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# Religious Education after Conflicts: Promoting Social Cohesion or Entrenching Existing Cleavages?

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*This article considers initiatives to reform religious education after violent identity-based conflicts in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia. The Taif Agreement, Belfast Agreement and Ohrid Agreement mapped extensive education reforms and established consociational power-sharing in the three jurisdictions, altering state identity and inter-communal hierarchies. The existing literature generates two hypotheses on the political function of religious education after violent conflicts: (a) religious education tends to entrench existing ethnic, national and political cleavages; or (b) religious education helps further mutual knowledge, integration and social cohesion after violent conflicts. This comparative research employs original interviews and documents to evaluate initiatives to reform religious education (as a curricular subject) in post-conflict Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia. It suggests that the first hypothesis reflects more accurately the political function of education: religious education helps entrench existing cleavages in these deeply divided societies, but this does not necessarily hamper short-term peace and political stability.*

## 1 Introduction and Literature

Collective narratives of identity have an important function during violent conflicts and are equally crucial to the success of peace processes. Religion is part and parcel of such narratives: whilst theories of modernization assumed that it would wither away, religion remains a central component of communal identity (Ivekovic, 2002: 523). This is the case

especially where religious cleavages coincide with other politically salient markers of identity such as nationality or ethnicity, as in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (Macedonia). As a fundamentally exclusive marker of belonging, religious allegiance remains a highly effective instrument for group definition and differentiation (Murgescu, 2002: 296). Confessional cleavages may be even more effective in cementing group cohesion because 'if the religion has an unquestionable missionary zeal, the confessional community turns inward, bound up in its past, proud of its identity and apprehensive about its future' (Salamé, 1986: 3). Thus, religion and confession can legitimise nation- and state-building projects and inform the collective memory of ethnic and national communities. But how is religion taught to children in societies emerging from violent identity-based conflicts? Does religious education typically foster integration and social cohesion? Does it cement the previously warring mutually exclusive communities?

This article considers initiatives to reform the curriculum of religious education (RE) in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia after their current peace agreements (the 1989 Taif Agreement, the 1998 Belfast Agreement and the 2001 Ohrid Agreement, respectively). It is widely accepted that official institutions, such as schools, produce and reproduce collective narratives of identity through their contents (curricula) and structures. However, it is not clear how schools adapt to new political realities after peace agreements, particularly in traditionally plural societies, where several ethnic, religious, national linguistic or cultural groups live separately but close to each other (Skeie, 2002: 53). The three peace agreements singled out education as a mechanism for the promotion of mutual understanding, social cohesion and reconciliation through common curricula and mixed schools. However, they also established (or re-established) consociational power-sharing in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia. Consociations allow all relevant ethnic, religious and national groups to participate in political and non-political institutions through executive power-sharing, autonomy, proportional representation and veto rights (Lijphart, 1977). They alter the identity of the state, its relationship to local communities, inter-communal

hierarchies and patterns of interaction. According to Lijphart, consociational power-sharing, rather than eroding inter-group boundaries, 'make[s] societies more thoroughly plural' in the short term (Lijphart, 1977: 42). This questions whether schools can emerge as instruments for mutual understanding and integration in post-conflict consociations (as stipulated by the peace agreements) or whether their contribution to peace and political stability is more complex.

Comparative analysis of RE can shed valuable light on this question. This is because, as Skeie puts it, RE is highly 'identity-sensitive' (Nelson, 2007: 6). This article focuses primarily on the arrangements for the teaching of RE as a curricular subject, but it will also incidentally consider the implications of the RE curriculum on the structure of the education system (particularly in regard to the separation or mixing of children belonging to different faith backgrounds). There is general agreement that a RE curriculum should provide some knowledge and understanding of religion (Skeie, 2002, 56). However, two other hypotheses on the political function of RE can be drawn from the existing literature.

The first hypothesis is that an RE curriculum should be designed and delivered by religious authorities, and nurture children's sense of belonging to a faith community. As Skeie puts it looking at Western Europe, this approach 'is countering relativism, indifferentism, disintegration' in modern society (Skeie, 2006, 24). Arguments in favour of this approach to RE mirror closely the arguments in support of state-funded religious schools: it would signal the state's respect for its faith communities, enshrine inter-communal equality and promote the inclusion and allegiance of members of the major religious communities to the state (Jackson, 2003, 90 Interviewee 1; Matevski, 2009: 7). Yet, in a deeply divided society this approach would primarily help socialize children in the culture and practices of discreet ethnic, national and political communities.

The second hypothesis is that an RE curriculum should be designed by the state to transmit knowledge about a variety of religious and non-religious beliefs and practices and explore ethical and moral issues through dialogue and comparison (Kuburić & Moe, 2006: 3;

Richardson, 2013: 11; White, 2004: 154, 162). According to Skeie, this approach would counter 'conflicts among religious and ethnic groups, discriminations, racism' (Skeie, 2006: 24). It would also address the core criticisms to a confessional approach to RE: the danger of indoctrination and proselytization and the erosion of 'social cohesion through separating young people of different religious and non-religious backgrounds' (Jackson, 2003: 93; Chadwick, 1994: 131; Gallagher, 2005: 434; Nelson, 2004: 253; Kassis, 2002: 368; Kuburić & Moe, 2006: 3, 6; Richardson, 2008: 2). In other words, it would foster mutual understanding, ecumenism and social cohesion in deeply divided societies by challenging 'prejudice and indoctrination... through those very aspects of education where there might appear to be the greatest danger of them occurring' (Richardson, 2013: 9).

This article will consider arrangements for the teaching of RE as a curricular subject before, during and after the conflicts in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia, respectively. Then, it will draw some comparative conclusions: RE is taught in state-funded schools when religion is salient to collective identities and when religious and political elites are interdependent. The specific current arrangements for RE in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia also suggest that RE helps entrench existing cleavages, making 'societies more thoroughly plural' (Lijphart, 1977: 42) rather than furthering mutual understanding and integration. In societies adopting consociational power-sharing, this may foster stability and peace, at least in the short term.

## **2 Method**

This comparative study is based on qualitative research carried out in three deeply divided societies. The author conducted original semi-structured interviews in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia in 2012-13. She interviewed a total of twenty-two curriculum writers, experts of RE, and policymakers in the three jurisdictions (eight in Northern Ireland, seven in Lebanon and seven in Macedonia). Interviewees were selected on the basis of their professional background and contribution to the local debate about RE, but also to ensure

broad representation of all the relevant religious, ethnic and national communities. They were given the opportunity to use an interpreter, but they all chose to carry out the interview in English. The semi-structured interviews lasted about one hour, and questions focused on the participants' experience and opinions about past and current approaches to RE and their relationship to conflict and peace-building. Nineteen interviews were recorded with the consent of participants, and the author manually transcribed the recordings verbatim. Three interviewees did not grant consent for recording, so the author took extensive notes during and immediately after the interview. Throughout fieldwork, the author compiled a journal recording non-verbal cues, to aid the subsequent analysis. The author carried out a deductive analysis of the interview data, manually coding the content of transcripts and notes to identify patterns across the three case studies and recurrent themes. When necessary, participants were contacted for follow-up questions to clarify their statements and ensure the genuine representation of their views. Curricula, official documents and reports were similarly coded manually to identify recurrent themes and substantiate the interview evidence.

The three case studies were selected according to the most different systems design method of comparative research. Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia differ in many respects. In particular, in Lebanon and Northern Ireland religious confession is at the very heart of the cultural expressions and political mobilization of different communities. Since independence in 1943, the Lebanese consociational political system assigned a fixed number of seats to each confessional community, reflecting (but also entrenching) overlapping confessional, political and national identities. Similarly, in Northern Ireland, 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' remain shorthand for different cultural, political and national allegiances (Arlow, 2004: 263). In contrast, in Macedonia religious allegiance was not salient to state and communal identity until the late 1990s: under socialist Yugoslavia, linguistic and ethnic identities were paramount. However, the three case studies are similar in one important respect: they all experienced violent inter-group conflict that was regulated

through consociational power-sharing. The most different systems design method of comparative research is ideally suited to generate hypotheses vis-à-vis a novel research field, and to highlight patterns among few case studies (Landman, 2008: 29). Thus, it is appropriate to explore for the first time the political function of RE in consociations. Due to the limited number of interviews and of case studies, further research should be undertaken to test the findings on other deeply divided societies before generalizing these finding to all societies adopting consociational power-sharing.

### **3 The Political Function of Religious Education**

The Taif, Belfast and Ohrid agreements regulated Lebanon's Civil War, Northern Ireland's Troubles and Macedonia's ethnic conflict by establishing consociational power-sharing. They also postulated extensive education reforms, including amendments to the curricula for history and citizenship education (in the Taif Agreement), increased opportunities for mother tongue instruction (in the Ohrid Agreement) and the promotion of state schools and of mixed schooling (in the Taif and Belfast Agreements). Yet, the three peace agreements did not consider RE.

To examine the arrangements for the teaching of RE as a curricular subject in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia, the next sections will survey the RE curriculum prior to their current peace agreements before exploring the extensive debates over RE in each post-conflict society. They aim to establish if RE typically: (a) helps socialize children in the culture and practices of separate ethnic, national and confessional communities or (b) fosters integration and mutual understanding.

#### **3.1 *Religious Education in Lebanon***

RE had a clear political function before and during the conflict in Lebanon: it helped socialize children in the culture and practices of separate confessional communities. The subject was introduced in state schools only in 1973: previously, religious authorities had protected their

prerogative to impart RE only in private religious schools without state interference (Abouchedid, Nasser, & Van Blommestein, 2002). When it was introduced, RE was a confessional subject, taught by clerics, and children were separated into different groups according to their religious background (Bashshour, 2003: 160; Frayha, 2004: 196). During the 1975-89 civil war, RE was criticized for directly contributing to the conflict by socialising children into hostile and exclusive narratives of identity and indirectly justifying their physical separation along confessional lines (Interviewee 19).

The Taif Agreement postulated the creation of common textbooks for history and citizenship education 'in a manner that strengthens national belonging, fusion, spiritual and cultural openness' (Document of National Accord 1989). Interviewees recall that the omission of RE was conspicuous, as many wished to employ the RE curriculum to 'make people belong to the same nation... independently of the religious links' (Interviewee 19) and promote societal integration (Interviewee 21). Others defended communal rights to impart confessional RE in state schools to provide children with 'ethical guidance' and nurture their faith development (Bashshour, 2003: 160-161).

In 1997, the Council of Ministers, including representatives of all the main confessional groups in Lebanon, voted to eliminate RE from the national curriculum, thereby abolishing the subject in state schools (Bashshour, 2003: 160; Abu Assali, 2013). Recognizing that private schools were legally entitled to supplement the national curriculum with additional subjects, the power-sharing executive established that private schools could only teach RE on 'weekends, and only for those who wish' (Interviewee 19; confirmed by Khalife, 2006: 153). This decision faced immediate opposition by a broad coalition of religious institutions, which refused to make RE optional in private religious schools and lobbied aggressively for the reintroduction of RE in state schools (Khalife, 2006: 153; Interviewee 19). Clerical pressure succeeded in eroding the Cabinet's decision: in September 1998, Prime Minister Rafic Hariri declared that RE was 'the foundation stone for the social, ethical and ideological existence of Lebanon' (Bashshour, 2003: 161). In a further step towards mending fences



with religious authorities, in late 1998 the Cabinet instructed the Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD) to 'study the possibility of adding religion to the curricula' (Frayha, 2004: 188). By November 1999, the Cabinet had reinstated one weekly hour of RE in state schools, and tasked CERD with preparing a unified RE curriculum and textbook (Bashshour, 2003: 162).

Interviewees suggested that the Cabinet envisaged a non-confessional and integrationist RE curriculum. Former CERD directors Frayha and Abu Assali claimed that in late 1999 CERD started working on a RE curriculum, taught by lay teachers according to a common unified textbook (Abou Assali, 2012; Interviewee 19; Frayha, 2004: 188). RE was expected to emphasize common values and convey uniform narratives of belonging, thereby contributing to 'national unity' and social cohesion in post-war Lebanon (Frayha, 2004: 188; Abu Assali, 2013). Frayha recalls that the RE textbook drafting committee included specialists in theology and curriculum writing appointed by CERD as well as clergymen chosen by the 'major religious sects' (Interviewee 19; Frayha, 2004: 189). This reflected the somewhat contradictory assumption that the clergies retained a fundamental responsibility for the religious education of children.

In fact, Frayha, who chaired the curriculum drafting committee, recalls that clergy members immediately demanded two sets of textbooks and curricula, one for Christians and one for Muslims (Interviewee 19; Frayha, 2013: 189). An official present at the meetings reported that discussions stalled because Muslim members of the committee insisted on describing Christianity through the prism of Islam (Interviewee 20), but this view was not confirmed by other interviewees. Instead, they suggests that, rather than focusing on a comparative, non-confessional curriculum, the drafting committee embarked upon the task of drafting a confessional curriculum for the faith development of children of different persuasions (Interviewee 19). This amounted to framing an ecumenical synthesis of Islam and Christianity and unsurprisingly, it proved too arduous for the curriculum drafting committee.

In a policy turnabout, in October 2000 the Lebanese cabinet declared that there would be two sets of curricula and textbooks, one for Muslims and one for Christians. It also timidly suggested that each textbook should contain some information about the other religion (Frayha, 2004: 189). If students of different religions sat in the same class, the Minister of Education suggested 'let[ting] the Christians learn in the Christian book and the Muslims in the Muslim book' (Bashshour, 2003: 162). Frayha recalls that this compromise did not satisfy religious authorities: reportedly, clergy members on the curriculum drafting committees called on the cabinet to amend its instructions because no Christian was comfortable and qualified to teach about Islam and *vice versa* (Interviewee 19; Frayha, 2004: 189). Frayha recalled that at this point, the Druze representative on the drafting committee, who had insisted on a unified RE textbook, resigned (Frayha, 2013: 109). At approximately the same time, Frayha was 'relieved' from his post because of a controversy over the contents of the common history textbook and 'the whole [RE] issue was frozen' (Interviewee 19; see also Frayha, 2013: 109).

As a consequence, RE retains an ambiguous status in Lebanon: it is part of the national curriculum but lacks any centrally prescribed aims and contents. All the experts and policymakers interviewed agree that in state schools, local religious authorities impart RE, define its contents and appoint RE teachers (Khalife, 2006: 149; Abu Assali, 2013). They mostly agree with Abu Assali, who claims that the lack of a common RE curriculum means that religious figures can 'go and teach what they want' during the weekly hour of RE (Interviewee 21). Empirical research corroborates the interview data: private schools, even more than state institutions, teach RE 'as they see fit', and RE often amounts to religious instruction and the performing of religious rituals (Abouchedid et al., 2002; International Crisis Group, 2010: 22; Frayha, 2013: 108; Khalife, 2006: 154). RE is usually taught by clergymen of the same sect as the majority of students, and this allows for religious outreach within the safe confines of a particular confessional community (Daou, 2012; Frayha, 2004: 190).

Beyond entrenching clerical influence over schools, Frayha claimed that RE encourages the labeling and creation of a sense of difference among children (Interviewee 19). He asserts that the contents of RE, and the separation of children of different faiths during its teaching, constructs RE (and religion more generally) as an instrument for exclusion. The literature confirms that existing arrangements for the RE curriculum have important implications for the structure of the education system and Lebanese society. Arrangements for RE may further the conflation of religious allegiance with communal belonging, and the perception of schools as bulwarks of group identity. This, in turn, justifies the proliferation of private confessional schools, competing with state schools for government subsidies and perpetuating the physical separation of children.

Moreover, a 2000 study of seventy-seven RE textbooks highlighted widespread use of discriminatory language, frequent juxtaposition of 'Christian' and 'Muslim', encouragement of feelings of superiority over other religions and emphasis on dogma and indoctrination (Frayha, 2004: 190; Khalife, 2006: 157). RE may therefore help reproduce the prejudices underpinning inter-communal conflict in Lebanon.

Finally, Christian confessions formulated a common textbook for the RE of Christian children (Wehbe & Labaki, 2012), but a variety of different books exist for the spiritual education of Muslim children. In an interview, a senior officer at CERD, reported the credible view that the political tensions between the Sunni and Shia communities hampered attempts at formulating a common RE textbook (Interviewee 20). Thus, the contents of RE may reflect the evolving political salience of communal identities in post-civil war Lebanon, where the Sunni-Shia divide has overshadowed other cleavages.

In sum, the interview data collected in Lebanon suggest that the Taif agreement did not alter the political function of RE. Interviews with experts and policymakers suggest that RE was shaped foremost by the interdependent relationship between clerical and political elites, which dictated the marginalization a common RE curriculum in the late 1990s. As Abu Assali puts it, politicians appeased the clergies 'because their force, their strength, their re-election'

depends on their relationship to religious leaders (Interviewee 21; the same point was made by Interviewee 19). Indeed, the interviews corroborate the literature in suggesting that RE as a curricular subject helps socialize children in the culture and practices of mutually exclusive confessional communities, which overlap with political groups.

### **3.2 *Religious Education in Northern Ireland***

In Northern Ireland, the 1947 Education Act entrenched the role of the RE curriculum as a 'means of induction into a particular religious, and often denominational, tradition' (Greer, 1991: 190). This had important structural consequences: the Protestant clergy's influence over non-denominational Bible instruction in state controlled schools justified the existence of a Catholic maintained school sector providing 'a Catholic education, on Catholic principles, with Catholic masters and the use of Catholic books' (Darby, 1976: 125; Armstrong, 2009: 300). Thus, the RE curriculum underpinned the creation of separate school sectors catering for different communities, and later discouraged initiatives for mixed education (Barnes, 1997: 73).

However, in 1992, a working party composed of delegates of the four largest Christian denominations in Northern Ireland (the Catholic Church, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church and Methodist Church) produced a *Core Syllabus for Religious Education*. Interviewees agreed with the literature that the formulation of a common syllabus appeared as 'a moment of historic change' (Chadwick, 1994: 178; Interviewee 4), and as a contribution to solving a conflict that many saw as essentially religious (Barnes, 1997: 78; Interviewee 3; Interviewee 2). However, participants also pointed out that only the four largest churches were invited to contribute to the syllabus (Interviewee 7; Interviewee 4), reflecting the close relationship between political and religious elites in Northern Ireland and the desire to restore it after a bitter dispute over the merging of the separate teacher training colleges (Richardson, 2008: 9). The literature also questions the ecumenical and integrationist potential of the RE syllabus. Nelson argues that the RE syllabus reflects the conviction of the four main Churches that RE was the only subject 'beyond the interference

of secular planners' as well as their solidarity against 'secular forces' (Nelson, 2007: 9). Thus, it did not challenge the confessional approach of Catholic Maintained schools nor the non-denominational (but Christian-oriented) approach of de facto Protestant controlled schools (Chadwick, 1994: 179). Whilst enshrining the aspiration to employ RE to foster mutual knowledge and understanding in Northern Ireland, the RE syllabus remained criticized for its Christian exclusiveness and for perpetuating the psychological separation of children belonging to different Christian denomination.

In 2002, with an 'unusually narrow exercise of statutory powers', the government called only representatives of the 'four main churches' to revise the core RE syllabus (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2007; Interviewee 1). An expert reported that in private meetings, civil servants insisted that the precedent of exclusive clerical control over RE, established with the 1992 syllabus, could not be overturned (Interviewee 7). Indeed, interviewees suggested that (as in Lebanon) religious authorities, politicians and bureaucrats still largely perceive the RE curriculum as an exclusive 'preserve' of the Catholic and Protestant clergies (Interviewee 7; Interviewee 4, Interviewee 5). In contrast to Lebanon, though, the Department of Education (DENI) and the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) attempted to influence the syllabus working group. For example, they insisted on providing an 'understanding of world religions' (Arlow, 2004: 296).

All the experts interviewed asserted that the 2007 core syllabus is more conducive than its predecessor to the teaching of several Christian traditions and to the tackling of issues related to morality, conflict and reconciliation (Interviewee 2; Interviewee 3; Interviewee 7). Specifically, it includes a module on world religions (for pupils between the ages of 11 and 14) and prescribes the study of the 'Roman Catholic tradition and at least one Protestant tradition' for pupils between the ages of 14 and 16 (Armstrong, 2009: 301; Interviewees 3; Interviewee 2; Interviewee 5). Yet, the interviews also highlight that in practice the 2007 syllabus is very flexible and remarkably similar to its predecessor (Interviewee 2). Experts point out that it does not establish the aims and pedagogical approach of RE (Interviewee 7)

and disregards the fundamental debate over whether RE is 'indoctrination or an academic study of religion' (Interviewee 4). Others argued that, similarly to its predecessor, it papers over the two intrinsically different approaches to RE in Northern Ireland's fragmented school system: doctrinal teaching for faith development in Catholic maintained schools and non-denominational teaching in controlled (de facto Protestant) schools (Interviewee 2; Interviewee 7; Nelson, 2007: 12). Thus, 'people [can] take what they want from the syllabus' (Interviewee 2). Reportedly, this is because, similarly to the Lebanese Ministry of Education, DENI has little or no control over RE and very few schools ever requested government inspections for RE (Interviewee 7; Barnes, 1997: 75-76; Greer, 1991: 196; Interviewee 3; Interviewee 2).

Several interviewees questioned whether the 2007 syllabus is 'fit for [the] purpose' of providing an understanding of diversity and of the complexities of Northern Ireland's society (Interviewee 2; point also raised by Richardson, 2013: 7-8). According to an expert, the syllabus' contents are premised on the assumption that children are either Christian 'or in need of becoming Christians' (Interviewee 7) and another interviewee characterized the syllabus as a 'compromise between fundamentalist Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants' (Interviewee 4). Other participants agree that RE in primary schools focuses either on Protestant traditions or allows for the participation in the Catholic rituals and sacraments through flexible contents and different textbook series (Interviewee 2; Interviewee 7). The contradictions inherent to this dual approach are most obvious in integrated schools (attended by children belonging to both communities). Here, while Catholic children prepare for the sacraments, other children may follow an alternative 'Delving Deeper' programme (Richardson, 2013: 20). Physically separating children during RE contradicts the integrated movement's emphasis on ecumenism and on open discussion of religious rituals (Richardson, 2013: 21) and may help socialize children into the separate narratives and identities of Northern Ireland's confessional and national communities even in integrated schools. In sum, despite the existence of a core RE syllabus, the political function

of RE in Northern Ireland is remarkably similar to that of RE in Lebanon: it helps reproduce the mutually exclusive Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant/Unionist communities.

The interviewees added that rather than tackling issues related to identity and conflict, the RE curriculum helps consolidate children's identification with a religious denomination, coinciding with wider national and political allegiances (Interviewee 3; Interviewee 2; Interviewee 7; see also Richardson, 2009: 8; 2013: 8-10). A participant reported 'a tendency to play safe, to take the traditional route, which was confessional teaching of religious education and to avoid controversial issues and discussion which may raise questions relating to other religions and their meanings' (Interviewee 3). This is not accidental: the syllabus working group refused to introduce modules on world religions and comparative Christian traditions in primary school, maintaining that this could confuse children instead of 'consolidating their grasp of their primary culture' (Armstrong, 2009: 307; echoed by Interviewee 7). Even at age 11 to 14, the 'four main churches' recommended to employ only a 'modest amount of teaching time' on world religions (Armstrong, 2009: 301-302; Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2006: 3; Interviewee 7; Richardson, 2013: 16-17). Research shows that most schools complied with this recommendation (Armstrong, 2009: 301; Interviewee 2; Interviewee 7; Richardson, 2007: 8). Indeed, the CCEA Executive Director confirmed that the CCEA's GCSE market share in Northern Ireland is lower for religious studies than for other subjects, and suggested this may be because schools try to avoid teaching two Christian denominations (Interviewee 5). By selecting a different exam awarding body for RE (such as the English Assessment and Qualification Alliance, AQA), schools are allowed to focus on a single Christian denomination. Thus, in 2011 over 70% of Northern Ireland's GCSEs in religious studies were awarded by the AQA, and only 26.4% by CCEA (Council for Curriculum Examination and Assessment, 2013). In 2001, Nelson found that in the South Eastern Education and Library Board, 95% of pupils in controlled schools sat the CCEA exam and 90% of pupils in Catholic maintained schools sat the AQA exam (Nelson, 2004: 255). Thus, Catholic maintained schools may avoid teaching

about other Christian denominations more frequently than their controlled counterparts (Interviewee 5).

Finally, interviewees propose that existing arrangements for the teaching of RE as a curricular subject legitimize the physical separation of children of different backgrounds into different school sectors: they justify the very existence of state-funded Catholic maintained schools (Interviewee 2; Interviewee 1), whose contribution to children's faith development is increasingly crucial due to 'increasing secularization' (Interviewee 6). They also protect the influence of the Protestant Churches over controlled schools, which the churches still regard as 'state-financed church-related' schools (Nelson, 2004: 251; Interviewee 7). Dual approaches to the RE curriculum influence teacher training (in two separate institutions: the Catholic St Mary's College and the non-denominational Stranmillis College), teacher employment procedures (exempted from the fair employment regulations of the Fair Employment and Treatment Order, 1998), school culture, ethos, symbols, and daily routine, whose pace is sometimes set by prayer (Chadwick, 1994: 150, 171-172; Interviewee 1; Interviewee 8; Interviewee 7; Richardson, 2008-16; 2009). Thus, some of the interviewees suggested that RE in Northern Ireland may help entrench 'sectarianism' through its impact on the structure of the education system (Interviewee 7).

In sum, the interviews painted a complex picture of the RE curriculum in Northern Ireland. The common RE curriculum helps the 'four main Christian churches' retain an influence over state-funded schools. In contrast to official documents, arrangements for the teaching of RE may also help reproduce the mutually exclusive identities of the local communities both through the syllabus contents and through their indirect influence on the structure of education. Whilst it is not established whether RE fosters discrimination on the basis of politicized confessional identities, the interviews in Northern Ireland suggest that rather than fostering integration and mutual understanding, RE may help reproduce different confessional communities largely overlapping with separate political and national groups.



### **3.3 Religious Education in Macedonia**

Religious denomination was a salient marker of group identity in Lebanon and Northern Ireland long before the Taif and Belfast Agreements. In contrast, interviews with local experts and practitioners confirm that religion was marginal to the construction of group identities in socialist Macedonia, where schools did not teach RE (Interviewee 10; Interviewee 13; Matevski et al., 2006: 139). However, after independence in 1991, religion helped provide the Macedonian state-building project with historical continuity and legitimacy (Interviewee 12; Ivekovic, 2002: 534). A surfacing conflict between the ethnic Albanian and ethnic Macedonian population in the context of regional instability and violence accelerated a 'vivid de-secularization process' (Mandaci, 2007: 9) and deepened the relationship between political and clerical elites. These rapid socio-political changes seeped into schools and generated for the first time a debate over the introduction of RE as a curricular subject. In 1999, at the request of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Islamic Community and Catholic Church, the government unilaterally introduced an hour of RE in state schools (Matevski et al., 2006: 140-141). The new subject was widely criticized as a form of indoctrination (Matevski, 2005: 5; Stavrova, 2007), which would separate pupils of different religious backgrounds (Matevski et al., 2006: 153). Interviewees recalled that RE was also criticized because it was taught by clerics, and this threatened the secular nature of Macedonia's educational institutions (Interviewee 11; Interviewee 9; Matevski et al., 2006: 142). Macedonia's Constitutional Court confirmed that RE violated existing laws preventing political and religious organizations from carrying out activities in state schools (Matevski et al., 2006: 141). Thus, by 2001, as silently as it was introduced, RE disappeared as a curricular subject.

Similarly to the Taif and Belfast Agreements, the 2001 Ohrid Agreement did not focus on reform of RE. Yet it postulated some constitutional amendments which increased the standing of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Community of Macedonia, the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish Community and the Evangelical Methodist Church as

'separate from the state and equal before the law', and entrenched their right to establish charitable institutions and schools (Article 19, Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia). Moreover, following the 2001 conflict, ethnic Macedonian political and religious elites became increasingly interdependent. By 2005, the Macedonian Orthodox Church (embroiled in a bitter dispute with the Serbian Orthodox Church over its legitimacy and status) established itself as a key institutional symbol of the identity and independence of the Macedonian state (Quercia, 2004: 25). For its part, the Macedonian government emerged as a staunch defender of the independent Macedonian Orthodox Church (Quercia, 2004: 25). In a highly symbolic gesture, the Macedonian President Branko Crvenkovski met the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia in 2005 and during the meeting, the Archbishop demanded the introduction of RE in state schools (Matevski, 2005: 6). This evidence suggests that RE emerged as an instrument to nurture the nascent relationship between political and religious elites.

In fact, by 2006, an empirical study recognized that 'the question is not whether [RE] will be introduced but for whom, when and in what form' (Matevski et al., 2006: 144). Clerics were the most vocal champions of RE, with the inter-faith Council for Interreligious Cooperation (consisting of representatives of the five confessions mentioned in the Constitution) arguing that RE was a taxpayer's right and that it should be immediately introduced in schools and taught by clerics, 'who believe what they say' (Stavrova, 2007). Politicians also favoured its introduction in state schools, perhaps to establish some state control over its contents (Matevski et al., 2006: 150). An extensive consultation by the Ministry of Education found that the public also largely supported the introduction of RE as a curricular subject (Matevski et al., 2006: 144; Interviewee 14). A further poll showed that most respondents viewed RE as an instrument allowing for the 'preservation of religious communities' and the transmission of their values and customs to children (Center for Research and Policymaking, 2006: 5). In other words, in post-2001 Macedonia, RE was expected to help consolidate religious identities overlapping with ethnic, linguistic and political allegiances.

In 2007, the Macedonian Parliament amended the Law on Education and the Law on Religious Freedom (US Department of State, 2008). Skeptical as to the ultimate aim of these amendments, the US Embassy observed that the government was ‘bucking the constitution to give youth what they don’t want’: confessional RE in state schools (US Embassy Skopje, 2009a). Indeed, in September 2008 the government introduced a weekly hour of RE for pupils 10-11 years old (US Department of State, 2008). The new RE curriculum was drafted by the Islamic and Orthodox Christian clergies and approved by the Ministry of Education (US Embassy Skopje, 2009a). News reports and interviews confirm that RE was immediately contested first because most of the proposed teachers were graduates of theological faculties unrecognized by the state (Interviewee 9; Interviewee 11; Stavrova, 2007), and their teaching could ‘turn our schools into churches and mosques’ (Balkan Insight, 2009b). Many claimed that the very presence of religious figures on school premises violated state secularism (Interviewee 9; Interviewee 11; Karajkov, 2009; Balkan Insight, 2009a), and would end up ‘blurring the lines separating church and state’ (US Embassy Skopje, 2009a).

Second, arrangements for RE were criticized for ‘adding another layer of academic separation beyond the existing linguistic barrier between ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian students’ (US Embassy Skopje, 2009a; Interviewee 11). The public supported introducing a subject about religion, but it largely opposed separating children along religious lines and requested suitable arrangements for students belonging to faiths other than the Christian Orthodox and Muslim (US Department of State, 2010). In contrast, the new curriculum appeared to further the identification of ethnic Macedonians with Orthodox Christianity and ethnic Albanians with Islam.

In April 2009 the Constitutional Court ruled that RE threatened the constitutional separation of church and state and should be suspended (Karajkov, 2009; Balkan Insight, 2009b ; US Department of State, 2009). In contrast to its silent elimination in 2001, the elimination of RE in 2009 inflamed public opinion, with protesters calling for an end to the Constitutional

Court's 'atheist dictatorship' (Karajkov, 2009). This may be because of the emergence of RE as a symbol of collective rights to reproduce communal identities through state institutions after 2001. Evidence from the media and official documents suggests that protests against the elimination of the weekly hour of RE also reflect the deepening alliance of some political and religious elites. Indeed, the Council for Interreligious Cooperation announced its intention to keep lobbying for the reintroduction of confessional RE (Balkan Insight, 2009d; US Embassy Skopje, 2009b), whilst the majority ethnic Macedonian party vowed to bypass the Constitutional Court and introduce constitutional amendments to make RE compulsory once and for all (US Embassy Skopje, 2009b). Education Minister Nicola Todorov assured that 'the reintroduction of [RE] classes is a sure thing' (Balkan Insight, 2009c). Witnessing these events, the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion and Belief warned that 'the two major religious communities in the country [Christian Orthodox and Muslim] wield considerable political influence and are eroding the division between religion and State' (Djenovic, 2009).

True to Todorov's promise, in September 2010 a new RE curriculum was introduced for pupils 9-10 years old (Bureau for Development of Education of the Republic of Macedonia, 2008a, 2008b). It was swiftly denounced as a 'way around the constitutional ban' and an expedient to reintroduce confessional RE 'by small steps' (Djenovic, 2009). The new subject is taught by a theology graduate and provides some information about the five religious confessions mentioned in the Macedonian Constitution (Bureau for Development of Education of the Republic of Macedonia, 2008a; Interviewee 9; Balkan Insight, 2008) This allows children to learn about other groups in the state, but also exemplifies the increasing alliance between political parties and the religious institutions mentioned in the Constitution (Balkan Insight, 2008; UNICEF Country Office Skopje, 2009: 78). However, over half of the RE curriculum focuses exclusively on a particular religious confession (generally the religion of the majority of children in the class) (Bureau for Development of Education of the Republic of Macedonia, 2008a). The curriculum also aims at teaching for belief (Bureau for

Development of Education of the Republic of Macedonia, 2008a). Despite this, interviewees unanimously agreed that the new RE curriculum is less controversial than its predecessors (Interviewee 9 expressed this most clearly).

News reports and empirical studies suggest that RE may directly and indirectly contribute to what some see as the 'promotion of two faith communities' overlapping with ethno-national and political cleavages (Interviewee 11; Djenovic, 2009; Fontana, 2013). This is first because, similarly to RE in Lebanon and Northern Ireland, RE in Macedonia may further the physical and psychological separation of children of different backgrounds. One of the interviewees, for example, claimed that most ethnic Macedonian children are exempted from RE whilst most ethnic Albanian children attend the course (Interviewee 11). Moreover, the literature suggests that religious institutions (particularly the Macedonian Orthodox Church) benefit from opportunities for outreach among children belonging to their ethno-linguistic community (Matevska, 2011: 131; Matevski, 2009: 3; Mirascieva et al., 2011: 1405). Finally, reports have emerged that ethnic Albanians may employ Islam to assimilate smaller communities such as the Roma and the Turks into their ethno-political flock (Mandaci, 2007: 9-12; Sidiropoulos, 1999: 146). This was not confirmed in the interviews, but – if accurate – would endow RE with an important function in extending the political constituency of ethnic Albanian parties.

In sum, the evidence collected in Macedonia suggests that, after 2001, RE emerged as a tool to sanction and nurture the relationship between some political and religious elites, to help religious institutions gain some influence over the contents of education in state-funded schools, and to cement the mutually exclusive ethno-political identities of Albanians and Macedonians (Fontana, 2013).

#### **4 Discussion and Conclusion**

The existing literature about RE in deeply divided societies points at two core hypotheses as to the form and political function of the RE curriculum in deeply divided societies. The first

hypothesis is that RE tends to reproduce separate and mutually exclusive communities through a curriculum designed to nurture children's sense of belonging to a faith community. The second hypothesis is that RE furthers mutual understanding, ecumenism and social cohesion among members previously warring communities by transmitting knowledge about several religions and encouraging dialogue and comparison. This article analysed arrangements for the teaching of RE as a curricular subject in three post-conflict societies adopting power-sharing to explore the extent to which RE complies with the two hypotheses in the literature. Due to the limited number of case studies and interviewees in each jurisdiction, further research is necessary before generalizing the present findings to all societies adopting consociational power-sharing.

Evidence about the political function of RE in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia prior to their current peace agreements suggests that the very existence of RE as a curricular subject depends on two factors: whether religion is a salient marker of belonging, and whether the interests of religious and political elites converge. This is most evident in the case of Macedonia, where the first calls for the introduction of RE can be traced back to the late 1990s, and intensified after the Ohrid Agreement, in parallel with deepening inter-ethnic tensions. During the conflicts in Lebanon and Northern Ireland, RE (alongside other subjects) directly and indirectly helped socialize children into mutually exclusive confessional identities, overlapping with different ethno-national and political allegiances. This is why, despite being overlooked in the peace agreements, RE emerged as an object for reform in the three societies.

The interviews carried out in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia add an important dimension to the understanding of the political function of RE in deeply divided societies adopting consociational power-sharing. They suggest that debates over RE in the three societies were informed by similar tensions between those supporting a non-confessional, comparative approach to RE promoting integration and social cohesion, and those calling for

faith development and the protection of communal cultures. This suggests a convergence in the educational debates of the three societies after the establishment of power-sharing.

Second, power-sharing governments recognized the special interest of religious institutions in RE and gave dominant local faith communities a right to shape the curriculum, often at the expenses of smaller or non-native groups. For example, in Northern Ireland, it appears that state institutions assume that only the 'four main Churches' have a legitimate interest in the RE syllabus (Interviewee 5; Interviewee 7). The recognition of this special interest generated a dual curriculum, allowing for a confessional RE in Catholic maintained schools and a non-denominational (but Christian-focused) RE in controlled schools. Similarly, in post-Taif Lebanon, politicians and technocrats hoped that a unified RE curriculum could 'make people belong to the same national values, [to] freedom, [to] democracy' (Interviewee 21) but religious authorities insisted on a confessional RE for socialization in a particular faith community. The latter perspective came to dominate, and RE in Lebanon's schools remains firmly under the control of Lebanese religious authorities. The case of Macedonia also suggests that RE is often employed to nurture the relationship between religious and political elites. Experts and policymakers agree that in the instable and polarized post-2001 context, political parties recognized that religious institutions could help cement local ethno-linguistic communities, largely coinciding with their political constituencies (Interviewee 10).

Third, this article shows that RE has a remarkably similar political function in consociational Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia: it tends to reproduce separate and mutually exclusive communities. RE contents and pedagogy reflect the assumption that children belong to one of several mutually exclusive and clearly demarcated confessional groups. Thus, curricula aim to teach, and sometimes practice, the faith children were born into. In Northern Ireland and Lebanon, religious denomination remains an impermeable marker of communal identity, but RE is not an instrument for proselytism outside the confines of a specific religious group. This may exemplify a minimum level of tolerance, mutual respect and recognition among previously warring communities. This is not the case in Macedonia,

where some members of the Turkish and Roma communities denounced RE as an instrument to marginalize or assimilate children belonging to smaller ethno-linguistic communities.

These findings have important implications for an understanding of the contribution of RE to peace and social cohesion in post-conflict deeply divided societies. They confirm the first hypothesis as to the political function of RE after violent conflicts: by nurturing children's sense of belonging to a faith community, current arrangements for RE directly and indirectly help socialize children in the culture and practices of discreet ethnic, national and confessional communities. This approach does not explicitly foster mutual understanding, ecumenism and social cohesion among members of previously warring groups. In fact, many warn that it may help socialize students into the cultural milieus for inter-communal conflict (Richardson, 2008: 2) and even translate political conflicts into an absolute 'struggle between Good and Evil' (Koppa, 2001: 45).

However, RE may contribute to peace and stability in more complex and indirect ways. As mentioned, consociational power-sharing, rather than eroding inter-group boundaries, 'make[s] societies more thoroughly plural' in the short term (Lijphart, 1977: 42). Thus, perhaps RE is one of the tools to legitimize and entrench this political system by reproducing those previously warring ethnic, national and confessional communities that now share political power. Indeed, proponents of a confessional approach to RE argue that only individuals and communities that are conscious and secure in their faith and culture can engage peacefully with others (Interviewee 1; Matevski, 2009: 7). In the short term, this approach may signal the state's respect for its faith communities, and the inclusion of their political and religious elites in decision-making. Moreover, if 'one of the greatest dangers confronted by religion and religious communities is that of assimilation and syncretism' (Kassis, 2002: 368-369), then current approaches to RE may help allay the existential fears of previously warring communities in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Macedonia. This could help promote short-term political stability, political legitimacy and even peace. However, its



long-term consequences are more ambiguous, because current arrangements for RE contribute to entrenching existing cleavages, and shy away from challenging 'prejudice and indoctrination... through those very aspects of education where there might appear to be the greatest danger of them occurring' (Richardson, 2013: 9).

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