

Inter-religious Dialogue among Young People in a Post-Conflict Society: Experiences with a Small Grassroots Project in Central Bosnia

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Abstract

This article offers insight into how an ever-widening gap between two communities of young people of different ethnic and religious background, living side by side without contact, can be addressed by local initiatives coming from within informal groups of community members. The figures given illustrate the prevalence of ignorance of “the other” among young people aged 15 to 19 who attend a specific form of school unique to Bosnia and Herzegovina that segregates students across ethnic lines. The grassroots project described in the article encompasses surveys, awareness campaigns, publishing, and workshop activities implemented in a geographically distinct and religiously diverse area of the upper Vrbas Valley in Central Bosnia.

Introduction

Bosnian and Herzegovinian society has a long history of religious coexistence. This history has, however, recently been stained by the bloody and brutal 1992-1995 war, which saw more than 200,000 people killed and more than a million displaced. Atrocities culminated in the Srebrenica genocide where more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys were exterminated in a few days by Serbian forces. The omnipresent legacy of war and the transmission of painful experiences to generations born after the war mean its consequences are still to be felt in a severely divided society. The society’s history of war is politically construed so

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as to reinforce division and reduce interaction between the different constituent peoples, opening doors for politicization and reducing confidence in “the other”. One could even argue that the political elites purposefully generate fear based on ignorance as a tool to maintain power.

Throughout history, religion has inspired mankind to the most noble of deeds, but has also served as rationale for some of the darkest actions of human history. Ignorance about “the other” has repeatedly caused confrontations over cultural, racial or religious differences. People are afraid of what they do not know. Perhaps the only things more dangerous than ignorance are the illusion of knowledge and holding onto false representations. Whether discussed on a global or local level, prejudice against a religious other can cause division and conflict. Religious tolerance and acceptance can be the basis for coexistence. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, religious affiliation plays a crucial role in identity because religion is used to distinguish between different national groups, which otherwise appear identical in terms of race and language. A recent survey has revealed that a large percentage of the population – approximately 79% - in Bosnia and Herzegovina believe in God. This percentage is significantly above the European average, of just more than 50%, according to a Euro barometer poll in 2010.² This high number of believers makes it imperative to work on inter-religious dialogue in Bosnian and Herzegovinian society, and to build on the very potential of religion. Despite the view that religion is more often a dividing than a unifying force, some studies have revealed that religious people show higher confidence in the prospects for successful reconciliation.³

Unfortunately, children of different ethnic backgrounds are segregated from an early age and lack opportunities to engage in the most natural way to learn about each other - experience and real life.⁴ Furthermore, students who attend so-called “two schools under one roof”⁵, and that is most students in the country,

2 Wilkes, G. et al. 2013. *Factors in Reconciliation: Religion, Local Conditions, People and Trust- Results from a Survey Conducted in 13 Cities Across Bosnia and Herzegovina in May 2013*, p.13, available at <http://www.diskursi.com/uploads/2013/dec/Edinburg%20Eng.pdf>.

3 Wilkes, G. et al. 2012. *Reconciliation and Trust Building in Bosnia-Herzegovina- a Survey of Popular Attitudes in Four Cities and Regions*. Edinburgh. CEIR/Project on Religion and Ethics in the Making of War.

4 For more on youth perceptions on Bosnian society see *Leaving the Past behind: The perceptions of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Nansen Dialogue Centre Sarajevo and Saferworld. March 2012., Sarajevo/London. available at: www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/633-leaving-the-past-behind accessed 15.8.2014.

5 This model includes two sets of teachers and students and two school administrations sharing the same school building, working independently. There are about 50 cases of “two schools under one roof” in Zenica-Doboj, Herzegovina-Neretva and Central Bosnia cantons. Most are in the last of these three (Kuburić & Moe, 2006). The international community (OSCE; OHR, CE) considers this model a form of segregation: “...For one thing, by suggesting that pupils from all three constituent peoples and the ranks of the ‘others’ should not attend school together, it appeared to legitimize and institutionalize a form of segregation.” (OSCE ambassador Douglas Davidson, September 2005, in *Večernji list*, March 24, 2005; English version available online (<http://www.oscebih.org/public/default.asp?d=6&article=show&id=969>)

attend confessional religious education with curricula that cover exclusively their own faith, with little or no space for other monotheistic religions. It is therefore quite understandable, however distressing, that the knowledge of other beliefs and tradition should be so scarce. Material on other cultures and traditions is underrepresented in other school subjects as well, including the so-called “national group of subjects”.

There are those who would argue religion is a core problem in the divisions and lack of trust between the various groups. For example, an analysis by *proMENTE* of the “national group of subjects” content in textbooks concludes:

Religious diversity is being treated as a problem, while belonging to one’s own religion is being treated very exclusively, which stimulates the feeling of being endangered... The way they portray “infidels” from their own ranks as less valued individuals is especially problematic.⁶

This distrust of religion may have roots in how religious symbols were abused during the war.

The context of Bosnian reality, however, favors work on inter-religious dialogue, especially among young people. Initiatives like the one described in this article can be a way of compensating, at least partially, for the unfortunate state of affairs regarding divisions and ignorance that has had such devastating long-term effects on society.⁷

Survey results – data gathering and awareness-raising

The first step in our project was to assess the actual knowledge young people have of “the other” in two communities in the Upper Vrbas area. We did this by conducting a small survey of a sample of 740 secondary school students in the towns of Gornji Vakuf/Uskoplje, Bugojno, Donji Vakuf, and Jajce. Table 1 contains further details about the sample. Catholic students were asked five closed-ended questions about Islam,⁸ while Muslim students were asked five comparable

6 *Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina: What do we teach our children?* The analysis of the “National group of subjects” contents in textbooks, *proMENTE* 2006, 5. available at: www.promente.net/OSF0-report-brief-e.pdf.

7 For more information, see the report, *Divided schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, (UNICEF Bosnia and Herzegovina, December 2009), at www.unicef.org/bih/media_14093.html.

8 1. What do Muslims believe in? a) in one God and Muhammad as the only messenger, b) in one God and Muhammad as one of His messengers; 2. When was Islam founded? a) during Muhammad’s time (1468-1531), b) during Muhammad’s time (571-632), c) during Muhammad’s time (145-208); 3. What is the holy book of Muslims? a) Ilmihal, b) Quran, c) Hadis, d) Sunnah; 4. Which city is considered the centre of Islamic spirituality? a) Istanbul, b) Mekka, c) Jerusalem, d) Medina; 5. Which are the two greatest Muslim holy days? a) Mevlud and Tawhid, b) Hajj and Eid Al-Adha c) Ajvatovica and Eid, d) Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha

questions about Christianity.⁹ Participants were also asked to describe how and why the two greatest holy days of the other faith were celebrated and were invited to comment on the questionnaire or religion in general. Finally, they were encouraged to write down what they would like to know about Islam or Catholicism.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample

	Sex		Grade				School type			Municipality			
	Female	Male	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	Grammar school	Technical school	Vocational school	Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje	Donji Vakuf	Jajce	Bugojno
Catholics (N=227)													
Number	137	90	38	40	90	59	138	23	66	90	1	50	86
Percentage	60.3	39.6	16.7	17.6	39.6	26	60.8	10.1	29.1	39	0.4	22	37.9
Muslims (N=513)													
Number	286	227	124	133	196	60	222	146	145	99	84	48	282
Percentage	55.7	44.2	24.1	25.9	38.2	11.7	43.3	28.5	28.3	19.3	16.4	9.4	55

Because the questions concerned very basic matters of the two religions and the participants were adolescents with broad access to information through the mass media, one would expect 100% accuracy in their answers. Around 21% of the Muslim students said that Christians believe in multiple gods and 86% of the Catholics answered that Muslims believe in one God and Muhammad as the *only* prophet. 60% of Catholics identified the Muslim holy days correctly, while 90% of Muslims were able to identify the Catholic holy days. However, only 2% of Catholic students correctly described the rationale of the Muslim holy days, as opposed to 33% of Muslims describing Christian holy days.

The questions the students asked about one another were illuminating. 48% of the Muslims asked at least one question about Catholicism, while 29% of Catholics had questions about Islam. Muslim students' questions about Catholicism were

9 1. What do Christians believe in? a) multiple gods, b) one God; 2. When was Christianity founded? a) with the formation of Vatican, b) with Jesus, c) in the Council of Nicaea, d) with the birth of Moses; 3. Which one is the holy book of Christians? a) Bible, b) Torah, c) Gospel d) Old Testament; 4. Where is the center of the Catholic Church? a) Jerusalem, b) Rome, c) Vatican, d) Bethlehem; 5. Which are the two greatest Catholic holy days? a) Christmas and Pascha b) Christmas and Easter, c) All Saints and Easter, d) St. John's Day and Christmas.

mostly about the trinity and the divinity of Jesus, Mary, the saints, the Pope's sinless nature, the absolution of sin by priests, the Bible's authenticity, and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Catholic students' questions about Islam were about the strictness of fasting during Ramadan and *salat*, the prohibition of pork, the *hijab*, the position of women in Islam, *wahhabism* and polygamy. These questions illustrated how students view each other through the lens of their own faith and demonstrate an inability to understand the other's perspective. Students portrayed each other's religion through their questions with negativity and prejudice, while disregarding shared values. For example, the Muslims asked "Why can't priests marry?", while the Catholics asked "Why are imams allowed to be married?"; the Muslims asked "Why don't Catholics take off their shoes on entering a church?", while the Catholics asked, "Why do Muslims remove their shoes on entering mosque?"; "Why do they get circumcised?" vs. "Why don't they get circumcised?"; etc. The students' questions raised controversial issues, suggesting that most of what they know about each other's religions was denigrating and provocative, serving to stress the superiority of their own identity and beliefs as closer to "common sense". Such an interpretation of course requires deeper analysis than is possible within the scope of this article.

Examples of the students' comments on the survey include:

This survey made me think I need to explore other religions more. Religion is not what makes people evil.

To me, Islam is a good religion, but it is the same as Christianity, so I don't understand why we are not one.

The questions about Easter and the Christian tradition made me think and realize how little I actually know about the people living next to me.

I cannot believe I did not know what the celebration of Christmas is about!

I wish we studied their religion and they ours, so we all got to know about similarities and differences in our beliefs.¹⁰

Comments like these illustrate individual students experiencing change in how they feel about the religious divisions in their society, which is exactly the response one aims for as a starting point of further inter-religious engagement.

10 Jusić, Mersiha. 2010. *Međureligijski vodič za srednjoškolicke-koliko učenici srednjih škola gornjevrbaške regije znaju o vjeri drugog i šta bi htjeli znati*. Sarajevo: Mali koraci, p.7 [Jusić, Mersiha, "Interreligious guide for secondary school students- how much students from the Upper Vrbas Valley know about each other and what they would like to know. Sarajevo: Small Steps, p.7]

Making an “Inter-religious Guide for Secondary School Students”

The sense of belonging to a local community, regardless of religious divisions, can be reinforced by small initiatives like the student survey, where participants engage on an important issue like inter-religious dialogue and are presented with the results later, leaving them to contemplate the issue and their own attitudes toward it. The survey itself provides interesting information, but the effect it has on the individual is a better measure of the work being done. The “aha!” moment when the individual comes to realize his or her lack of knowledge may become the basis for a change in attitude. This focus on changing individual attitudes sets this model apart from more general approaches that lack this crucial individual component.

The findings of the survey are gathered in a small publication, entitled “An Inter-religious Guide for Secondary School Students”, with brief introductions to the monotheistic religions written by local theologians, answers to the questions asked by the participants, and a glossary of terms related to these monotheistic religions. The publication provides a fruitful combination of locally relevant data and good sources of information about other religions for use as future reference in the students’ everyday life.

Firsthand experience with “the other”- workshops for students

But, minds are not changed merely through acquiring data or information... Rather, it is solely through the slow and steady building of personal relationships that one discovers the fundamental truth that all people everywhere have the same dreams and aspirations, that all people struggle with the same fears and anxieties. (Reza Aslan)¹¹

As mentioned earlier, the majority of students included in the project from the Upper Vrbas valley in Central Bosnia had no previous interaction with their peers of a different faith. Workshops were organized to raise their awareness of inter-religious and intercultural dialogue. To do so, they had to be prepared to interact and discuss the topic within an atmosphere of free expression. For most of the students, this was a life-changing experience, as it was the first time for them to sit down and talk with their peers of different religions. We also wanted the students to begin understanding the differences between the religious groups as normal and to explore and accentuate their similarities. Religion is only a

11 Reza, Aslan. 2011. *No God but God- The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. London: Arrow Books, *xv*.

part of our identity. As individuals, we possess many identities which make us more similar than we may think at first. Keeping this in mind, the workshop was designed to help students communicate in a safe environment that was accepting of difference. Students were encouraged to reconsider their own prejudices and to articulate and communicate their attitudes about different forms of religiosity so as to learn how prejudice leads to intolerance and discrimination. Having teachers from their respective religions present helped create openness during the workshop.

A simple exercise called “What’s in my name?” is a good ice-breaker activity. Each person states his/her name and tells the group something about it: how they got it, what it means, whether they like it or not, etc. The point of this exercise, besides getting acquainted, is to show how we all share similar personal histories (for example: “*I was supposed to be called X, but I ended up being called Y*”; “*My name is X, I was named after a saint/prophet and I like my name*”. This activity emphasizes that each of us is an individual with his or her preferences, dreams, and goals, regardless of their religious or other identities. Additionally, since many names have a religious meaning, the exercise can serve as a good introduction for what comes next.

The workshop continues with a more competitive game called “How much do we know about each other?” Students were divided into groups of six by randomly assigning them one of four colors. Each group was given a colored envelope with sixteen terms originating from Judaism, Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam. The goal was to categorize each term correctly under the right religion and its symbol. Students’ reactions to the game are usually very positive. They remain alert and fully engaged in the activity. When each group has finished, correct responses are counted. The count is done while offering explanations and correct answers as needed, while also asking the students for their impressions of the game and the terms mentioned. One group is announced the winner and small prizes are given and shared among the group members, but the real prizes are the impressions and views exchanged in a friendly manner between students.

A final activity can help accentuate common values. Before introducing the Q&A section of *The Guide*, students are asked to pick up a piece of paper from a box with an actual question asked by a student in the survey and answered in *The Guide*. Participants are then asked if they understood the rationale of the question, whether it is something that interests them as well, and whether they can answer it themselves. This activity usually generates discussion, facilitated by the religion teachers present, making it a teachable moment. It also brings participants relief for having - perhaps for the first time - an opportunity openly to articulate their opinions and dilemmas.

This method of learning about other religious groups is not rooted in stereotypes. It is more effective to have Muslims represent Islam and Christians Christianity than to have them interpreting each other’s religions. By allowing

students to speak for themselves, we work against having an outsider describe another faith in his or her words, using concepts and images from their own religious background, and so blurring their personal feelings towards it. Instead, we find it possible to develop the empathy that is the foundation of acceptance. This type of exchange makes for a powerful first-hand experience and having a priest and an imam present their religious views and engage in conversation adds authenticity to the program.

Conclusion

The reality of life in Bosnia and Herzegovina today is that more grassroots initiatives aimed at true inter-religious dialogue are needed, especially amongst young people in local communities systematically divided through the “two schools under one roof” system. The effective model presented here, involving a survey, an awareness campaign, publications, and workshop activities, creates opportunities for individual participants to begin to change their own perceptions, face their own prejudices and lack of knowledge, and begin to have direct contact with “the other” in the context of authentic and open dialogue. This model can be replicated in areas where there are tensions caused by divided communities and opportunities for interaction are lacking.