

Balkan PERSPECTIVES

A magazine on Dealing with the Past

BELIEVERS FOR PEACE

..... 16

HOW DO RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS CONTRIBUTE (OR NOT) TO FACING THE PAST?

..... 08



Faith or Religion?

- 03. EDITORIAL
- 04. VOX POP
- 06. WHEN RELIGION DEALS WITH THE PAST
- 08. HOW DO RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS CONTRIBUTE (OR NOT) TO FACING THE PAST?
- 10. MOTHER THERESA'S PAST IS AT STAKE IN MACEDONIA
- 12. ISLAMIC COMMUNITY FACING THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND A GROWING EXTREMISM



- BELIEVERS FOR PEACE 16.
- RELIGION AND POLITICS - A DANGEROUS COCKTAIL 18.
- CHALLENGES IN FACING THE PAST; BELIEVERS AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES 20.
- NEWS AND UPDATES 23.
- IMPRESSUM 24.





EDIT- ORIAL



Pristina, June 2017

Dear Readers,

While one should not describe the wars in the Western Balkans as solely religious conflicts, the role of religion shouldn't be left out when talking about dealing with the past in the Western Balkans. Many peace building initiatives are linked to religious movements, and terms like reconciliation and forgiveness remind us of religious values that are promoted by most religious institutions.

With this 7th issue of *Balkan.Perspectives* we want to shed light on the relation of religion and dealing with the past and examine which elements of faith can support an inclusive process of coming to terms with the violent events in the past. At the same time, we also want to talk about the cases in which religion can be misused in order to maintain or fuel conflicts and how such instrumentalisation can be faced.

In our lead article, Zlatiborka Popov Momčinović gives us an overview of cases in which the world religion played an important role in dealing with the past and how religious beliefs can help people trust in reconciliation processes.

Muhamed Jusić takes a more critical stand on the state of the art of the interreligious dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to him, the attempts that have been made until today to contribute to reconciliation weren't adapted to the everyday realities of the people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He therefore calls for a stronger commitment to the reconciliation process and makes some concrete recommendations for the future.

Dardan Hoti has a similar approach when elaborating the potential of some religious communities in Kosovo when it comes to dealing with the past. He spoke with some of the religious leaders and presents their perceptions of the situation in Kosovo.

Shpëtim Nuredini takes the canonization of Mother Theresa as an example of how religion is being politicized in Macedonia and why religious belonging is still interlinked with the ethnical belongings of the people. Todor Pendarov comments on the relationship of religion and politics in Macedonia and criticizes the mixture since they are hindering a constructive process of dealing with the past.

Safeta Biševac has examined the situation of the Islamic communities in Sandžak and of a perceived growing extremism in communities that until now were known for their peaceful acceptance of others. She presents and compares the situation there during the war of the '90s and today.

As always, we are looking forward to your comments and remarks on this issue and hope that you find the reading useful and enriching. If you'd like to subscribe to the magazine or for any other comment, please contact balkan.perspectives@forumzfd.de.

I am also taking the opportunity to say goodbye since this is the last issue that I am presenting as editor-in-chief. I have enjoyed working with the editorial team at all times and hope that you will continue to enjoy reading *Balkan.Perspectives*.

Best wishes,
Maike Dafeld
Editor in chief

WHAT

DOES

RELIGION

MEAN TO

YOU?

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Religion is very important for me because it helps you to deal with life's difficulties and helps make good decisions.

Amila, 30

Religion for me is something that is only for me and doesn't need to be exported to the public.

Rusmira, 29

Religion is an outdated, corporatist and political machine that exploits the fragility of human mindset.

It is a way to control the masses and imprison man's freedom by giving false hope of something that is imaginary.

Zlatko Č., 27

SERBIA

As a nonreligious person, I observe religion as a political and social force, not as a personal matter. In our region, the church is an instrument of political ideologies and vice versa. They support each other to straighten the borders or create new ones, building the invisible wall among people and nurture the hatred against differences. Such is the opposite of what is the essence of religion.

Djurdja Dj, 30

Religion means nothing to me. I see people as good or bad regardless of one's religion. Throughout history, religion has been (mis)used for a number of atrocities that have taken place in our region. People have done cruelties in the name of God, so I try to think with my own head.

Marija V, 32

Religion is having faith in something beyond ourselves; something huge, something pervasive, something that creates causes and consequences to everyone equally, without stereotypes and prejudices and without a burden of rationality. Religion is having faith for something beautiful, like love, yet also much bigger than that.

Miloranka T, 30

KOSOVO

Religion, for me, means peace. If there were no religions in the world, many things would be different.

Fisnik S. 32

Service and veneration have something to do with the cult of Gods.

Atthedona Rr. 27

Religion is a belief that there is only one God and to not harm and always try to do good. God is everywhere, in the church, mosque, street, and the shrine.

Rrezearta B. 33

Religion is a faith that elaborates the cause, nature and purpose of the universe, requiring devotion and rituals.

Selvie I. 35

MACEDONIA

Religion is a belief in God. It is a belief in something sacred that guides our spiritual life.

Violeta.K 43

Religion is to believe in God, who tells us to love and respect ourselves first and then others.

Irina.S, 37

Religion is a tool for controlling the mass of citizens, and dividing people.

Milcho.S 30

WHEN RELIGION DEALS WITH THE PAST



Whether they want to or not, in the days preceding Eid-el-Fitr, many Muslims take the sickles, small grub hoes, some flowers and pieces of fabric and head for the cemeteries. This is a ritual they never miss. They head towards the cemeteries to “do the honors” to their deceased loved ones. This is also done for putting up appearances for others; when the prayers in the morning of Eid-el-Fitr are over, many family members go to the cemeteries, which are well-maintained, and remember the deceased ones. This is one of the instances when Muslims in Kosovo face the past, through a religious celebration.

But in general, the past and religion are often debatable in the bridge between peace and war. All religions talk about peace, and war is mentioned very few times. Tony Selimi, an internationally known expert on the behavior of thought and human emotional intelligence

argues that, “It is debatable to say that there has ever been a war, the primary cause of which and the fighting were due to religion. At the same time, almost all conflicts or bigger wars had some religious aspect or some connection with religious issues. Religion has played a strong role in small and large conflicts, in world and civil wars, and in the majority of contemporary wars.” Since religion is often an element in conflicts and wars, it should also be taken into consideration when talking about reconciliation and dealing with the past.

The Contribution of Religion in a Peaceful Society and Potential Aggravation

In Kosovo, the interreligious dialogue has started to take on that challenge and to bring together representatives from the many religious communities. Dom Lush Gjergji, a Catholic clergy sees the participation in such dialogue as a crucial role of religious leaders: “The interreligious dialogue is nowadays one of the most important issues for the Kosovar society.”

His position is very similar to Imam Sabri Bajgora. Bajgora says the mission of religions is to elevate people, not to incite hatred that may feed wars, and he appreciates the interreligious dialogue in Kosovo: “A primary mission of the celestial religions is to contribute to peace, tolerance, love, respect and understanding.



After the war in Kosovo, the religious communities have given a valuable contribution in building peace and creating understanding. Many interreligious meetings and conferences are an evidence of this having the sole purpose of eradicating hatred between the people living in Kosovo”, says Imam Sabri Bajgora. Whether religion can contribute to a peaceful society, is for him a question with a ready answer: “Not only that it can, but it is the primary mission of celestial religions to contribute to peace, tolerance, love, respect and understanding.” In Kosovo, interreligious cooperation has been achieved through joint meetings and conferences, attempting to separate religion from the political influence.

Xhabir Hamiti, lecturer at the Faculty of Islamic Studies, emphasizes the words “interreligious cooperation” as keywords for a long-term peaceful society in Kosovo. He even considers the religious leaders as the right people to calm the political and national conflicts within the country nowadays. To attain this, Hamiti says we should avoid submission.

Peaceful Interreligious Dialogue at Risk?

“In order to achieve positive cooperation and to cultivate a common good for the citizens, the religious communities should not allow themselves to become tools of any foreign religious organization but to be true to themselves, because nobody seeks the good for the country and the environment where we live more than ourselves”, says Hamiti.

In addition to the risk of politicization of religious communities, Hamiti adds that the lack of political stability in Kosovo harms, obstructs and makes impossible the true interreligious cooperation in the country.

Bajgora reinforces this point: to him, the Balkans resemble a spent fire that can be easily lit in terms of conflicts which the region has faced since the '90s. While the conflicts in the Balkans were not motivated by religious motives, the division between religions in the region did not enable peaceful conflict resolution.

Dom Lush Gjergji sees the contribution of religion to a society, and says that this can happen only when religion is true to itself: “It can give a great contribution, understandably, if it is a truthful religion, i.e. service to God and relatives, or it can give a negative contribution when it is politicized, manipulated, degraded, allegedly referring to God but no to Him or Men, in other words, when it has no values and no spiritual virtues”.

Elements of Religion that Can Help in the Process of Dealing with the Past

While the non-politicized interreligious dialogue can contribute to peacebuilding and dealing with the past in Kosovo on a societal level, religious elements and rituals can help individuals to overcome their suffering.

For Dom Lush Gjergji there are two basic principles that are much needed: truth and love. Both of them enable us to accept the past, although there may be wrongs in it, which cannot be changed, but can be reviewed. If needed, Dom Lush Gjergji says that “we should improve them, ask for forgiveness and forgive with the power of faith and love.”

In addition to that, religious rituals such as prayer can give support to individuals. According to Tony Selimi, prayer is a form of meditation that helps people to quiet their minds and focus on their souls and can for some people offer relief and comfort.

While not everyone can relate to spirituality and religion, it is interesting to look at the potential that both can offer when it comes to dealing with the past. The institutionalization of the interreligious dialogue can be seen nowadays as another step in Kosovo towards reconciliation and peace. It will be interesting to follow this process in the upcoming years and to see whether further successful contributions can be made by the different religious leaders.

Dardan Hoti is a journalist and editor who has worked for media in Kosovo for more than six years. He was awarded with the Journalism Poverty Prize by the United Nations Kosovo Team in 2013. Dardan has been an Association of Journalists of Kosova board member since 2014, now in his second term.

Zlatiborka Popov Momčinović, PhD, Assistant Professor is a professor of political sciences at the University of East Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. She holds a degree in sociology from the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. During and after her studies she was active in civil society. From the year 2005, she was engaged as teaching assistant at the Faculty of Philosophy in East Sarajevo, where she defended her master thesis *Political Culture in the Period of Transition*. At the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, she defended her PhD thesis about women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and wrote a book *Women's Movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Articulation of One Counter-culture*. She published more than 60 articles dealing with the gender, activism, reconciliation, civil society and public role of religion. In the last four years she is a member of the research team within the project *Factors of Reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, in cooperation with the University of Edinburgh. She is also engaged as an expert and lecturer within the PRO Future Project, launched by Catholic Relief Service and supported by USAID, dealing with the issue of peace and reconciliation in municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

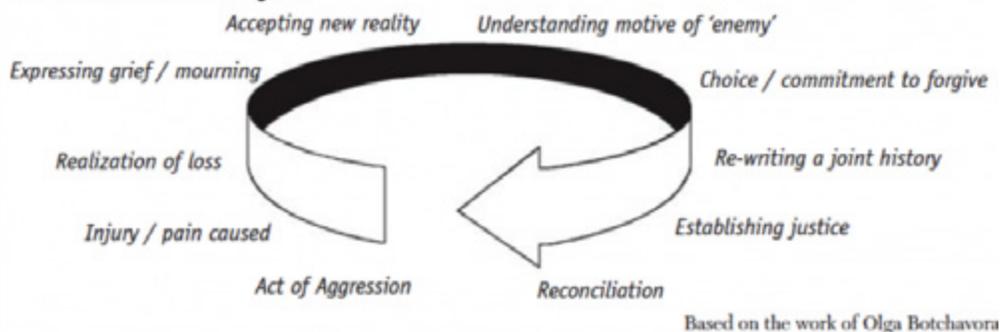
How do Religious Elements Contribute (or Not) to Facing the Past?

Religion is frequently seen as a phenomenon that is an obstacle for facing the past, especially in our region. Religious communities and churches with their narratives and religious monuments are more spaces for exclusive memories, selective memory and victimology which pays homage only to "its own" or faces other victims in a more abstract and, eventually, dehumanising way. The religious discourse frequently approaches victims in such a manner that victims are "equalised", and even the great German writer and Nobel Prize winner, Heinrich Böll, warned in his essay *Der Preis der Versöhnung*, i.e. the price of reconciliation, of the danger of such an approach of "keeping a balance as the one kept at an accounting office".

Since facing the past is a phenomenon that cannot be understood well without understanding the term reconciliation as a "strategy with many faces", we believe that such facing needs to be set in the context of reconciliation. Without it, facing the past is a purpose in itself and is not sufficiently oriented towards the present and future (see the picture on the left).

Pathways & Patterns of Reconciliation

Reconciliation as a cycle



The purpose that religions seem to serve, if we take a look at this cyclical expression of reconciliation, is to express suffering, losses and traumatic experiences, but only of its own group. This confirms all over again the ideology of religious nationalism and communication that actually legitimised conflicts in this region. Such a practice certainly needs to be faced in their own religious ranks, not to say trenches, because they are still operating.

In other aspects, they are almost not engaged, at least not in our region. They also have a selective approach to some segments of this topic, such as truth and forgiveness. Truth, for example, is forensic, narrative, dialogue-related, restorative. Our religious narratives give space only to their own narratives, not to those of "others", and to their own forensics that operates as a martyrology, i.e. the space for the cult of their own martyrdom. Forgiveness is always expected from the other side, which bears the risk for a crime to be cyclically repeated. As the great theologian from this region, Miroslav Volf, outlined in his essay *Remembering Wrongs Rightly*, one should act as if it was forgiven, even if that is not the case, because only such a position will not result in a desire for revenge, which leads to past being repeated. Religions thus also confirm their transcendence, striving for the better, higher, otherworldly that offers wider and fairer horizons, in Christian sense a space for the birth of not only new man, but also its own original role and authenticity.

Some of the positive examples to be found in some other countries are certainly something to be learned from, such as the role of German theologians following WWII or the role of Anglican bishops in South Africa during and after apartheid. Desmond Tutu, a South African Anglican bishop, played a particularly important role in the establishment of the Transitional Justice Committee, and as known, religious officials from this region not only questioned the establishment, but also the work of such a committee in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region.

Following the Nazi crimes, German theologians, for example, asked the dangerous question whether Christianity is possible after Auschwitz¹, warning that not Judaism had died in the in death camps, but rather Christianity, since it had borne open or hidden anti-Semitism for centuries. In our case, such questions are not asked², except in works and critical reflections of marginalised theologians and religious officials. However, they certainly constitute an important resource that should obtain more visibility and forms of support. German theologians were also saying that religion should be the space for "dangerous memories" and that it has a creative role, rather than preserving its own privileges and

regret for happier times when there was the alliance of "throne and altar", which in our case is somehow being established in all religious communities. They are more related to the state, and less to the society, and even to its own believers. In this way, in collusion with ethnic elites they are playing an important role in the production of a selective memory that becomes a "hidden semi-official history".

However, there is room for optimism, at least minimal one, such as in case of works of some theologians, which we pointed out, as well as in dialogue meetings, although they frequently stay at a normative level, joint local initiatives focused on future that do not deny the past, but rather overcome it in a socially creative and responsible manner. The engagement of female theologians and believers is also particularly important, but they are insufficiently visible due to social misogyny and patriarchal religious structures. Also, institutional forms of facing the past and dialogue have their disadvantages, and it is certainly important that the Interreligious Council operates in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which also has its own local branch offices. The Interreligious Council publishes important publications that point out the diversity of Bosnian and Herzegovinian society, reacts in case of attacks against religious buildings, supports the meetings of young theologians, whereas at the local level there are numerous joint projects focused on the daily lives of persons, which ensures that obstacles in the form of dehumanised interpretation and continuous focus on the past in a distorted manner are overcome.

Also, some research in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows (e.g. the four-year Edinburgh on reconciliation processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina)³ that believers in this region, irrespective of their religious community, had more "faith" in the reconciliation of non-religious persons. They supported to a larger extent various initiatives on both vertical (official) and horizontal (social and human) level. This certainly constitutes an important resource and also a message that believers can and should participate in a different and more creative way in various activities that will treat the past in a different way, for a better present and future. There is no literal time delimitation between them, but rather a movement through space, which gives us a better reflexivity and step away from the "naturalised" silence of selective remembrance. Faith and religiosity also provide a space for the "rebellion of heart" against various forms of evil, both old and new, which create the background cacophony (a phrase by Miroslav Volf) of our daily lives, including our religious one.

1 Which constitutes a paraphrase of Adorn's thesis that poetry is no longer possible after Auschwitz.

2 As some theologians (such as Nikola Knežević, Alen Kristić, Zoran Grozdanov etc.) ask where Orthodoxy was in Srebrenica, Catholicism in Jasenovac, etc.

3 A particular focus in this research lies on religion as a factor in reconciliation processes: www.ceir.co.rs/diskursi/uploads/2013/dec/Edinburg%20Bos.pdf



Shpëtim Nuredini
Editor-in-Chief at RTM2 (MPT2),
former correspondent of satellite TV
station ALSAT, Tirana

Mother Theresa's Past is at Stake in Macedonia

The Balkan societies, particularly in Macedonia, will face difficulties for a long time in dealing with the past. The reason for this challenge is the lack of willingness to know oneself as we know others, and to accept others as we accept ourselves. The lack of willingness to search for historical facts and the tendency to misuse history and identities were revealed during the canonization of Mother Theresa.

Was Mother Theresa an Albanian, Macedonian, or Wallach? Was she a Skopjean from Albania's Skopje, or a Skopjean of Macedonia's Skopje? Was she a devoted Catholic believer of whom both Muslim and Orthodox believers should be proud of or should she be rejected because she did not belong to the faith that other people chose?

The dilemma on the question of her identity was clarified by the saint herself, with a single sentence, which represents her identity card: "By blood, I am an Albanian. By citizenship, I am an Indian. By faith, I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to the Heart of Jesus", stated Mother Theresa, born Gonxhe Bojaxhiu. However, instead of accepting her as a unique and outstanding personality, her identity is highly politicized.

Although a person can represent a mosaic of identities, in Macedonia many limit identities to the ethnic belonging of a person. The fact that Mother Theresa was of Albanian descent and at the same time of Catholic belief challenged these simplistic perceptions. Mother Theresa was both an Albanian and a Catholic, and now a saint.

The Albanian community in Macedonia feels quite often neglected and underrepresented. Therefore, the fact that the origins of Mother Theresa were neglected during the ceremony of canonization wasn't perceived very well. The President of the state Djorge Ivanov managed to count all the identities of Mother Theresa the Saint, but he omitted her ethnic identity. In fact, to make the situation more confusing, he failed to mention her birth name, Gonxhe. Both the Minister of Culture and the Bishop of the Catholic Church did the same mistake. During the commemorative event organized by the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Macedonia dedicated to the canonization of Mother Theresa, the organization's President Taki Fiti stated that Mother Theresa came from a family of mixed ethnic backgrounds, causing very negative reactions.

The events around the canonization of Mother Theresa proved again that the Macedonian society not only lacks the capacity to deal with the past, but instead fans the flames of the ethnical division and the underlying conflicts within the society.

One of the monumental prayers of Mother Theresa was the prayer she made during her speech at the UN in 1985 where she said: "God grant me the strength to bring peace, where there is error to bring the truth." Macedonia still has to work on establishing a version of the truth that can be accepted by several sides. While working on that, we need to meet each other with peace, tolerance, mutual respect and redress of errors. We should leave the usual nationalist thinking patterns behind us and interact with each other as equal members of this society.

Islamic Community Between Consequences of War in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Growing Extremism

At the beginning of 2014, Mirza Ganić died in the fights between the Free Syrian Army and ISIL near Aleppo. He was nineteen years old and from Novi Pazar. He was a good child, the best primary school student in his generation, and he had the best grades at the secondary grammar school. Two months before his graduation he went to Syria to fight for ISIL. His family did not know that he was planning to go to Syria. He contacted them from there when he arrived.

He used Facebook from Syria to send his photos, war theatre reports, but also to send threats to individual Bosniak politicians and NVO activists, whom he was accusing that they had betrayed Islam. Ganić was not the first person from Sandžak to fight and die in Syria, but he attracted attention specifically because he was an exemplary young man, who went to fight for ISIL. Since there are no official data, the media are speculating with varying figures regarding the number of Muslims who left Serbia to fight for ISIL, mostly Bosniaks from Sandžak, and these figures vary from several dozens to several hundreds. A dozen of them died. After Serbia had adopted a law according to which leaving to foreign war theatres became a criminal offence punishable also with a prison sentence, the number of men from Sandžak joining ISIL dramatically decreased. Maybe not that much because of the law, but rather because of the declining popularity of ISIL. There are numerous questions asked in relation to this. What motivated young Bosniaks to go to fight in Syria? Is extremism in Sandžak on the rise and what is the role of the Islamic community?

*Impact of the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina

According to the 2011 census results, Islam is the third largest religious community in Serbia. Out of 7.2 million citizens of Serbia, there are somewhat more than 220,000 Muslims, around 3%. The largest share among Muslims is Bosniaks. There are somewhat more than 145,000 of them and they mostly live in Sandžak. The six Sandžak municipalities that belong to Serbia, there are 238,787 inhabitants, 76,590 (32%) are Orthodox Christians and 156,575 (65.5%) are Muslims. In former Yugoslavia, there was a single Islamic community, the seat of which (Rijaset) and religious leader (reis-ul-ulema) were located in Sarajevo. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Islamic community was unable to function normally, so that Muslims in parts of former Yugoslavia started organising themselves independently. Muslims in Sandžak established the Islamic community lead by the mufti Muamer Zukorlić. The Milošević-lead government back then refused to recognise this religious organisation and claimed that it was a political organisation with separatist intentions. As of 2007, there are two religious Muslim organisations in Serbia that do not recognise each other. The Islamic community in Serbia is connected to the Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its religious leader is the reis-ul-ulema in Sarajevo. It is lead by the chief mufti Mevlud Dudić. The Islamic community of Serbia has its leader, the reis-ul-ulema Sead Nasufović, who wishes to cooperate with Sarajevo, but advocates an independent religious community of Muslims in Serbia. There are no theological differences between the two Islamic communities. They rather differ in the sense that one of them sees its seat in Sarajevo and the other in Belgrade. The Government of Serbia has so far, obviously for political reasons, protected the Islamic Community in Serbia, but the Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić also established good relations with the former chief mufti of the Islamic Community in Serbia, Muhamed Zukorlić, who left his religious position and entered politics. He is a PM at the Assembly of Serbia and a supporter of the current Vučić's government.

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) was the hardest test for traditionally good relations between Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Serbia. Although Serbia officially has not participated in the war, the political and military leadership back then, lead by the late Slobodan Milošević, wholeheartedly supported the politics and army of Bosnian Serbs lead by Radovan Karadžić and general Ratko Mladić, and volunteers from Serbia participated in fights. Since the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina also had a religious component, it had to impact the inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations in Serbia, too, especially in its areas bordering with Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Bosniaks-Muslims

constituted a significant portion of the population, and sometimes even the majority. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina mostly impacted Muslims in Sandžak, which is a border region between Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The most serious attacks against Muslims, their property and religious buildings were recorded in Bukovica, a place near Pljevlje, in the part of Sandžak that belongs to Montenegro, and near Priboj, in Serbia. The governments of Montenegro and Serbia invested millions of euros in the reconstruction of Muslim houses in Bukovica and the proximity of Priboj over the past years, as well as in various reconstruction projects in these areas destroyed in the war. However, nobody was held accountable for the committed crimes. The best-known two cases of kidnapping and murder of Bosniaks-Muslims, citizens of the former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, or Serbia and Montenegro, are "Sjeverin" and "Štrpci". On October 22, 1992, 17 Bosniaks were abducted in the village Mioča (Rudo Municipality in a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina with majority Serb population) from a bus that transported passengers from the Priboj village Sjeverin to Priboj. They were taken to Višegrad (Bosnia and Herzegovina), tortured and killed. Also, in February 1993, 20 passengers, 19 of them Bosniaks and one Croat, who resisted the abduction of these people, were abducted from a Belgrade-Bar train in the village of Štrpci, also a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina controlled by Serb forces. The abducted persons were taken to an unknown location and killed.

It is interesting that during the war in the neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina, in spite of the crimes committed also against Bosniaks from Sandžak, there were no cases of religious extremism or inter-religious and inter-ethnic incidents in Sandžak. The fact that Serbs and Bosniaks in Sandžak respect each other became clear also on March 17, 2004, after the drowning of two Albanian children in the river Ibar. Serbs from a neighbouring village were accused of being responsible for it, without any evidence, as it turned out later. On this occasion, Albanians attacked Serbs in Kosovo and destroyed dozens of churches and monasteries. On the same evening, Serbs retaliated by setting mosques in Belgrade and Niš on fire, and there was a series of attacks against Albanians and Muslims and their property. In Sandžak, everything was quiet, and the Islamic community there condemned religiously motivated attacks in Kosovo and Central Serbia and it called upon its believers not to give into hysteria and not to seek revenge. The mufti Zukorlić in that period invited his followers to particularly pay attention and protect Orthodox buildings near Novi Pazar, monasteries Đurđevi stupovi and Sopoćani, as well as Peter's Church.

*Views of Muslim Religious Leaders

Bosniaks from Sandžak accepted Islam during the multi-century rule of the Ottomans. As a European people of Slavic origin, which had lived with members of other religions for centuries, Bosniaks belong to the more liberal Sunni Muslims. Many persons were thus surprised by the appearance of more radical views of Islam that were observed in Sandžak over the past 10-15 years through the activities of the Wahhabi and Salafi. There were several incidents where members of the Wahhabi movement tried to impose their type of prayer at some mosques, interrupted music concerts, distributed fliers in which they were explaining what is in compliance with Islam, and what is not. The most serious incident happened in 2007, when a group of Wahhabi was arrested and charged with the organisation of a training camp near the village Žabren, between Sjenica and Novi Pazar. The two Wahhabi groups were convicted for terrorism.

Over the past years, there were no incidents of this type in Novi Pazar and Sandžak, and it seems that the Wahhabi and Salafi are not that visible in the streets. In Novi Pazar it may be observed that over the past years there is an increasing number of women, especially young women and girls, who accept the Muslim way of clothing and wear a hijab. It seems to be in compliance with the general trends in former Yugoslavia, especially after the wars in the 90s and dissolution of the former state. Young Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Albanians, etc., are increasingly focusing on their nation and religion. In case of Muslims, such focus or "return" to Islam seems to have both domestic and international causes. After the war in Bosnia, and as a response to numerous crimes, the national and religious consciousness and pride of Bosniaks became stronger. Wars in Muslim countries, as well as the xenophobia in Europe also resulted in the fact that young Bosniaks are increasingly focusing on their religion and distancing themselves from the Western values.

Islamic religious leaders, irrespective of the religious community they stem from, in general regularly condemned war crimes, extremist phenomena, especially terrorist acts that individuals allegedly committed in the name of Islam, stressed the necessity of mutual respect and co-existence of various religions and advocated that local Muslims should continue respecting the traditional version of Islam that has been

present in this region for centuries. The former mufti, Muamer Zukorlić, who was accused by some that he rendered possible the growth of extreme wahhabism in Sandžak, and who, during the trial of a group of Wahhabis, was said to have been the target of a planned terrorist attack as a “CIA agent”, became one of the leaders of the Bosniak Democratic Community in Sandžak and an MP at the Assembly of Serbia. Zukorlić had been accused of extremism and separatism by most Serbian media, but he now became the political partner of the official Belgrade. He is advocating the politics of reconciliation between Serbs and Bosniaks, Muslims and Christians, but without forgetting the crimes.

“You cannot leave so important issues behind, you cannot stop counting the victims. Crimes are something to be condemned, perpetrators are to be prosecuted, and this is a task for the judicial and other institutions, but there should be principles. The process may further unfold in a positive manner only if there are principles. It certainly cannot unfold by denying, postponing or sweeping it under the carpet. It is very important to gather and to say that we wish a dialogue, that we wish to overcome it. Not to postpone, forget, minimise”, says Zukorlić. While speaking about the issue of radicalism, Zukorlić stresses that “fire cannot be put out by another fire” and that it is necessary to create an environment in which extreme offers are not interesting, and that improving the economic and social situation in Sandžak is of particular importance in this. “We wish to see a strong Sandžak in terms of culture, economy, transport, as a nucleus of the future collectiveness in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, etc. Sandžak is a place where the good meets, a cross-roads between the motorway leading from Belgrade towards the sea and from Sarajevo towards Novi Pazar. Neither Serbia nor Montenegro should be afraid of such a Sandžak and Bosniaks. We have shown that we do not plunder and attack. With such an investment, we wish a Serbia where everyone is equal and respects one another. For such a state we are willing to jointly build and create”, said Zukorlić during his election rallies.

The Islamic community of Serbia, lead by the reis-ul-ulema Sead Nasufović, regularly condemns extremist phenomena and crimes and advocates a tolerant, multi-ethnic and multi-religious life. Although Nasufović is officially the leader, this religious community is connected to the family Jusufspahić, which has been controlling the Muslim community in Belgrade for centuries. Many Muslims, especially in Sandžak, resent the fact that the Jusufspahićs were too close to politicians that brought evil to Muslims in this region, Slobodan Milošević and Vojislav Šešelj. The Jusufspahićs and the Islamic community in general have a good relationship with the authorities, stress their ties to Serbia and their opposition to extremism. “Where we are present and going, there is no extremism”, says Muhamed Jusufspahić, the former mufti of the Serbian Islamic community in 2007. “We, Muslims in Serbia, all of us for whom the Lord is more important than anything created, condemn violence, any killing and any intrigue leading to killing”, said Jusufspahić back then, while commenting on the terrorist attacks in various European countries.

Safeta Biševac is a journalist of the daily newspaper Today from Belgrade and co-editor of the newspaper insert Sandžak Today of the daily newspaper. During her long career in journalism, she mostly dealt with internal politics, but also with regional topics, humanitarian issues and human rights.



Author: Randall Puljek-Shank

BELIEVERS FOR PEACE

Believers for Peace is an interreligious initiative launched in 2006. The eight-member group of believers leading this initiative includes Christians and Muslims from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and it has been active in peace building for a number of years. The initiative Believers for Peace gathers around a common vision "By Building Peace, We Celebrate God", which is the title of interreligious peace gatherings and conferences organised by this initiative.

Three regional interreligious conferences have been held so far: in Croatia in 2006 (Island Krk), in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2008 (in Blagaj near Mostar), and in Serbia in 2010 (in Andrevlje, Vojvodina). The next conference is planned in Croatia in 2017 (Omiš). The conferences were an opportunity for believers interested in peace building to meet and the topics focused on the potentials of Abrahamic religions for peace building by connecting religious contents and non-violence as the attitude and manner of social activism. The purpose of meetings during conferences is

discovering and learning about peace impacts, concepts and theologies for the purpose of raising the awareness of believers of their responsibility to build the civil society.

In its work so far, the initiative Believers for Peace has been encouraging believers to learn and deepen religious contents that will empower them to work on peace building in order to contribute to a peaceful coexistence in societies they belong to by actively practicing their own religion.

In 2013, the initiative Believers for Peace started an initiative entitled Declaration of Believers for Peace. The declaration contains principles based on which a believer actively working on peace can be recognised. These criteria constitute guidelines for non-violent action. Every person can sign the declaration and thus symbolically oblige himself or herself to make efforts to build peace through non-violent action and by taking the strength and motivation from their own religion.

The organisational group of this initiative meets two to three times per year during consultation weekends. These consultations are frequent occasions for identifying burning issues of interreligious peace building that need to be tackled over the coming period. The topic that the next conference will focus on is the issue how Believers for Peace should deal with problems in a time of nationalism and xenophobia.

All these activities resulted in the desired outcome, namely that an increasing number of citizens, both Christians and Muslims, from Southeast Europe identify themselves with the name "believer for peace" and send the message of the initiative Believers for Peace as their own message.

The initiative Believers for Peace is connected to similar initiatives, networks and organisations such as the European network Church and Peace, Saint Francis prayer and the related group of the same name, Croyants pour la paix from France as well as Gläubige für den Frieden.

In October 2013, the declaration was presented in Berko near Vukovar and in Vinkovci as part of the Saint Francis prayer, and in December of the same year, the declaration was promoted in the presence of more than hundred participants at the Centre of the Islamic Community in Rijeka.

At the beginning of June, 2014, the declaration was presented in Sarajevo as part of the peaceful commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the beginning of World War I ("Peace Event Sarajevo 2014").

On January 1, 2015, Believers for Peace published an appeal for peace a week before the tragic attack against Charlie Hebdo in Paris. That appeal addressed the issue of silent intolerance in Europe and our society in the form of islamophobia. A warning was issued that various forms of phobias do not endanger only the members of a certain religious group, but also peace as a common good of all citizens. In addition to its general nature, the appeal also has a practical aspect, since it proposes specific steps that every person can take when fighting intolerance and prejudices.

RELIGION AND

POLITICS - A

Given the various socio-historical conditions in different parts of the world, different concepts of state and religion and their relationship have developed. Politics and religion are quite often interconnected. Religions have founded countries, but the states have also supported and strengthened religions. Additionally, religions through revolutions and gradual influence have been changing social structures, the country or the state apparatus, and if not changed, often adapted and taken full control of entire religions.

While in earlier times religion and state were very much interlinked empirical research shows that in the last two decades of the previous century and the first decade of the 21st century, secularism has grown and the role of religion in society and the state have decreased. Secularism means that religion and faith are a part of the private sphere of each individual and do not engage in policy-making and conduct of the state. In the second decade of this century, especially in Southeast and Central Europe, there is a rising trend of restrengthening of the relationship between religion and politics, and the State.

The Republic of Macedonia is a secular country according to the Constitution and laws that separate formal politics from religion and guarantee full respect and protection of religious pluralism. Because there has been so little empirical research done in our country on the questions of

religion and politics we have to rely heavily on our own experiences, the media and the daily perceptions of our elected officials.

The system does not seem very secular to me observing the hype on media during major religious holidays when state party leaders are spotted in the Church or the Mosque. Personally, being a believer myself, I do not care which one of our leaders finds the coin when they slice the so-called Christmas bread for Christmas or which religious holidays they celebrate.

Religion should not be taken only as folkloric tradition that secures more votes. It also should not influence political decision-making and policy development. Unfortunately, politics in Macedonia are often justified through religious arguments. For example, the government policy for larger families is based on the Christian and Muslim belief that abortion is one of the greatest sins. The law that forbids abortions restricts women from the right to independently decide whether or not to have a child. Another example is the understanding of sexual orientation which for our political elites is identical to the understanding of the two largest religious communities, the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Patriarchate, and the Muslim community. Islam and Christianity claim that gay relationships are an affront to the teachings of God, as described in the Bible and Quran.

DANGEROUS COCKTAIL

In the context of Macedonia, not only politics and religion are dangerously interconnected. The ethnic identities of citizens are added to that dangerous cocktail as well and are being misused by nationalist movements. Today, to be a good and a „true Macedonian“ and a patriot means to be a Christian and Orthodox, and on other hand, the “real Albanian“ primarily means to be a Muslim and Sunni.

The mixture of politics, religion and ethnic identities fuels conflicts and tensions in our country and are not enabling us to deal with our past in a constructive way. The rising trend of converging religion and politics over the last ten years in Macedonia is in the long-term hurting the citizens of Macedonia if we are not able to overcome the divisions that are too often promoted by our leaders.



Todor Pendarov is a columnist, political analyst, journalist and a member of the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia.

Muhamed Jusić is an Islamic theologian, Arab studies expert and Middle East and Balkans analytic. He is the author of several books and studies on the Arab world and Islam. He is a columnist of Al Jazeera Balkans, newspapers and magazines StartBiH, Oslobođenje and Preporod. He is a collaborator of the Centre for Advanced Studies in Sarajevo and the project coordinator of Islam in Southeast Europe.

Challenge of Facing the Past, Believers and Religious Communities

————— The process of facing the past, healing traumatic experiences from the past war and the process of reconciliation itself imposes itself as one of the key questions in all aspects of the social, economic, and even religious life among peoples that have lived together in this region for centuries. Many experts who know the situation in the country agree that “the brutality of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the suffering and tribulation, dimensions of destruction that were recorded, suggest that establishing the truth will be a painful and arduous job”. From our own experience, but also from the experience of many other actors in the interreligious dialogue that has become current, at least in case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we cannot avoid noting that the lack of willingness or lack of a true model to face what was happening during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which culminated in the crime of genocide, was the stumbling stone also among persons representing religious community or claiming to be believers. The issue of facing the recent past simply constitutes an “unexploded mine” that all organisers of any interreligious meeting are afraid of.

The same issue occurs in case of normalisation of any other relations, from the return of displaced persons over more intense economic and cultural cooperation in this region. It is thus an imperative for us to start dealing with this issue as a society and stop producing “parallel truths”.

Religious communities can and should also contribute to this in order to ensure a better basis for the process of healing the memories and facing the past. They cannot establish the facts on the suffering or causes of the conflict, but they can create an environment in which such issues will be discussed without bias, agitation or manipulation with emotions. Religious communities and believers can thus significantly contribute to facing the past and rebuilding the trust by promoting the idea of inter-religious dialogue.

Religious Communities and Reconciliation

In this context, not even the process of facing the past stemming from religious communities and faith of motivated informal groups and individuals has not demonstrated better results, because in most cases it was limited to interreligious dialogue without tackling and facing what was happening and finding clear models and principles of the reconciliation process.

Frequently the reason due to which religious communities are reluctant to initiate the process of facing the past, is interpreted by some parts of the civil sector that is critical towards religious communities by the fact that this would require them to re-examine their role during the wars in this region, which they are not willing to do (and not just them, but also other actors, such as the media).

During my discussions with numerous members of religious communities, when asked why religious communities do not lead the process of reconciliation, they would most frequently respond that they could not be expected to initiate such a process, which has obviously been stagnating in all other domains of social life for quite some time. The extent and manner in which religious communities should and could participate in the process of facing the past is something that every of them should set as their goal.

Interreligious Dialogue and the Process of Facing the Past

In spite of the fact that the issue of facing the past is frequently an obstacle for the interreligious dialogue, it is a fact that religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina have made the first, even though formal, steps towards an interreligious dialogue that can be a precursor to reconciliation, and that in addition to the activities of IRC and IRI, there is an increasing number of cases at lower levels and in local communities where numerous projects are started for the purpose of interreligious dialogue and cooperation. However, during such gatherings, the issue of war heritage is most frequently avoided, and every time when the issue of past is treated, it becomes obvious every time that there is still no agreement as to what was happening here or a common vision as to how to proceed. What numerous examples from local communities show is the potential that religions have to become the ones starting a dialogue, instead of being instruments of dissension. Such a potential can be used in order to start discussing the most complex issues in the society of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Potential for Facing the Past

In its efforts to face the past, Bosnia and Herzegovina could and should use the experiences of other crisis areas in order not just to learn some lessons and ensure effective solutions, but also to try avoiding negativities occurring in such processes. Of course, there may not be any transfer of ready solutions, whether this is a German, Finnish, South African or some other model, since cultural, historic and other circumstances are different. Also, waiting for the “elites”, no matter whether they are political, religious or academic, to agree on facing the past in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a waste of time. For this reason, grassroots initiatives, no matter how small, should not be neglected.

In addition to this, all religious communities have a considerable potential in their basic teachings that can assist with the process of facing the past and building peace and reconciliation. I primarily mean the institution of forgiveness and the “open door of repentance” that all religions teach.

Religious feelings can mobilise persons faster than any other of their identities. This is why they are most frequently used to mobilise persons for war and justify violence. But this very fact (that religion has an incredible fast and effective transformative power) can be a valuable potential in promoting non-violence, reconciliation and peace building in conflict communities and societies.

What is certainly interesting is that this region has one of the highest levels of public religiosity, although from personal experience in daily life one has the impression that the level of moral responsibility for one’s own, and especially collective actions, is very low. This becomes an obvious obligation, but also a chance for religious communities to contribute

in order to redirect such religiosity somewhere else, because it is hardly possible to have a reconciliation process without the willingness to assume collective, if nothing else, moral responsibility. Given the awareness of all controversies around the issue of collective responsibility, the fact remains that, even if someone is not responsible for what members of its people did in its name, he/she is certainly responsible for how he/she relates to it today.

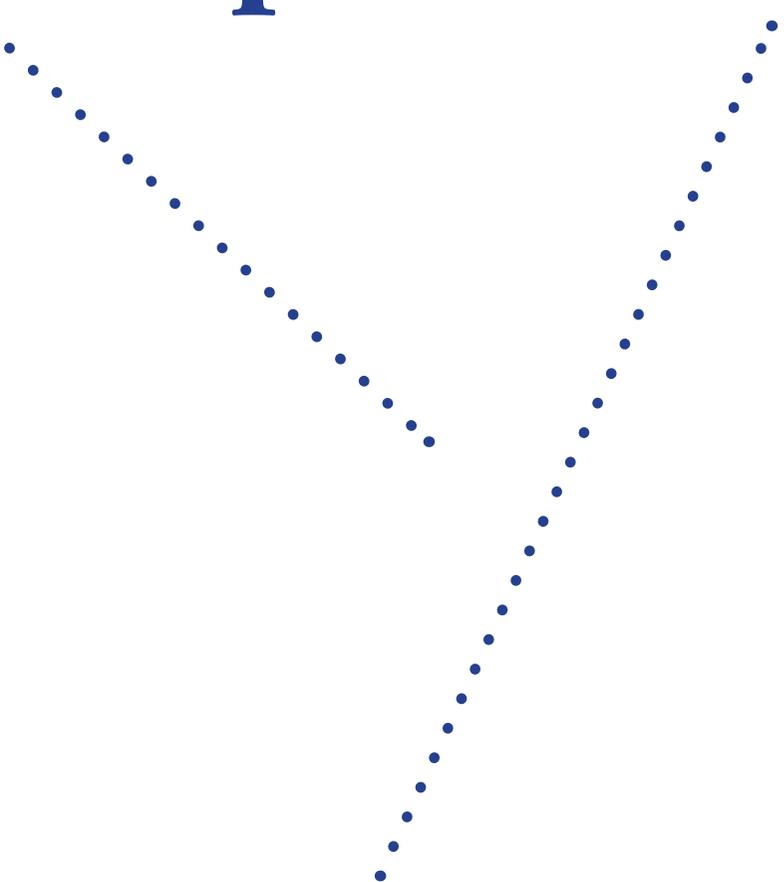
Also, we should not leave out the potential that is traditionally evident in case of all ethnic groups, namely the feeling of "shame", which is more present in the culture than the feeling of moral responsibility, which constitutes an important potential for initiating the process of facing the past.

It is evident that the process of forgiveness and reconciliation is frequently not initiated due to fear from oblivion and piety towards victims. However, to forgive and to forget is not the same, because in order to forgive, we have to have an active memory of what happened, in order to forgive, we have to know exactly what is being forgiven.

The horrific wars that occurred in Bosnia and Herzegovina and countries of the region in the '90s have lead, as maybe none before, to a division of the society along ethnic lines. For the Balkans, as a blood-soaked region, such a state of intolerance, which the history clearly outlines, both from the Ottoman and later periods, is something unnatural. People and peoples in this region have one of the longer and richer traditions of co-existence, multiculturalism, multiple religions and traditional values that dominated in spite of all horrific periods that this tumultuous part of Europe was going through, which gives us hope that, if only the right conditions are created, people in this region will regain that spirit and find a way to live together, create a better future and produce social capital that all persons in Europe, but also beyond, will benefit from



news & updates



The new section on the website **Dealing with the Past - BLOG/VLOG** will be launched on **1st of June**

Dealing with the Past Blog, the new media product of online platform about Dealing with the Past www.dwp-balkan.org, was officially launched on 1 June 2017. DWP Blog is the regional online platform for constructive reflection on the topics related to dealing with the past for the purpose of strengthening constructive and open approach on the regional level. By using Blog/Vlog tool we want to promote constructive online discourse related to current topics in the field of dealing with the past.

We invite all Bloggers/Vloggers from Western Balkans who are interested in the topics on dealing with the past and are willing to open constructive debates on those topics, to become involved in this new media platform and to contact us if you would like to contribute to the Blog/Vlog or if you need any additional information.

Please contact Sunita DautbegovićBošnjaković, Project Manager, forumZFD Sarajevo at bosnjakovic@forumzfd.de or info@dwp-balkan.org.

next issue

The 8th issue of Balkan.Perspectives is going to examine why dealing with the past should be taken into account when talking about education. We are looking at how nationalism is being spread through the schools and universities but want to also present best practice examples of how formal and non-formal education institutions are promoting inclusive ways of remembrance.

Impressum

Balkan.Perspectives is published by *forumZFD*.

The Forum Civil Peace Service (*forumZFD*, Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst) is a German organisation that was established in 1996. It trains and deploys peace experts to conflict regions where they work together with local partners to promote peaceful coexistence and non-violent conflict resolution. Its strategic partner in the Western Balkans is Pax Christi in the Diocese of Aachen.

In the Western Balkans, the focus is on projects in the field of dealing with the past and on fostering dialogue between opposing parties. This includes school mediation projects, the support of civil society, or enhancing media capacities for a more constructive approach to dealing with the past.

The program is financed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

EDITOR IN CHIEF:

Maike Dafeld

EDITORIAL TEAM:

Sunita Dautbegović-Bošnjaković, Vjollca Islami Hajrullahu, Nora Maliqi, Vjera Ruljic, Nehari Sharri

AUTHORS:

Safeta Biševac, Dardan Hoti, Muhamed Jusić, Shpëtim Nuredini, Todor Pendarov, Zlatiborka Popov Momčinović

LAYOUT:

Kokrra

PRINT:

Envinion

TRANSLATION:

LBG Communications (Albanian), Bjanka Osmanović (BCS), Reis Kjerim (Macedonian)

PROOFREADING:

LBG Communications (Albanian), Violeta Kostadinovska (Macedonian), Zinaida Lakić (BCS), Tenzin Dolker (English)

CONTACT:

Balkan.perspectives@forumzfd.de

PLACE OF PUBLICATION

Cologne

Forum Civil Peace Service | Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst e.V. (*forumZFD*)

Kosovo office: Sejdi Kryeziu 16 - Pejton 10000 Prishtina	Serbia office: Prote Mateje 17 11000 Belgrade
Bosnia and Herzegovina office: ul. Branilaca Sarajeva 19 B 71000 Sarajevo	Macedonia office ul. Borka Taleski 11/4 1000 Skopje

Disclaimer

Balkan.Perspectives is created as a regional platform for constructive debates on dealing with the past. The views expressed in this magazine are those of its respective contributors and do not reflect the view of either the editor or *forumZFD* and its partners. While the publishers carefully check the web links promoted in this periodical, they cannot be held responsible for the content of external websites.

Copying and redistributing this material in print or electronically is acceptable, provided the text is not modified, and that appropriate citation is included. There is no fee charged.