

2-2019

**Book Review: Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić (ed.),
Education in Post-Conflict Transition: The Politization of Religion
in School Textbooks**

Nikola Knezević

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>

Recommended Citation

Knezević, Nikola (2019) "Book Review: Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić (ed.), Education in Post-Conflict Transition: The Politization of Religion in School Textbooks," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol39/iss1/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić (ed.), *Education in Post-Conflict Transition: The Politization of Religion in School Textbooks*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018, 316pp, hardback. ISBN: 978-3-319-56604-7,

Reviewed by Nikola Knezević, Ph. D. Protestant Theological Seminary, Novi Sad, Serbia and Las Vegas, NV.

One of the undeniable facts of the modern era is that education is the key to the past, the present, and the future. In the aftermath of apartheid and the quest for the freedom from racial segregation, Nelson Mandela has spoken the truth when he said: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Rethinking these words in the light of recent conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia raises many concerns, since education, as powerful as it may seem, can be easily abused and become a source of divisions. Memory is often interpreted and therefore politicized by the ruling political or religious elites. Concerns are deepened, even more, when it comes to religious education and the way textbooks are ethically or historically biased.

The greatest value of this book is a comparative analysis of religious education textbooks used in primary and secondary education throughout the Western Balkans, and how their content is interpreted in the light of recent armed conflicts and domination by religious and political parties. Discourse analysis is the primary research method used in the book. It is an important asset for the social studies students, media studies, as well as the students of theology. It includes fourteen articles, by authors of different religious and ethnic backgrounds and social science profiles, who provide the reader with unique and multidisciplinary perspectives. Two dominant subjects emerge: first, an analysis of the content of religious education textbooks in the countries of Slovenia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Kosovo, and second, how such

educational content is used/abused; namely, how religion is politicized, and ethnic division legitimized through religious education (p. 21) in the Western Balkans.

Such intertwining of sacred and political is encouraged by the governments or religious entities themselves, that are reluctant to leave the selective, ideologically biased, exclusive remembrance while they pursue an institutional forgetting of the facts. In such a political context, the content of religious education approved by the governments and conducted in public schools represents a source of divisions and confusions, deepening the already segregated and fragile communities by numerous economic, demographic, and political issues. Worthy of mention is the fact that religious minorities (such as Protestant evangelicals) are excluded and not allowed to conduct religious education in public schools. This is the case in Serbia and Croatia (p. 265). Authors assert the pessimistic but candid conclusion that the educational system can be described as a "system of apartheid" (p. 398). Certainly, the book presents a valuable resource on a high academic level useful for every student or scholar who wants to engage further into a specific topic analyzed here.

While dominant religions in the Western Balkans have been playing a significant role in rebuilding national identities in the aftermath of the downfall of communism, these religions were abused and manipulated towards politicization of religious language and various amalgamations of sacred and secular. To some extent, even now, a few prominent clergy members are still standing as representatives of nationalism and anti-western sentiment.¹ This

¹ During the war, the official media in the Balkans were often the main source of propaganda. Religious media were not immune to such abuse either. During the wartime period, the main religious press/media of the dominant Balkan Christian confessions, such as Serbian Orthodox "Pravoslavlje" [Orthodoxy] and "Crkveni glasnik" [Ecclesial Voice], or the Roman-Catholic "Glas Koncila" [Voice of the Council] had published articles or appeals with strong exclusivist nationalistic rhetoric backing the official state war agendas. Such selective narrative supporting the conflict is still present even today, especially in the monthly of the Roman Catholic Church, "Glas Koncila", a stronghold of religious nationalism and historical revisionism. See: Nikola Knežević, "Kultura sećanja, problem selektivizacije i politizacije religije u verskom medijskom kontekstu", *Uloga medija u normalizaciji odnosa na Zapadnom Balkanu* [The culture of Memory, the problem of selectivity and politicization of religion in the religious

includes clergy of several religions, whether we speak of the Islamic Community, the Serbian Orthodox Church or the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia. Public discourse of dominant religions displays a strong mythological sense, conflict rhetoric, exclusiveness, and antagonism towards the other, especially towards ethnic, religious or sexual minority groups. I am convinced that a major opportunity is being missed, one that is found in the underlying conclusion of the book. While religions, and therefore religious education, should be a *conditio sine qua non* for reconciliation, including the process of transitional justice in the ex-Yugoslav context, religions themselves, and consequently education originating from such sources became the very opposite, i.e., an ideological, pseudo-religious framework for vilifying and excluding the "other," embracing the nationalist, mythical, victimological, exclusive narratives or self-proclaimed messianic agendas. Education as the "weapon" has a whole different meaning in the Balkan context, leaving a very grim and murky picture of the future. Theological discourse should be a catalyst for social-political criticism, including of nationalism, whenever an ordinary person becomes the victim of populism, demagoguery, and bargaining by the privileged political or religious elites, or whenever human dignity is jeopardized and made senseless. On the contrary, religious education as well religious discourse in general became the source of the conflict and divisions. That being said, the possible consequences could be very serious with readership and audiences so young and prone to ideological manipulation and reinvention of tradition.

Instead of a conclusion, I wish to state what should be a fundamental premise of every religious textbook. Following Marx's call for emancipation of the human being, the Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann sees liberation from religious, ethnic, or any other alienation in the

media context in The Role of Media in the Normalization of relationships in Western Balkans] (Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet i CIRPD, 2014).

creation of the “new human identity” where one builds his identity in community with others in finding and creating the identity of acceptance, the so-called personalization in socialization.² As he states: “The human emancipation of men from self-alienation and mutually alienating relationships becomes possible when different people meet without fear, arrogance and the repressed feelings of guilt, when they see their differences as strengths and adopt them productively.”³ Moltmann considered the basis for reconciliation between people being situated in the act of Christ’s redeeming sacrifice of atonement, where reconciliation of humanity as the object of reconciliation with the Creator who stands while a subject of reconciliation is enacted. “God has reconciled with us [humanity] therefore we could and should be one”⁴ Hope which derives from such relationships anticipates a bright future. A future that does not proceed from the consequences of the past and the actualities of the present, but from the opportunities situated in the future. Thereby, beyond the *hic et nunc*, a perspective of hope is offered, a horizon of possibilities, a *novum* of God’s promise that encourages humankind to enter into a particular dialectical process of struggle with the given circumstances of life and overcoming of conflicts.⁵

²Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen, and, H. M. Vroom, *Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 304.

³Jürgen Moltmann, *Raspeti Bog* [The Crucified God], (Rijeka: Ex Libris, 2005), 373.

⁴ Gort, Jansen. and Vroom, *Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation*, 306.

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Teologija Nade*, [Theology of Hope], (Rijeka: Ex Libris, 2008).