

The pupils at our school had an interesting discussion with Mr Aleš Gulič, The director of Office for Religious Communities in Slovenia. He visited us at our school on 26<sup>th</sup> November. The interview took place in a very relaxed atmosphere. He was interviewed by the 9<sup>th</sup> grade pupils who participate in Comenius project LOOR: Jera Sitar, Klara Grašič, Aleš Šilar and Klavidj Starman.

Aleš Gulič was born on 5 March 1954 in Trbovlje. After graduating from the Trbovlje Gymnasium, he studied at the Ljubljana Faculty of Arts, majoring in Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian studies. For his first thesis he was awarded the Student Prešeren Award.

In 1984 he worked as a Slovenian teacher at the Secondary School of Economics in Trbovlje, later (1985–1989) as journalist and language editor, and then (1984–1985 and 1989–2004) as editor-in-chief at Radio Trbovlje.

As a member of the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia, he served as a Deputy to the National Assembly in the 2004–2008 term. During that time he was a member of the following working bodies: the Commission under the Incompatibility of Holding Public Office with Profitable Activity Act (President); Commission under the Prevention of Corruption Act; Committee on Labour, the Family, Social Policy and Disability; Committee on Domestic Policy; Commission for Relations with Slovenes in Neighbouring and Other Countries. He was also active in the field of relations between the government and religious communities in Slovenia.



His active involvement in life and activities in Trbovlje and Zasavje earned him the highest municipal award in 1997 – the 1 June Award. He has closely collaborated with musicians and artists and has even published a selection of artistic texts by Slovenian poets and writers with links to Zasavje entitled Šarabanka (1997) with links to Zasavje. He is also noted for his humanitarian pursuits as a member of the Trbovlje Lions Club, which centres its activities on helping people by providing relief and education as well as raising awareness.

[http://www.vlada.si/si/o\\_vladi/kdo\\_je\\_kdo/vladne\\_sluzbe/urad\\_za\\_verske\\_skupnosti/](http://www.vlada.si/si/o_vladi/kdo_je_kdo/vladne_sluzbe/urad_za_verske_skupnosti/)

**1.) What is your role in the government, what are your main areas of activity, tasks, aim and what will your program be about in the future?**

Well, the question looks like you are expecting a big thing. Office for Religious Communities is not a big office. There are only six of us. Our job is mainly to inform the government what is going on at the religious communities, if it wants to know of course, we prepare the material for ministers or government. It depends what they want – but this is the part which isn't ideal. I don't know if they are interested or if they already know. The other part is purely administrative. The religious communities register here and they get the certificate about this so that they can open bank accounts, and at the same time they inform us about the number of the ordained people who are entitled to social contributions. The religious communities contact the government when they want to propose something or ask a question. This is the task of the commission for the dialogue between the religious communities which is also a political organization. We are a kind of a link between the state and the religious communities in Slovenia. It is usually said that there are 43 communities in Slovenia, but in fact there are 70 of them. Some are registered, some function as societies. According to our constitution these are equal, and I, as the director of the office, take care of this. In my opinion, one has to obey the constitution. My plan is to improve the first part. I want to attract the academic part, the scientists who deal with religion, and there are a lot of them, but they didn't have contact with this. In this way, the government would know what it is dealing with and would react properly when there are conflicts.

**2. What are the origins of your religion knowledge and the questions of religious communities?**

I was younger than you are now. The story is quite anecdotic. You can understand this, and I like it, I don't even explain the story to the elder. I had a school-mate in the first grade and we stole two pieces of cake in a sweet shop. A few days later we came to his place to do our homework. His grandmother said: "God told me you were stealing." "What did I steal?" "A cake." It was a bit strange, why would God told her only for me, and not for her grandchild. And when I asked my schoolmate, why he told this to his grandma, he said he didn't, God did it. Well, I took this as truth, although everything wasn't OK. I thought both were lying. Ten years later, in grammar school, I told him this story and he became red in his face and said he didn't remember this. So he lied for the second time. And so things were going on. But it wasn't just for this. In my life I have seen a lot of people in doubt, and I've also seen people that religion helped them. I've seen those who believed, they didn't just count on God and they coped well without trouble. And I've seen those who rely just on God, saying 'he will take care of everything.' I saw this when I was being cured as an alcoholic. There were some very religious ones and they took active part in their healing and they succeeded, and some who let everything to God to make things right for them and they weren't successful. I have been interested in religion throughout my entire education, I had acquaintances among people of various religious communities, in 60s and 70s, when this was modern to do. Hindiusm came

from India, I got involved in world literature, I had some friends among priests. So this interest has roots in a kind of astonishment, followed by curiosity, and at last you try to find out what forces human to make his god.

**3. How do you evaluate relation between religious communities – are they tolerant or no?**

Yes, they are tolerant, which is actually bad. Tolerance means effort. It means you know something and you don't like it and you try to feel all right. I would like to see that we exceed this tolerance, to live normal lives, to be surprised that everything is supposed to be this way, and not to feel obliged to say, yes I don't like this but I have to be tolerant. Such efforts aren't alright. It is perfect when people live in harmony with each other, they respect each other, but this is more than tolerance. Tolerance means pressure, something that you have to think about and you become higher than they are. There is some arrogance in tolerance and arrogance is a deadly sin.

**4. How would you describe your relation to religious questions – political or professional?**

This is the most difficult question, I don't know how to answer it. As a director of the office I have to act legally correct, but when we live in a country with such a constitution, this is the political decision. When this is legal then it is professional. This is as long my work is concerned, but when we talk about my personal relation, the thing is different. I am a Liberal as to my party, I also have important function, I am the president and as such a person I have to deal with this. But this isn't a kind of enforcement, I am that kind of a person and I can do it easily, from the inside of me. I can't separate this easily. I am a professional and I try also that my office is legally correct towards all the religious communities. This is the professional level which is defined and I have to do this because I am a government clerk. This is not hard to do, I feel it inside.

**5. Do your plans involve Pope's visit, because Roman Catholic church is the most widely spread religion in Slovenia?**

Oh dear, these activities are too high for a government clerk. Pope is a state man, the representative of Vatican. He has an open invitation. President Drnovšek has already invited him and such invitations are never repeated. When the Pope agrees and says, I'll come in six months, we'll start the preparation. But for the time being we don't plan his visit to Slovenia. This isn't Slovenia's decision, we invited him, the Pope has to decide. Our office doesn't deal with this, this is left to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

**6. Do you estimate that the right for religious belief is assured to all the citizens (for instance in army?)**

I am sure it is so. I think in Slovenia there aren't any illegal religious communities or beliefs. Everybody has the constitutional right for his conscience in the 41st paragraph of the constitution and it included not only religious matters but also other consciences, atheist or humanist. It is not only discussed in religious communities. Religion is only one of the forms for expressing yourself, but there are others and we want to make them equal, not only religious communities, which are meant to join people of the same religion, but also to make equal those who don't have these. The constitution means the same as Bible.

### **7. How are religious communities financed in Slovenia?**

We shouldn't finance them because religion and the state are separated. Some things are supported by government, such as renovation of churches which are considered cultural monuments, then Caritas which funds at natural disasters, catholic schools with public program. Where it is the matter of state and religion we finance them. Everything else doesn't belong here. The government pays a part for social insurance of ordained people. This is a big debate and the matter is at the constitutional court and it is to be finished in the next few days. Wherever around the world they are separated this isn't the case. The religious communities support themselves from their assets. Slovenia has returned them all their properties that have been taken from them in the past. Slovenia is the only country that has returned them everything and they are capable of financing. In the past some parts were financed by the government and this led to present days and now there are problems. The same means for the payment of priests in the army and in prison. I think the government has to make it possible if people want so, but on the other hand is the question of necessity. I think it is not necessary. Priests in the army just join couples in matrimony and baptise, but this isn't the religious care. The debates will follow, especially when the matter is settled at the constitutional court. The court has already declared that we have to follow the paragraph 7, where it is stated that state and religion are separated.

### **8. What about the conflict with Vatican? Are the problems solved? Do you feel any pressure?**

There wasn't any official conflict with Vatican. At least I didn't argue with them. They didn't like it because they were familiar with my point of view, I put in the Law of religious freedom which was made differently and according to the constitution. They realized they lost a lot of money so they didn't agree. Then they found my hobby motorbikes and band Laibach and all the things which are important to me. I am not ashamed and I am proud of all those people. But they shouted. But in fact this was made by only one part of the media – to be sold better and to tease. The things became nasty, because they didn't affect only me but also my family. My son and daughter are adults and accustomed to many things. But my father who was watching TV at that time, felt annoyed and had a heart attack. I told him not to watch TV, it causes problems. Luckily, he is still alive, but that starts to worry you.

### **9. How do you get on with minor religious communities (what do their representatives think about it)?**

We get on very well. To make it clear, I cooperate with everybody at the chat shows and there are times we come apart with laugh. I don't like conflicts and also they feel better. I get on with the Orthodox, the Muslims, and even with minorities because they look a little weakly and they don't get anything from the government. If there are less than 1000 believers, you get nothing. They don't have special needs and I want them to have the same needs for all the communities because then we can devote our attention to what is humane, solidarity and what we are listening to all the time. But if you want to get more, it's no good.

**10. Do you meet with all the representatives of various religions or with each separately?**

Both. Once or twice a year there is a common meeting. There has already been the first one when I was appointed the director of the office. 25 out of 43 representatives came, which is the biggest number, in the past there were about 10-11 representatives. This time they were more curious. It was a nice meeting. In December we have another meeting. Some would like to call it Christmas meeting, but it can't be, because some people celebrate Christmas, the other don't. I visit the representatives. But I don't attend services which I explained them. The government mustn't have anything to do with services. As soon as you go, they see it as a sign to give this community a more important meaning. Some communities are very practical. Muslims don't invite anybody who isn't a Muslim to Bajram service, but they make a reception for everybody else. The same thing was done at the anniversary of Saint Stanislaw institution. The service was for believers, the reception for everybody. This is the best solution for not getting involved. If you want to keep state and religion separate you have to be neutral. Neutral means you are equal towards everybody, and not they are equal among themselves.

**11. How do smaller communities solve problems with space?**

This is a hard thing to do. They usually rent the space or buy it. Some do it outside. Some do it at home. Those who have services inside, usually have more costs which are covered with their voluntary contributions and sponsorship and in any other way. This isn't state's business. When they found a company which funds them, then it concerns the state as well and they have to pay taxes. There aren't many such cases. It's not true that they don't pay taxes. They don't pay it when it is for humanitarian causes, but also other companies don't pay it either. These things are settled and done. But rumours stay.

**12. What is the government's opinion about religious education at school?**

The constitution and the law say NO. At places, where this had been done in the past, e.g. Croatia, they have difficulties. Children whose parents are atheists, Muslims, they all have to pray. And when the government says that all religious communities are equal, then this equality must remain. You can't be neutral, if they count the members and they decide who is the majority, and the rest should adapt. These are the basic human rights and we mustn't be forced with something that we don't accept. But when a person wants to act in such a religious way, they can do it, because the religious education isn't prohibited. In Croatia this was done and now there are problems because the others are shortened. When the religious education is practised at private schools meant just for one kind of believers, this is not a problem.

The government can help religious communities if they have space problems and the lessons can take place at schools. The religious community must pay the rent as well as the other users.

**13. How do religious minorities acquire believers?**

Some have it built-in to acquire believers more or less intensive. Some don't. They have ordained people, believers whose task is to bring more people to this community. They make

effort, make public speeches, baptize small children (which is doubtful for me). It is difficult to say what is the rule, but mostly by personal contact.

**14. Are you a member of a political party?**

I have been a member of Liberal Democracy for 5 years and the president of the party's council.

