

## **YUGOSLAVIA: WILL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION BE COMPULSORY IN SCHOOLS?**

**by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 5 December 2000**

Controversy continues to rage around the planned resumption of religious classes in the state educational system. The dominant Serbian Orthodox Church believes such classes should be compulsory, while the Helsinki Committee believes this would violate the religious rights of the non-Orthodox.

At the Church's Synodal Council, which met from 1-3 November in Belgrade, religious education was the only subject on the agenda. Since the ousting of Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian and Yugoslav governments have announced their intention to reintroduce religious education, not permitted since 1946. The Synodal Council insisted that 'religious classes should be implemented in all grades in both elementary and secondary schools as a compulsory subject'. It also established a committee to devise a religious education curriculum, headed by Bishop Ignjatije of Branicovo.

Responding immediately, the Serbian religious affairs minister Dr Gordana Anicic declared that religious classes in the first grade of elementary school should be compulsory and in later grades optional. However, Yugoslav President, Dr Vojislav Kostunica, told The Los Angeles Times that he personally believed religious education should be voluntarily and appropriate to children's age and education level.

On 21 November the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia criticised the 'joint initiative' of President Kostunica and the Orthodox Church to introduce religious classes, saying this would 'seriously violate the principles of a secular state' and mark the return of the church 'from the sphere of personal to public life as a form of indoctrination'. 'This will cause children and parents to state their religious affiliation, which in conditions of lasting religious and national intolerance in Serbia can only create problems.' Because the Orthodox Church is the state's only partner in this venture, the Helsinki Committee considers this a violation of the religious and human rights of the non-Orthodox.

Just three days later the Orthodox Church sharply criticised the Helsinki Committee. 'The statement that religious belief is a private matter for every individual and that religious education threatens to make church dogma a foundation of moral education actually represents the fear of Satan and all of his followers for the last six decades.'

'This Church has no moral rights to teach our children, the future generations, about religion. We remember what they were for in the previous wars - only recently were they against Milosevic,' Milanka Saponja-Hadzic, Helsinki Committee spokesperson, told Keston News Service on 1 December in Belgrade. 'We indeed support every individual's right to decide whether to send their children to religious classes, but we deny the Orthodox Church the right to teach moral issues.' She believed that before the Orthodox Church can demand to teach morality, it should come to terms with its involvement in recent history. She noted that only three Orthodox clergymen - Patriarch Pavle, and two Kosovo-based clergymen Bishop Artemije and Father Sava Janjic - had apologised for the 'atrocities' committed by Serbian forces in Kosovo before the arrival of NATO-led forces, not the Orthodox Church as a whole.

Dr Olga Popovic-Obradovic, professor at Belgrade Law Faculty and writer on the relationship between the church and society, complained that the Orthodox Church's response to the Helsinki Committee showed it was trying to dominate society. 'The way it was put speaks for itself - those who dared criticise the Orthodox Church's rapprochement with the new government are servants of Satan!' she told Keston on 30 November. 'We cannot allow forces like these to be responsible for the religious education of the youth. They respect only one way of thinking - their way.'

Sonja Biserko, president of the Helsinki Committee, told Keston on 1 December in Belgrade that an open debate was needed to find out society's attitude to religious education in schools. 'We are organising public discussions and inviting specialists in this area. We cannot yet confirm that any Orthodox representative will take part, but we are hoping that the rules of civil society will be respected here as well.'

No Orthodox official was willing to respond to the Helsinki Committee's criticism. A Belgrade Patriarchate press officer told Keston that the Church's statements represent the official Synod position, and that Keston should not ask for more.

'The return of the banished religious lessons ... will in no way spark religious or national intolerance, let alone arouse religious discrimination against members of other faiths or atheists,' the Orthodox Church concluded in its criticism of the Helsinki Committee. The discussions the Helsinki Committee is organising and a promised book on the subject will open up a public debate. (END)