Islamic Educational System in Bosnia and its Prospective Contribution to the Place of Islam in European Schools

Štěpán Macháček

A Balkan Country as a Model?

In many European countries, Christian Religious Education classes forms a part of national primary and/or secondary school curricula. However, similar arrangement for Islamic Religious Education classes in Europe is not so common. So far, the problem has concerned the Muslim immigrant minorities of Western Europe. But in recent years, several European countries with significant autochthonous Muslim population joined the European integration processes with the perspective of becoming one day member states of the European Union, as Bulgaria already did in 2007. These Southeast European states have incorporated Islamic Religious Education classes and Islamic schools into their education systems. If this incorporation is successful, this experience could present an inspiration for EU institutions in solving the problem of religious education of the Western European Muslim minorities and in setting possible common framework for Islamic education in the EU. I have chosen Bosnia-Herzegovina for a thorough examination of the place of Islamic Religious Education classes and Islamic schools in its education system because discussions and practical steps have run there since several decades and Islam is more present there in the public space than in any other country of the region.

European Educational Reforms and the Balkan States

The European integration processes concern also the education field. The endeavour of the EU institutions in this area is aimed among others at the unification of the manifold system of academic grades and examinations of the European countries. The Bologna Declaration which has launched this process was signed in 1999 and today, forty-six states participate. In regard to Islamic education in the Balkan states, it is important to note that millions of Muslims of Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia will be affected in the future by the “Bologna process”. All these countries have signed the Bologna Declaration, as did two other, predominantly Muslim states: Azerbaijan and Turkey.

In Bosnia, the main efforts of the international community, which still largely interferes in Bosnian policies, is the establishing of a unified system for all pupils and students of the country. This reform should among others eliminate one of the factors supporting the ethnic and religious division of the Bosnian society. Subjects of History, Literature, or Religious Education are in the forefront of the reform efforts. In 2000, a major project, the “Shared Modernization Strategy for Primary and General Secondary Education in Bosnia-Herzegovina”, started.

http://downloads.akademie-rs.de/interreligioeser-dialog/091120_machacek_educational.pdf
Reintroduction of Religious Education to Bosnian Schools

With the weakening of the communist regime and gradual disintegration of Yugoslavia, the religious communities and some political circles demanded the reintroduction of Religious Education into national schools. In the school year 1991/92 already, Catholic Religious Education classes became part of the curriculum of the national primary and secondary schools in Croatia. Thousands of Bosniak pre-war residents and war refugees in Croatia were also affected by this measure and Islamic Religious Education classes were organized for them. Such an attempt was obviously more difficult and highly sensitive in the case of Bosnia, where the three main religious groups coincide with the constitutive nations of this republic. However, since the first democratic elections in 1990, even in Bosnia the religious communities sought the reintroduction of Religious Education into national schools. In both Croatia and Bosnia, intellectual discussions preceded political decisions. Two basic opinions emerged: some supported the introduction of an inter-confessional subject called “Culture of Religions” (kultura religija), treating the main world religions from a historic and cultural perspective, while others (predominantly in the religious circles) advocated separate classes for each religious group (and thus some kind of catechism). The former expressed among others their fear of seeing one ideology (Marxism) replaced by another one (compulsory Religious Education) at national schools. This dissension has been lasting until today.

Despite all these discussions, in which some prominent Bosnian ulama such as Mustafa Cerić an Enes Karić supported the idea of teaching Culture of Religions, confessional (separate) Religious Education classes turned in 1994 into reality. Both the Islamic Community (IZ) and the Catholic Church wished to be in charge of the teaching of this subject and the Bosnian law satisfied them. Each religious community thus prepared its own textbooks and teachers. The Bosnian IZ established training schools for Islamic Religious Education teachers (called Islamic Pedagogical Academies, see below) to assemble teaching staff. Initially, the Law on education was valid for all the Federation and stated that Religious Education was optional. With the implementation of the Constitution annexed to the Dayton peace agreements in 1996, however, education fell under the responsibility of the entity and canton authorities. Thus, in the Federation, the status of Religious Education differs today from canton to canton and is either compulsory (but the child can be exempted on the request of its parents) or “optional-compulsory” (once chosen by the child, the subject becomes compulsory for the whole school year).

How is the Islamic Education Organized in Bosnia

The 2004 Law on religious communities states that everybody has the right to achieve Religious Education, both at national schools and in religious premises, and that teachers are appointed by their respective religious authorities. In practice, however, only the dominant religion is taught in most parts of the Republika Srpska and in most cantons of the Federation. In cantons where Muslim Bosniaks form a majority and Catholic Croats a minority, Islamic Religious Education classes are given but Catholic ones are not (and vice versa). It does not mean that Catholics are supposed to attend Islamic Religious Education classes: they just do not have the possibility to have their own Religious Education classes. Thus the above mentioned right is not fulfilled and there is a discrimination against minority children.

In any event, the high percentage of children attending Islamic Religious Education classes must be very satisfying for the IZ. For example, in the school year 2003/04, attendance of Islamic Religious Education classes by Bosniak children was 97% at primary schools. According to certain surveys, children generally and sincerely like the subject which they regard as relaxed in comparison to the
others and as offering higher chance to get good marks (which improve their average assessment). In 2004, Religious Education was also (re-)introduced into the curriculum of the primary and secondary schools of Serbia. This directly affects the Bosniaks of Sandžak, a region with a slight prevalence of Bosniak Muslim population and now divided between Serbia and Montenegro. The Sandžak branch of the Bosnian IZ, enjoying a large autonomy, established its own Islamic Pedagogical Academy, later renamed Islamic Pedagogical Faculty, in Novi Pazar in 2001. So today, Bosniaks living in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sandžak and in the diaspora in Croatia (all of them falling under the religious authority of the Bosnian IZ based in Sarajevo) are all encompassed by Religious Education classes, defined and taught by IZ personnel.

Since 1994, the discussion has continued on the nature of Religious Education. Part of Bosnian public and intellectuals and also international agencies – including the UN High Representative and EU Special Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina – regard this subject as a factor dividing children on a religious and thus on a national basis in the specific case of Bosnia, and call for bringing it back into the premises of the religious communities and for introducing instead some sort of History of Religions. The international community has indeed put certain pressure on Bosnian authorities to replace Religious Education by a sort of History of Religions in the school curriculum and has been frequently criticized for this by religious communities. In 2000, the OSCE Mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina has introduced the subject Culture of Religions into some Bosnian schools as a pilot project. However, the project met with strong resistance in some schools and from the part of the religious authorities and has not been fully implemented. In 2002, the OSCE took the responsibility of coordinating the reform of Bosnian education system, whose aim is to ensure to all children “a quality education, in integrated multicultural schools, that is free from political, religious, cultural and other bias and discrimination”. In compliance with the new Law on primary and secondary education voted in 2003, a governmental agency was formed in early 2007 to supervise the reform progress. This step caused hostile reactions from the IZ, as well as from the Orthodox and Catholic churches, which fear a reduction, or even abolition, of the Religious Education classes and their replacement by classes of History of Religions. Mustafa Cerić, appointed as Bosnian reisu-l-ulema in 1993, denounced such a perspective in a *hutba* (Friday prayer sermon) in February 2007, in spite of his stance on this issue in the early 1990s. The content of Islamic Religious Education classes overlap to certain degree with that of the *mektebs* (religious courses in the mosque). When, in the early 1990s, Enes Karić advocated the introduction of Culture of Religions into national schools instead of Religious Education, he argued that religious communities should keep and develop their own religious classes in churches and mosques (or *mektebs*) on a facultative basis. Nowadays, the tendency is to make the Religious Education classes more theoretical, based on a core of basic knowledge about the teaching, history and culture of Islam. Mektebs, in turn, should become places for more practical religious training. Even in present situation, the Bosnian IZ continues to regard *mektebs* as an important means of reinforcing Islamic awareness (and thus, indirectly, Bosniak national consciousness) among young Bosniaks. There has been no decrease in *mekteb* attendance after the introduction of Religious Education into national schools, as many had predicted. On the contrary, according to the IZ, Religious Education at school encouraged many parents to have their children attend *mektebs* too.

Besides the Religious Education in the national schools, there are six Islamic secondary schools in Bosnia and more in other Balkan countries. These schools, called *madrasas*, are controlled by IZ, but they are nowadays fully integrated in the national education system and the religious subjects play a minor role of their curricula. Islamic morals are emphasised in these institutions and most of their graduates continue in their studies at different laic faculties.
Bosnian Islamic Faculties and the Definition of a “European Islam”

Islamic Religious Education teachers in Bosnia are appointed by IZ and are educated in IZ-controlled Islamic faculties. Here, the mainstream Bosnian or Balkan Islam, and thus possibly also a “European Islam”, is being defined. Two ideological currents, or poles, in my opinion, form the mainstream of contemporary Bosnian Islam and control different Islamic faculties in the country. I suggest to provisionally call these two mainstream currents “Bosnian intellectual Islam”, which is mainly represented by the Faculty of Islamic Sciences (FIN) in Sarajevo, and “universal moderate neo-Salafist Islam”, represented by Islamic Pedagogy Faculties in Bihać and Zenica.

One of the most noticeable differences is the academic background of the professors at the different Islamic faculties. FIN professors have generally obtained their university education either from Yugoslav faculties (faculties of Law, Philology and Arts are mostly the case, in addition to the FIN itself) or from (primarily Western) universities abroad. Only a few of them studied in Muslim countries like Malaysia, Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Moreover, their academic background is usually oriented toward philosophy rather than theology. This profile gives to the FIN a European and intellectual orientation, and its programme is characteristic of a moderate, modern and intellectual Islam. It is probably the form of Islam that some European intellectuals and officials would like to see as a “Euro-Islam”, a term vaguely defined but used on many occasions.

On the other hand, the faculties in Bihać and Zenica were both established in the 1990s and are led today by ulema formed almost exclusively at Islamic faculties in Saudi Arabia. Also, the most prominent lecturers at these schools have a similar academic background, with a few who received their training in Jordan or Tunisia. I refuse to consider Saudi training as an irrefutable proof of being a representative of a rigorist interpretation of Islam. However, if one considers the books and articles published by these ulema (for example in the Novi Horizonti magazine), the difference between them and those lecturing at the Sarajevo faculty becomes evident. Also, the plans of lectures for IPF students contain a list of recommended literature including Salafist authors such as Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Yusuf al-Qaradawi etc.

One of the main theological arguments that oppose the two currents is the issue of madhab (school of Islamic law and thought). While most IZ officials and Sarajevo faculty professors maintain that the Hanafi madhab is the only valid for Bosnian Muslims (such provision is included in the Constitution and in other regulations of the IZ), those close to the Islamic Pedagogy Faculties argue that one should be free to chose any of the Sunni madhhab or rather that the differences between madhhab do not matter. At the political level, however, both currents agree with the necessity of integrating Bosnia into the European Union (an approach reflected in the institutional reforms at all three Islamic faculties) and neither of them shows ambition of interfering directly in party politics.

Both “Islamic intellectuals” and “neo-Salafists” proposed their own candidates for reisu-l-ulema elections in 2005, but Mustafa Cerić managed to be reelected. However, considering the fact that the Islamic Pedagogy Faculties basically train the prospective Religious Education teachers at national primary and secondary schools and that the FIN basically train the future IZ personnel and medresa teachers, the role of these faculties in the definition of Islam for coming Bosnian generations is substantial. If the project of an International (European) Islamic University in Sarajevo becomes reality, then this intra-Bosnian struggle about the definition of Islam could easily influence similar ongoing debates at the European level.

The main struggle around the definition of Bosnian Islam happens at the formal level, but another influential actor at the informal level is also present and must be taken into account.
Summary

The enlargement of the European Union to Southeast European countries with their millions of indigenous Muslims will contribute to a change of understanding of the reality of Islam in Europe among European officials and intellectuals. More and more, Islam will cease to be perceived as an alien religious and cultural phenomenon. Following the situation of Islam and Islamic education in those countries will help us to predict the future nature of „European Islam“, if it one day becomes a reality. Against this background, Bosnia with its highly institutionalized form of Islam and its well developed system of Islamic education can be a valuable source of inspiration. On the other hand, among Bosniaks themselves, the struggle between those advocating the present form of confessional (separate) Religious Education classes, placed under the responsibility of the main religious communities, and those promoting the teaching of an inter-confessional subject called “Culture of Religions” is present.

Given the position of Bosnia-Herzegovina as the country with the liveliest intellectual life of indigenous European Muslims, the efforts of Bosnian reisu-l-ulema Mustafa Ćerić in turning Bosnia and its capital Sarajevo into the centre of institutionalized “European Islam” are only logical. The contemporary ideological transformations of Bosnian Islam could be therefore of high importance for the future of Islam in Europe—or, possibly, of “European Islam”—in general. In Bosnia itself, Islamic schools play an important role. While the medreses underwent important transformations and became modern general secondary schools with an Islamic moral atmosphere and lifestyle (as opposed to vocational schools), the Islamic faculties are institutions training and employing Bosnian ulema and Islamic intellectuals.

In Bosnia, we can trace two main Islamic ideological currents. The moderate neo-Salafism, controlling today the Bosnian Islamic Pedagogy Faculties, is getting stronger all over the world. A very likely scenario is that it will soon dominate also the Bosnian Islamic Community, although not necessarily with the warm support of majority of Bosnian Muslim public. Islamic thought in Bosnia is strongly polarised, although some rapprochement is not impossible. However, if there is a serious project of building up European Islamic institutions, this moderate neo-Salafist current should be taken seriously into account. More so, if one expects that both Muslim diaspora in the Western Europe and the Balkan Muslims shall regard these institutions as their religious authorities.