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Book Review

Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić (eds) *Education in Post-conflict Transition: The Politicization of Religion in School Textbooks*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

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An edited volume entitled, *Education in Post-conflict Transition: The Politicization of Religion in School Textbooks*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan series in *Religion, Politics and Policy* and edited by two scholars, Gorana Ognjenović (University of Oslo) and Jasna Jozelić (Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, University of Oslo). This volume focuses on the politicization of religion and the development of religious education in public schools, and the degree of religious liberty and human rights in several, mainly former Yugoslav countries. Apart from an introduction, the volume has thirteen chapters and a conclusion. Chapter authors include scholars from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia . The book also covers case studies of religious education in these countries.

Implementing religious education after years of communism was a challenging process; it included creating curricula and textbooks, and training teachers in religious education. After the wars in the 1990s, it became more complex to speak about the “religious other,” bearing in mind that religion was perceived as a source of conflict and was a significant element in ethno-national divisions in Yugoslavia. In the introductory chapter, Ognjenović and Jozelić explain how the politicization of religion is one of the “most effective mechanisms by which nationalists traditionally keep ethnic groups separate from each other” (1).

The authors’ intention was to evaluate progress or regress in post-conflict societies using the example of school textbooks for religious education in primary and secondary schools. One

of the main common research questions in their case studies was: to what degree is religion politicized in various examples of school textbooks used in public schools? Focusing on the two Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Islam, the authors emphasized the existence of many overlapping views and similar understanding of certain issues, especially their relationship to other religions (3).

The question is not whether the textbooks are politicized, but to what degree they are politicized, in the sense that the level of politicization also reflects the institutional ability to adapt to an ever-changing world (4). Religion was silently absent as a significant element that can bring social cohesion or promote diversity. In the chapter “Changing Faces, Swapping Places: Oh Sister Where Art Thou?”, Ognjenović focuses on the presence of women and gender policies in religious education. Ognjenović stresses the systematic ignorance of women’s rights and the “rapid march of the two Abrahamic religions taking over public education” (18).

Religious education as part of the public educational system in post-conflict societies has a very important impact on group relations and society. Emphasizing the importance of education in both individual and society progress, Jozelić provides an example of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a multi-ethnic society. She notes, “In a multi-ethnic society, religion has been used and became a major agent in re-building the nation and state” (24). Nevertheless, religious education classes frequently become a source of conflict among students. In these cases, the role of religious education can be misused for strengthening divisions between individuals or for political purposes. This still very fragile field for post-conflict societies can easily become a new source of segregation and division, instead of vice-versa. Promoting a dominant set of values or a homogenized society picture without mentioning “religious or ethnic others,” Jozelić concludes that “divisions that arise within a system of “two schools under one roof” and lack of unified

system on religious education brings new ethno-national, religious or linguistic divisions in society” (29).

In the chapter on the Islamic religious education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Zrinka Štimac explains how religious education within the Islamic community takes place at several levels, both in state schools and in religious schools. It was officially introduced in state primary schools in 1994, and in secondary schools several years later. Textbooks are published by the Islamic community and approved by the federal education ministry. From the first curriculum published in 1994 until 2006, some progress and modernization were made. The primary purpose of textbooks is for students to “become firm in their own religious point of view. Other religious traditions are nevertheless touched upon implicitly or explicitly in the curriculum, which is positive development in contrast to the curricula used in the first 8-year structure”(45). In another chapter, Štimac also analyses the Catholic religious education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically pointing out the goals and content of these textbooks. Since a number of documents issued by the Vatican and other theological sources are included in the creation of their religious education curricula, information on other religious traditions is present as well. The author mentions analyses based on primary schools’ textbooks in which “religious diversity is discussed in a positive light as well as giving critical information on negative roles played in history by the religious communities they represent” (104). Giving examples of implicit and explicit depictions of religious pluralism, the author mentions that in the senior grades of primary school, lessons on Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and other Christian churches do exist. As part of the educational reforms that took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the year 2000-2001, a new subject called “Culture of Religions” was introduced, with faith-

based religious education becoming an optional subject. However, this program was not supported and implemented.

The Catholic Church has been active in shaping the educational landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina through its foundation of school centers open for all young people regardless of their ethnic or religious background (121). Another chapter on Bosnia and Herzegovina, authored by Dženana Husremović, focuses on religious education and the large group identity. The term, “large group identity,” is defined as “the result of historical continuity, geographic reality, myths about common ancestry and other events” (182).

Maca Jogan, an author of two chapters on Slovenia and the Catholic Church, points out that the content of textbooks for religious education “depends on a wider social environment and the place the Church holds in it” (63). The details of the historical context of religious education that this chapter is based on is listed in chronological order: pre-First World War period, Interwar, Second World War, Socialism, Post-socialism (until 2015) and lastly, New Evangelization in the twenty-first century. Based on the content analysis of religious education textbooks, Jogan brings several important conclusions on “multidirectional politicization as a factor of survival and strengthening of the social power of the Catholic Church” (168). Fighting against the “worst totalitarianism”—communism, religious teaching was an important “instrument of gaining and reinforcing power of the Catholic Church” (169). Jogan covers a range of topics including the general situation of religion in the different ex-Yugoslav countries, the social position of churches, the issues of gender, the reconciliation after the Yugoslav Wars, and the integration of the EU.

Ankica Marinović wrote a chapter on Croatia and Catholic religious instruction textbooks. After the 1990s, the high level of declared Catholics and the revitalization of

religiosity after the fall of communism became a trend in Croatia (as in many other Eastern European countries). Discussing the legal framework of church–state relations in Croatia, Marinović mentions the international agreement on cooperation in the field of education and culture signed by the Republic of Croatia and the Holy See in 1996. This agreement defines some of the basic principles for the religious education system and how it should be organized. When the *Religious Communities Act* was finally approved in 2002, it regulated the position of religious education in the public-school system (134). In the spectrum of different types of religious education in public schools, from strictly confessional, loose confessional, to non-confessional, Croatia applies the traditional (confessional) type. Other post-communist countries have similar programs of religious education which include elements of catechism of traditional or dominant/majority religious communities in a respective country. Confessional religious instruction was introduced in the public school system in Croatia in 1991-1992 by the Ministry of Education and Culture and from the beginning, it initiated public discussion. Dialogue between religious communities with their representatives and scholars almost did not exist. In the case of Croatia, there are also indicators of the politicization of religion in the 1990s. Marinović notes that religious instruction textbooks are “not tolerant and dialogical in the case of atheism and irreligious people at all. Atheism is absolutely unacceptable from the Catholic point of view” (146).

Several chapters of this book are dedicated to the case of Serbia and their religious education that was introduced in the public-school system in 2001. In the chapter authored by Bojan Aleksov, readers can follow the development of state policy of introducing religious education as well as a critical overview on church and state relations in Serbia after 2000. Only seven “traditional” churches and religious communities can perform religious education classes

in public schools: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, the Islamic community, the Jewish community, the Slovakian Evangelical Church, and the Christian Reformed Church. Srdjan Barišić and Vladimir Jevtić present a content analysis of textbooks, focusing on two questions: “how the role of religious elements of national identity is presented and evaluated in textbooks, and how do textbooks present the relation between ethno-confessional identity and ethnic distance” (246). Many textbooks conclude that the relationship between the national and the religious identity is central. By analyzing the process of decision-making in the publication of textbooks, Svenka Savić was able to focus on the elements of gender and interreligious discrimination in the texts of the textbooks (253). Savić collected data from the curriculum of religious education in elementary schools for Orthodox, Catholic and Islamic religious communities (in Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian) and data from two Protestant churches (in Slovakian and Hungarian). This chapter brings interesting data analysis on gender roles and stereotypes that exist in textbooks. She also concludes there is an insufficient level of interreligious dialogue or learning about the religious other in most textbooks, except those in Protestant communities. Zorica Kuburić notices that religious education started to develop in the period of wider social changes in the Serbian society. Religious education, together with civic education, are an alternative subject-initiated reform of the educational system in Serbia (275). Religious education textbooks in Serbia, according to Kuburić, “present the ontologically based Orthodox catechism. The textbook is furnished with illustrations adequate to children’s age” (295). Teachers also have a major role in religious education alongside textbooks. The volume ends with a chapter on Kosovo, authored by Gjylbehare Bella Murati and Vedat Sahiti, on the current debate between secularists and religious communities on religious education in public schools (299).

The concluding chapter summarizes the main goals of the volume to provide insights into policies of religious education in schools in post-conflict societies of several Southeast European countries. Contributions in the volume showed how religion can be an instrument of achieving a political goal and enhance segregation between pupils of different religious backgrounds. Providing the possibility to have a religious education program that includes interreligious dialogue is a complex process, especially in the Balkans. The volume is valuable for scholars interested in religious studies, educational policies, and Southeastern Europe in general. However, it lacks some possible recommendations on the future improvement of religious education curricula, especially in terms of developing interreligious dialogue. Considering the pluralistic nature of all the countries this volume deals with, the editors and authors offer solid and detailed insights into a complex topic that can help us to better understand the role of religious education in a post-conflict context.