

RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS A KEY TO INTERETHNIC COOPERATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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Abstract: Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country characterized by the interconnectedness of ethnic and religious affiliation, the country is home to three main ethnic groups (Serbs, Croats and Bosnians) who are members of three different religions (Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam). The history of Bosnia and Herzegovina is accompanied by deep religious and ethnic divisions and aspirations. The cause of conflict and intolerance in the country is often because of the different interest between all three religious parties. The intention of the authors of this paper is to draw attention to the importance of religious dialogue in interethnic relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as the main key for spreading a culture of peace, mutual tolerance and understanding.

Key words: religious dialogue, Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnic affiliation.

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Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina, like every Balkan country, is an interesting area where different forms of religious, cultural, and social life take place. It is a place where different cultures of Western and Eastern Christianity and Islam collide. All of these differences are linked to national and ethnic conflicts throughout history. For centuries, different ethnic and national groups have lived side by side on this soil, where each of them built their own tradition, preserved their culture, national identity, and religion. We will show you how, under the influence of politics, different religious affiliations have an impact on negative interethnic relations, and also what the role of religions and their members is in spreading a culture of peace, mutual understanding, and tolerance among different ethnic and religious groups.

Religion can often be misused for political and ideological purposes, and as such it can create tension, conflict, and bad relations between different religious and ethnic groups.

On the other hand, if religion is not used for manipulative, ideological, and political purposes, it can encourage the development of cooperation, tolerance, and peace, which is key for the development of a stable democratic society. Religious affiliation forms religious identity and therefore influences behavior and shapes the way individuals think. It can also have an impact on politics in a given society, just as politics can have an impact on religion, which can be positive or negative for relations between different ethnic or religious groups.

Ivan Colovic (2008:64) points out that the fall of communism led to restoration of the religious relation towards the nation in former communist countries. He believes that conflicts that arise in intercultural communication between Balkan people, and especially between the people of the former Yugoslavia, cannot be explained as a consequence of insurmountable differences, but are the result of an unbearable similarity, which is perceived as a hostile provocation, as a threat to the nation's greatest asset, a unique and indivisible way of existence, national identity.

In contemporary research on religion, Ivan Cvitkovic emphasized that religion can bring people closer and further apart, he believes that religion "brings together those of the same religious identity, but it is also an important element of "otherness" that separates them from members of other religious identities (especially in times of social crises when the boundary between "us" and "them" became more and more emphasized)" (Cvitkovic, 2016:52). Cvitkovic (2016) points out that the integrative or disintegrative function of religion in society depends on the religion itself, but also depends on the social environment and on the degree of individualization, whether religion is private or public, "visible or invisible"; whether the society is homogeneous or religiously plural. According to Cvitkovic (2016), in Bosnian society, religious communities act in a disintegrative way, in which religious communities are used as factors of national integration.

Dutch cultural anthropologist Ger Duijzings (2005:51), researching religious identity in the Balkans, noticed that religious symbols and customs, although often nurtured only in residual forms, have become part of the national heritage and as such help to outline ethnic boundaries. He points out that religious affiliation defines and outlines ethnic identities, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where every group speaks the same language, ethnic identities are expressed through religious customs, symbols and markings, also the way someone is baptized is a perfect example of that, or when it comes to Muslim men, physical characteristics, such as circumcision.

The bond of religion and religious institutions to a certain national and ethnic group is marked by Dusko Trninic (2018:30) as the ethnification of religion and the religious. The author appoints religion with Berger's notion of a "sacred blanket" of local, ethnic or national identity, where its mobilizing role comes to the fore, because it represents a significant social and political force. According to the author, the identity function of religion is most suitable for manipulation and ideologization, which goes into the direction of using religion for non-religious purposes. "Religious ideas and ideas are

increasingly used for non-religious purposes, making religions participate in conflicts that seek to prevent the democratization and integration of the modern world. Various groups that have primary political pursuit have put a religious sign in front of their name, justifying their goals, presenting them as religious" (Trninic, 2018:86).

The emphasis on ethnic and national affiliation, together with religious affiliation and the strengthening of their identities, is characteristic for people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has been particularly evident since the beginning of the war in 1991 until today. A major contributor to the increasing emphasis on religious identities, along with ethnic identities, is the threat of authenticity and uniqueness from others. Ethnic and religious identity is increasingly revived as individuals are threatened by rapid changes to preserve the culture, language, and traditions of their own people. It should be emphasized that the revival of ethnic and religious identities in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina is accompanied by ethnic conflicts, inequalities, the spread of negative stereotypes and prejudices about members of others. Religion, religious leaders and organizations should serve politics only to reduce intolerance and to stop the spread of negative tendencies among people in Bosnian society.

1. Religion and politics in post war BiH

Establishment of political parties in this area, at the beginning of the nineties of the last century, is showing us how religion and politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina are connected. Each of the political parties with a national sign, received the support of its religious community. That is why we use the terms politicization of religion or religiosity of politics. We can point out that both terms describe the events that have been taking place since the beginning of the nineties of the last century, and which have affected interethnic conflicts and disagreements on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Abazovic (2006:99-100) points out that in the post-war situation, religious and political leaders mutually enjoy the processes of politicizing religion and involving politics into religion, and that Dayton Agreement, as a compromise solution, contributed to the creation of fertile ground for political intervention with the prefix of national. "Religious nationalism, therefore, insists on the symbiosis of the political and the religious, on the nationalization of the confession that precedes the religiosity of politics, which is a reminiscence of the pre-political era, when the religious establishment invoked the right to govern the country because religion was an important (or most important) element for its establishment. Today, religious nationalism wants to invoke the right to govern politics, because it helped to create such and such (ethno-national) politics. Religious nationalism is in the function of "invented tradition", as defined by Hobsbawm, i.e. in the function of manipulating the past in the interest of current political interests" (Abazovic, 2006:106-107).

We can agree with Abazovic's (2006) claim that religious nationalism, as a specific form of collective representation, is an obstacle to the development of democracy, the rule of law and the enjoyment of individual and collective human rights, especially in post-socialist countries, and in the multi-confessional Bosnian society, he singles out religious nationalism as a direct threat to its development and survival. The claims of Srdjan Vrcan (2003:320-321) should also be emphasized, who, referring to the facts about the role of religion in political and interethnic conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, points out that religious institutions, despite good intentions, most often approved the sources of conflict, and put themselves behind "their people", even though the war was not religious.

Mirjana Kasapovic (2005:86) also points out that Bosnia and Herzegovina has a divided society whose political history is characterized by the coexistence, but also the confrontation of three main religious and ethnic blocs, Muslim-Bosniak, Orthodox-Serbian and Catholic-Croat. She believes that for more than five centuries, members of the three main religious and ethnic communities have nev-

er permanently, together and massively opted for one country, while Vukomanovic (2004:131-132) believes that the religious element is not a crucial element for the outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia, but rather "identity conflicts" in which religion is suitable for easier articulation of much more complex reasons for conflict. Vukomanovic (2004) points out that the war in this region is more the result of a political and interethnic conflict, where religion appears as a significant element of ethnicity, so at that moment the war was perceived as an interreligious conflict, which was reflected in the example of the destruction of temples, mistreatment and killing of priests, as recognizable symbols of the presence of an ethnic, national or religious community in a certain territory.

When it comes to the relationship between politics and religion, Cvitkovic (2019:49-50) points out that it is impossible to bypass political topics in the media, through all-day programs of religious content, which can be used, especially before the elections, by giving preference to some candidates. He also emphasizes the great responsibility of the media, because many will form their views on religion on the basis of religious broadcasts on radio, TV or in print media. He states that the culture of reading about own or other religions in Bosnia is at a very low level, which is an obstacle to the creation of a society with higher moral responsibility.

We must point out that religion and religious organizations still play a key role in political decision-making in BiH society, religious leaders are often seen in the media in the presence of political officials, which can affect their decision-making process. And since political parties are mostly nationalistic, religion takes on the role of a guideline for party supporters, because religious identity in BiH society is most often merged with ethnicity. In this regard, religion and religious communities often become an instrument for achieving political goals.

The joint appearance of political leaders after religious leaders, especially in the media, is often an easy way to gain political gains and voters. In a plural and multi-ethnic society, such as Bosnian society, religion should be a private matter, which would require neutrality towards religious communities on the part of the state and political leaders. This would be one of the conditions for the development of multi-ethnicity and a democratic society, which guarantees the common, peaceful coexistence of the three ethnic and religious communities in this region, with respect for diversity in religious and ethnic affiliation and non-discrimination in mutual action.

The Work of the Interreligious Council on Religious Dialogue and Interethnic Cooperation in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Concluding Remarks

Religious pluralism in multiethnic societies, as well as in the society of Bosnia and Herzegovina, increasingly requires the development of tolerance, stable and peaceful relations between different religious communities. These relations are achieved through the development of religious dialogue and getting to know each other's religion. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Law on Freedom of Religion is guaranteed by the Constitution and implies the right to freedom of religion and belief, the execution of religious regulations and rituals, while churches and religious communities must not spread intolerance toward other churches and religious communities and their believers, as well as any form of discrimination (*ZAKON (mpr.gov.ba)*). The development of interreligious dialogue, and thus a stable multiethnic society, has been made possible by the knowledge and respect for members of other religions and ethnic communities, as well as by raising awareness of the negative influence of political leaders on the spread of prejudices and stereotypes, as well as manipulation for political gain.

In order to encourage good cooperation between different religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina was established in 1997. Its main goals are:

- Reducing prejudice and raising awareness of the importance of interreligious dialogue and cooperation by improving relations between churches and religious communities in BiH;
- Improving the relations of churches and religious communities with the country through common Commitment
- Connecting the Interreligious Council of BiH with regional and international initiatives (*O nama - Međureligijsko vijeće u Bosni i Hercegovini (mrv.ba)*).

In order to achieve the best possible interreligious cooperation and dialogue, the Interreligious Council of BiH, as a domestic, non-governmental organization, has launched numerous projects since its establishment **in order to jointly build** a stable civil society. A representative of the Jewish community in Bosnia and Herzegovina **is also** a member of the Assembly of the Interreligious Council, in addition to religious representatives **from** the Islamic, Orthodox, and Catholic communities (*Struktura organizacije - Međureligijsko vijeće u Bosni i Hercegovini (mrv.ba)*). Also, as part of the Interreligious Council, Committees for Interreligious Cooperation **have been established** in 15 local communities, **with the aim of spreading** tolerance, respect for diversity, and the protection of fundamental human rights through local actions. "Our religious and spiritual traditions share many common values. These common values can serve as a credible basis for mutual respect, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence in Bosnia and Herzegovina," **is stated** as the main goal for the formation of the committee (*Odbori za međureligijsku saradnju - Međureligijsko vijeće u Bosni i Hercegovini (mrv.ba)*).

As part of the projects of the Interreligious Council in BiH, since 2010, a project called "Protection of Holy Places" has been launched. **Its** main goal is to improve the protection of religious buildings and other objects of importance **to** churches and religious communities **of all confessions** in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the annual report for 2020, which refers to the improvement of the protection of religious buildings and other places of importance **to** churches and religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Council listed several challenges they encountered in implementing the project. These challenges include finding donors who would finance this important project **and weak cooperation mechanisms** with national institutions, prosecutor's offices, and courts, **in order to minimize** attacks on religious buildings.

The report states that in 2020, there was a noticeable increase in the number of attacks on religious buildings and officials, who are a minority in the area, as well as an increase in incidents of hate speech and threats online, especially through social networks (*Zaštita svetih mjesta- Šesti godišnji izvještaj (mrv.ba)*).

Although the main goal of the Council is to condemn any form of attack on religious buildings or officials, **in recent months** we have seen dissatisfaction with its activities. At the beginning of 2023, Metropolitan Hrizostom of the Serbian Orthodox Church terminated his membership in the Interreligious Council of BiH, due to the silence of this body on serious criminal acts **recently committed** against the Serbian people. The Metropolitan informed the members of the Assembly of the Interreligious Council in BiH that, as of January 31, 2023, he would cease his membership in the Council until the Council "heals" and stops "remaining silent." Among the reasons for leaving the Council, he stated that its members support the political views and interests of their own people, or of one political organization, **to the detriment of** others.

From this report, as well as from a number of other events and attacks on religious communities, we see that the country should contribute to better organizing projects that would **reduce** such attacks. Furthermore, members of the Council and representatives of religious communities should respect the basic goals of the Council's work, which is to condemn any form of attack or discrimination against "other" religious communities. If the common goal of all members were the respect and appreciation of all religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and non-discrimination and neutrality **in** politics, both religious and ethnic dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina would be improved.

In plural societies, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a history marked by national and religious conflicts and intolerance, there is a high chance that the spread of hatred, negative prejudices and stereotypes about the other, as the main causes of spreading distance between different ethnic and religious communities, still seems sustainable. We can conclude that the religion and religious organizations have a great role in encouraging the development of the most important values in plural and multiethnic societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. If the political influence on religion and the religious influence on politics were reduced, there would be a greater chance for the development of harmonious relations between different ethnic and religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Religious neutrality by the country and the encouragement of the development and operation of all religious communities equally, is a prerequisite for religious plurality and non-discrimination.

It should be added that, in addition to religion and religious leaders, education and educational institutions would play a major role in mutual cooperation and peaceful coexistence, which would contribute to a better knowledge of the "other and different". Better knowledge of other religions, as well as the way of life of different ethnic communities, is a prerequisite for the development of tolerance and reduction in the number of negative prejudices and stereotypes about the different. Good communication between religious representatives and members of the Interreligious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the support of the country, educational institutions, media, as well as political leaders, can be replicated to the believers themselves, in order to build tolerance, dialogue and a culture of peace.

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