

KOSOVO: SECULARISATION OF SOCIETY UNDER UN AUTHORITIES

by Geraldine Fagan and Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 26 November 2001

Despite being one of its largest missions with at least one large building in Pristina alone, Keston News Service was told at the headquarters of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) in the Kosovar capital on 25 October that the organisation has no post dealing solely with religious affairs. On requesting information on religion in the province, Keston was presented with a 16-page January 2001 report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) as the only publication in the OSCE's possession on the subject.

Speaking to Keston at Decani Monastery on 26 October, Fr Sava (Janjic), assistant to Abbot Teodosije, complained that even though the Serbian Orthodox Church is "the only institution left representing the Serb people in Kosovo," religion had been "totally disregarded" by the international authorities. When on 25 October Keston asked Sister Mikhaela at Pec-Patriarchate Convent why there were apparently no OSCE reports of problems faced by religious communities in the province, she remarked, "because we don't exist."

A Moscow source told Keston that the OSCE in Kosovo does in fact employ an adviser on religious issues - Andreas Szolgyemi, who is currently approaching the end of a mandatory six months' sabbatical. Speaking to Keston by telephone from Hungary on 16 November, Szolgyemi acknowledged that not enough attention is paid by the international authorities and agencies in Kosovo to religious affairs. "For the OSCE and UNMIK the main issues have been politics and political parties," he explained, "but even these are very much influenced by religious ideas." Szolgyemi pointed out that the majority of Kosovars are greatly influenced by religion "even if they are not religious in the sense of visiting mosques - they live like Muslims." However, he thought that Kosovo's administration was now becoming more attentive to religious developments due to a recent visit by a representative of the Vatican, about which he said he knew no further details.

Szolgyemi said that his primary role in Kosovo had been to locate different religious groups, to encourage their leaders to discuss religious affairs and to inform his colleagues about religious practices. The information given to Keston that the January ICG religion report was the only such report in the OSCE's possession was, in his view, "a big mistake" probably due to lack of co-ordination between departments, since he had written a 90- page book on the subject which the OSCE's Vienna office had had on disk for a year.

In Kosovo, Keston found that a tendency by the authorities to disregard religious life was immediately apparent in two public spheres - education and the media. There is currently no religious education in schools in Kosovo, secretary to Grand Mufti Rexhep Boja, Xhabir Hamiti, told Keston in Pristina on 25 October: "We would need UNMIK's permission to go into schools." Yet despite signs that a sizeable proportion of the religious community would favour the option of religious education within the state curriculum, the UN authorities appear opposed. Although the ICG religion report acknowledges that the Islamic community "advocates establishing religious classes in public [state] schools and offering Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox children the option

to choose their own courses", and that the Catholic Church wishes to establish a religious high school in Prizren, it recommends that "public schooling for all communities in Kosovo should remain completely secular." While making little mention of religion, UNMIK's June 2001 annual report states that "the focus of education is being changed from being identity-based to a personality orientation."

Both the Orthodox and Islamic communities in Kosovo have their own publications - the weekly bulletin "Herald of Kosovo and Metohia" and the monthly magazine "Diturio Islamie" respectively. Currently, however, there appears to be no religious broadcasting of any kind in Kosovo. Hamiti told Keston that the UNMIK authorities in Pristina have twice rejected a Muslim proposal to broadcast a radio programme with a religious component produced by local imams, professors and students. The two refusals - approximately one year and two months ago - were "diplomatic and polite" but without substance, said Hamiti, and the Islamic community believes that the religious component is the true reason, since "ten other radio stations operate freely in Pristina." (Radio Gracanina, based in the Orthodox monastery, has reportedly had UNMIK support, but is not primarily a religious radio station.)

On 26 October UNMIK deputy head of Pec (Peja in Albanian) regional administration, Bob Charmbury, told Keston that he was not aware of any official regulations governing religious education or broadcasting; "the whole world of broadcasting is just evolving." He commented that, while he would accept the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church as a partner in dialogue, the international community did not view the Church as "the voice of the Serb people." As far as Charmbury knew, there was no specialist post in UNMIK for religious issues: "It is not in our remit - our job is to get on with the civil state." (END)