of theology, thus enforcing ethical norms and rules of conduct. Religiosity represents an ethos of freedom and love. This is why the goal of the classes for the first high-school grade is to develop the awareness of students that Christianity is a church, a liturgical community, and to draw the attention of students to the notion of *character* as a basic Christian concept. Without an adequate understanding of the concept of character, it is impossible to understand that the Christian belief in God is a way of life, and not an academic doctrine or ideology (Midić, 2003: 63).

Religious Education in the second grade of high school emphasizes Christian ontology, based on the doctrine of the One God who is the Holy Trinity. In the third grade, the plan is to convince students that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the created world, while the goal of the fourth year is to suggest to students that history has its goal: the created world will become the Kingdom of God, and death will be overcome.

### **Textbooks**

The curricula and textbooks are proposed by the religious communities. The textbooks are written by authors from within the religious communities. All books must be revised by the Commission of the Ministry of Religious Affairs which controls and approves the textbooks. This Commission, which meets several times a year, includes seven representatives from the seven traditional religions and three representatives each from the Ministries of Education and Religious Affairs (since December 2004) plus the Chair of the Commission, 14 members altogether. A Serbian Orthodox priest or bishop heads the Commission. All textbooks are published by the monopoly publisher, the Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Supplies (*Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva*).

#### *Orthodox textbooks*

The analysis of the textbooks for Orthodox Religious Education clearly reveals their confessional character. The textbook for teachers is entitled *Priručnik za nastavnike osnovnih i srednjih škola* (2003). The only author of all textbooks for both teachers and students is Ignjatije Midić, a Serbian Orthodox bishop (Midić, 2001; 2002; 2003a; 2003b; 2003c; 2003d; 2005).

The textbooks for students of the first through fourth grades have a typically Orthodox visual focus on icons and pictures. The books have between 31 and 51 pages (A4 format). There are no published textbooks for students from the fifth to eighth grades, only the numbered list of lectures. The following lectures are planned



for the fifth grade: Preparation of the world for the coming of the Son of God; God's care for the world and people before Abraham; the choice of Abraham and his descendents as the cornerstone of the Church; Abraham and the Jewish people as the first image of Christ and his Church; the Ten Commandments and Old Testament prophecies; death as the ultimate enemy, and human efforts to overcome it. The plan for the sixth grade includes a discussion about Christ and the Orthodox creed. In the seventh grade, the students will work on the concept of the Holy Trinity, as well as on baptism and liturgy as the practical demonstration of belief in the Holy Trinity. The eighth grade elaborates the Christian understanding of character, including freedom as a precondition of personality.

The book *Crkveni slovar* (Church Grammar) for the first grade of the elementary school has eleven lessons. Each one is accompanied by an "Instruction in Faith" and questions about the lesson. The illustrations are very traditional and diverse. Each lesson is written as a story with key concepts such as love, church, selfishness, generosity, baptism, liturgy, and the Eucharist.

The textbook for the first and second grades of high school (Midić, 2002) has 88 pages and includes 37 pages of full-color pictures characteristic of Orthodox tradition. After an introduction about the importance of personality in Christianity, the author pays attention to faith and atheism. The second lesson is about the relationship of faith and knowledge, including the possibility of understanding. The approach itself is philosophical, logical and theological. The lesson "Love of God as the Love of Man" is about the love between the people living in a community. Towards the end of the textbook for the first and second grades of high school, there is a lesson about the creation of the world and the primeval fall. Every lesson ends with questions and further instructions for students. The books are, in general, characterized by a dogmatic and theological approach.

We may conclude that the textbooks for Orthodox religious education are confessional and catechetical in character. They try to explain the Orthodox understanding of Christianity.

#### *Roman Catholic textbooks*

Roman Catholic textbooks include various texts, illustrations, photographs, pictures of famous artistic works and quotations from the Holy Scriptures, as well as from other religious sources.

The author of the Roman Catholic textbook for the first grade of the elementary school is Rev. Andrija Kopilović (from Subotica). The title of his textbook is "Let the children come to me" (*Pustite k meni malene*).<sup>17</sup> The textbook

<sup>17</sup> An allusion to Mt 19: 14, Mk 10: 14, Lk 18: 16.

was printed by the Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Supplies in December 2001 after it was approved by the Ministry of Education. The textbook is in accordance with the plan and program published in *Službeni list* 5/2001. It has five thematic parts and 29 lessons. The content reflects the spirit of ecumenism as well as the recommendation for respect of other confessions.

The general impression of the textbook is that it seeks to be acceptable for all Christians and that its content and artistic format reflects the state of the art in publishing textbooks for younger students (Dačić, 2002). It is available in Croatian and Hungarian.

The textbook for the first grade of the high school, "Know yourself" (*Upoznaj samoga sebe*) by Janos Penzes and Andrija Kopilović has 63 pages and numerous black and white photos from earlier periods.

#### *Islamic textbooks*

The program for Islamic religious education does not include thematic chapters, but 30 educational units with short instructions. The textbook is called *Ilmudin*, and it has three authors: Hazema Ništović, Dževeta Ajanović and Edina Vejo. Its goal is to teach children the rules of conduct in Islam, which clearly distinguish Muslims from other religious communities. This practical side of demonstrating faith is developed from the very outset of this textbook. It starts with a Muslim greeting (*Selam*), i.e. the instruction on how to greet the members of Islamic faith. It remains unclear how to recognize a Muslim in a plural society, such as Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, where non-Muslims also live.<sup>18</sup> The *Selam* greeting is represented in a following way: two boys shake hands and utter this greeting while meeting friends and acquaintances. In the textbook for the first grade of the elementary school there is a picture of girls. They wear long dresses and headscarves.

Each lesson is written in the imperative form – *remember*. The girls are represented as small women dressed traditionally. A child is situated in a homogeneous Muslim environment, without any relations to others. A flag and a mosque are represented as symbols of Islam and Muslim identity.

Major importance is also given to diet and *suras* from the *Qur'an*, written in Arabic and followed by a translation. The textbook is clearly confessional in character. Its purpose is to teach about faith and Islamic tradition.

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<sup>18</sup> This textbook is the same in both of these states.

The textbook for the first and second grades of high school (*Uvod u islam: Ilmudin*) is a translation of a well-known book by Muhammed Hamidullah (2002).<sup>19</sup> The book covers information about Islamic faith, culture and history. It does not have a single picture, just the text organized over 166 pages in 15 chapters.

The textbook represents Islam as an all-encompassing system, from the revelation to everyday life. The most frequently misunderstood question, it is stated, is about the meaning of holy war. Its goal is

to establish freedom of conscience in the world, which is the goal of Muhammad's struggle. This is the holy war of Muslims, the only war whose goal is not exploitation, but sacrifice, the war whose only goal is the triumph of God's word. Everything else is forbidden. There is no mentioning of waging war in order to coerce people to adopt Islam. Religion itself prohibits that. (Hamidullah 2002: 122)

On the same page we also learn that Islam prescribes strict discipline:

The basis of Muslim nationality is religious, not ethnic, linguistic or geographic. Normally, the conversion from Islam was considered a political treason and it was punished, but history shows that this punishment was not applied. Neither at the time when Muslims ruled from the Pacific to the Atlantic, nor today, at the time of the political, material and spiritual impotence, did there exist apostates from Islam. This is true not only for the Muslim states, but also for the states under colonial dominance, making all efforts to convert Muslims into other religions. (Ibid.)

This passage seems rather controversial in the light of the fact that religious education in plural societies is offered to children of the same age, from the standpoint of different positions towards the issue of conversion, i.e. the right to change one's religion or belief.

### Teacher Training

The training and selection of teachers plays a key role in the realization of Religious Education. For this kind of class, an elementary knowledge of pedagogy and psychology is necessary. The government ministries that share responsibility for Religious Education have organized training seminars three times so far. The Ministry of Religious Affairs organized a seminar for teachers on February, 6–7 2004. It was dedicated to methodology, since Religious Education classes are taught by priests and laypersons who may not have had psychology and pedagogy in their education. Another seminar for religious teachers, organized in summer 2005 by the

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<sup>19</sup> Muhammad Hamidullah (1908–2002), distinguished Muslim scholar who lived in exile in France after the partition of India and Pakistan. The original book, *Introduction à l'Islam* (first published 1957, several revised editions since) was intended as a correspondence course.

Ministry of Education, included small groups of school administrators. A group of authors prepared a manual for the seminar leaders (Dešić, 2005).

The leaders or religious communities issue a permission to teach religion in public schools. For all teachers, education level VII/I is required, but level VI is also accepted.<sup>20</sup> If there is an insufficient number of teachers for confessional religious education in schools, other persons can teach if the respective religious institution grants permission.

In Serbia today, there are nearly 2,000 teachers of Religious Education. This is a new workplace for all those who studied theology in traditional religious communities, especially for female teachers.

The Ministry of Education and Sports and the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Serbia instructed the department heads in the former Ministry how to organize Religious Education (December 9, 2002), and the instruction was forwarded to schools. It includes six points, as follows:

1. *The status of the subject and teachers:* students sign up for Religious Education a year in advance; it remains an optional subject for the first generation of 2001/2002 (until the end of their education); each year, the teachers of the subject sign a work contract with their school; they have a right to vacation.

2. *Teachers' duties:* to accept school duties; to prepare for classes; a pedagogue may audit classes to learn about the realization of Religious Education.

3. *Notification of religious education.*

4. *Grading policy:* grading is descriptive and does not influence the final grade point average; the abbreviations for descriptive grades are: outstanding (*Ist.*), good (*Dob.*) and satisfactory (*Zad.*).

5. *Free activities and supplementary education.*

6. *Instructional resources.*

The government shares responsibility for teacher training with the religious communities. Between 2001 and 2005, eight seminars for teachers of catechism were conducted by the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>21</sup> In 2005 two regular annual seminars were organized. There are groups of Religious Education teachers that hold meetings once a month in sixteen Belgrade municipalities. There are separate groups for elementary and high schools.

The number of students opting for Religious Education has not been precisely determined. According to research and some estimation, this figure goes up to at least half of the enrolled students. Among 195 teachers, there are 10 priests on the

<sup>20</sup> Level VI is a high school diploma, while the level VII/I is a university bachelor's degree.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Sandra Dabić (cf. n. 16 above).

level of the Belgrade Metropolitanate. There are 90 women who work in the elementary and high schools with the same rights and duties as men.

### **Empirical data on the attitudes towards religious education in schools**

Several studies have looked at attitudes towards religious education prior to its introduction to the Serbian educational system (Kuburić, 1997; 1999; 2001; 2002; 2003; Đorđević and Todorović, 2000). Attitudes towards religion, atheism and sects are interesting research subjects, due to their significant transformation over short period of time. One may note significant differences between experts, religious leaders, Orthodox theologians, Protestant students and secular students. Orthodox Christians would like to have confessional education for their own community only. Protestants, as well as secular students, prefer education *about* religions, to be taught by philosophers and sociologists rather than theologians.

According to the Ministry of Education data, about 30% of parents whose children started their education decided that their children will not attend either Religious or Civic Education. One third opted for Religious Education, 20% for Civic Education, while 10% chose both (Radisavljević-Ćiparizović, 2002: 222).

In the next year, the option not to select any of those subjects was cancelled, so that Religious Education and Civic Education became the alternative subjects (Joksimović, 2003). More than 50% of elementary-school children, and half as many in high schools, applied for Religious Education. This demand was not fully met, due to a shortage of staff and teaching materials. In the second year, according to informal data, enrollment was 49% for the first grade of the elementary schools. A joint study by the Center for Empirical Research of Religion, Novi Sad, and the Institute for Pedagogical Research, Belgrade, was carried out in 2003 (Kuburić, 2003). The sample comprised 540 parents and 628 high school students. The questionnaires included questions related to the following concerns: the reasons why parents and students opted for a certain subject; the degree of expectation fulfillment and satisfaction with learning a selected subject; and the willingness to select the same subject again. The respondents were also asked to express their opinions about the teaching contents and teachers, as well as to assess the teaching effects of the selected subject.

The parents think that their children have positive attitudes towards the teachers of the optional subjects. The parents of children attending Religious Education (Serbian Orthodox Church) frequently point out changes in children's behavior related to religious restrictions. If one compares what the parents and children say about Religious Education, one may conclude that positive opinions prevail. Both the parents and students assess most favorably the content of this

subject. A considerable number of them are also satisfied with the teaching method, because it differs from that of other subjects. Favorable assessments of teachers pertain to both their methods of teaching and personal characteristics and attitudes towards students. At the same time, a number of parents and students make remarks about the process of teaching with regard to the organization and conditions of work, teaching methods and teachers themselves. The remarks about religious teachers indicate the importance of teachers' selection and training, so that they can get acquainted with the methods most appropriate for students' development according to their previous knowledge and capacities (Joksimović, 2003).

The majority of the population in Serbia is Orthodox, so research has mainly covered the implementation of Religious Education conducted by the Serbian Orthodox Church. There are more problems with regard to religious minorities (Aleksov, 2004; Milićević, 2005). Research remains to be done on other churches and religious communities, and on the reaction to Civic Education.

### **Conclusion**

Religious Education, more than any other school subject, has been a conflict-prone field on many levels, especially in the education system. Its reception ranged from rejection to acceptance, from fear to the hope that it has the power to install or uproot a socio-political system.

Even though it was not compatible with the programs and contents of other school subjects, Religious Education was launched in Serbian schools in November 2001, as an optional subject for students of the first grade of elementary school and high school (ninth grade). Pupils could choose between two subjects, Religious Education or Civic Education, or select none of them. The following year (2002/2003), Religious and Civic Education received the status of elective subjects: the students were obliged to take one of the two. In 2003/04 their status remained the same, but was also effective for the third grade of the elementary school. In 2004/05, this procedure became applicable for the entire duration of education. By doing this, Serbia followed Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina where, by demand of the dominant religious communities, confessional religious education was implemented in 1991 and 1994 respectively.

Traditional churches and religious communities obtained the same rights in conducting religious education in public schools. It is interesting that this right was granted only to those religions that are nationally or ethnically based (the Serbian Orthodox Church, with Serbs; Islamic community, with Muslims/Bosniaks; Roman Catholic Church, with Croats and Hungarians; Slovak Evangelical Church, with Slovaks; Reformed Christian Church and Evangelical Christian Church, with

Hungarians; and, finally, Jewish Community). In 2005, the Romanian Orthodox Church, another “national” church, was added to this group.

The programs and contents of Religious Education are defined for each of the traditional churches and religious communities, reflecting the confessional character of religious instruction. The confessional, multi-denominational model has survived a constitutional challenge, whereas proposals for a subject based on a multi-cultural, comparative Religious Studies approach have not been accepted.

According to the data gathered by research that examined the reasons why students and parents chose religious education, the majority of children mentioned new knowledge and interest in the subject as their motives to take this subject. Religious education has succeeded in meeting parents’ expectations, more than the students’.

Throughout the twentieth century, religious education in Serbia reflected political changes: from being the main value system carrier in schools (during the time of the Kingdom of Serbia and Kingdom of Yugoslavia), to being an enemy, who had to be expelled together with teachers who taught it (during the Communist period). Fifty years later, it was reinstalled in the education systems of the postcommunist states, influencing again the moral behavior of young people. Empirical studies show that religious education is accepted as the free choice of students. Any coercive implementation of such a subject in public schools, or state prohibition of its availability within religious communities, would not be in agreement with religious rights and freedoms of individuals and religious communities.

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