

YUGOSLAVIA: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION DEBATE CONTINUES

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 21 December 2000

Serbian Orthodox Bishop Ignjatije of Branicevo, who is in charge of the newly appointed church commission for the implementation of the religious education in state schools, told a press conference in Belgrade on 5 December that the Church believes religious education should be obligatory for all students, although he added that parents who did not wish their children to participate could opt out by registering at the beginning of the school year. Although Muslims broadly support the religious education plans, some Protestants have told Keston News Service that they fear the content of the syllabus will not reflect their own beliefs or that those who opt out will be stigmatised (see KNS 4 December 2000).

The press conference was held immediately after a meeting between Bishop Ignjatije and Bogoljub Sijacic, federal minister of religion. For his part, Sijacic declared that 'religious classes are in the domain of human rights', adding that 'we should find an appropriate model for our multiconfessional country'.

In the wake of this statement, members of the Belgrade University Council stated the following day that the Orthodox Theological Faculty (expelled from the University in 1951 by the Communist government) might be received back, after rigorous checking that its academic level meets university standards.

Members of the Islamic community expressed support for religious education in schools, arguing that this would mean that Islam would be taught in areas with sizeable Muslim populations. 'This question is one of the most important and we believe that in resolving it we will not face misunderstandings and resistance, since it is in the interest of all nations and religious communities,' declared an editorial in Glas Islama (Voice of Islam), a monthly magazine published in Novi Pazar, the main town in the Sandzak region of south western Serbia which has a majority Muslim population. 'Positive statements from Dr Gordana Anicic, Serbian minister for religion, should mean that nationalised property will be returned to the Islamic community of Sandzak, and that the Islamic religion should be taught in all schools where there are students of Islamic faith.'

But some Protestants oppose compulsory religious education in schools. 'Religious classes should not be obligatory for children of other confessions,' Dr Jovan Mihaljcic, an Adventist pastor and professor at Belgrade's Adventist Theological Faculty, told Keston on 12 December in Belgrade. 'Although we are for religious education, we believe that the formation of a believer is the responsibility of the family and the church, not the state. Whenever a close relation exists between a church and the state, there is a clear danger that some other churches or denominations will be treated as second class churches. We believe that religious education is the responsibility of the religious communities, i.e. the churches.'

Dr Mihaljcic reports that the Adventist Church already has its own programme of religious education. 'We have been holding religion classes for our children for three decades now and we have prepared materials for eight elementary classes.'

A preacher from the Christian Nazarene Community expressed concern about the possible content of the religious syllabus. 'They will only bring religious and pagan feasts, saints, icons and St Sava into the lives of the children,' the preacher - who asked to remain

anonymous - told Keston by telephone from Novi Sad on 10 December. 'We do not want our children to be taught paganism simply dressed up as Christianity. We think a subject like the history of religions would be more appropriate or at least to establish classes with Protestant theology. Otherwise, in every school we will face divisions in classes or children afraid to say they are not Orthodox.'

Other Protestants are not so concerned. 'There are only 7,000 Evangelical Christians in Yugoslavia, and we cannot expect to have the same status as the members of the Serbian Orthodox Church,' Dragoljub Jovanovic, vice-president of the Yugoslav Association for Religious Freedom, told Keston on 12 December in Belgrade. 'I personally think it is a fantastic opportunity for our as well for other children to have this opportunity to hear how God created the world, for instance. If there were to be some favouritism or inadequate teachings, our children hopefully will be able to react and express their own belief and we, the parents, will have our opportunity to react at class meetings and school board meetings. We hope that the government will remain wise in regard to this matter.' (END)