

**RELIGIOUS EDUCATION - CHALLENGES AND  
PERSPECTIVES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: WESTERN  
BALKANS /SERBIA**

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**Abstract.** *At the beginning of the 21st century religious communities have again become the focus of everyday life in the Balkans and Europe in general. New challenges showed the importance of religion but unfortunately it is obvious that we need to provide new directions in order to answer to these issues. Immigrant crises brought millions of people into Europe while terrorist attacks show the power of religious convictions. We have been challenged to look for how to provide new guidelines for Religious Education in contemporary society. Respecting partnership with other religious communities and achieved goals we have again been called to struggle together in the present time to deal with new tasks. We have been invited to cross the line of tolerance in order to enter into the space of true common life. In order to achieve some of these goals we need to look upon our theology and from that ground to build a new "dynamic" understanding of RE and its role in education.*

**Keywords:** *Religious Education, Islam, religious communities, education, tolerance, violence.*

### **Introduction**

If we take a look at the past, probably the best example of good cooperation between different religions in Serbia, has been the re-introduction of Religious Education (RE) in state schools in 2001. After being banned in 1952,<sup>1</sup> Religious Education has been reestablished in rbian state schools, allowing traditional communities to have their own confessional teaching. The Serbian Orthodox Church, even though it is the major religious denomination, insisted during the dialogue with the government that all other denominations should have their own RE, respecting diversity and multiculturalism in Serbia.<sup>2</sup> Acting together, traditional religious groups received approval from the government in 2001. The ecumenical atmosphere of the dialogue and cooperation between different churches and religions had a victorious ending for all. Almost 16 years after these accomplishments, the situation does not look very bright. Every denomination worked on its own program for RE with more or less respect for others. That is the point in which we can notice the most troublesome issues. Instead of opening up young people for religion in general, RE tries to keep each group in its own box without a sense of

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<sup>1</sup> Rastko Jović, "Istorijat verske nastave", in *Verska nastava u beogradskim školama*, Beograd, BF ITI, 2011, p. 78-89.

<sup>2</sup> In Serbia we have members of SOC 84,5%, Muslims 3,1%, Protestants 0,99%, Roman Catholics 4,97%, Jews 0,008%: Official statistics in Serbia in 2011, [www.popis2011.stat.rs](http://www.popis2011.stat.rs), accessed in 28. 09. 2016.

mutual sharing and dependence. The question at stake is: can we work together or is it impossible? What should be the most important achievements of RE in contemporary society in Western Balkans, with special interest to Serbia? RE in Serbia is not compulsory, students can choose whether they want to attend Religious Education classes or Civic Education. There are no grades in either of these subjects, only a descriptive evaluation of students.

### **Secularism**

After 16 years of RE in the state schools, politicians in Serbia use every opportunity, almost every year, to speak about the urgent need to ban/to end RE classes in state schools. It is usually said that the secular state cannot tolerate RE in state schools. It is not our intention to go deeply into the issue of secular state,<sup>3</sup> but it is obvious that the majority of those who oppose RE do not make a clear distinction between secularization and secularism.<sup>4</sup> However, it is also striking that a former minister of Education in Serbia believed that RE leads to segregation.<sup>5</sup> His opinion has been supported by many liberal thinkers and the media,<sup>6</sup> although research showed a different picture.<sup>7</sup> Also, 16 years after its introduction, teachers of RE do not have a regular work agreement, but need to renew their contracts each year. This gives any government the possibility of easily removing RE from the school curriculum each year.

The argument of the secular state reveals the tragedy of our intellectual elites.<sup>8</sup> While the Church sometimes played a tragic role in the European West, the Church in most of the Balkans was subjugated to the Turks or the despotic governments of their respective countries. Being an integral part of the nation, the Church played a major role in the liberation of

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<sup>3</sup> Ivan Markešić, "Sekularna država i kršćanstvo", in *Hrišćanstvo u 21. veku*, Novi Sad/Leskovac/Niš: Prometej, Leskovački kulturni centar, 2014, p. 297-311.

<sup>4</sup> Ivan Cvitković, "Kršćanstvo pred izazovima 21. stoljeća", in *Hrišćanstvo u 21. veku*, Novi Sad/Leskovac/Niš: Prometej, Leskovački kulturni centar, 2014, p. 121.

<sup>5</sup> Novi nastavni planovi za pravoslavnu veronauku. (2016. August 29.). Retrieved from <http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/362365/Novi-nastavni-planovi-za-pravoslavnu-veronauku>, accessed in 28. 09. 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Report on reaction of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Orthodox Faculty of Theology in Belgrade concerning the new program of Religious Education (2015. December 24.). Retrieved from <http://prosvecenodrustvo.org/saopstenja.php?id=10>, accessed in 28. 09. 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Slavica Gašić-Pavišić&Ševkušić, *Verska nastava u beogradskim školama*, Beograd, PBF ITI, 2011. Cf. *Verska nastava: Đaci su zadovoljni*. (2010. August 5.). Retrieved from <http://www.vreme.co.rs/cms/view.php?id=1109033&print=yes>, accessed 28. 09. 2016.

<sup>8</sup> S. AntoniĆ, "Elita kolonijalnog mentaliteta" (2015. October 5.). Retrieved from <http://www.nspm.rs/kolumne-slobodana-antonica/elita-kolonijalnog-mentaliteta.html>, accessed 28. 09. 2016.

the Serbian and many other Balkan peoples from foreign occupation.<sup>9</sup> Secularization viewed as a process of emancipation of society also had positive effects on the Church as well.

The model that emerged from the radical changes that came with secularization and modernity privatized the church and religion in every form, liberating the public space and citizens from ecclesiastical tutelage and from any religion/metaphysical reference, thus reminding the churches of the voluntary character of Christian communities.<sup>10</sup>

Even though we have several models of cooperation between church and state in the EU, for most people in the Balkans, secularization has been identified with socialism and the aggressive separation and persecution of the church which still strongly affects intellectual thinking. For some liberal intellectuals the socialist persecution of the Church is still the dominant model of secularization. In their opinion, the Church should be privatized and mostly non-existent in public space. Here we come to our challenge posed to RE in public schools. Working in state schools the Church has the opportunity to deal with social issues that are common to all people – believers or non-believers: violence, drug addiction, poverty, abortion... All these issues are related to both faith and life, they are interconnected proving that religion can play a significant role coping with problems of our modern era. In order to show its credibility, RE needs to have a more flexible, dynamic approach to the challenges. Dogmatic definitions should be reinterpreted into living signs corresponding to the needs of today's people. Self-encapsulated in dogmatic teaching, RE only proves that secularization has done a good job leaving religion outside of public life. Unfortunately, many do not seriously take into consideration these facts believing that catechism shields the church against adversaries.

### **Confessional Character of RE**

The confessional character of RE has come under strong attacks from the public media in Serbia, even though several countries in the EU also have it.<sup>11</sup> In 2003 the Helsinki Committee attacked the state and even the possibility that the Theological Faculty could become part of the University again. The Theological Faculty was one of the founders of Belgrade University (BU) in 1905 but, ironically, in 1952 it was expelled from it. Defenders of the secular state believed that even the possibility of re-entering BU poses a significant threat to the separation between church and state. Some of these arguments look very superficial and yet they could be

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<sup>9</sup> Predrag Puzović, *Prilozi za istoriju SPC 4*, Beograd, PBF/ITI, 2014, p. 58-78.

<sup>10</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*, Geneva, Doxa and Praxis, WCC Publications, 2012, p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> Ireland, Austria, Germany, Greece, Croatia, Poland, Portugal, Italy, Bulgaria, Spain, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

guidelines for the future of RE. In Serbia the Church always played a defensive role, waiting for attack and then struggling to react. Today, in a world of information we have the possibility of preparing ourselves in advance, reacting more proactively ahead of challenges. In this context, RE should not become just another class on religion in general, but it could be both confessional and at the same time open to other religions and other opinions. This is primarily a theological quest, defending the Church from position to understand Herself as another denomination. The question would be how do we understand ourselves? Do we recognize the Orthodox Church as a historical reality, or we're in the process of ever becoming Orthodox in the true meaning of that word? Is Orthodoxy something achieved, a finally and historically defined reality? Finding the right answers to these questions could influence RE more profoundly in our state schools. And yet when we start to deal with these questions problems arise immediately, as has been seen at the Pan Orthodox Synod on Crete where many delegates were reluctant to sign the *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World* document.<sup>12</sup> Fr. Alexander Schmemmann talked about "orthodoxy" and the authentic tradition of the church. In his idea, the reunion of the churches is not a reattachment to the historical Orthodox Church but the movement toward 'orthodoxy' that could be in Afanasiev' understanding bilateral, including not only non-Orthodox Churches but also the historical Orthodox Church<sup>13</sup>.

All these facts pose the question to us: "In what light do we see other confessions?"

a) Do we see them from the purely historical perspective in which all Christian denominations need to become the identical as we are in today's historical existence?

b) Do we see them from the eschatological perspective in which we need to find "orthodoxy" in other traditions that differ from ours in order to achieve unity?

The Pan-Orthodox Synod on Crete seems to accept the first answer and strong historical grounding, and that is evident in chapter 6 of the document *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World*. If local Orthodox churches accept this position then obviously RE will become more focused on confessional character with strong dogmatic accent and any

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<sup>12</sup> This was evident on Crete this year (2016) where many Orthodox participants struggled to define the relationship between the Church and other Christian denominations ending up with the document that hasn't been signed by many members of the council, the document: *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World*. Retrieved from <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/rest-of-christian-world>, accessed in 29. 09. 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Nikolai Afanasiev, *Tradition Alive*. Lanham, Rowman&Littlefield Publishers, 2003, p. 5.

change to it would be understood as threat to the Orthodox Church.<sup>14</sup> Now it becomes more obvious that self-understanding of the Orthodox Church influences our ability to produce a dynamic program of RE in contemporary society. The program should be confessional, respecting our specific context, but also open to others showing wide understanding and mutual cooperation between confessions and religions. It means that RE should be both confessional but also *multi-religious faced*, i.e. fostering “multi-religious education”.<sup>15</sup>

### **Islamic State/Migrant Crisis**

When talking about significant social changes that take place at the global level prominent religious intolerance becomes growing issue. One of the reasons for this can be found in more frequent terrorist attacks of radical religious extremists and the functioning of the self-proclaimed “Islamic State.” The number of jihadists is expressed in a percentage, compared to the total population of a country or geographical region showing that Region of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina together with Albania are one of the top ranking areas on the list of 22 states and provinces from which Islamic State recruits soldiers.<sup>16</sup>

Another potential source of conflict in the domain of religion is the so-called “migrant crisis”, which has led to an encounter between people from two different cultural and civilizational milieu. There is no doubt that Islam and Christianity were the dominant factors in the formation of the Arab and European culture, i.e. ways of life, value systems and behavior patterns of the population of the Middle East, North Africa and Europe, so it is quite obvious and easy to understand that the knowledge of their own and other people's religion is key for a mutual understanding and a necessary prerequisite of peaceful coexistence<sup>17</sup>. RE could be an important tool in our

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<sup>14</sup> This could be seen in today's struggle concerning new program of RE in Greece: Υφαντής, Π. (2016. October 6.). Το νέο Μάθημα των Θρησκευτικών και οι πολέμοι του. Retrieved from [http://xronikagr.blogspot.rs/2016/10/blog-post\\_4.html](http://xronikagr.blogspot.rs/2016/10/blog-post_4.html) /Καλαϊτζιδης, Π. (2016. October 3.). Επικίνδυνα θρησκευτικά. Retrieved from [http://panagiotisandriopoulos.blogspot.rs/2016/10/blog-post\\_3.html?m=1](http://panagiotisandriopoulos.blogspot.rs/2016/10/blog-post_3.html?m=1), accessed 29. 09. 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Ulrich Riegel, & Ziebertz Hans-Georg, (2007). "Religious Education and Values", in *Journal of Empirical Theology*, XX, (2007), p. 55.

<sup>16</sup> Upozorenje britanske štampe: Borci sa zapadnog Balkana ratuju po svetu (17. April 2015.). Retrieved from <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Svet/551514/UPOZORENJE-BRITANSKE-STAMPE-Borci-sa-zapadnog-Balkana-ratuju-po-svetu> / Opasnost od BiH povratnika iz Iraka i Sirije? (2015. March 14.). Retrieved from <http://www.dw.de/opasnost-od-bih-povratnika-iz-iraka-i-sirije/a-18316088>, accessed in 29. 09. 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Dragan Koković, "Religija i kultura, niti skrivenog stvaranja", in *Religijska kultura*, Leskovac, Leskovački kulturni centar, 2015, p. 18-29; Ivan Cvitković, "Europski strahovi od susreta kultura", in *Religijska kultura*, Leskovac, Leskovački kulturni centar, 2015, p. 30-45.

state schools for trying to address these issues in a theological manner – offering reconciliation and a new vision of our life together.

### **Social Issues**

Religious Education should be emptied from its purely dogmatic teaching into “dogmatics of life,” i.e. reinterpretation and contextualization of dogmatic definitions in order for them to serve our society and our church in a more benevolent manner. Theoretical definitions of dogmatics need to find their expressions in the fields of common social issues. It would be a good way to present to the public that RE is responsible towards society. Common issues for many members of public space could be in various fields: ethics, medicine, biology, ecology, education, art... Especially important could be bioethical challenges, genetic engineering, and consumerism, breakdown of the family, alcoholism, drug addiction, dignity of life for elderly people, transsexuality, genocide and many others. These subjects represent neuralgic spots that interconnect religious communities, state institutions and society in general<sup>18</sup>. “Dogmatics of life” in this way would represent pro-active attitude of RE in front of many difficulties that will be posed by state in coming years.

In reality, modern children live in a world occupied by information which is valid for several hours before it is substituted by more up-to-date material. Regular schools will have more and more problems of being boring to modern youth. The majority of teenagers in Western Europe spend almost 8 hours each day on-line, we have no certain data for the Balkan region.<sup>19</sup> They get most of their knowledge about the world beyond their family through their mobile phones and social networks online. If school is boring for young people, the same could be said for RE which follows the same pattern of other classes in the school. Scholastic presentation of the lectures in RE does not have a much hope for success<sup>20</sup>. More accent should be made on experience than on information that kids absorb as another info during the day.

### **De-Cult Motion**

In order to achieve “dogmatics of life”, faith needs to be emptied from the cult as a purpose in itself, something that we could call: de-cult. RE lectures should present to students that faith is not only about customs

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<sup>18</sup> Dragomir Sando, Imperativ korelacije", in *Pravoslavni katiheta*, 03/09 (2009), p. 44-47.

<sup>19</sup> Mladi u Srbiji koriste internet za druženje, informisanje i obrazovanje (2010. March 4.). Retrieved from <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/mladi-u-srbiji-koriste-internet-za-druzenje-informisanje-i-obrazovanje/dckw4ew>, accessed 29. 09. 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Svetomir Bojanin, "Ne vaspitavamo rečima, već ponašanjem", in *Pravoslavni katiheta*, 10/12 (2012), p. 52-67; Oliver Subotić, "Slabosti obrazovnog sistema i saveti katihetama", in *Pravoslavni katiheta* 04/10 (2010), p. 25-29.

(baptism, wedding, funeral...), liturgies for great feasts or traditional folklore associated with faith – but a way of life. Instead, we need to explain and theologially ground our position that faith exposes itself in everyday actions, even those that could look like trivial.

One of the problems which can face teachers of RE in this approach is misunderstanding from the church and other colleagues at the school. They think that such RE is more avant-garde than it should be, or even unsuitable. Unfortunately, religious communities are unaware that this concept would be more beneficial for them too. If religious communities still believe that the imperative for them should be the promotion of faith as good deeds then this would be the proper road. That would offer more possibilities to present faith as a tool for peaceful coexistence in a society which fosters tolerance being against discrimination and violence<sup>21</sup>.

In that sense, it is necessary to find a way of being more present in public life. Young students should be taught that their faith is not another colorful addition to their lives. On the contrary, they need to be invited to critically examine the world in which they live through the lenses of loving God who gave Himself out of love for the world. Promoting justice, peace and better cooperation with people is movement of that dynamic which loves the transforming world. "Fear of death" cannot be the best way to approach youth, even though this path is often part of our dogmatics. Young people would not be very excited to approach faith only because of that kind of fear. The meaning of the word "death" should be enriched with a new meaning. Death is conquering man in fear, conquering his true freedom. Unless we reflect on injustice that is doing the same to humankind, enslaving and conquering human existence - death as a natural process becomes a long waited phenomenon<sup>22</sup>. Religion is not presented as a cult that helps people to do whatever they want with the "help of God" and to keep them calm at the point of death. We need to rise above this cultic sea<sup>23</sup>, where the forces of today's world want to keep us. Reaching beyond the cult brings religion into the arena to cope for humanity within human civilization.

Our theology presents us Christ who in order to be the Savior, to encourage, inspire and elevate gifts of people emptied Himself (kenosis) of any power empowering those in need. Today men have a significant amount of power in our religious institutions, in our communities and in our homes. People, men and women, have been invited to kenosis, to empty ourselves of the egoistic power delivering the space for each human being, their lives and their talents. In that respect RE can be of enormous help in building just society of both sexes. RE should offer knowledge on *gender justice* being

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<sup>21</sup> Dragan Simeunović, *Političko nasilje*, Beograd, NIRO Radnička štampa, 1989.

<sup>22</sup> Rastko Jović, "Globalizacija i veronauka", in *Veroučitelj u školi*, III (2012), p. 79-96.

<sup>23</sup> Rastko Jović, "Nedostojnost hrišćana kao pitanje socijalne solidarnosti", in *Srpska teologija danas*, Beograd: ITI/PBF, 2010, p. 103-112.

capable to present it as a genuine theological issue. Gender justice should not be identified as justice only for women – making more divisions in society – but rather it is aimed at holistically building a just community of men and women, where every member of creation lives and flourishes contributing with their talents to the society as a whole. This will not happen unless we operate within the scope of a history of open and shared space for men and women that builds up and realizes their diverse gifts. The development of the curriculum and women's experience needs to be also at the center of RE in order to prepare and equip young people with respect in this domain. Religious Education which does not speak and respect the majority of our members (women) is not adequate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **De-globalization**

Religion should be aware today that religions should not fight amongst themselves. Overtly atheistic societies today promote a negative picture of religion which could be called “negative inclusion”, i.e. media incorporate religion only through negative pictures. Religion has been perceived as a negative way of life, conservative and backward which hurts society<sup>24</sup>. This kind of media presentation cannot be changed through violence and negative attitude towards the world. The atheistic and secular worldview presents our hope and chance that we finally find these new ways of doing Religious Education showing its relevance for today's world<sup>25</sup>. That task cannot be accomplished only by the Orthodox Church or Orthodox believers solely. We need the support of all believing people regardless of their religious affiliation. In that sense Religious Education needs to show more cooperation within religious people promoting religious plurality. As more as we continue our religious battles we convince secular society that religions need to be excluded from the public life of society. The first step to avoid these mistakes would be to work with young people offering them alternatives and not new enemies. The very first alternative could be “de-globalization”<sup>26</sup> i.e. through RE we need to avoid the identification and replication of the global conflicts on a local level. In the name of our future, we have to avoid globalization of conflicts. In a sense, globalization should be rejected in these terms in order for religion to survive<sup>27</sup>.

### **Conclusion: *Beyond Tolerance***

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<sup>24</sup> Rastko Jović, "Obrazovna uloga crkve u očima srpskih štampanih medija", in *Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva u štampanim medijima 2003-2013*, Beograd, Mons Hemus, 2015, p. 123-134.

<sup>25</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*.

<sup>26</sup> Mitri Tarek, Σκέψεις για τις σχέσεις Ορθόδοξων Χριστιανών και Μουσουλμάνων. *Ισλάμ και φονταμενταλισμός*, in *Ορθοδοξία και παγκοσμιοποίηση*, Αθήνα, Ίνδικτος, 2006, p. 65-79.

<sup>27</sup> Rastko Jović, "Globalizacija i veronauka", p. 79-96.



In order to achieve the aforementioned new and fresh understanding of the role of RE in contemporary society, we need to have a good theological grounding to accomplish it. Again and again we have been invited to re-evaluate and reinterpret our comprehension of Orthodox theology and its understanding. The Good Samaritan story could be a good starting point which should evaluate our thoughts and directives. In this well-known story a Good Samaritan helps one Israelite. And obviously these two groups did not like each other. At the end, Christ answers the question about who is our neighbor. The Samaritan has been praised because he helped another human being while he did not show any interest in converting anybody into his faith! This lack of conversion is striking for most believers who believe that conversion is the main task of our living faith. Sometimes to justify our own mistakes and troubles we eagerly and fanatically want to convert. We read the story but obviously not many of us notice this detail in which Christ has invited us to be a good human beings primarily, or in other words, our humanity is at the same time our main priesthood. We preach to this world with our deeds of love and not through conversion of those which do not belong our religious community.

Intolerance is a thing of the devastated souls whose faith is reduced to more or less desired torture that they wanted to generalize, to institutionalize. Since happiness of neighbor has never been an initiative in itself, it is mentioned only when it is necessary to ensure peaceful conscience or to hide behind the noble reasons ... No one is willing to submit himself to the discipline he himself undertook, not the yoke to which he agreed upon. Beyond the joy of missionaries and apostles is always looming persecution. Advocacy around the conversion does not at all aim into liberation of people, but to enchain them... They will do everything ... to subjugate into captivity, and if possible, identical to their own<sup>28</sup>.

Religious people need to understand that tolerance<sup>29</sup> is not enough and it cannot be a goal in itself. On the contrary, we need to go beyond tolerance<sup>30</sup>. If we announce tolerance as our sole goal, then we are moving towards religious and cultural ghettos. In that sense, religious education will be similar to that of secular education. RE should insist on unique role that could be achieved in order to promote a better understanding and cooperation between different religions – that process should lead us from tolerance into a space of communication. Communication is a real challenge because our communities do not know each other very well. The EU

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<sup>28</sup> Emil Sioran, *Pad u vreme*, Sremski Karlovci/Novi Sad, Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, 2008, p. 26.

<sup>29</sup> Kostas Mygdalis, "Tolerance, Otherness and New Technologies", in *The Social Dimension of Monotheistic Religions*, Athens, Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, 2012, p. 54-61.

<sup>30</sup> M. Đurić, "O toleranciji iz verske perspektive", in *Hrišćanstvo u 21 veku*, Novi Sad/Leskovac/Niš, Prometej, Leskovački kulturni centar, 2014, p. 274-275.

recommendation has been that RE should incorporate several classes on understanding of others. RE already achieved some positive modes of tolerance in a Serbian society<sup>31</sup>, but that is not enough.

Taking everything into account, RE as a subject in the future should be an expression of respect for our own context, our history and region. Christianity should not speak only to those who are in the churches, rather it needs to be more publicly visible. That would be betrayal of Christ who came for the whole world. Serious work on RE to be a more proactive player in contemporary society is a necessary precondition to leave a better world for a future generations, otherwise they will be presented with the prospect of further conflicts and violence.

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<sup>31</sup> Slavica Gašić-Pavišić&Ševkušić, *Verska nastava u beogradskim školama*, Beograd, PBF ITI, 2011, p. 15-28.