

**A CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM PLEA FOR EDUCATION ABOUT 'THE OTHER' IN AREAS OF
CONFLICT**

David G Kibble and Qari Asim

Corresponding Author:

David G Kibble
12 Hodgson Crescent
LEEDS
LS17 8PG
UK

E mail: dg.kibble@hotmail.co.uk

Abstract

Societies in conflict usually portray negative images of 'the other,' such images often being transmitted through the education system. Using school curricula in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Israel and Palestine as examples of such a negative transmission, it is argued that real

peace between societies in conflict will only be developed where the younger generation in particular are enabled to see things through the eyes of those who are traditionally seen as their enemies. It is shown how such a more empathetic education is not just something that is politically useful: it is something that is demanded by both Christianity and Islam – two faith traditions present in both conflicts studied.

Keywords

Bosnia-Herzegovina; Christianity; education; Islam; Israel; ‘the other;’ Palestine; reconciliation.

In 2007 138 Muslim scholars issued *A Common Word*, a document which suggested that Christians and Muslims worship the one God and which called on Christians to work together with their Muslim colleagues in social action projects.¹ That was followed in 2008 by the *Makkah Declaration* in which, again, a group of Muslim scholars called on Christians and

¹ The document is available at <https://www.acommonword.com/>

Muslims to work 'side by side in spreading virtuous ethics and values... [including upholding] justice, virtue and peace.'² In the spring of 2019 Pope Francis visited Abu Dhabi where he signed the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* with the Grand Imam of al Azhar, Ahmed al Tayyeb.³ Like the previous documents this one again called for Christians and Muslims to work together on social projects, including the promotion of peace in areas of conflict.

It will be the purpose of this paper to suggest that one area where Christians and Muslims can and should work together is the promotion of learning about 'the other' in areas of conflict. We believe that there are good political and religious reasons why this should be done.

A. Education about 'the Other' in Bosnia-Herzegovina

The population of Bosnia-Herzegovina is divided into three ethno-religious groups: Bosniaks make up 48 per cent of the population and they are Muslim; Serbs make up 37 per cent and they are Orthodox Christian; the third group are the Croats who are Catholic and who make up 14 per cent of the population. A recent article in the *New York Times* pictured how the divisions manifest themselves today more than 20 years after the civil conflict ended in 1995: the city of Mostar has two fire stations, one for the Muslim Bosniak area and one for the Catholic Croat area; two garbage companies, one for the Bosniaks and one for the Croats; two hospitals, two electricity companies, two bus stations and two football teams.⁴

² The declaration is available at <https://www.kaiciid.org/node/1016>

³ The document is available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html

⁴ Andrew Higgins, 'In Bosnia Entrenched Divisions are a Warning to the World,' *New York Times*, November 19, 2018, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/world/europe/mostar-bosnia-ethnic-divisions-nationalism.html?utm_so

The state itself is divided into two entities: Republica Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into ten cantons. Each of the ten cantons together with Republica Srpska and the additional Brcko district are each responsible for education in their area, including curriculum policy. Kelly Hill summarises the result of this delegation of authority as follows: 'Schooling is characterised by monoethnic classrooms, segregated schools, opposing pedagogies, and an absence of a common curriculum.'⁵

The vast majority of young people attend schools alongside students of their own ethnicity – Bosniak, Serb or Croat. In some instances Bosniak and Croat students attend a school which is in the same building as that of another ethnic group but they will be on different floors of the same building or school will held at different times on the same campus – sometimes with a one hour break in between the two to ensure that the students do not come into contact with one another. These schools, over 50 of them, are known as 'two schools under one roof,' each with its own headteacher – even when they are taught at the same time. When these schools were set up at the end of the 1991-5 conflict after many schools had been destroyed it was assumed that in time the two schools would become one but this has not generally been the case. In more rural areas or in schools run privately there is some ethnic mixing: in Mostar Gymnasium, for example, Croat and Bosniak students join for computer sciences classes and for some after school activities; but this is a rare exception. Only the privately run United World College in Mostar, housed in the same building as the

urce=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=399304fdfe-RELIGION_WEEKLY_2018_11_20&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-399304fdfe-399970869

⁵ Kelly Hill, 'Possibilities for Social Cohesion in Bosnia-Herzegovina,' *Peabody Journal of Education*, 86, 2011, 155

Mostar Gymnasium, fosters real ethnic mixing. Its website says, 'though national divisions in Bosnia and Herzegovina persist... we are still the only school in the country where Bosniak, Croat and Serb youth live and go to school together...'⁶

This system of ethnically and religiously divided schools has been seen by many students and their teachers as divisive. In the ethnically mixed Nikola Sop secondary school in Jajce there were plans to make the school a 'two schools under one roof' in 2017. The staff and students protested vigorously and the plan was eventually abandoned.⁷ Where students attend ethnically segregated schools prejudice often lurks beneath the surface; one NGO suggested that young people are more divided than previous generations. One study concluded that 'the effect of this [two schools under one roof] formula has been the emergence of a radicalised youth that do not have a vivid memory of the war, yet have more extreme views than their parents.'⁸

It will come as no surprise to learn that the three different ethnic groups have different curricula. Croats learn about Croatian history, Serbs about Serbian history and Bosniaks about Bosnian history; they learn different languages and have different lessons in Religious Studies – which are often confessional in nature. When the President of Republica Srpska, Milorak Dodic, was asked when Serb students would be taught about the genocide in

⁶ <http://uwcmostar.ba/>

⁷ Cf the BBC News report, *Bosnia's Pupils Fight Ethnically Divided Education*, 23 July, 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wrlpJ34Lxs>. Cf also Katherine Heroux, 'Pupils Challenge Ethically Divided Education in Bosnia,' *Balkan Insight*, 12 June, 2017, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/students-challenge-ethnically-divided-education-in-bosnia-06-12-2017>

⁸ Louis Monray Santander, 'Reconciliation: a Critical Approach to Peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina,' *Peace, Conflict and Development*, 22, 2016, 98

Srebrenice he replied, 'It's not true and will not be studied here.'⁹ School textbooks make heroes of one ethnic group whilst demonising another.

There has been an element of peace education in Bosnia-Herzegovina but it is difficult for students to take it seriously when they are educated as separate ethnic and religious groups. Dubravko Lovrenovic is a historian and former Deputy Minister of Education; he commented, 'If you don't have a common curriculum, if you don't agree about history, how can we make a modern political culture... How can we create citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina? How can we talk about a common future?'¹⁰ In Bosnia-Herzegovina education about 'the other' is decidedly absent, unless you mean demonization of the other.

B. Education about 'the Other' in Israel and Palestine

In 2017 a report sponsored by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre and the Middle East Forum drew the conclusion that Palestinian school textbooks foster a de-legitimization and demonization of Israel and that they indoctrinate Palestinian students to pursue a violent struggle rather than promoting education for peace.¹¹ The report described how in Palestinian school textbooks Jews are seen to have no rights to the land of Israel. It describes how there is no recognition of it as a sovereign state and how since 2016 most textbooks replace the word 'Israel' with the phrase 'Zionist occupation.' In the schoolbooks there are

⁹ Danijel Kovacevic, 'Bosnian Serbs to Ban Lessons on Srebrenice Genocide,' *Balkan Insight*, 6 July, 2017, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnian-serbs-to-ban-lectures-on-srebrenica-sarajevo-siege-06-06-2017>

¹⁰ In Kristen Chick, 'In Bosnia's Schools Three Different People Learn Three Different Histories,' *Christian Science Monitor*, 31 August, 2014, available at <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0831/In-Bosnia-s-schools-three-different-people-learn-three-different-histories>

¹¹ Arnon Gross and Ronni Shaked, *Schoolbooks of the Palestinian Authority: The Attitude to the Jews, to Israel and to Peace* (np: Simon Wiesenthal Centre /Middle East Forum, 2017), available at <https://israelbehindthenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Schoolbooks-PalestinianAuthority2017.pdf>

maps and texts which replace 'Israel' with 'Palestine;' the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the mosque in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, the town of Caesarea and the city of Tiberias are all seen as Palestinian sites. The report describes how Jews are portrayed as enemies of Islam's prophets, of Moses, of Jesus and of Muhammad. In one 2016-7 text book they are referred to as the 'Devil's aides.'¹²

There is no attempt to help Palestinian students understand the Israeli 'other:' students are not helped to understand why Jews wanted to return to their ancestral homeland nor are they taught about the holocaust. There is no information about the Jewish religion and no attempt to help students understand the reasons for and the nature of the Israel / Palestine conflict. In the words of another 2017 report into the Palestinian curriculum, it 'seems designed to create an Us (Palestinian) versus Them (all things Israel) mentality...'¹³

One of the main topics for discussion when analysing Palestinian textbooks and the Palestinian curriculum is whether or not students are incited to violence. The 2017 report sponsored by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre felt that they are. In a 2016 textbook there is, for the first time, a call for the expulsion of Jews living in Israel: the text includes the words, 'I shall remove the usurper from my country and shall exterminate the foreigners' scattered remnants.'¹⁴ Two textbooks quote *hadith* which use the term *jihad*: one *hadith* suggests that

¹² It has to be said that some of the facts in Palestinian textbooks about which the report complains can only be regarded as true, even if, as so often, there are two sides to the story. For instance, the report complains that textbooks say that Israel limits the movement of Palestinians within Palestine, that it demolishes houses, uproots trees, takes Palestinian land and steals Palestinian water. The report needs to recognise that these are features of life that Palestinian children see and experience on a daily basis

¹³ Elad J Pardo, *Palestinian Elementary School Curriculum 2016-7: Radicalisation and Revival of the PLO Program*, (Jerusalem: Impact-se, 2017), available at <http://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/PA-Curriculum-2017-Revised.pdf>

¹⁴ Gross and Shaked, 215

jihad is the third most important thing in God's eyes after prayer and respect for parents; the other says it is the most important thing after belief in God.¹⁵ One grade 12 text book contains the following advice: '*Jihad* is one of the most exalted factors that place a Muslim nearer to his God. Moreover, it is the highest apex of Islam.'¹⁶ In each case the Palestinian textbook authors interpret the word *jihad* in terms of a military struggle.¹⁷

What about the other side of the divide? Do Israeli textbooks foster an understanding of the Palestinian 'other?' It is generally agreed that in recent years Israel's education policies have moved more to the right with schools reinforcing Jewish and Zionist values and placing less emphasis on the promotion of co-existence.¹⁸ It is also agreed that the presentation of 'the other' is poorer in Ultra Orthodox textbooks than it is in Israeli state textbooks.¹⁹ Like Palestinian textbooks Israeli textbooks also publish maps without a recognition of the two states: a study published in 2013 reported that 76 percent of maps showed no border between Israel and Palestine and that the words 'Palestine' or 'Palestinian Authority' did not appear at all.²⁰ In one instance a map showing Israel without its border with Palestine is legitimated by a biblical quotation in which God promises Abraham the entire area 'from the river Prath to the uttermost sea.'²¹

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 220. Shiraz Maher describes how salaf-jihadi thinking categorizes *jihad* in a similar way; cf Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, (London: Penguin, 2017), 32-3

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 220

¹⁷ The word *jihad*, of course, can mean mental, spiritual or physical struggle

¹⁸ See Soli Vered, 'Peace Education in Israel: an Educational Goal in the Test of Reality,' *Journal of Peace Education*, 12 (2), 2015, 138-153; Dan Cohen and David Sheen, 'Haaretz's Or Kashti on the Rightwing Religious Takeover of the Ministry of Education,' *Mondoweiss*, 8 September, 2015, available at <http://mondoweiss.net/2015/09/rightwing-religious-education/>

¹⁹ Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, *Victims of Our Own Narratives? Portrayal of the Other in Israeli and Palestinian Schoolbooks*, 2013, 2. Available at http://d7hj1xx5r7f3h.cloudfront.net/Israeli-Palestinian_School_Book_Study_Report-English.pdf

²⁰ *Ibid*, 43

²¹ Nurit Peled Elhanan, *Palestine in Israeli School Books: Ideology, Propaganda in Education* (London: I B Tauris, 2012), 104

In 2012 Peled-Elhanan published her study of textbooks used in Israel. She found that in a number of geography, history and civics textbooks there were no positive verbal or visual presentations of Palestinians; she found that they were represented as terrorists, refugees or primitive farmers. Palestinians were often presented as what Peled-Elhanan calls the 'Oxfam type' – a farmer following a primitive plough pulled by oxen or donkeys. Whilst she concludes that 'racist and discriminatory practices' which appear in Israeli textbooks contribute toward the poor behaviour by some young Israeli soldiers toward their Palestinian neighbours, the positive attitude to violence that is presented in some Palestinian textbooks is absent.

Once more in both Israel and Palestine we have an education system where real education about 'the other' is absent. It is not the authors' purpose to make a detailed comparison between the two: what we will say is that, although the Palestinian textbooks seem to present a future in which violence towards 'the other' seems inevitable, it is difficult for many Palestinian students to envisage anything else when in their daily life they are constantly reminded of what they can only term as occupation. Nevertheless, the more negative stance toward Israel in the recent Palestinian curriculum is regrettable.

C. Education about 'the Other:' a Political and Religious Imperative

Societies that are divided would generally prefer to be reconciled; countries that are involved in conflict would prefer to live in peace. Effecting reconciliation and peace is, however, no easy task. In South Africa and Northern Ireland, for example, although the armed conflict is a thing of the past it is obvious that establishing real peace and reconciliation is a

generational task. It is a task which political leaders have set themselves because visionary leadership and the wish of the people have demanded it.

Peace and reconciliation is not something that comes about when political leaders sign pieces of paper, necessary though that is. Peace and reconciliation is something that develops between groups of people and which takes place when people themselves actively become engaged in some form of peace making. It is our belief that part of that peace process is an education about 'the other' as part of young people's education. The Dayton accords which ended the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995 have been described as a 'self-sustaining machine for producing misery.'²² The accords failed to ensure that the country's young people were given an education where they could begin to develop either a knowledge of or relationships with young people of other ethnicities and faiths. With each faith and ethnic group being given little opportunity to learn about 'the other' it is not surprising that healed relationships are a long way off. Watching some of the Youtube clips of young people in the country tells us that many of the young people themselves recognise that they are being brought up to simply replicate the hate of their parents; many are asking for a way out and a road towards greater integration.

Similarly in Israel / Palestine education about 'the other' is a political imperative. When a group of Christians and Jews visited Israel / Palestine a few years ago one of the questions they asked people on both sides of the divide was whether they would support the concept of education about 'the other' in schools; there was universal agreement that this

²² Julian Borger, 'Bosnia's Bitter, Flawed Peace Deal, 20 Years On,' *The Guardian*, November 10, 2015, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/nov/10/bosnia-bitter-flawed-peace-deal-dayton-agreement-20-years-on>

would be a good thing.²³ Such an idea has been put forward on a number of occasions, most recently by Gershon Baskin.²⁴ Yet in the visit by Christians and Jews they were often told, again by people on both sides of the divide, that politicians are more interested in bolstering their own positions rather than making real moves toward peace. The audience was stunned when Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat told them in Bradford University that there was no way that Palestinian children would learn about ‘their oppressors.’ That political imperative of education about ‘the other’ in Bosnia-Herzegovina is also a political imperative in Israel / Palestine.

It is our contention that education about ‘the other’ is not just a political imperative: it is a religious imperative too. In both Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Israel / Palestine there is a sense in which religion is part of the problem. In the former hostility between the three ethnic groups was and is hostility between three ethnic groups who identify with a faith community – Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim. In Israel / Palestine it is not just a conflict between two different nations or ethnicities that are made up of different faith groups: there are people within those faith groups who believe that their tenure of particular pieces of land is a religious obligation. Some in the Jewish community believe that the promise given by God in the Hebrew scriptures that they would inherit the land we currently designate as Israel / Palestine and beyond gives them permission to establish political power there now.²⁵ Similarly many Muslims believe that the whole of former mandate Palestine is a *waqf* or endowment

²³ David G Kibble and Mike Fligg, ‘Jews and Christians from Leeds Discuss the Israel / Palestine Issue and Visit Israel and Palestine Together,’ *Theology*, 120 (1), 2017, 18-26

²⁴ Gershon Baskin, *In Pursuit of Peace in Israel and Palestine*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2017), 272. Baskin assumes that learning about the other will form part of a peace agreement: we suggest that it can come before such a process

²⁵ Gen 15: 12-21 and 17: 8; Deut 34: 1-4

given to them by God and one for which they should now strive.²⁶ If religion is part of the problem then religion must be part of the solution and that solution should include dialogue between different faith groups.

But there is a second reason why Christians and Muslims in particular should be calling for education about ‘the other:’ the establishment of reconciliation and peace is something that our two faiths hold as a religious good. From a Christian perspective the creation story in Genesis affirms that people are created by God and are therefore to regard one another as brothers and sisters. People are not meant to live in conflict and to be unreconciled. Peacemaking is something commended by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5: 9) and also by other biblical writers including St Paul.²⁷ In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul says that Christians are given the ‘ministry of reconciliation.’ In the first instance, of course, Paul is no doubt referring to the gospel message of God’s reconciliation with man in Christ but such a God-man reconciliation needs also to be reflected in human relationships if the whole concept of reconciliation is to have real meaning. Christians are to reflect the religious God-to-man ‘vertical’ reconciliation in ‘horizontal’ relationships.

If Christians take the Kingdom of God as an ethical motif then they can look to exemplars such as Isaiah’s visions of swords becoming ploughshares (Isa: 2: 4) and of animals living peacefully together (Isa 11: 6-9). A second Christian motif is the incarnation itself: God becoming man in Jesus in order to bring peace between man and God. Christians can see this as a prime example of understanding ‘the other:’ in the incarnation God demonstrated an

²⁶ See for example the Hamas Charter, article 11, available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp

²⁷ Cf eg Rom 14: 19; Heb 12: 14; Jas 3: 17-18; 1 Pet 3:11.

understanding of humanity as the estranged other in its deepest sense. Again, Christians can argue their case based on a third motif: the need to understand 'the other' as a reflection of the internal life of God in the Trinity. The persons of the Trinity are seen to open themselves to each other, to 'go out' to each other and to 'receive' each other. Such 'going out to the other' is a motif which Christians can follow themselves and which they can argue is needed in the secular educational sphere if real reconciliation and peace is to be effected between people who are at the moment not at peace and remain unreconciled. The action of the father in the parable of the prodigal son illustrates the importance of taking the initiative in reconciliation: Christians, like the father and like God himself, are to take the initiative and to see that such initiative taking is reflected in social and political relationships.

The same argument about the need for education about 'the other' can also be made from a Muslim perspective. First, Islam confers dignity and respect on a human simply by virtue of him or her being a human. The Qur'an says, 'We have conferred dignity on the progeny of Adam' (Qur'an 17:70). This dignity is bestowed by God on all humans regardless of their ethnicity, religion, tribe or nationality. Accordingly, fair treatment of all human beings and engagement with them is part of acknowledging the God given dignity of fellow human beings.

Secondly, diversity is part of the divine plan according to the Qur'an.²⁸ 'If God had willed, He would have made you one community but things are as they are to test you in what He has given you. So compete with each other in doing good' (Qur'an 5:48). The Qur'an refers to the differences between humankind and explains that the purpose of these

²⁸ Qur'an 49:13

differences is to test people in order to discover how they respond to revelation. The responsibility of humankind is not to lead exclusivistic, hermetic lives or to demonise 'the other' but to make use of the difference by establishing relationships based on excelling one another in doing good.

Thirdly, inter-faith dialogue and the protection of the identity and religious symbols of others are Muslim duties. Muslims are called to protect 'cloisters and churches and synagogues and mosques, wherein the name of God is oft commemorated' (Qur'an 22:40). In addition, there are examples of religious co-operation from the life-stories of the prophet Muhammad and his companions. The Charter of Medina, set for the city state's citizens, and the Treaty of Hdaybiyyah made with the people of Makkah are two important documents that testify to their dialogic life. The prophet abandoned the title *Rasulullah* (Allah's Messenger) when writing the Treaty of Hdaybiyyah because the Meccans did not believe in Muhammad as a prophet of God.²⁹

Finally, without the necessary education about 'the other,' people can all too easily develop an irrational fear and mistrust and that can lead to violence. The Qur'an, therefore, urges believers to be 'witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety' (Qur'an 5:8). Accordingly, Islam encourages people to 'reach out to the other,' to be just in dealings with people of other faiths and to build castles of peace.

D. Conclusion

²⁹ <http://mercyprophet.org/mul/node/691>

What we are suggesting, then, is that education about ‘the other’ needs to be a component in the education of young people in areas of conflict. We believe that it can help to reduce tension and help to promote peace. Peace, in the end, is not something that takes place when politicians sign pieces of paper but something that takes place between two sets of people; education about ‘the other’ in areas of conflict can help both sets to accept one another as partners rather than seeing one another as enemies.

It should not be thought that educating young people about the other is easy: it is anything but. Societies in conflict generally portray ‘the other’ as delegitimised and positively avoid gathering any information that might contradict their current beliefs. Education about ‘the other’ requires students to look at information which may sometimes lead them to question their beliefs about ‘the other’ and indeed sometimes about their beliefs about themselves. These beliefs are what are sometimes called core beliefs and questioning them is a difficult and painful process. Maya Kahanoff says that change in this area is ‘complex, slow, and arduous, and requires overcoming multiple barriers. It requires a change of beliefs, positions, feelings and behaviour patterns...’³⁰ The sort of changes that are being looked for have been described by some as ‘spiritual;’ George Njoroge, writing about peace education in Rwanda, suggested that the teacher herself may need to transform her heart, mind and soul.³¹

³⁰ Maya Kahanoff, *Jews and Arabs in Israel Encountering Their Identities: Transformations in Dialogue* (Lanham / Jerusalem: Lexington Books / Van Leer Institute Press, 2016), 19. The dialogue process between Jewish and Palestinian university students described in her book shows how difficult and painful the process of examining one’s core beliefs and opening oneself to others can be. For details on the psychology of examining and changing one’s core beliefs cf Daniel Bar-Tal and Evan Halperin, ‘Socio-Psychological Barriers for Peace Making and Ideas to Overcome Them,’ *International Journal of Social Psychology*, 29 (1), 2014, 1-30. For a study on a teacher’s perspective in Bosnia-Herzegovina cf Sarah Clarke-Habibi, ‘Teachers’ Perspectives on Educating for Peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina,’ *Journal of Peace Education*, 15 (2), 2018, 144-168

³¹ George Njoroge, ‘The Reconstruction of the Teacher’s Psyche in Rwanda,’ in Zvi Bekerman and Claire McGlynn (eds), *Addressing Ethnic Conflict Through Peace Education*, (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 215-230

Education about 'the other' is a necessity in areas of conflict; often it just does not happen. It has been the purpose of this paper to show that not only is such education a political necessity but that it is positively demanded by our two faiths, Christianity and Islam. Our two Abrahamic faiths urge the need for self-relativisation and self-transcendence.

This is an area in which, despite our theological differences, we can and should work at together to help bring peace to our fractured world. 'Education about' the other is only a start: education needs to develop into meeting and talking with the other and, in the words of Miroslav Volf, embracing the other.
