

Segregation from an early age

Religious education in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia

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Introduction

Religious education in multicultural and multiconfessional societies is, as a rule, very sensitive topic. Whenever we want to discuss certain aspects of it we can count on strong opposition from the Church. Nevertheless sometimes we feel obliged to touch upon the topic when we see that it can seriously harm the society. As a clear example of such case we can look at present day situation in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. All three of these neighbouring countries are, more or less multicultural and multiconfessional i.e. in every these three countries we can find Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks.

When we look at the history of inter ethnic conflicts in this region we can see that the inter ethnic struggle was at the same religious struggle, as in this particular case it is impossible to separate between those two. It is so because religious affiliation is the only substantial difference between these south Slavic nations.

This paper would like to throw some light on religious institutions and their involvement in past conflicts and to point out the fact that religious institutions of Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks are inseparable of nationalism and politics, moreover they have in a way developed and grown together. Thus it is my firm belief that if we want to ensure those conflicts never repeat again we must ensure to keep religion away from public schools at least, and if we manage to do that we will prevent the future generations of being indoctrinated in beliefs that were behind most of the atrocities that happened during 20th century conflicts between Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks.

The paper itself has two objectives. First one is to introduce the reader with particular religious institutions, to provide him with the insight in their history as well as in their active and passive involvement in past conflicts, and by doing so to provide him with clear as possible picture of the situation. Second goal is to familiarise the reader with the contemporary situation with religious education in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, and based on previously said to point out why the subject of religious education can be used by politicians and other elites for various manipulations.

I have divided the paper in two parts. In the first part I plan to introduce every religious institution separately and to briefly go through its history from the foundations until the present day. I will first discuss the Serbian Orthodox Church, then the Croatian Catholic Church and finally the Islamic Community, Bosniak religious organization. That part will be followed by a short retrospective of the events that influenced and shaped the relations between the respective religious institutions during the 20th century. The second part of the paper will be primarily focused on the problematic of the present day religious education, where I will present the contemporary problematic of religious education in public schools. After doing that I will sum up and draw the conclusions based on previously said.

History of religious institutions

Serbian Orthodox Church

There is generally accepted belief that the Serbs adopted Christianity sometime during the 7th century. However until 13th century, precisely the year of 1219, the Serbian Orthodox Church wasn't autonomous and belonged under archbishopric of Ohrid, which was under tutelage of patriarch of Constantinople. In the year 1219 Serbian Orthodox church finally achieved autocephalous status under the leadership of Rastko Nemanjić later known as saint Sava. Since then it enjoyed its autonomy until the year of 1389 when the Battle on Kosovo field took place between medieval Serbian state and rising Ottoman Empire. The Serbian forces were defeated and that defeat marks beginning of the fall of Serbian lands under Ottoman rule, under which control they will, more or less, stay for around five centuries.

During that period Serbian Orthodox Church remained the only institution of Serbian people, performing the role of secular authority organising courts, foreign affairs, collection of taxes etc. But it was not all. As Perica notices under Ottoman rule, Serb clergy actively participated in popular uprisings and wars for the restoration of statehood and during that period Serbian Orthodox Church became a warrior-church devoted to the preservation of ethnic identity and the struggle for statehood and nationhood. (Perica, 2002)

Another scholar dealing with the issue Michael B. Petrovich, sees Serbian Orthodox church of that time as cultural and quasi-political institution, which embodied and expressed the ethos of Serbian people to such a degree that nationality and religion fused into a distinct 'Serbian faith.' This role of the Serbian church had little to do with religion ether as theology or as a set of personal beliefs and convictions. (Petrovich quoted in: Perica, 2002)

The most important element of this so called "Serbian faith" is the Kosovo myth. It recalls the Battle at the Kosovo field on 28th of June 1389, which presented the beginning of an end for Serbian medieval state. The myth is further strengthened by the 1690 Serbian Great Migration under guidance of Patriarch to Habsburg lands, when Serbian population left Kosovo and other territories that were part of its former medieval state. Serbian Orthodox Church kept in memory this migration as a departure from sacred historical and cultural centre which was later compared with Jews and Jerusalem as nations lost paradise. (Perica, 2002)

Other significant characteristic of Serbian Orthodox Church is a cult of ethnic saints. It is expressed through canonising almost all Serbian medieval rulers. This was as Radoslav M. Grujić notices, wise and far-reaching practice, by supporting the faith and national pride through the worship of our national saints and martyrs. (Grujić in Perica, 2002) This practice led to the fact that in interwar kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the Serbian Church worshiped over 30

national saints. In communist Yugoslavia, the number of saints more than doubled. From the beginning of the systematic worship of the national saints in the late sixteenth century to the present day, the Serbian Orthodox Church canonized around 80 saints who were all ethnic Serbs, most of them being leaders and members of clergy.

Catholic Church in Croatia

Although Croat people adopted Christianity in 7th century it was only in the second half of 19th century that the “ethnicization” of Catholic Church in Croatian lands began, as before that among members of high catholic clergy there were no ethnic Croats. Although a large number of Croatian priests were great scholars and patriots as for instance Marko Marulić, who is considered to be a founder of Croatian literature or Rajmund Damjanić, creator of first Croatian orthography, all the bishops were foreigners. With strengthening of Croatian nationalist movement in 19th century the pressure rose on the Holy See to appoint more native Croat church leaders, native saints and blessed martyrs. The popes generally welcomed this initiative and from that point on the number of ethnic Croat bishops had steadily risen, but the Croats, in contrast to other Catholic nations of Europe, had to wait much longer for their native saints. (Perica, 2002)

The first native Croat saint of the Roman Catholic Church came as late as 1970. At that time, for example, the rival neighbouring Serbian Orthodox Church worshiped 60 saints, all ethnic Serbs. In order to mitigate the Croatian frustration over the lack of native saints, Pope Paul VI changed several centuries-old regulations for the canonization of saints. As a result in 1970 the Dalmatian Franciscan missionary and crusader Nikola Tavelić was canonized in Rome.

Church in the Croat People (Crkva u Hrvata), as it came to be referred to by church leaders and church press, had by now acquired three saints of Croat ethnic background, two more blessed martyrs, and four “servants of God”(future sainthood candidates). (Perica, 2002)

The Islamic Community

History of Muslim religious organization in Bosnia and Herzegovina is connected with Austro-Hungarian annexation. Before that Bosnian Muslims or Bosniaks, didn't have its own autonomous religious organization. They have operated under Ottoman religious authority (the Meshihat) in Istanbul. Nevertheless, soon after the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina Bosniaks begin to actively think about founding its own autonomous religious organization. After several attempts such organization was finally founded, first in Belgrade and after that in Sarajevo, and it was called the Yugoslav Muslim Organization (YMO). In the beginning it operated under the auspices of Bosnian Muslim political party, which is another

argument pointing out to the fact that religion in is, as a rule, closely connected with nationalism and politics.

Religious institution in first Yugoslavia, during the WII and in second Yugoslavia

The Kingdom of Yugoslavia

In Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes latter to become the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, only religious institution that had been officially recognised by state was Serbian Orthodox Church. Position of Catholic Church finally appeared to be solved when, after long negotiations, Vatican and royal government agreed the terms of a treaty in 1935. The treaty met with a fierce opposition from Serbian Orthodox Church. When it finally reached the assembly for ratification in 1937 Serbian Orthodox church went a step further and threatened with taking people in the streets and excommunication of all delegates who vote in favour of concordat. By Serbian Orthodox Church the treaty was seen as interference of Holy See in Yugoslavia's internal affairs that would upset the interconfessional equilibrium in the country. Warning protest occurred on 17th of July 1937 when after service patriarch and other members of high clergy took people into the streets of Belgrade. The walk soon grew into massive riots which later deserved label "Bloody liturgy". Majority of Serbian Orthodox Church high clergy shared the same views regarding concordat. One of the most influential people of his time, Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, famously stated:

Rise three fingers Orthodox Serbs! This popular rebellion does not undermine, it will fortify our homeland. Down with all antinational elements: parasites and bloodsuckers, capitalists, godless, and communists! The Serbian faith is awakened because it is hurt. Serbian national consciousness is awakened because it resists the attack from all internationalists and those who build bridges for the pope of Rome and his Church—the oldest international, the oldest fascism, the oldest dictatorship in Europe! (Velimirović quoted in: Perica, 2002)

This as a result had that the concordat was never ratified and the animosities between churches grew even stronger. These late 1930s events gave a clear picture of the religious institutions positions in the Kingdom and in a way the served as an introduction for what is going to happen just a few years later when the WWII started.

Second World War

During the Second World War the territory of Kingdom of Yugoslavia was divided between axis powers and their allies into several occupation zones and pro-axis satellite states. The occupation and the divisions were followed by bloody inter ethnic conflict between three major factions. First faction was Ustašas, Croatian pro-Nazi nationalists, who founded an independent state of Croatia by annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and some parts of Serbia.

The second faction was Serbian royalist army, also known as Četniks. In the beginning they even cooperated with partisans against the occupation forces, but as communists were also their ideological enemy, later in the course of war they joined forces with Germans and Italians and fought against communists.

Third fraction and eventual winner of this conflict was Anti-fascist People's Liberation Front or partisans, led by Tito. In the beginning they weren't very populous movement, but in the lights of Croatian fascist and Serbian royalists massacres over civilian population, people massively joined partisan units to fight against them. The multinational movement gained its full strength after allied official recognition in 1943.

At this point it is important to also mention Young Muslims, Bosniak organization who constituted an independent faction and allied with various factions, except the Četniks. If we take into consideration all of these groups fighting in the same area, sometime all against all, we can get the picture about the complexity of the situation.

A common denominator for Ustašas and Četniks were massive crimes against other ethnicities in Bosnia and Croatia. Četniks crimes in Bosnia and Croatia as well as Ustaša's are well documented, just as the involvement of Serbian and Croatian religious institutions are. Both Serbian patriarch Gavriilo and the above mentioned Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović supported the quisling regime in Serbia, who directly cooperated with Nazis and with the Četniks. Many orthodox priests supported Četnik formations; some of them even directly joined them. The most famous among them is probably Momčilo Đujić, leader of the Dynaric division, which carried out numerous ethnic cleansings of non- Serbian population. While, as Perica notices, the Četniks remained "replica of traditional Balkan banditry", the Ustašas, organized in the Independent State of Croatia planned to exterminate both the communists and all not Croatian ethnicities. Many members of catholic high clergy were involved in those plans, as for instance archbishop of Sarajevo, Ivan Šarić, the bishop of Banja, Luka Josip Garić, as well as thousands ordinary clerics. (Perica, 2002)

After the Communist victory in 1945, majority of clerics who supported Četniks and Ustašas were expelled, trialed or executed. Many of them were directly considered as war criminals. But some of those exiled clerics and remnants of Ustaša and Četnik movements, who managed to escape, settled in the West, from where they have continued to actively work on undermining of the communist regime through: lobbying foreign governments, publishing books and even

financing terrorist actions in Yugoslavia. They kept their struggle against the regime until the very end of the second Yugoslavia.

The second Yugoslavia

As far as the religious institutions were concerned second Yugoslavia is viewed as a period of, more or less peaceful coexistence and development. After the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) interfaith dialogue was supported, especially between Serbian Orthodox Church and Catholic Church. This dialogue even resulted with few ecumenical Catholic Orthodox prayers. The Yugoslavian government was supportive of this dialogue, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But as the time went by the old divisions prevailed against ecumenism.

Vast majority of Croatian clergy accused Serbian Orthodox Church for supporting royalist regime that discriminated against Catholic Church and for supporting Četnik movement, infamous for their crimes against Croatian civil population. Serbian Orthodox Church also reacted badly to this ecumenical initiative. How ecumenism was perceived by Serbian Church testifies statement from prominent professor of the Belgrade theological faculty Dmiririje Bogdanović:

I am afraid that the Roman Catholic Church's strategy of dialogue is but another way to achieve re-assertion and rejuvenation of Roman Catholicism as the leading social and political force in the world. That is why we Orthodox cannot espouse this ecumenical dialogue as it is conceived by the Catholic Church. We must not help making a room for political maneuvering. One religious organization cannot be above others. No Church can put itself in the center of social and political power. No Church can be equal partner to the state. If one religious organization acquires for itself such a decisive influence in political life, it would soon demand a special status and privileges that other churches do not ask for themselves. That would disrupt the religious equilibrium in our multi-confessional society, with possible serious political implications. Consequently, the fundamental precondition for a serious and open dialogue will be that the Roman Catholic Church as well as other churches become thoroughly apolitical. (Bogdanović in: Perica, 2002)

Despite that official government persisted on good relations with the respective churches and supported ecumenical dialogue, because it has seen it as a way of ensuring that church activities don't include support of any sort of nationalism, and by doing that to keep two biggest Yugoslavian nations, Serbs and Croats, under control. To further ensure control over churches government also used its secret police for spying on the members of clergy.

On more positive note, the churches were receiving significant financial support from the state and they have enjoyed relative freedom in conducting their affairs as long as it doesn't involve acting against regime. They have used these sources to rebuild its infrastructure.

Third major religious institution, The Islamic Community experienced boom in the second Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav Muslims were finally in 1968 recognized as distinct entity. The key

differences between Croatian and Serbian religious institutions and Muslim one, according to Perica were: that the Muslim religious organization did not establish itself, like the Christian Churches, as a guardian of national identity. In contrast to Serbian and Croatian Christian clergy, Muslim clerics did not systematically worship medieval native rulers, native saints, territory or ethnic myths. If we take the mythology advanced by the Christian churches, Bosnia and Herzegovina were Catholic or Orthodox but unquestionably Christian lands. Muslims did not have myths of their own—they were aliens in their native land. (Perica, 2002)

The Bosnian Muslims or Bosniaks themselves were divided in two frictions. The one stressed ethnicity and modern secular national identity, and the other, who considered religion the key ingredient of the new national identity. Eventually the second friction prevailed.

Prominent politician and later the leader of Bosniaks Alija Izetbegović in his controversial book from 1970 *The Islamic Declaration—A Program for the Islamization of Muslims and Muslim Peoples*, envisaged the “transformation of a non-Islamic into an Islamic society, that would begin with a “*moral reconstruction*” and “*inner purification*” and evolve into “*social and political revolution*”. The declaration made it clear that once Muslims become a majority in one country (thanks to their relatively high population growth) they should demand a state of their own, organized according to Islamic laws and norms because, in Izetbegović’s words, “*Islam and non-Islamic systems are incompatible*”. Although initially The Islamic community was openly pro Yugoslavian contrary to Serbian and Croatian churches, Izetbegović ideas over time gained more and more support within the community, especially when Yugoslavia witnessed the rise of nationalism after Tito’s death in 1980. (Perica, 2002)

Main problem with the communist government was that it never secured legitimization from churches. After Tito’s death, ever increasing outbursts of ethnic and chauvinist statements could be heard from churches, who perceived themselves as leaders of its people and main pillars or the opposition against the state.

The end of Yugoslavia was slowly approaching and it became was apparent that the Tito myth and myth of brotherhood and unity as the key ingredients of Yugoslavian civic religion weren’t strong enough to hold back nationalistic tensions. The 1990s and the dissolution of the common state returned the region in the 1940s. All the ghosts from the past were resurrected and the bloody ethnic conflicts in which the religion again was a key ingredient, begun.

Religious education in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia

In Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Croatia religious education returned to schools in 1991 at the very beginning of the war. In Serbia it happened in 2000, after the regime change. It was the first time religious education returned to schools after 1945 and the communist victory in WWII.

Ever since its return to schools religious education divided society into two camps: the religious institutions who were pro and the pro civic society elites, who were against. Religious education in all three countries is an optional course, together with civic education. Each country faces with its own problems regarding the religious education, but still there are many similarities.

Let's first take a look at the situation in Serbia. Unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia who introduced religious education in 1991, Serbia introduced it into school curriculum as an optional course together with course named civil education, in year 2000 after the regime change. Now, twelve years after that, there are increasing voices that say that teaching religious education gave us only problems, that the interest of children is declining and that there are no apparent benefits from teaching it.

Sociologist Mirko Đorđević, when asked about the problems said: *first there were problems with grading it. Should it be graded as other courses, or the grade from religious education won't be calculated into grade average? Then there were problems with teachers. In beginning we had priests teaching it, then they were replaced by teachers specialised for religious education, who soon proved not to have enough pedagogical experience for working with children.* He further adds: *Results are bad. Children have started to differentiate between them according to religious affiliation and it separates them more than it brings them together.* As a further problem Đorđević mentions the fact that in Serbia there are two parallel educational systems: *We have public and church educational system. The church one has plan and programme from elementary schools to university. The two systems differentiate on some key issues, as for instance Darwin's evolution theory and Creationism.* (Đorđević in: Grabež, 2011)

The grade finally entered the grade average, which caused a lot of problems as teachers usually give the best grade to all children. The problem with teachers of religious education is still an issue, as there are not enough of them to cover entire country so schools hire people who aren't specialised in teaching religious education. There was even a case when school hired a local plumber as a teacher, which is of course the most extreme case, but it is great to illustrate the problems schools face. And those are problems when it comes to teaching children states most represented religion. When it comes to minorities religions, the situation is even worse, because only in bigger cities such children can have their own religious education, which automatically leaves significant number of children without possibility to attend religious education classes about their religion.

Another significant problem was with the textbooks, which quality was disputed a lot of times, from introduction of religious education when fifty years old books were used till the new editions which by some don't fulfil the standards.

In Croatia situation is a slightly different. Teaching of religious education started earlier than in the case of Serbia which provided enough time for ensuring quality teaching. However it also faces strong opposition from those who are in favour of secular state. It is as in Serbia and

optional course and the grade obtained from religious education is also included in calculating grade average. The main problem, according to sociologist of religion Ivan Markešić, is that the Croatian parties don't dare to touch the issue of religious education in schools as they are afraid of starting conflict with the Catholic Church, which enjoys special position in Croatia. He further adds that in contract signed between Holy See and the state of Croatia stays that Church provides teachers as it does with the plans of the textbook, which are then printed by a state. He also mentioned that in all this the other religious communities profit as they have the same status as the Catholic Church, they all get the money from the budget. Further he adds: it would be wrong to speak against religion and religious, and its meaning in person's life, but religious education should be transferred to church institutions and religious communities. (Markešić in: Miladinović, 2011)

In Croatia there are also a lot of supporters of the course religious culture, which would not concentrate solely on one religion but which would deal with the issue of religion in general. Still their voices don't appear to be strong enough.

Finally the situation in Bosnia is very complex. The very state structure, consisting of two entities and ten cantons crates a lot of problems. In general the religious education was introduced in 1991. Since then there were many problems with the teaching of it. Along with usual problems with textbooks and teachers, we have a strong position of The Islamic Community which doesn't allow any interference in respect to religious education. As a famous example we can take attempt of the minister of education and science of the canton of Sarajevo to remove religious education from schools when the religious authorities reacted in a very aggressive and threatening way: Head of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian religious community Mustafa Cerić stated: *We will not allow you to teach our children infidelity! That state schools are our schools. We pay the taxes. It is not your private patrimony minister but it is ours. We will teach religious education in those schools. If you touch religious education you will have Sarajevo summer on the streets.* (Cerić in: Boračić, 2011)

As minister soon stated that the only goal was to stop discrimination in education, which suffered children that don't attend religious education. Catholic Church also reacted, stating that the minister is not competent of making such decision and changing laws.

Besim Spahić, professor of political science on University of Sarajevo, when discussing Bosniak religious education says: there is something very negative in our society, because through religious education you emphasize your own religion. In such institutions and even public schools it always depends who finances them. If it is Iran than the priority become Shia teachings and if it is Saudi Arabia then the priority are Sunni teachings. It even separates children within the same religion, concludes professor Spahić. (Spahić in Boračić, 2011)

Conclusions

When we look at the history of the religious institutions of Serbs, Bosniaks and Croatians, we can see that they are indivisible of nationalism. Their involvement in wars is also undisputable. And yet it is somehow allowed that representatives of such institutions teach our children religious education. If we take well known fact that every religion claims to be the right one, we can imagine all the negative consequences it can have on children in multiconfessional environment. The very idea of dividing children according to their religious affiliation for me is not acceptable. But when we take the situation in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, when we consider the history of Serbian Orthodox Church, Catholic Church in Croatia and The Islamic Community and when we look at the involvement of those organizations in past conflicts between these nations we see that situation is even worse. What is even more striking is that they children don't decide should they attend classes of religious education or not, because parents chose for them. As teaching about Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism and Islam is not only based on teaching about bible and Koran, but it is also teaching about various traditions, what can we expect that from Serbian, Bosniak or Croatian cleric to teach children about, when we take into consideration all the past conflicts between those nations. Can we really expect of those people to teach children that neighbours are not enemies, that they should respect every other religion and not to allow that religion becomes tool of segregation? I honestly doubt so, cause there have been numerous examples about clerics and religious teachers preaching hatred. Moreover, they don't try to hide it so much. Animosities between respective religious institutions are open and visible on every step. If didn't resolved their disputes regarding the conflicts occurred during the WWII, how can we expect that they will deal with resolving the recent conflicts disputes? Unfortunately to such people was given the opportunity to teach children religious education in public schools, to influence them from an early age by to filling their heads with despise to everything that is not "theirs". Will children educated in that way be able to create a better future for the entire region? I have my doubts. That is why I am firmly against religious education in public schools and I believe that it doesn't belong there but to churches. Religious affiliation is a private matter and that is why it should stay in the domain of privacy.

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