

Religious Education in Serbia¹

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When the government of the Republic of Serbia decided to introduce religious education into state schools in 2001, Serbia came into line with the neighbouring countries, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where at the request of the dominant religious communities confessional religious education had been part of state school curricula ever since the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia in 1991.² In Serbia, religious education was introduced under chaotic circumstances, shortly after the democratic changes following 5 October 2000, to which it was directly linked. The previous regime of Slobodan Milošević had rejected all initiatives seeking the introduction of religious education into state schools, in spite of the numerous concessions and policy changes toward the church made since the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Confronted as it was by the numerous challenges of transition, the newly created ideological vacuum and the need to mitigate the radical nationalism that had marked Serbia in the 1990s, the new democratic government led by Zoran Đinđić decided to introduce religious education in a calculated scheming attempt to ensure the sympathy of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). This decision provoked vehement reactions from the government's opponents, but its effects and consequences have not so far been the subject of any serious analysis. This paper is a pioneer venture in that direction.

In the introductory part of my paper I survey the public debate that accompanied the introduction of religious education in Serbia. I then analyse the underpinning legislation and the relevant regulations. In the empirical part of my study I look into numerous components of religious education: the curricula and syllabi, the textbooks, the teachers' professional competence, practical problems related to the implementation of the programme in the schools, the (lack of) interest on the part of the students and the indirect discrimination provoked by the introduction of religious education. I pay particular attention to the rivalry between religious education and the other optional subject, civic education, this posing the most serious structural problem ensuing from the introduction of these two subjects. The educational reform that took place in Serbia in 2003 has left the model and the status of religious education in Serbia unchanged, and in deep discrepancy with the changes that religious education is undergoing in other European countries. Finally, I make recommendations as to how to improve religious education in Serbia within the existing legal framework, on the basis of the experience of other countries and the advances that have been made in religious pedagogy and didactics as well as in the understanding of the importance and the role of religious education in schools.

The Introduction of Religious Education

The SOC was the chief proponent of the initiative to introduce religious education into state schools. The demand that such education should have a confessional character arose out of

the attitude that ‘there is no such thing as a general concept, let alone a universal religion – we can have a religious experience exclusively within a specific religion and a specific denomination’ (Šijaković, 2001, p. 23). It was argued that religious education should be introduced in Serbia on the basis of a number of rights that are provided for in international agreements: the right to education; the right to choose one’s own world view; the right to practise a religion; and parents’ rights to bring up their children in accordance with their religious beliefs. The discussion thus took place in the context of the existence of religious education in other European countries, but the insistence on the confessional model meant that a whole range of experiences and solutions from other countries were disregarded.

There were other impulses behind the call for the introduction of religious education: the crime rate, which was rising everywhere; domestic violence; and the perceived danger from the spreading of so-called destructive sects. As in other formerly socialist countries, the dominant argument in favour of religious education was the fact that it had been undemocratically abolished by the communist authorities after the Second World War (Petition, 2001). Fr Radomir Popović, a professor at the Theological Faculty of the SOC in Belgrade, even claims that this was a matter of ‘mutual conspiracy and understanding’ between the communist authorities and the ‘sham democracies’ of Western Europe and America with the aim of ‘promulgating spiritual devastation and creating a spiritual void, predominantly in Orthodox countries’ (Popović, 2001, p. 8).

A number of laypeople and priests in the SOC held that a Christian can be formed only through confession of faith, participation in church life through religious services, confession of sins and receiving Holy Communion, and that the church should not rely on the secular state and its educational system to implement its pastoral activities and spiritual mission. According to them, priests and monks ought to conduct their activities through missionary work in the church itself, just as religious parents ought to ensure a Christian upbringing for their children by addressing the church rather than secular schools, ministries and similar institutions. They were outnumbered, however. Those who prevailed were in favour of obligatory religious education: a mandatory option between religious education and an alternative subject. Unlike the Catholic Church in Croatia, the SOC and other religious communities in Serbia proposed that children who choose not to attend religious education classes should be offered an alternative subject, related to ethics, and to be designed by educational experts. The optional nature of the subject was disputed by the SOC, which argued that it should be an option within compulsory classes, on the grounds that children are unable to make independent decisions about their syllabi and that they will tend not to go to optional classes. In view of the fact that religious education is a new and unfamiliar area, both for the students and for their parents, surveys as a way of assessing public opinion were not taken into consideration, on the grounds that the views expressed would be ‘not valid and incompetent’; church and state thus claimed a monopoly in deciding the matter (Sando, 2000).

Meanwhile numerous nongovernmental organisations and educational experts were warning that the manner in which religious education was being introduced into state schools was against the Constitution and the required procedures and standards concerning the introduction of new subjects into the curriculum, which require a two-year experimental application, followed by an expert analysis. The Board for the Right to Education Free of Religious and Political Indoctrination (*Odbor za pravo na obrazovanje bez verske i političke indoktrinacije*) set up by the association of teachers, associates and researchers of Novi Sad University led the campaign against the introduction of religious education in state schools, with 90 nongovernmental organisations joining in their activities and supporting their statements.³ The Council of Belgrade University (its highest governing body) all the rectors and numerous university professors in Serbia, organisations of education experts such as the

Educational Forum (*Obrazovni forum*), the Association of Pedagogic Societies of Yugoslavia (*Savez pedagoških društava Jugoslavije*) and others also joined the opposition. Opponents of religious education in state schools pointed to the fact that religions have been a disuniting factor in the Balkans and argued that the introduction of confessional religious education programmes would mean supporting isolation, reinforcing ethnic divisions and creating obstacles to social cohesion; they argued for the teaching of the universal values of religion, its importance in the life of society and of the individual and its influence on historical developments and art in a way that would create a favourable environment for bringing the children of different confessions closer together (Đorđević, 2001). The SOC categorically denied the possibility of discrimination against children on a confessional basis, but their very defence occasionally contained discriminatory language.⁴ Pointing to concrete examples in various publications and models of upbringing recommended by the SOC, some scholars issued warnings about the possibility that discrimination against women would enter state schools along with religious education (Sekulić, 2001). At the same time, in SOC publications, the language used in arguing for the introduction of religious education was often discriminatory toward women.⁵ Some critics, like Professor Ljubiša Rajić for example, took a practical stance, arguing that Serbian schools were in a sorry state – classes being attended in two or even three shifts, up to 50 students per class, insufficiently trained teaching staff and a lack of teaching equipment – and that the introduction of religious education was a deliberate diversion in order to avoid tackling the existing problems, which had not been tackled under the previous regime either (Ninčić, 2000). Professor Ivan Ivić articulated the most far-reaching doubts about the introduction of religious education in Serbia, based on his 35 years of experience in education (Ivić, 2000, p. 172). Arguing that education in Serbia was inefficient, undemocratic and unable to promote positive values, and pointing to the fact that the postmodern culture of the young rejects all comprehensive structures and value-systems, Ivić warned that religious education would be either completely ineffective or even negative in its effect. Even the minister of culture, Gašo Knežević, argued for postponing the introduction of religious education for one year, until 2002–03, in order to prepare competent teaching staff and appropriate materials, while the interim period would be used to test various options, so as to avoid problems such as those that occurred after the hasty introduction of religious education in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Knežević, 2000).

The debate regarding the justifiability and character of religious education did not prevent the authorities from taking concrete steps towards the introduction of religious teachings in schools. In March 2001 the Board for Education (*Odbor za obrazovanje*) of the Assembly of Serbia demanded that religious education be introduced into the curriculum as a regular subject. A few months later, following talks with the SOC Holy Synod, the late prime minister Zoran Đinđić held talks with the representatives of six more religious communities on 5 July, and announced the introduction of religious teaching in state schools as of September. By government decree, these seven religious communities were proclaimed traditional, thus obtaining the right to religious education in state schools, financed by the state.⁶ A state Commission for Religious Education (*Komisija za versku nastavu*) was set up, consisting of representatives of the religious communities that had been named as traditional and representatives of the Ministries of Education and Religions, who were authorised to plan, organise and supervise religious education. The Ministry of Education was given the task of preparing an alternative subject, which, while decisions on religious education were being made, had neither a name nor a clearly defined role and content.

The selection of only seven religious communities authorised to implement religious education in state schools sets a precedent, because the previous law did not discriminate between different religious communities. A draft law on religion, which proposed

a similar division between traditional and nontraditional religious communities, had been rejected in 1994 after numerous objections (Sekelj, 2001). Small religious communities were particularly affected by the new definition at a time when a fierce public campaign against their practices was under way, resulting in numerous physical attacks on their facilities and representatives. Moreover, one traditional church, The Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC), which functions officially in the Banat area, was not included among the seven recognised religious communities. The exclusion of this church acquired a new dimension in view of the fact that its members are of the Romanian ethnic minority, whose children are legally entitled to education in their mother tongue, and therefore also to religious education as part of the state educational system. The reason for this exclusion is the conflict between the SOC and the ROC that broke out after the ROC appointed its own bishop in Vršac alongside the SOC bishop. The SOC then broke off all relations with the ROC, and state decrees denied the latter the right to implement religious education.⁷ Among other denominations that have been left out of the list of traditional religious communities is the Christian Adventist Church, which is entitled to offer religious education in Austria, as well as in neighbouring Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, provided it is required and there are enough students to make it practically feasible.

The introduction of an optional subject as an alternative to religious education, which is supposed to promote civic values such as democracy, human rights and tolerance, also came under harsh criticism; primarily because the new subject, which was later named 'civic education', was being introduced hastily and with no previous public debate. The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights declared that an option couched in these terms implied that religious education did not promote democracy, human rights and tolerance. Opponents of the introduction of religious education therefore called for a boycott of 'civic education' as well.

In September 2001 the two Ministries published the brochure *Religious Instruction in Schools in Serbia (Verska nastava u školama u Srbiji)*, with the aim of presenting the newly introduced subject and helping students and their parents to decide between the two optional subjects, religious education and civic education. The reason for the 'reinstatement of religious education' is said to be the parents' right 'to provide their children with an upbringing in accordance with their own religious beliefs', which derives from the internationally-recognised right to freedom of religion and the 1990 UN Convention on Children's Rights. The brochure emphasises that religious education is a natural and indispensable part of the educational system in practically all democratic countries and that research has revealed that more than 87 per cent of citizens are religious, with 82 per cent of secondary school students wishing to attend religious education classes. The basic goals and content of religious education are briefly outlined, with a special emphasis on the idea that 'there is no conflict between science and faith, as nearly 90 per cent of scientists are religious'. The arguments in the brochure came in for severe criticism, mostly concerning the figures and percentages it abounds in. Sociologists warned that data on confessional affiliation do not necessarily imply anything about the respondents' religious feelings (Gredelj, 2002). The percentages referring to secondary school students and to religious scientists were criticised as unrealistic and were compared with the findings of the research conducted by the independent Centre for Study of Alternatives (*Centar za proučavanje alternativa*) in Belgrade that reveal that citizens' opinions on religious education are mixed and inconsistent and that, with considerable generalisation, the conclusion can be drawn that one third of citizens are in favour of the introduction of religious education, one third are against it and the remaining third are either undecided or uninformed (Mihailović, 2001; Gredelj, 2002). The internationally renowned scholars Ljubiša Rajić and Laslo Sekelj denied the assertion that the right to freedom of religion and the International Convention on Children's Rights implied the right to religious education, because these undertakings do not bind a state

to introduce religious education in schools but in fact insist on the protection of children from influences encouraging religious or any other kind of divisions (Rajić, 2001; Sekelj, 2001). According to their interpretation of these international conventions, the only obligation of the state is to ensure freedom for religious education – that is, to not impede it.

After the results of a poll in September 2001 that revealed a relatively low number of children and their parents opting for religious education, the Holy Synod of Orthodox Bishops accused the minister of education Knežević, the officials of his Ministry and the school authorities (principals and pedagogues⁸) of having taken advantage of their positions and, contrary to all the previously achieved agreements and the basic democratic principle of equal treatment of religious education and the alternative subject of civic education, of conducting an orchestrated campaign against religious education and oppression of the parents and students who were in favour of this education (Informativna, 2001). The bishops of the Catholic Church in Serbia joined in this protest, accusing the school authorities of discrimination against Catholics and propaganda against religious education (Bjelajac, 2001). Apart from sporadic cases of misunderstandings in schools, the opting procedure in the schools could hardly justify expressions such as ‘orchestrated campaign’ or ‘oppression’. Yet it was clear that the Ministry of Education had manifested resistance to the model that had been imposed by a political decision on the part of the prime minister against the opinion of all educational experts and institutions. The results of a survey conducted among elementary school teachers also testified that the majority of the teaching staff thought that confessional religious education ought to be replaced by a different model of religious education (Todorović, 2002).

Legislation in the Field of Religious Education

According to laws adopted in the course of the same year, 2001, religious teachers in secondary schools are required to have completed theological education at university level, whereas those teaching in elementary schools are required to have completed theological education at ‘higher school’ level.⁹ Schoolteachers with additional theological training are also allowed to give religious instruction. The criteria of ‘additional theological training’ are not specified, which leads to the conclusion that they are to be set by the churches. Eventually, the Ministry of Education received the lists of teachers from religious communities and its task was only to publish it. According to this list, religious education in Serbia is implemented by some 1500 teachers, divided as follows by confession: 1200 Orthodox; over 200 Catholic; 50 Slovak Evangelical; 40 Muslim; 19 Reformed; 5 from the Evangelical Christian Church of Augsburg Confession; and one Jewish. According to the law, religious teachers sign an annual contract with the school in which they work, granting them equal labour rights with the teachers of other subjects, while the time limit of the contract gives the churches the possibility of influencing the choice of religious teachers and of replacing those they deem unfit. The contract stipulates that religious teachers have the same rights and obligations as other teachers regarding the school’s regular activities. The school pedagogues and authorised representative of the religious community are entitled to visit classes. Attendance records are kept in the same way as for the other subjects. Work is not marked according to the normal numerical standards, but with descriptive marks (distinction, good and satisfactory); these marks are entered in class registers and students’ reports, but do not influence their average grade. Optional activities and supplementary activities are also allowed, as well as the use of specific teaching materials that the schools are to provide for the teachers.

The Ministry of Education published the syllabi for religious education for the first year in elementary and secondary schools for all the confessions concerned. The syllabus

contains the objectives, tasks and content of religious education and brief instructions on how the programmes are to be implemented. These programmes are entirely designed by the religious communities, without the participation of educational experts or experienced teachers. There are no major differences in the objectives and tasks of the various denominations, but there are differences in the content and in the sophistication of production and presentation. The programmes have already been subject to critical analysis by experts who have pointed out disregard of didactic and methodical principles, terminological imprecision and inadequacy for the age of the students (Dačić, 2002, pp. 51–70).

So far the Ministry of Education has not received any analysis of or research on the effects and results of religious education, in spite of the fact that it has been over two years since it was introduced into elementary and secondary schools. Only occasionally do some findings or information about specific issues appear in the press. The representatives of the religious communities did not accept a proposal for conducting a common evaluation of religious education and civic education under the auspices of UNESCO, UNICEF and the Open Society Fund.¹⁰ The explanation was that it was too early for such an evaluation, especially if this job was to be given to experts from abroad, although the research and data processing on the national sample were supposed to be conducted by the commercial public opinion poll agency ‘Strategic Marketing’ from Belgrade. The religious communities refuse to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of religious education, and the Ministries of Religions and Education are also reluctant to share most of their data. In order to proceed with this research I therefore had to resort to the ethnographic method of data collecting. The following analysis is based on my personal insights acquired by visiting religious education classes in 15 schools throughout Serbia and on discussions with several dozen religious teachers, representatives of the most numerous confessions, school principals, officials of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religions, teachers, parents and students. The governing principle in the selection of the schools was one of representative sample, and I therefore visited urban and rural schools, schools in religiously homogenous and in multi-confessional environments, schools with a few dozen students and those with a couple of thousand, elementary and secondary schools, grammar schools and vocational schools. The observations that follow apply exclusively to religious education, although they need to be placed in the larger context of the Serbian educational system, which, on the threshold of reform, confronts a host of ideological dilemmas and is suffering severely from unsolved financial and personnel problems.

Perspectives on Religious Education in Practice

The common denominator in all the opinions I obtained in the course of this research – from teachers, religious teachers and other interested observers – is the conclusion that religious education was introduced into school syllabi too hastily. While the decision to introduce religious education was taken at the eleventh hour, the plans and programmes arrived even later, after religious education had already begun as a new school subject. School principals were frustrated by not having received more detailed instructions after the government decree. Secondary schools, which notoriously suffer from lack of space, were not able to solve the problem of timetables and implementation of the teaching schedules.

The Catholic priest Josip Temunović from Subotica believes that religious education was launched without the necessary preparation, without trained teachers and in a school system that had previously been criticised as inadequate and dysfunctional, all of which will have disastrous consequences. Temunović warns that under such circumstances, religious education in schools hardly achieves any objective, and that more is lost by the fact that attendance at parish catechism classes has decreased, especially among Catholics, whose rate

of attendance used to be very high. Tadej Vojnović, professor at the Catechist-Theological Institute (*Katehetsko-teološki institut*) of the Subotica Catholic Diocese, expressed similar views, fearing that religious education in schools would suffer the fate of Marxism, a formerly mandatory school subject that the students deemed boring and unpleasant. Vojnović suspected that religion, like Marxism, had been introduced for political and ideological reasons. Instead he proposed that confessional religious education remain within the church sphere, while schools should provide teaching about the fundamental concepts of faith and the main world religions. Branka Josimov, the pedagogue of Subotica Grammar School and teacher of civic education, identifies the major problem in introducing two new subjects as the fact that parents, students and other interested parties were never asked for their views. In her opinion religious education was superimposed in an accord between church and state and civic education was introduced only as an inevitable alternative, although there had been even fewer initiatives in support of the latter. Vesna Fila, principal of the Vladislav Ribnikar elementary school in Belgrade, also thinks that the introduction of religious education was effected hastily, with no preparation for the students, their parents or the teaching staff, who, in general, had not participated in the debate. Models from other countries (Germany, Austria and Croatia) were transferred and applied, overlooking the specific circumstances in Serbia, although there had been suggestions for different solutions. Her school is particularly satisfied with their religious teacher, but she expressed doubts about the competence of religious teachers in other schools, which could have been avoided by appropriate training, of the kind that was provided in the case of civic education. According to Fila, the recently published textbooks are also inadequate. She considers religious education essential, because it provides the groundwork and basic knowledge about the fundamentals of civilisation, but warns that the main teachings of other religions should also be studied. A particularly problematic feature, in her opinion, is that not the slightest attempt has been made by the state organs to conduct an evaluation of religious education in schools.

The largest religious community that did not obtain the right to religious education in the schools, the Adventist Church, issued instructions for parents to enrol their children in civic education and to continue sending them to religious education at their churches, where textbooks and trained teachers are available. This church had successfully organised religious education during the communist period, and they believe the degree of tolerance was greater then. After the introduction of religious education in public school there has been some mistrust towards Adventist children for opting for civic education, although no serious instances of discrimination or other incidents have been recorded.

The Syllabi and Textbooks

The appearance of the religious education syllabi was delayed; the religious communities had submitted them in various forms and their processing and standardisation had therefore been a lengthy process. In view of the fact that the selection of textbooks and religious teachers rests with the religious communities, the only remaining task for the Ministry of Education is to approve them and prepare the former for publication. None of the officials of the Ministry of Education is an expert in the area of religious education; the Ministry is therefore not competent to analyse the various syllabi. An illustration of the (absence of) participation of the Ministry of Education in this process is the statement made by a district Ministry of Education official who said that it was the Ministry of Religions, in cooperation with the local diocese, which had exclusive authority in the area of religious education.

According to Dimitrije Dimitrijević, editor for religious education in the state Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Materials (*Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva*), the

publication of all the textbooks for religious education was delayed. The Orthodox Catechism for the second year came out nearly one year late. The textbooks were late because of the decision that new textbooks should be produced and that the textbooks should be examined by representatives of the other religious communities in order to avoid content that could provoke religious intolerance. This was a remarkable move forward compared to the situation in Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina).¹¹ In contrast to the situation regarding other subjects, in the case of religious education the Institute for Textbooks functions exclusively as a technical service, and has no editorial authority whatsoever, not even regarding the illustrations and technical features, in spite of the fact that it covers all the publishing costs. It was agreed that the Institute should do the proofreading, and the Institute considered that the translation of the textbook for the Islamic community was badly done, even unintelligible, and using non-standard terms. The Islamic community, in turn, published the textbook for the second grade of elementary school independently, which was against the law. The Islamic religious teachers in Sandžak have also been using the textbook for Islamic religious education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, ignoring the legal norm that all textbooks used in public schools must be published by the above-mentioned Institute. The textbooks for Orthodox religious education are translated into Roma, although it is not known where they are being used, what their circulation is and whether they have been translated into the appropriate dialect. The Catholic religious teaching materials, written in Croatian, are also published in Hungarian, Ruthenian and Ukrainian. Once again, it has not been established which schools use the Ruthenian and Ukrainian translations, nor indeed whether there was a need for the duplication of translations, printing and circulation, since the same ethnic community is in question. Other (Protestant) denominations have not submitted any textbooks at all, so the classes are either conducted without them, or using textbooks that have not been approved by the Commission for Religious Education and printed by the Institute.

It is obvious that the Commission for Religious Education is trying, through its activities, to build up the image of religious education as a serious and important element within the educational system. However, there are two weak points to this strategy. The first is the typical and widespread belief that textbooks are the most important, if not the only, element in teaching. While energy and attention have been concentrated on textbooks, activities such as teacher training, teachers' manuals, seminars, and working with parents and the teaching staff have been neglected. The second weak point is that the hastily prepared textbooks often contain flaws, the gravest of these being that they do not necessarily correspond with the students' ages, educational levels or cognitive abilities. Virtually all the religious teachers agree on this point. Furthermore, as a rule religious teachers do not adhere to the prescribed curriculum, which they consider to be too comprehensive and unsuitable for the age of the children and their previous knowledge. Many SOC religious teachers are critical of the fact that one person is, practically, in charge of the curriculum and syllabi, and is also the author of the textbook. Some particular lessons are very difficult to understand, because they refer to ongoing theological disputes. What is more, there is no difference between the textbooks for grammar schools and for three-year vocational schools, in spite of the fact that there are enormous differences in the students' previous knowledge and levels of interest. Some have commented that the religious education textbooks which have appeared so far do not relate to the content of other school subjects and that they pay no particular attention to the students' life experiences and the everyday reality they face. Furthermore, in the course of the preparation of the curricula and syllabi and of the few existing textbooks, parents' and students' reasons for opting for this subject, revealed by several research studies, have not been taken into consideration.

Religious Teachers

Another problem, which is more serious than the lack of textbooks or the delays in their publication, is that there exist no other teaching resources; in this respect we may contrast civic education, which abounds in teachers' manuals and supplementary materials. Religious teachers thus have to rely exclusively on their personal resources, creativity and initiative, and, this is a demanding expectation, in view of the fact that the majority of the teaching staff are insufficiently prepared and trained. Religious teachers themselves admit that they lack training and education for the implementation of the prescribed curriculum, that they are not familiar with the principles of preparing lessons and presentation of the teaching material, and that they often find themselves torn between fulfilling curriculum objectives and wider educational tasks expected of them. They alone have to cope with the selection of teaching methods and procedures, and the lack of teaching equipment and materials.

The regulations concerning the mandatory education level requirements for religious teachers cannot practically be fulfilled in most of Serbia. In the Vranje SOC diocese, for example, only four or five individuals have the required qualifications. The situation is similar in the Niš, Mileševo, Timok, Raška-Prizren and other SOC dioceses. According to a priest of the Subotica Catholic diocese, a mere ten per cent of religious teachers possess the required qualifications, and while the others have undergone supplementary instruction, this has not included training in pedagogy or didactics, with the main criteria for selection being, according to church figures, loyalty to the church and personal piety. Although the Ministry of Education and the Commission for Religious Education insisted on the organisation of seminars for further training of religious teachers, the exchange of experiences and, above all, introducing teachers to didactic approaches to education, such initiatives were in fact left to the individual religious communities and SOC dioceses. Uniquely, religious teachers have not been given the accredited handbooks for professional teacher training published by the Ministry of Education, nor was their professional promotion envisaged in the project for the reform of the educational system.¹² In Austria, where the SOC has been implementing Orthodox education for ten years already, financed by the Austrian Ministry for Education and Culture, seminars for Orthodox religious teachers are organised on a regular basis, addressing didactic topics and methods of intercultural and interreligious teaching. In Serbia, even in the largest and richest Orthodox dioceses, such as the Banat, only annual meetings of religious teachers are held; no supplementary training or seminars are organised. Nor have there been any meetings of religious teachers at the interconfessional level, although practically all the religious communities that are legally entitled to religious education are active in the Banat. The only exception seems to have been a meeting of religious education teachers of the Orthodox diocese of Bačka and the Catholic diocese of Subotica in Novi Sad on 1 March 2003, organised by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religion. Among the Orthodox dioceses, Belgrade and Braničevo have taken the initiative in organising seminars for religious teachers. A participant in one of these seminars, a religious teacher from the Belgrade Orthodox diocese, noted that the seminar helped him realise that a child's attention span is no longer than a quarter of an hour, and that he has to plan a variety of activities in order to maintain children's attention throughout the class. Other religious teachers, meanwhile, complained that at seminars they were usually lectured *ex-cathedra*, while little attention was paid to indispensable methodical skills, psychology and pedagogy. At the seminar in Novi Sad it was proposed that religious teachers be organised on a territorial rather a confessional basis, so that they could resolve common problems with concerted efforts.

The prevailing opinion in educational circles is that the definition of qualification requirements for religious teachers should comprise a pedagogical dimension, complementary to the dimension of theological expertise, which would bring their qualifications as close as possible to those of other teachers. Religious teachers should take into consideration developments in educational sciences (pedagogy, didactics and psychology) as well as parents' expectations and the general atmosphere in the school and the social environment. Without an analysis of the concrete situation and of the students' educational and developmental needs, religious teachers are left to rely on their intuition, to adapt to the situation and improvise according to their personal resources.

Another unsolved issue concerning the status of religious teachers is the validation of diplomas obtained in schools and institutions abroad. Furthermore, nothing is being done to integrate the educational institutions that various religious communities in Serbia have set up to train future religious teachers. Only three large religious communities (Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim) have recently set up schools of this type; meanwhile the entire area of religious pedagogy remains underdeveloped in comparison with Bulgaria, for example, where there are more than 100 reference books covering this area: none of the other religious communities that have been given the right to implement religious education in schools in Serbia has schools for training teachers.

There have been complaints in many schools that the religious communities fail to appoint religious teachers in a timely manner at the beginning of the school year. Neither the law nor teachers' manuals provide for competitions or any other customary school activities in the sphere of religious education. Religious teachers generally take part only in the organisation of the celebration of St Sava's Day. Their integration into the working environment is further hampered by the fact that, because of the small number of religious education lessons, they usually teach in several schools and have little opportunity to become acquainted with the other teachers or to establish links with them. School principals practically never visit religious education classes, on the grounds of non-interference with the autonomy of religious education. Few are the schools where the teachers of civic education and the religious teacher mutually visit each other's classes, although this could have beneficial effects in the exchange of experiences, the decreasing of tensions between the two subjects and the motivation of the students.

The Belgrade Orthodox diocese, which has established a special office to coordinate all activities related to religious education in schools, sets a positive example. It has a supervisory board, publishes supplementary materials for teachers, and has organised several seminars, while all the Belgrade religious teachers meet on a regular basis with the coordinator for religious education, who has no other duties apart from this. There are 103 religious teachers in Belgrade, 85 of whom are laypeople, and over half of whom are women. The board for the selection of religious teachers in Belgrade mainly chooses young religious teachers who have recently graduated from the Faculty of Theology or the Institute for Catechism of the SOC, often deploying them according to their place of residence, even in the schools they used to attend and whose teaching staff they are familiar with. The experience of the board is that the young religious teachers are full of enthusiasm at the beginning of their working careers.

On the other hand, in rural areas and in small towns it is priests who usually provide religious education. Lay religious teachers in the SOC consider that the priests involved in teaching do not possess suitable pedagogic and professional expertise and that they are overwhelmed by other obligations. They believe that religious education ought to be in the hands of lay teachers who have recently graduated from the Faculty of Theology, which has been reformed, old juridical principles being replaced by interpretations of the Holy Fathers translated into the Serbian language (contemporary patristic theology). If a religious

teacher has other obligations in the religious community, apart from teaching, then he or she is likely to be only a visitor in the school. The prevalent opinion in many schools is therefore that the religious teacher should have no other obligations if the set objectives are to be achieved and the number of interested students maintained. The numerous obligations of priests in their parishes bring into question the purpose and the feasibility of their parallel activities as religious teachers; in rural areas it is often normal for them to be absent from classes. In Užice, the priest who was appointed to teach religious education was later assigned to a parish and stopped coming to classes, while the newly appointed teacher never appeared. The complaints of some schools in the Niš Orthodox diocese were forwarded both to the relevant department in the Ministry of Education and to the diocese, but the problems still remain. The religious communities themselves do not insist on the priority of teaching. When I visited Novi Pazar practically all the teachers of the Islamic religious community were absent because they were attending the funeral service for the former president of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegović. Religious communities often change their religious teacher, which provokes negative reactions among the students and the school teaching staff, because interest in religious education declines and the continuity of the teaching process is lost. In many schools, classes are not held regularly, but once a fortnight or even more seldom.

In September 2003 the Vranje Orthodox diocese removed from the list of religious teachers deacon Vladimir Savić, after he had testified in court against the bishop of Vranje, Pahomije, who was charged with paedophilia. This deacon, who graduated in theology in 2001, used to teach in the School of Economics and Chemistry in Vranje (Stojković, 2003). As a substitute, the diocese appointed a pensioner, which is against the law. A similar thing occurred in the School of Economics in Niš, where, according to the pedagogue of the school, a handsome, intelligent young religious teacher who had been attracting many students was replaced by an elderly city priest whose classes only three students continued to attend, while the staff felt cheated, because no one had consulted them. The schools express their discontent because the Ministry of Education merely approves the list of religious teachers proposed by the religious communities. The religious communities assign religious teachers from their list to a particular school; while the school's only duty is to make sure that the deployed candidates meet the legal requirements for working in the school. The schools say that these arrangements put them in an inferior position, and that the law provides neither for the possibility of complaint nor for legal protection of the religious teacher.

In the Orthodox and Catholic Churches there are additional tensions, between the lay teachers and the clergy. The Catholic Church even imported several priests to Subotica in order to occupy teaching posts there. There is a widespread view among priests of both confessions that lay teachers should not teach religious education on the grounds that they are not competent to do so. Clerics secure the better posts in urban secondary schools for themselves, while deploying the lay, usually female, teachers in elementary schools. This practice is most evident in the Islamic religious community. On the other hand, the vast majority of students, parents and teachers think that they can establish better contacts with lay teachers.

Opting for Religious Education and its Accessibility

Schools have many reservations about the way in which students opt for religious education rather than civic education. The leaflet prepared by the Commission for Religious Education for the purpose of selection between the two subjects is not detailed enough and does not provide sufficient information for making a choice. In 2003 leaflets were not distributed

in Novi Pazar, so the selection was made in schools according to the confession to which the students belonged. Biljana Dimitrijević, principal of the Third Belgrade Grammar School, thinks that students are unprepared for choosing between the two alternative subjects. They often opt for one of them to spite their parents; many change subjects during the school year. Dimitrijević believes that students in her school are generally guided by information obtained through the media or by word of mouth from their peers. Religious teachers admit that it is difficult to opt for an unfamiliar subject. Parents are not given enough information and they also find it difficult to make a choice. Secondary students are not eager to study either subject, on the grounds that both of them are boring.

The percentages of students opting for religious education vary. Vojislav Milovanović, the minister of religion, says that in the first year 50 per cent of elementary school students and 20 per cent of secondary school students opt for religious education, although it is not organised for all of them because of technical, personnel and other problems (Milovanović, 2001). Two independent analyses report the figures of 36.2 and 39 per cent for secondary school (Bjelajac, 2001; Gredelj, 2002). In the second year, according to figures issued by the Ministry of Education, approximately 49 per cent of elementary school students opt for religious education (there are no data for secondary schools). The highest rate, fluctuating between 80 and 100 per cent, is in the Raška/Sandžak region, primarily among Muslim children. This is followed by the western and central Serbian regions, then by Belgrade and Vojvodina; while the lowest interest rate is in southern and eastern Serbia. According to these data, an average of 50 per cent of students in Serbia opt for religious education; this is still far below the average figure recorded in neighbouring countries with which Serbia shares a common past.¹³ More students opt for religious education in rural areas of Serbia, although there are exceptions. In the area of Vranje, interest in both religious education and civic education is remarkably low, and the numerous local Roma population does not opt for religious education at all.

In most rural areas, religious education has not been organised in the remote branches of schools, for example in the eight branch classes of the Sveti Sava school in Pirot. None of the school authorities has attempted to solve the problem of non-existent religion classes for rural children. Meanwhile the church authorities say that they are respecting the minimum number of ten children per class and do not therefore organise religious education classes in the villages. The problem in the rural branches of local schools is that they often have only one classroom, which has to be divided when two alternative subjects are offered. The situation in Novi Pazar is particularly bad, with schools working in three shifts because of the notorious lack of space; here the introduction of new subjects and the division of pupils on a confessional basis create enormous practical problems.

The Commission for Religious Education decided in principle that religious education should be offered even when the number of children is below the legal minimum; yet this decision is being implemented with great difficulty. Technical problems and a shortage of eligible teachers mean that small religious communities, as well as large religious communities when they represent a minority, are not in a position to organise religious education, and they therefore fear that they will be subject to indirect discrimination. The poor organisation and poverty of the Muslim (predominantly Roma) population in areas outside the Sandžak mean that the Islamic religious community is unable to organise religious education in southern Serbia or in Vojvodina. The Slovak Evangelical Church does not organise religious education in many places inhabited by its members, not even in the town of Kovačica, with its large Slovak population. The children of minority confessions often attend civic education classes or in some cases even Orthodox religious education, because their parents do not want to separate them from their peers. In Sombor all the children from different schools who wish to attend Catholic religious education

are brought together in one school, but under such circumstances it is difficult to keep an accurate record of the students and their attendance rate. In all the secondary schools in Subotica the Reformed Church can gather only one class of students interested in religious education. In Belgrade, Niš, Smederevo and many other places, at least one Catholic or Muslim student can be found in every class, but there is no religious education for these denominations.

Obviously, simple statistics regarding the implementation of religious education are not and should not be the only criteria for its evaluation. Religious teachers see absenteeism and lack of motivation on the students' part as the biggest problem. In the grammar school in Pirot 30 students opted for religion classes, but 80 per cent of them never attended. The decrease of interest among students is accounted for by incongruous timetables, excessive workloads and low motivation for a subject that is not graded numerically. The religious teachers see the lack of textbooks, appropriate space and work schedules as a discouraging factor. The students often transfer from one optional subject to the other, especially if they come up against problems in one of them. The religious communities themselves have contributed to the scattering of students by their tardiness in appointing religious teachers. In several vocational schools I visited in Niš and Belgrade (the School of Mechanical Engineering, the High School of Economics and the School for Hotel Management and Catering), the students were particularly unmotivated and undisciplined. Asked why they had enrolled in religious education at all, if they had no interest in or motivation for the subject, they responded that it was because they were Serbs.

In other places, however, the picture is different. In the Miroslav Jovanović Cerovac elementary school in Vrčin religious education was introduced in all classes on the principal's initiative, with 80 per cent of the students in attendance; all the parents of the first-year students opted for religious education, so that civic education was not introduced at all. The prevailing opinion in this school is that religious education has a positive impact both on the students' behaviour and on the teaching staff, while the parents have nothing but praise for it. Whether out of genuine desire, or in order to avoid having their children stand out as different, Muslim parents have also opted for Orthodox religious education. The principal is opposed to the introduction of the alternative subject of civic education because the existence of this subject implies that the students who attend religious education are not being educated in civic values. The religious teacher's classes are based on a plan that he prepares himself. He gives the students numerical marks in pencil, because he feels that these encourage motivation and responsibility in the children, but when it comes to final grades, he observes the rules and assesses their knowledge descriptively. He thinks that religious teachers must understand that religion is a school subject like all others and behave accordingly, keeping strict attendance records and thus raising the students' awareness of the relevance of the choice they have made.

Rivalry between the Two Subjects and Conflicts in the School

The gravest structural problem in the current teaching scheme for religious education and civic education is that they have been conceived as alternative subjects in the school system, although their content, tasks and objectives do not present alternatives (alternatives could be, for example, confessional and non-confessional religious education, or ethics from religious and nonreligious perspectives). In this respect it is also evident that the provision for obligatory choice between religious education and civic education has no professional but an exclusively political basis. Furthermore, because of the compulsory alternative nature of the subjects, which forces the student to choose one of the two, the proponents of both options see the other as competition. In a situation where the number

of schoolchildren is decreasing every year for demographic reasons, teachers are facing the possibility of losing their jobs. Some of them are undergoing professional training for the newly introduced subject of civic education, and they tend to manifest resentment against religious education, which is being introduced into schools as an additional subject that requires new teaching staff. Negative attitudes among the teachers of both subjects often result in fierce competition for students and for their parents' approval of their subject.

Another cause of rivalry between the two subjects is the insurmountable antagonism between the SOC and the Ministry of Education. The prevailing attitude in the SOC is that the state's role should be confined to financing the implementation of religious education, while the church should be free to decide on all other aspects of the subject (Lavrentije, 2002).

Republika Srpska is cited as an example where the results of religious education, according to Orthodox Bishop Lavrentije of Šabac and Valjevo, are encouraging and pleasing for the church. Yet my own modest insight into the problems related to the implementation of religious education in Serbia coincides with the critical attitudes expressed about the implementation of religious education in Republika Srpska, the negative experiences of which were unfortunately not taken into consideration when religion education was introduced in Serbia.¹⁴ The most serious objection by the SOC concerning the implementation of religious education is that the choice between religious education and civic education is made at the beginning of each school year and not for all the eight years of elementary and four years of secondary school at once. Some schools have received objections because the students and their parents are supposed to make their decision in the presence of the school principal or pedagogue, without the religious teacher.

There are complaints about the inequality of the subjects. The fact that it is schoolteachers who usually teach civic education means that students tend to opt for it more often. Although problems of timetabling have now become less frequent, complaints from religious teachers are still heard concerning the fact that in some schools religious teaching is scheduled as the seventh class, or as an early morning class, and thus given marginal status. The response to religious education in schools is particularly problematic in the south of Serbia. In many communities, the teaching staff resent the religious teachers, who, in turn, avoid entering the teachers' room. The religious teachers are not invited to attend teachers' meetings. In many schools there have been objections because religious teachers come to classes wearing their clerical garb.

An uproar broke out during a lecture on sects being given by a local priest at the invitation of one of the schools in Pirot when he spoke of 'civic education' as one such sect. In 2002 the Niš Orthodox diocese circulated 50,000 copies of a leaflet (published by the Lipovac Monastery), which also depicted civic education as a sect. The Holy Synod of the bishops of the SOC refers to it as the 'so-called civic education' and often accuses the minister of education and educational experts of undermining the spiritual and moral values of the people, defining their reforms towards modern education as 'perfidious brainwashing' (Informativna, 2002). In the first two after the introduction of the two new subjects, religious teachers in the Raška and Prizren diocese and the Islamic community in Sandžak used to tell students that those who opted for religious education could not attend civic education classes. In one school in Belgrade the religious teacher established very good cooperation with the civic education teacher, who gave him some instruction in teaching methodology and methods for coping with other practical problems. He therefore decided to acquire some further training at the seminars for civic education teachers that she was attending. However, he was advised by the SOC not to do so on the grounds that they were harmful. Some religious teachers do not record their classes in the school register, saying that they are ignorant in practical school matters, which poses a serious problem for the

school administration; at the same time, they blame the school authorities if children fail to enrol for their subject. In the schools around Niš, religious teachers refuse to participate in any extra-curricular activities; they do not cooperate with the teaching staff and do not allow any of them to visit their lessons. The priest in the village of Mramorak threatened parents that he would not bless water if they did not opt for religious education for their children.

The implementation of religious teaching in schools is also related to the display of religious symbols and the performing of religious rituals, which has become common in many schools in Serbia and a cause of suspicion, especially in multiconfessional environments. In Novi Pazar, school principals do not approve of Muslim schoolmistresses wearing veils at work. However, the Supreme Court of Serbia ruled that to forbid them to do so was a breach of their civil rights, and ordered a school in Novi Pazar which had suspended a female teacher from work to reinstate her to her teaching position.

During my research, and contrary to some widespread expectations, I did not obtain any indication that the introduction of religious education in multinational communities in Vojvodina and Sandžak had led to any recorded serious problems or interconfessional disputes. Indeed, the curricula prescribe that three or four classroom periods per school year be dedicated to acquainting students with the teachings and beliefs of other religious communities. This is not observed in practice, however, and furthermore, the existing textbooks do not contain this type of information, nor do religious teachers study it during their professional training; they do not therefore feel competent to teach things they themselves are not very familiar with. Nevertheless, I came across some positive examples, for example in Prijepoljska Župa, where the Orthodox religious teacher conducted the religion class, substituting for the absent Muslim religious teacher.

Although the debate that went on in the press in Serbia prior to the introduction of religious education predicted possible conflicts among students, it seems that the students took no heed of this. The engagement and interest of their parents is even weaker than their own, the parents' attitude towards religious education being as indifferent as it is towards other subjects. The parents I talked to said that they had decided to enrol their children in religious education because they wanted them to know something about their 'roots' or national tradition. Generally they were not practising believers, but people who wished their children to be 'properly' brought up, to be informed about 'their' or 'the Serbian' religion, or even people who deem that 'religious education cannot do them any harm'.

Reopening the Question of the Status of Religious Education

During the period of my research (March–November 2003) the Ministry of Education of Serbia prepared a new law on elementary and secondary education which reflected the strategy of the educational reforms promoted by this Ministry and which included alterations in the status of religious education. Students were to be given the possibility of choosing among at least four alternative subjects, two of which would be religious education and civic education, while the others would be offered by the various schools depending on their possibilities. Subjects such as computer training, creative writing, environmental education and a second foreign language were suggested. Students would thus choose two optional subjects, which would not have to be either religious education or civic education. All the religious teachers and SOC clergy I spoke to fiercely criticised this model, fearing that the parents would opt for the 'more useful' subjects. In an official statement the SOC claimed that the proposed educational reform was not beneficial for society and accused the Ministry of Education of striving 'to create a post-modern child, a sort of a clone, which is a crime against education and spirituality that should be incriminated'. The Holy Synod of the SOC sent a written demand to the Assembly of Serbia that the draft law be immediately

withdrawn (Informativna, 10 June 2003). Simultaneously, the Novi Sad citizens' association *Forum iuris* addressed a petition to the Constitutional Court of Serbia seeking a reconsideration of the constitutionality of the introduction of religious education in state schools, pointing out that it represented a breach of the constitutional principles of separation of church and state, the equality of citizens and the equal status of religious communities (Beta, 2003).

In a sudden turn of events, while education reform was being discussed in parliament, the patriarch of the SOC and the other members of the Holy Synod met the minister of education, Knežević, who then lent his support to the existing model of religious education in state schools (Informativna, 4 July 2003). It was agreed that the mandatory alternatives of religious education and civic education would not be affected by the introduction of optional subjects in the course of educational reform. In return, the representatives of the religious communities backed the reform. In their joint statement, they upheld the agreement that the late prime minister Zoran Đinđić had reached with the representatives of the religious communities, thus reiterating that a political accord was the foundation for religious education in public schools. On the same day, the minister of religions, Milovanović, held a press conference, questioning the petition submitted by *Forum iuris* and referring to the 2002 census, in which 95 per cent of the citizens of Serbia declared themselves as believers, with only 0.5 per cent atheists and 4.5 per cent undecided or undeclared.¹⁵ These results were interpreted as a clear signal to the state to respect the religious rights of its citizens.

The Constitutional Court of Serbia had the last word about religious education in early November 2003, when it ruled that the legal regulations according to which religious education and its alternative subject had been introduced into schools complied with the Constitution, thus rejecting the demands contained in the petition from *Forum iuris*. As the spokesman of the Court, judge Ljubomir Popović, explained, the supporting arguments for this decision were that the programme of religious education was approved by both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religions, upon previous consultation with the religious communities; that students were not forced to attend religious education classes since they were given the freedom of choice between religious education and civic education, which protected the students' and their parents' right not to declare their religious affiliation; and that the grades in this subject were descriptive and did not affect the students' final score. Slobodan Vučetić, president of the Constitutional Court, sustained Popović's opinion that the legal acts contained no incongruence with the Constitution, but he remarked that the curricula, particularly the one for Orthodox catechism, contained some regulations that might be unconstitutional (Verska, 2003). The statement of both judges remained incomplete. The position of Popović on the participation of the Ministry of Education in the approval of the programme of religious education is not borne out by the findings of my own research and in my view, because of the almost exclusive authority of the churches in matters of religious education, does not guarantee the principle of separation of church and state. Furthermore, the existence of only one alternative subject and the previously described situation in some multiconfessional communities does not allow for the definition of religious education as a free choice. Unfortunately, this second round of decision-making concerning religious education, which finally and fully established its status, took place during the summer and remained, generally, beyond the reach, participation and interest of the public.

Many issues remained unresolved and much criticism unanswered. In reaction to criticism from one of his colleagues, Professor Sima Avramović from the Belgrade Law Faculty, one of the creators of the law on religious education, explained his arguments, and, indirectly, the arguments of the Serbian government, for the introduction of religious

education (Avramović, forthcoming). Avramović insists on the fact that this is an issue of returning religious education to the legal system, and not of introducing it for the first time, and draws a comparison with the process of denationalisation of assets, the restitution of property rights after the Second World War. However, the question of property restitution needs to take into account the historical perspective and changes that have taken place in the meantime. The situation is similar with religious education. The forcible and undemocratic abolition of religious education by the communist authorities after the Second World War does not mean that that it should be reinstated in the form it used to have 50 years ago – that is, that it should be exclusively in the hands of the religious communities that used to provide it at that time.

Unfortunately, not even the debate on ‘the right of parents to educate their children in accordance with their religious and philosophical beliefs’, which is an integral part of many human rights conventions, and which began with the introduction of religious education, has led to appropriate interpretations. While the opponents of religious education have focused on the negative aspects of the protection of this right, that is, on the parents’ right to protect their children from ideological indoctrination in educational institutions, Avramović and other supporters of religious education have emphasised its positive aspect, the fact that parents, as taxpayers, should enjoy the right for their children to receive an education in accordance with their religious and philosophical convictions. This is the reason why it would be more appropriate to re-examine the procedure according to which religious education was introduced, instead of insisting on the issues of constitutionality, statutory matters, and the compliance of religious education with international conventions. Rejecting the possibility of the violation of ‘the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and confession’, Professor Avramović invokes legal regulations that authorise the Ministry of Education to select counsellors for religious education and to sanction the textbooks and approve the list of teachers. However, my research has shown that these regulations are not being implemented in practice, or that they are rubber-stamped, which means that the authorised state agencies renounce their right to control religious education, including the possibility of preventing the violation of children’s rights.

The last argument in favour of the current religious education system in Serbia advanced by Professor Avramović is that it entirely conforms to international legal requirements; that is, that Serbian domestic legislation is on the right track to be harmonised with the legal systems of other European countries. This comparison does not take into consideration the numerous changes that have taken place in religious education in Europe over the past few decades, primarily as a consequence of growing confessional and cultural pluralism, the danger of marginalising religious education in the contemporary world and the changed relations between the state and religious communities (Schreiner, 1998). A fundamental change in theological paradigms followed the move from authoritative methods of education in favour of educational methods conforming to children’s interests and needs, and has influenced the alteration of the character of religious education in many European countries. I shall mention here only the main trends, which are reflected, for example, in the legal amendments adopted in Scotland in 1980 and in England and Wales in 1988, as well as in the ongoing debates in France following the *foulard* affair (the ban on veils) and in Germany after its unification (McNeill, 2000; Beck and Hendon, 1994).

In many countries, students are no longer separated on a confessional basis, while their religious teachers are no longer educated in religious schools, but rather at special departments for the study of religion which have been established at numerous universities. In Great Britain and in the Scandinavian countries, it is considered to be one of the responsibilities of the secular state to offer students a balanced and critical knowledge of religion, indispensable for understanding their own religious heritage and past as well as the

challenges of the present, and for preparing them for the future, by introducing to them the various different religious systems (Templeton, 1999; Foster, 1998). Getting to know other religions from a confessional perspective is no longer considered to be sufficient. By carefully altering the objectives and content of religious and moral education, the educational authorities in Great Britain and Scandinavia refuse either to be carried away by the principles of relativistic indifference toward religion or to yield to parents and religious communities the choice of educating children in specific religions. On the contrary, their educational perspective is of a spiritual development of children that will enable them to assume a creative attitude toward the complex reality of the third millennium. For the same reasons France, the bastion of secular education, has recently begun to introduce religious studies into secondary schools.

In Germany, except for the state of Brandenburg, the concept of 'religious education' with a curriculum that would be entirely the responsibility of the state and drawn up by the state educational agencies has not been accepted. Nevertheless, ever since the 1970s confessional religious education in Germany has been undergoing changes. The Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church have developed curricula aimed not only at introducing students to their traditional religious heritage, but also at helping them understand other religious beliefs and preparing them for dialogue and the development of their own independent views regarding their own religious orientation. Several states (Nordrhein-Westfalen, for example) have launched religious education for Orthodox Christian students and also, recently, pilot programmes of religious education for Muslim students. The delay in the organisation of religious education for the members of other religious communities in Germany is caused by the imperative requirement of educational institutions that the teachers of religious education should be experts with a diploma from a German (pedagogic) institution. Furthermore, the religious communities must fulfil the requirements of permanence and unity in order to be accepted as equal partners of the state, whose religious authorities examine and license their curricula.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The most problematic issues that have become apparent in the course of this research are the lack of integration of religious education into the educational system of Serbia and the polarisation and tensions that are present in many schools between religious education and civic education. The reason for adverse reactions to religious education lies in the procedure of its introduction, which was seen as involving a tacit accord between the SOC and one or more political parties. After two years of implementation, and after having been endorsed by a host of legal and judicial decisions, religious education in Serbia continues to lag behind the existing standards in other countries, whose examples are often invoked as a justifying argument for its introduction. Numerous aspects of the teaching process and the resolution of all arising problems are left to the Commission for Religious Education, an institution that functions outside the educational system and therefore lacks legitimacy.

Religious education in state schools ought to be given special status because it differs from church catechism both from the organisational point of view and as regards its content. Even if the confessional model is retained, its implementation requires close cooperation between the religious communities and the educational authorities in all organisational and substantial matters, concerning the curricula, methods, textbooks, supervision and accountability of both parties for the teaching process. The state, and specifically the Ministry of Education, should be responsible for the professional training and professional development of religious teachers and for the appointment of qualified experts who will be directly responsible for the articulation and resolution of all the problems related to religious

education, as is the case with other subjects.¹⁶ The integration of religious education also requires a precisely defined system for the validation of diplomas in religious studies acquired abroad, with an emphasis on pedagogic qualifications. In order to improve the effectiveness of the teaching process, the religious communities ought to introduce a pedagogical and didactic dimension to their studies, or broaden it if it already exists. In addition to this long-term measure, and in view of the unequal resources available to the religious communities, it is the Ministry of Education that should assume responsibility for organising professional seminars for religious teachers of all the religious communities with the aim of enhancing their integration into the educational system. As a preliminary, regular meetings should be organised involving religious teachers, school principals and representatives of the ministries and boards competent to deal with practical problems arising in schools, so that the seminars for training the teachers would not be encumbered by such issues. The current tendency in educational reform is toward educational and professional training for teachers throughout their career, as well as the explicit possibility of professional promotion, which ought to apply to religious teachers as well. The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the schools, should examine and recommend other possibilities leading to the integration of religious teachers and religious education into everyday school life, from the option of appointing religious teachers as class tutors to the participation of religious teachers in school celebrations and excursions and such activities as the preparation of exhibitions. Numerous organisational issues and technical problems, which also make religious education a marginal subject, can be resolved only through the cooperation of educational structures and religious communities in an atmosphere of openness, patience, mutual understanding and compromise, rather than in an atmosphere of mutual accusations of the kind that has been dominant so far, especially in the attitude of the religious communities toward the schools.

The present arrangement makes it practically impossible for students to study both religious education and civic education, although it is evident that the two subjects have different content and should not be represented as alternatives. The main recommendation of the evaluation of civic education, that a compulsory choice between these two subjects should not be imposed, has not been observed (Civic, 2002, p. 9). As the prospect for a change in the status of these two subjects is nonexistent, a solution could be found in an attempt to decrease the difference in their content as a way of eliminating rivalry between them. One possibility would be to introduce into the civic education curriculum, at least in secondary schools, a non-confessional introduction to the world religions. The main obstacle to the implementation of this concept is the lack of the teaching staff, as the existing educational institutions in Serbia do not offer training in this subject. The Ministry of Education should take measures to overcome this deficiency by forming new departments for the comparative study of religions, and could start with additional training for history, philosophy and sociology teachers.

Religious education for students from small religious communities does not normally pose a problem in big cities, but, as noted above, it often does so in small village schools and in branches of local schools. Here it would be advisable to set up alternative models. In schools where religious education classes are not feasible the children should be offered alternatives such as excursions or summer camps, which could include abbreviated and specially adapted religious (and also civic) education programmes.

The Ministry of Education and the religious communities will have to solve the problem of the frequent absenteeism of clergy who teach religious education, who because of their parochial obligations and the nature of their vocation frequently cannot adhere to their teaching schedule; this, in turn, directly affects the integration of religious education, its status in the schools, and the students' motivation. It is important to ensure that the religious teachers appointed by the religious communities should not be frequently changed, except

in cases of flagrant breach of discipline or professional incompetence. It is also important to require schools to respect fixed teaching schedules, including both the place and the time designated for religious education classes. Without full integration in the school educational system, religious education will not achieve full legitimacy, nor will it motivate the students to attend regularly.

The question of evaluation, in all its aspects, needs to be looked at closely. Evaluation is an important stimulus for students and a method of monitoring their work, and it is a teacher's duty to explain to the students the criteria being applied. At the moment most religious teachers seem to have opted for the easiest approach, giving all their students the highest grade. Evaluation of religious studies should be integrated with the methods used for other subjects. Regardless of the selected approach (numerical or descriptive), it is important to ensure that it should clearly reflect defined criteria; these take into account both the objectives of religious education and the results of contemporary research into the grading systems. The issue of evaluation is not confined to the grading of students, however, but also involves the evaluation of the teachers and all the originators and implementers of the curricula and syllabi. In order to achieve creative and high-quality supervision of religious education it is necessary to establish cooperation between the educational authorities (the school, the educational and pedagogic institutions and the Ministry) and the religious communities. In the spirit of educational reform, in addition to the measures that are indispensable for upgrading religious education and achieving its integration into the educational system, it is also necessary to make the activities of the Commission for Religious Education, as well as all the other bodies involved in religious education, transparent and accessible to the public. It is of particular importance to keep parents and school personnel permanently informed about developments related to religious education because of the very nature of this subject and because of the fact that its introduction has given rise to so much controversy.

The introduction and implementation of religious education in Serbia so far has been characterised by principles that were subjected to criticism in the recent study of primary education conducted by UNICEF in collaboration with the Ministries of Education in Serbia and Montenegro (Comprehensive, 2001). This report concludes that the decisions relating to education were made in a centralistic manner and applied regardless of the context and that the teaching process was organised in an inflexible way. The report finds that the documents concerning religious education predominantly contain intentions, desires, declarations and curricula, with no accompanying mechanisms and resources that would ensure their implementation. Students, parents and religious teachers were not consulted when the objectives of religious education were being defined, while the curricula and syllabi were not harmonised with existing curricula, let alone with the current reforms and the modernisation of the school system. Educational reform in Serbia should not ignore the curricula and syllabi of newly introduced subjects, nor should it disregard the development and experiences of religious education in other countries. Religious education in schools makes sense only if it is correlated with the general educational curriculum. When invoking the conventions on human rights in upholding the right to religious education in schools, the religious communities in Serbia need to accept the fact that according to these conventions, schools must uphold democratic and pluralistic principles that imply tolerance and openness to different religions and different perspectives on the world. If it fails to observe the principles of educational reform and to aspire to an integration of its objectives, content and methods in the teaching process, within the context of a pluralistic school, both in the world and on the domestic scene, religious education in Serbia will retain the status of a guest (or intruder, in the eyes of its opponents) in the school system.

Notes

- ¹ This paper is an abbreviated version of a study conducted as part of the 'International Policy Fellowship' programme of the Open Society Institute in Budapest. The author expresses his gratitude to professors Vladimir Ilić and Thomas Bremer for their suggestions and support.
- ² In Bosnia and Herzegovina RE was introduced in the Republika Srpska in 1992 and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1994, first as an optional subject and later as an option among compulsory subjects. In 2000 the High Representative of the international community proposed the introduction of 'Religious Culture', a subject that would involve the teachings of the four traditional religious communities in that country, primarily from the cultural perspective, but the three major religious communities rejected this proposal.
- ³ For details on the campaign and its activities, see www.geocities.com/veronavika.
- ⁴ Archpriest Radomir V. Popović wrote that none of the denominations throughout Serbia ever complained that they would be threatened by the introduction of religious education, except for the representatives of the Jewish community, who expressed their fears that an Orthodox child could tell a Jewish child that it was the Jews who crucified Christ. Professor Popović retorted, 'The Chinese surely did not crucify Christ, and it is not the Christians' fault that the Jews did it' (Popović, 2001, p. 8).
- ⁵ The only foreign author quoted in the compilations advocating the introduction of religious education into state schools, Deacon Andrei Kurayev of the Russian Orthodox Church, considers that 'boys manifest more interest for religion because they strive for universal truth, and their world is more fraught with theory than that of girls, who tend to accept their creed upon being attracted to a specific church figure (for example, to a priest)' (Kurayev, 2001, p. 21).
- ⁶ According to the decree on the organisation and implementation of religious education published on 27 July 2001, the following religious communities were proclaimed traditional: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Islamic community, the Catholic Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession, the Jewish community, the Reformed Christian Church and the Evangelical Christian Church of Augsburg Confession. These are the denominations that enjoyed the right to religious education in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia before the Second World War.
- ⁷ More details can be found in Efekti (2003). Excerpts were published in *Danas*, 12–15 August 2003.
- ⁸ In the Serbian school system the 'pedagogue' has a degree in pedagogy and is responsible for supervising the education in each school.
- ⁹ Higher school (*Viša škola*) implies a level of education above high school but below university.
- ¹⁰ The evaluation was conducted in 2002 for civic education only and published in Serbian, and in English as a separate brochure (Civic, 2002).
- ¹¹ Some of the textbooks that are being used in Republika Srpska were written according to the curriculum of 1939 from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. They contain some perspectives that are contrary to universal principles of tolerance and respect for other ethnic and religious groups. The legally approved Protestant denominations are labelled as sects, the Catholic and Protestant creeds as erroneous, and the World Council of Churches as a Masonic institution that the Orthodox churches should leave as soon as possible. Furthermore, the textbooks in Republika Srpska also have other drawbacks: they are not adapted to the students' age and many pieces of information and assumptions are incomprehensible without previous knowledge. The questions at the end of each lesson simply require students to repeat the contents of the given lesson.
- ¹² In 2002 the Ministry of Education launched a large-scale education reform in Serbia. Religious education was however completely left out of the reform.
- ¹³ In Croatia over 90 per cent of elementary school students attend religious education, and 94 per cent of the students of the Islamic confession in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- ¹⁴ In a summary of the experiences from Republika Srpska, five essential drawbacks in the implementation of religious education were established: (1) unprepared teaching staff and priests' absenteeism from classes because of their parochial obligations; (2) disregard of the fact that the students had no previous knowledge of the subject; (3) the fact that the curriculum

and syllabus did not conform to the students' age; (4) the excessive general teaching requirements and the workload of students; (5) the overly comprehensive curriculum and syllabus for religious education (Pajić, 2001, pp. 70–71).

¹⁵ In the census, 85 per cent out of 7,498,000 citizens of Serbia declared themselves as Orthodox, 5.5 per cent as Catholics, 3.2 per cent as Muslims and around 1 per cent as members of different Protestant denominations.

¹⁶ Recently, a supervisor for religious education was appointed in the Ministry of Religions, contrary to the legal document that provides for this post in the Ministry of Education.

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