

THE ART OF CONNECTING CULTURES

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Abstract: *Four major ‘ideal type’ models may be distinguished in cultural relations in society: Monocultural (monopoly of one culture), Multicultural (living apart together, in mutual tolerance), Secular (rule of law, equality, culturally neutral) and Intercultural (different cultures connected in equivalence). Cultural diversity will become more prominent in the wake of increasing globalisation and migration – which makes the challenge of connecting cultures more urgent than ever. This essay reports on a content analysis of the proceedings of two European conferences on religious dialogue and cooperation (2019, 2022) in Struga, North-Macedonia. These suggest that today cultures are being disconnected rather than connected. Where several major cultures co-exist they struggle for cultural priority; where one dominant culture exists it defends itself against intrusion by other cultures. At the same time there is a persistent pull towards the secular model. This stands in the way of coming closer to the intercultural model. Movement in the direction of an intercultural model appears to remain restricted to statements of political and religious correctness or incidental grass roots initiatives.*

This essay will offer a survey of policies that have had a positive and negative effect on connecting cultures, leading to explore the transition to an intercultural society. The critical variables in that process will be identified and analysed, leading to proposals for proactive policies to strengthen the connecting process.

Keywords: *cultural diversity, religion, secular modernity, pro-active policy.*

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Introduction

Cultural diversity will become more prominent in the wake of increasing globalisation, which makes the challenge of connecting cultures more urgent than ever. The aim of this essay is to explore how progress may be made in bringing cultures together. It will offer a survey of experiences that have had a positive and negative effect and explore the critical variables in that process, leading to proposals for proactive policies that may create and strengthen an intercultural society.

The essay is based on the study of general literature and more particularly, on a content analysis of the proceedings of two European Conferences on Religious Dialogue and Cooperation held in Struga in North Macedonia, in 2019 and 2022². The explicit aim of these conferences was to contribute to bringing religions closer together, thus enhancing peace and balanced progress, improve the quality of democracy, and enrich social and cultural relations. These conferences took the concept 'religion' more broadly to also mean 'culture'. Indeed, it may be argued that civilisations and cultures are largely made with religious material and play a central role in defining the social, cultural and political structures, even in secular societies (Tramontano 2021: 45).

1. The dynamics of cultural relations

Four major types of relations in cultural relations in society may be distinguished: 'monocultural' (monopoly of one culture), 'multicultural' (different cultures living apart together in mutual tolerance), 'secular' (equality of all citizens, culturally neutral) and 'intercultural' (different cultures connected in equivalence). A conceptual model for analysing the dynamics of change and the development in relations between cultures is presented in Figure 1. The model shows the four major types of relations between cultures, the dynamics of the movements between these four types, and the critical variables that may cause these movements.

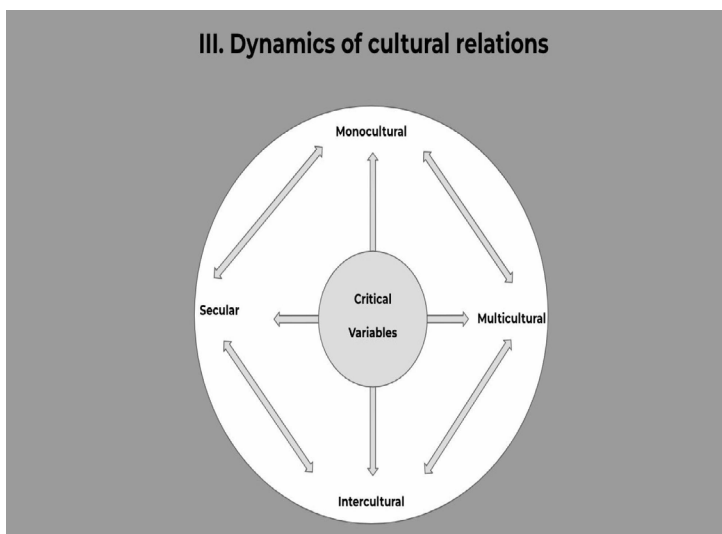


Figure 1. The Dynamics of Cultural Relations; a Conceptual Model

² The European Conferences on Religious Dialogue and Cooperation were followed up by a World Conference in 2023, a second World Conference is scheduled for 2024.

In a *monocultural society* the norms and values of the dominant culture prevail. Other cultures are 'second class'. Many countries in pre-modern Europe practised the principle *cuius regio, eius religio* (every country its own religion) which led to intolerance towards minorities, to persecution, even to expulsion, like once in Spain under Inquisition. The values that are found fundamental for the dominant culture are considered the main moral standard for all citizens. Today the so-called 'European Christian Matrix' remains a monocultural reference in many countries.

In a *multicultural society*, different cultures co-exist in mutual tolerance – none of them imposes its values and norms on all citizens of a society. Al- Andalus in pre-medieval Spain, and the Balkan under Ottoman rule are examples of such cultural co-existence. Yet, even when a multicultural society may be based on benevolent tolerance, it also makes for a split society with split identities, education, solidarity and so on, which may lead to living apart together in parallel communities. These may sooner or later come into conflict, and even end in violence.

The *secular society* is culturally neutral, it guarantees equal rights to all citizens irrespective of culture and religion. It is a typical liberal view of society: the same rules and rights apply to all citizens, who may live according to their culture and religion, as long as they respect the common secular rules of society, and do not put their loyal participation in society into question. Secular values of individual freedom, equality and the rule of law are dominant.

In an *intercultural society*, different cultures unite in an open society, not only in equality but also in equivalence. Diversity is celebrated and supported by an inclusive cultural frame as foundation, with full respect for minorities.

The four abovementioned types of relations between cultures are four 'ideal types' in the sociological sense. In reality of course, relations between cultures are changing and developing. The dynamics of these cultural relations will be examined in the following section.

1.1. *The dynamics of cultural relations: the European experience*

The Struggle for Cultural Priority

Religions tend to rigidly adhere to their beliefs and dogmas. They instil them in their believers, and then develop an exclusive identity. The history of mankind is the history of civilisations, each viewing itself as the centre of the world. Dogmatism does not change along with societal change, and globalisation would appear to intensify instead of reducing the polarisation of religions: conflicts between religions are stepping up and become internationalised. (Fileva, 2022 & Pavlevski, 2022).

Eastern Europe and the Balkan in particular, remain the epicentre of interreligious tension between Orthodox Christianity and Islam, coupled with interethnic conflicts. The civil wars, especially those in Serbia, Bosnia- Herzegovina and Kosovo, have not resolved the ethnic and religious divisions, fire is still smouldering. The Balkan remains an ill-fated corner of Europe, caught in a complex knot of problems in which ethnicity, language and nationality play important parts, and religion (and its cultural attributes) perhaps the most important. Religious division still rears its ugly head. There is a parade of (often new) mosques with tall and elegant minarets, while on top of mountains a huge Christian cross attracts attention. It is as if both religions are trying to outshine each other and mark their territory. Schools poke up religious education. Religions are digging in. Believers claim to have the true God at their side, writes Zoran Matevski. Religious freedom is interpreted as a simple existence of one next to the other. The division of people between "us" and "them" produces violence based on a totalitarian understanding of faith (Matevski, 2020, 2022).

The Orthodox and the Islamic communities in North Macedonia do often not follow their theological principles but show intolerance and hatred towards each other, and religious intolerance is often wrapped up in ethnically based agendas (Avirovic, 2020). Research in Bosnia-Herzegovina shows

that all three ethnic groups (Serbians, Croats and Bosniaks) perceive themselves uncritically, idealise the image of their own people and have negative stereotype prejudices about all other ethnic groups; people do not trust each other (Milosevic&Siljak, 2020:107). Interreligious strife may become barbarism, as happened in Bosnia Herzegovina, and may play an important role in apocalyptic battles, as is now the case in Ukraine: a cultural war, this time between two opposing sides within the same Christian Orthodox family.

The Defence of the Established Culture

The constructs and presumptions of 'what is Europe' and 'who is European', writes Emily Greble, have developed within a distinct Christian context (Greble, 2021: 258). The Enlightenment may have replaced religion by secularity, but religion powerfully shaped European statehood and Christianity continues to play an important role in national culture, law, and concepts of morality (*ibid*: 9). Today, Europe's citizens belong in majority to the 'European Christian Matrix'.

The growing immigration from outside Europe is changing the cultural landscape. The Muslim migrants constitute the majority and carry with them a religion that Huntington has declared incompatible with Christian culture. The growing number of migrants leads to internationalisation of religious issues and conflicts around the world. The terrorist attacks on European soil in the first decades of the 21st century, the rise of the Islamic Caliphate as well as the trend of immigrated Muslims to keep their own identity, have resulted in fear and resistance and eventually to islamophobic reactions, especially by right-wing populist parties (Grizhev *et al*, 2020: 75-79). There were many forms of provocation like Koran-burning, placing pigheads in front of mosques, arson, aggression against refugee centres and so on. And it paved the way for justifying border control with walls, fences with barbed wire, pushbacks by FRONTEX, even naval blockades. Next, interreligious conflicts became political, then military. The attacks on Charlie Hebdo, Bataclan and Brussels Airport were acts of jihad-militancy in reaction to western arrogance. These experiences feed growing xenophobia and racism and a steady rise of nationalist right-wing populist political parties. The reaction is to respond to force by force. Iliev & Taneski mention a NATO Declaration on Strategy, adopted June 2022 in Madrid, 'to counter, deter, defend, and respond to threats and challenges posed by terrorist and religious terrorist groups' (Iliev & Taneski, 2022: 43-5).

The Pull of Secular Modernity

Cultural relations navigate today between monoculturalism and multiculturalism but also tend to blend into secularization. A free-riding style of religiousness, de-confessionalisation and marginalisation of religion are the current trend, especially in Western Europe. At the same time, the promise of Western Europe's prosperity becomes more attractive for millions of inhabitants of the Balkan and Eastern Europe. Attracted by high standards of living in the West, also South and East Europeans develop consumerist values. Kurashcalls it 'Disneyzation': a desire to belong to the universal material culture (Kurash, 2022).

In the present political discourse in Europe, secular values and norms are becoming the ultimate reference for society. But rapidly increasing immigration of people with other religions and cultures has become a new element in the secularisation process, and governments had to react. Starting with notions of living-happily-apart-together-multiculturalism integration policy soon became assimilation policy (Schinkel, 2017: 23). In many European countries civic integration courses, admission exams, diploma's and so on, seek to mould migrants into the home of the West, pulling them into the dominant culture. The West considers itself to be the official carrier of the ultimate social and cultural values. This one-way integration amounts to distinguishing 'citizens' from 'non-integrated' persons

that are discursively exorcized from society. Schinkel calls this the *domestication of difference*, 'Modern' is defined as 'being Western'. This 'whitewashing of immigrants' amounts to cultural conversion (*ibid*: 214-219).

The perspective of the ultimate superiority of secular Western culture is backed up by many of today's influential scholars. The French philosopher Marcel Gauchet contends that Europe is in the ultimate phase of the process of ending religion, is pulling itself out of religious structuration and has no choice but to become the first laboratory of secular modernity (Gauchet, 2017: 8-17). The philosopher Steven Pinker developed an evolution theory that presents the secular modernity of the West as model for the Rest. Yuval Noah Harari foresees the world blending into a single global civilisation, as an extension of The West. The dominant culture is once regarded as 'a culture', but also as 'the culture' that is neutral and universal since it is enlightened, leading to sort of an Enlightenment fundamentalism³.

Religious and Political Diplomacy

The main theme of the earlier mentioned Conferences on Religious Dialogue and Cooperation was on how to improve the relations between the main religions in Europe, between Christianity and Islam, and between different streams within Christianity. National and international experiences were reviewed, particularly that of the World Council of Churches which embraces all who have faith in Christ. The challenge for the Council is to develop an ecumenical worldview of humanity and dignity, considered to be the basic Christian values (Kopiec, 2021). This ecumenical movement produces lots of honourable declarations and resolutions but cannot show for any impressive list of concrete achievements – it seems to get stuck at the level of dialogue at high level without producing concrete results (*ibid*). Linjakumpu examined other Christian faith-based networks that are engaged in inter-religious peace-making, such as the Conference of European Churches and the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions. She concludes that even when these conferences do play a role in peace making, their full capacity has not been utilised so that their impact remains limited (Linjakumpu, 2021: 87-88). Another study bitterly concludes that the ecumenical movement is 'passing a winter period in its history' (Florescu, 2020: 70).

Diplomacy for improving relations between all major religions in the world is initiated politically by the United Nations and its many agencies. An important trigger was the UN Millenium Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in 2000 and the ensuing UN Working Group Religion and Sustainable Development. This diplomacy appears to bear more fruits as it inspires UN and EU agencies to promote and fund interreligious and intercultural projects, by UNESCO, the European Cultural Foundation and so on.

Grassroot Initiatives

Indeed, many public and private projects benefit of funding by UN and EU agencies. There are also many, often private initiatives to bring different cultures together, at times just out of curiosity, but also of generosity, charity and empathy. Action groups to support minorities, protest marches against racism, contributions to the press and the media. It is impressive to see the dedication, the time and resources that many European individuals and institutions invest to help refugees – either financially or by helping them learn a new language, have their diplomas recognised or obtain of-

³ I have elaborated these observations in an earlier publication: 'Who is afraid of diversity', in: Matevski, 2021a: 12-26.

ficial citizen status. This can be seen as a form of inclusive community building, particularly when picked up by schools and sports, youth- or community organisations.

There is yet another trend visible. Secular modernity, with its consumerist and prosperity ideology, begins to give more and more citizens a fright. Awareness of the illusions of neoliberal economy marks the beginning of the saturation of secular modernity. More and more people in “the West” have had enough of it. People begin to embrace trees to converse with nature, pilgrimages attract more and more people, young and old, clubs where people meet to reflect on life grow like mushrooms. There is a growing need for giving meaning to life, sort of a post-secular spirituality. It looks as if religion is being re-invented, attempting to fill the growing moral and cultural vacuum. This is how people open-up for other cultures.

Visionary Perspectives

Present society remains marked by fragmentation, inequality, violence, wars, greediness, identity crises, superiority- and inferiority feelings, collapsing political ideologies and so on, whilst religions are digging in. This triggers the dream of a universal human culture based on mutual respect and cooperation in a search for universal common values and universal human rights values (Matevski, 2020, 2022). There are many visionary declarations, theories and books that pull us into the perspective of a perfect intercultural world. A Utopian illusion perhaps, but a perspective is needed as a beacon, a visionary push into the direction of an intercultural society.

1.2. Critical variables in the dynamics of relations between cultures

Analysing the experience of cultural relations, a number of variables that play a critical role in its dynamics can be identified. These are: social policy, democracy, religion, education, communication and media, knowledge, and geopolitics.

The praxis of *social policy* could best be captured under the notion ‘the protection of the European way of life’. It builds on the superiority complex ‘West is Best’, fed by enlightenment fundamentalism. This leads to a cultural integration policy of assimilation and absorption of minority cultures into The West, which in turn leads to parallel communities of minorities that want to keep their own ‘way of life’. Freedom of organisation and the right to vote are the base of *democracy* but the ensuing majority rule easily entangles minorities that become politically marginalised on top of their social marginalisation. This trend is replicated in *religion*, the ‘European Christian Matrix’ defends its values against other religions, particularly against Islam, for instance by disapproval or prohibition of religious symbols as dress, by overhearing speeches and sermons of priests, by controlling the finances of mosques and so on. The discord between the different ways of life is nurtured by partisan denominational *education* instead of education in public schools. Mutual perceptions of cultures and religions are further distorted by manipulation of the *social media and the press* through fake, hate and snake news, sections of the population watch CNN, other El Jezeera, there is freedom of speech and a democratic public press but many sections of society produce their own truth through the social media in particular. Collection and production of *knowledge* continues to use the old grammar of Western hegemony - though only recently it has begun to rewrite history and re-analyse the colonial past. Finally, there is a rapid change in *geopolitics* from bipolar to multipolar, which sets the West against the Rest. Wars tend to become cultural wars and turn Europe into a fortress defended by NATO.

In conclusion, the struggle for cultural priority, the defence of the established culture and the pull of secular modernity, tend to disconnect rather than to connect cultures - leading to a process of *progressive mutual exclusion*. The efforts of religious and political diplomacy, the private and grassroots

activities and the visionary perspectives bring the promise of connecting cultures, the promise of an intercultural society – and should lead to a process of *progressive mutual inclusion*.

2. Democracy, secularity and religion

A major future challenge is how to accommodate cultural diversity in a liberal and secular democracy. The secular state is neutral with respect to religions – it cannot connect people *culturally*. Yet, secularity must take cultural plurality seriously, including the role that religions still play in the public sphere.

In West-European countries most believers have a free-wheeling adherence to religion, in Southern Europe religiosity is stronger, in Eastern European countries large sections of the population cling to their faith – with remarkable ferocity in Poland and Hungary. In the Balkan religion is common practice. A survey in 2018/2019 shows that the respondents in North Macedonia identify themselves in majority as religious individuals (over 90%): they believe in God, almost half of them believe in re-incarnation (Petkovska *et al*: 2019). High religiosity is also confirmed in a study of Bashkimi. Religiosity is believed to fill the gaps the other social institutions and organisations fail to fill (Bashkimi, 2022). It plays a role in generating policy decisions, mobilizing moral commitments, defending human rights, legitimizing ethnic or national identities, instilling work ethics and so on (Kurtishi, 2020). The social media offer new ways of interaction of religion and spirituality. Networked religion motivates less rigid religious affiliations and less formal and static adherence to the traditional authoritarian structures and hierarchies (Drakulovska, 2020: 50). Finally, as migration increases, we can expect religiosity in Europe to increase. The major contingent of migrants to Europe carry the Islam with them. Muslims also belong to the future of Europe and it is too often forgotten that the Islam has belonged to Europe since long. They have given tremendous impulses to European science and civilization: in the Al Andalus Empire in Spain, for seven centuries, and later in the Ottoman Empire, they contributed to the development of Europe (Moller, 2019). In her recent and amazingly well-researched book *Muslims and the making of Modern Europe* historian Emily Greble concludes that even when Muslims are part of European history they remain second class citizens. Why, writes Greble, are they still so often portrayed as outsiders to it: as foreigners, migrants, interlopers, or vestiges of the Ottoman past? (Greble, 2021: 261). They were agents of European history and politics, not alongside, outside or in the periphery. As they are a core part of Europe's history, they must be reintegrated into the telling of European history itself (*ibid*: 262).

Religion matters. Kurtishi quotes Habermas who stated that religion has not disappeared from the public sphere – therefore, its place will have to be considered in modern secular society. “The global resurgence of religion can be seen as part of the larger crisis of modernity – it provides meaning, a coherent context for understanding the world” (Kurtishi, 2020: 87). Schinkel notes that the paradox that Western societies may become both more secular *and* more religious can be plausible. A ‘secular age’ is not a ‘post-religious age’ (Schinkel, 2017: 169). Delphine Allès notes that there is a ‘return of religion’ as she calls it, a mix between culture and religion: the search for an alternative for values and norms that are disappearing with individualism and materialism (Allès, 2023).

Europe does not need to be absorbed into one secular culture that assures constitutional protection of equal rights and equal chances, independent judiciary and democracy, and ensures equal access to education, work, housing, healthcare, and provides protection to individuals under the rule of law. Society should be an open society in which cultures are connected, including those that nurture the soul, belief, faith and God. The secular state remains a cold plastic raincoat, instead of a warm human cloak under which all citizens can safely adopt a shared identity in addition to own cultural identities. Secular modernity can be dressed up by a shared culture that does connect, accept, and

celebrate different cultures and traditions that citizens wish to continue to nurture. A vision must be developed of how different cultural communities can be connected in mutual *equivalence* which must be added to *equality*.

Tramontano writes that the liberal democratic model has to move from its normative setting of values, and face in a concrete way the co-existence that characterizes the social order of European society. Liberalism is a worldview or ideology, with a specific concept of the human being and a specific concept of religion in which religion differs from the liberal norm. The basic question therefore is, how can a political culture based on specific cultural premises integrate cultural groups whose values diverge from these premises. (Tramontano, 2020: 147-8). Allès warns that the “return of religion” should not mean that religious leaders should get involved in politics, they should not overplay their role. The correct position when taking religion into account, she believes, is not the return of religion to politics, but a contribution of religion to the larger challenge of building a more humane society, in which there is room for differences of opinion in a peaceful way (Allès, 2019, 2023).

The secular state does not allow religion in its domain, but democracy has to play a crucial role in bringing cultures together, it will have to embrace and express cultural diversity. Not politically by the blunt axe of majority rule, by counting heads and accept the position of the majority, but by guaranteeing respect for minorities and make earnest efforts to find common ground. Indeed, one of the biggest issues is how to integrate different communities, without forcing them to adopt the culture of the majority. Mutual perceptions between cultures, including perceptions of superiority or inferiority, stand in the way of forming a new community of people and a shared feeling of belonging to society. Tolerant multiculturalism may be the first step but must become dynamic and inter-cultural. Must allow citizens to maintain their own cultures and identities and at the same time allow them to be fully part of the society in which they live. It has to be a search for a common foundation upon which differences can be understood and accepted as an enrichment of society as a whole. This process will fail if other cultures are seen as a threat.

In conclusion, how then to link religion to secularity and democracy? Should religions enter the arena of the secular state and of political democracy? They should not. Secularity is the terrain of cultural neutrality, guaranteeing equality to all citizens and assuring fair rules of the game for all. Secularity does not take sides and in political democracy there is no place for religious dogmas. The task of political democracy is to *facilitate and support* cultural diversity and cultural democracy, but not to *intervene* or to *steer* intercultural relations. Culture and religion can flourish and be celebrated on the terrain of civil society which has and may further develop its own democratic procedures. The challenge therefore is to develop a political democracy that supports and facilitates connecting cultures, and a cultural democracy in civil society that builds and strengthens the institutions that connect cultures.

3. Conclusion: the need for proactive policies

The studies reviewed in this essay show the danger of structural disconnection of cultures as well as the promise and potential of connecting them. Cultural diversity can be expected to increase, different religious communities will live together in Europe. Acceptance of diversity and full respect for minorities are the ingredients necessary to foster trust in Europe, in a globalising world. The challenge is to find ways and means that enable people to successfully interact across cultural boundaries to solve problems of mutual concern. The French political scientist Dominique Vidal expects that increasing migrations and the subsequent problems of social and cultural integration will be the greatest challenge in the future, something similar as the challenge of climate change (Vidal, 2023). It is estimated that by the turn of the century, at least a third of Europe’s population will have a migrant

background and European citizens will have to find a common response to how they are going to organise society together. Taking up this challenge is urgent. It cannot wait, *tomorrow is today*, the well-known Bulgarian futurologist Ivan Krastev keeps repeating wherever he lectures. Intercultural learning demands a deliberate effort. Successful management of diversity, writes Zemon, requires recognition of all identities in a society, as well as acceptance of all relevant diversity in culture, language, religion, ethnicity, gender and so on. Effective regulations, including strategies and policies of inclusion, integration, multiculturalism and interculturalism, as well as effective mechanisms that identify and address potential problems, crises and conflicts, are also needed (Zemon, 2021: 49).

Mutual integration is the art of constructing common ground between citizens of different cultures, through dialogue and common action, creating new and shared norms which govern relationships in intercultural life. This can only succeed if citizens work out their social and cultural relations *in reciprocity*. Dialogue is an important first step and must remain a supporting factor in the process. But more is needed, an inclusive cultural frame must be built as foundation that binds people of different cultures together and gives them a shared feeling of belonging and of a shared future.

This cannot be achieved by political intervention in connecting cultures. Developing a connecting culture is not a matter of putting different cultures in a mixer and turning them into a tastier new one. One cannot simply flip a switch; it is not a matter of seeking the best pie by putting the different pieces together, but by making a new pie, a common culture. For instance - as the Dutch philosopher Paul Cliteur has proposed - by designing a *moral Esperanto*, a mosaic of pieces from different cultures, a code of conduct for everyone, democratically decided by the majority, and then legally enforced. He presented it as a directive for human interaction – which takes legal precedence over religious or other cultural norms for behaviour. In practice this would result in the legal protection of the norms and values of the majority, through a political process controlled by that same majority.

Political intervention does not connect cultures, but political support and facilitation are necessary. A typical example is education. Today, massive ignorance breeds prejudices that are at the root causes of interethnic and interreligious conflicts (Constanza, 2022: 25), and prejudices are intertwined with negative emotions such as hatred, fear, anger, shame and so on (Angelovska, 2022: 112). Hate speech is often strongly connected with religious issues and religious belonging. Lack of communication between representatives of different religions lead to false perceptions, to stereotypes and misunderstanding, and misinterpretation of the intention and actions of a particular religious community' (Jovkovska & Gjorgjevski, 2022: 59). Crucial will be to stop partisan mono-cultural education systems that nurture mutual prejudice. But the different religions keep their own and separate education systems. Primary education in the Balkan remains divided along ethnic/religious lines in separate schools (Avirovic & Dragovic, 2020), it does not overcome prejudices and stereotypes of the ethnic and religious other. Interculturalism can be promoted when children are taught that society is a spectrum of differences (Matevska, 2021). It is necessary to introduce younger generations of all backgrounds, to each other's histories, religions and ways of life – in public, multi-cultural education. By a cultural and educational policy that should respect cultural diversity and lead towards creating a society in which cultures intertwine and transform multicultural into intercultural (Milosevic & Siljak, 2020: 106).

Anita Gracie reports on experience in Northern Ireland where Catholics and Protestants have almost entirely separate school systems. In a strategy of reconciliation of religious strife, shared education is now being developed to contribute to the building of tolerance and mutual understanding between Christian communities. Syllabi are being worked out for the teaching of world religions at all stages from 4 to 16 years old; this will become statutory. Moreover, this will include visits of places of worship of all different religions (Gracie, 2021).

Connecting cultures is primarily a question of developing cultural democracy in the civil society domain. Triggers are needed to bring people and cultures together. Seeking solutions for problems

commonly felt as urgent, taking shared responsibility, shared goals, shared visions, undertaking common projects, building a shared future.

Diversity enriches. Art is a golden opportunity for mutual learning. The coexistence of different cultures inspires creativity, which may unleash in music, theatre, literature, dance, painting, and architecture. Artists of a variety of cultures can address the public to trigger a change of mentality; to promote dialogue and open the perspective of other humans. Also, people can begin to share in the happiness of each other's holidays. Some supermarkets already offer free sweets to their customers at the occasion of the Muslim *Eid al-Fitr* feast, non-Muslim citizens participate in the festive *Iftar* meal at the end of Ramadan. Since an increasing number of Europeans are no longer aware of the significance of some Christian holidays, it should be expected that in due course consideration will be given to ceding some of these holidays to Muslim and other communities. It will encourage people of different cultures to come out of their trenches, judge each other with more curiosity and respect, and understand each other better, which will accelerate the growth of contact between them.

It is important to take the long view: mutual integration is a process that takes generations, with trial and error and patience it must be allowed its march of time, and not be judged by immediate problems that unavoidably arise. It is a matter of learning to live in diversity, there will be culture-shocks when contested issues and deeply engrained beliefs such as on the role of women, of homosexuality and so on.

Connecting cultures cannot be invented, constructed or imposed, it can only grow and take root in people's souls and minds when they address challenges that they together consider urgent, in *shared* projects.

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