

PREFACE

From 23-27 June more than 70 scholars from 20 countries from all over the world gathered in Kruševo at the Third World Conference for Religious Dialogue and Cooperation, where we met to discuss the pressing religious conflicts of this world. Religion is often perceived as a problem. The Conference explored how to make religion a resource for international dialogue and peace. Aware that we cannot solve all problems, as scholars we believe that creating spaces of dialogue between and within religions offers valuable opportunities for promoting peace. Religion today is often misused for political purposes and for supporting wars, while secular ideologies try to exclude religion from the public sphere. Persecution and discrimination of religious minorities continue in different parts of the world. Religions are expected to act as a voice for peace, forgiveness, coexistence, tolerance, and understanding. The essence of religion is to celebrate the creation of the world, not its destruction. However, religions have produced a divided society, with divided identities, divided education, divided loyalties, divided worldviews, which may and often does lead to polarization and conflicts. Instead, religions can promote values that bind and unite, inspire flourishing interreligious relations.

Who we are? We are scholars of religion.

What we want? We want peace among religions, spiritual movements and nonbelievers.

What we do? Since 2019, we held an annual conference in North Macedonia, a multireligious, multicultural, and multiethnic country, where we discuss religions' role in a global and fractious world.

In giving individuals a sense of belonging, religious groups help them to find themselves in modern times. For instance, religious leaders, pointing to modern society's loss of ethical values and increased corruption, preach: the only answer to the current 'decay' is a return to traditional values and religious norms. Hence, religion supplies these individuals with a feeling of being a part of a group that represents their interests and allows them to regain their traditional sense of who they are.

The impact of globalization on religious practices is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Globalization has diverse impacts on religion, ranging from the spread of religious ideas and practices to the challenges faced by traditional belief systems. The interplay between globalization and religion is an intriguing area that requires further exploration. The relationship between globalization and religion presents both possibilities and challenges. On one hand, globalization offers opportunities for religious communities to connect with each other across borders and share their beliefs on a global scale. On the other hand, it can also lead to clashes between different religious ideologies and values.

Religions, with their religious values and religious characteristics, can be seen as globalizing systems, shaping cultural and political dynamics worldwide. They have the power to influence societies and individuals in profound ways, especially in an increasingly interconnected world. This influence can be seen in the rise of religious nationalism and the enactment of religious legislation. The cultural and political significance of globalization for religion cannot be underestimated. It brings about changes in religious practices, beliefs, and identities as people are exposed to new ideas, cultures, and perspectives. This can lead to both positive transformations as well as conflicts within religious communities.

Reflecting on the impact of globalization on religious practices highlights the need for ongoing dialogue and understanding among different faith traditions. It is essential to recognize the diverse ways in which globalization affects religions around the world while respecting individual beliefs. In light of globalization, it is crucial for individuals to critically engage with the implications of religion on their own religious practices. This involves actively questioning how their faith interacts with global forces such as technology, media, migration, and economic systems. By fostering open-mindedness, empathy, and respect towards diversity in religious practices, we can navigate the challenges posed by globalization while harnessing its potential for positive change in the realm of religion.

While globalization has brought about positive changes in terms of increased religious diversity and interfaith dialogue, it has also presented challenges for some traditional practices. Globalization's

influence on religion can inadvertently lead to the marginalization or dilution of minority religions or indigenous belief systems. The dominance of major religions in a globalized world can overshadow the rich cultural heritage and distinctiveness of these smaller faith communities. Christian movements are affected by globalization, as it impacts their global reach and influence. Furthermore, globalization has intensified religious differences and conflicts in certain regions, impacting world religions and world politics. As people with different religious backgrounds come into contact through globalization processes, tensions may arise due to conflicting beliefs or cultural clashes. It is crucial to address these challenges by promoting tolerance, understanding, and respect among diverse religious communities, including the Christian faith.

Divisions between participants in war conflicts are often based on their different identities or awareness of them. Religious divisions have been the cause or accompanied many conflicts: between Catholic Christians and Muslims in East Timor; Jews and Muslims in the Middle East; Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland; Muslims and Hindus in Kashmir and the Indian state of Gujarat (conflicts between India and Pakistan); conflicts between Hindus and Sikhs in India; Taliban exclusivity towards other religions in Afghanistan. We can also add war conflicts in the Great Lakes region of Africa (Victoria and Tanganyika – Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda) in which the clergy also played a certain role; in the so-called Horn (Somali Horn – Ethiopians, i.e., Monophysite Christians, against Eritreans and Somalis Muslims); then in Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamils Hindus); Chechnya (Orthodox and Muslims); Ivory Coast and Sudan (Christians and Muslims); as well in Kosovo and Lebanon. The characteristics of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh (Monophysite Christian Armenians and Muslim Azeris) are particularly interesting for our topic. And of course, we will pose the dilemma of whether the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is the first religious war in the XXI century.

Today, there was a significant change in the perception of religion as a factor of conflict and possible reconciliation. Three factors are crucial: strengthening of fundamentalist tendencies in world religions; the role of Christian churches in the radical changes that took place in some eastern and central-eastern countries (primarily in Ukraine and Poland); and strengthening of ecumenical processes in the world. This had the effect that religious conflicts are no longer derived only from non-religious primary causes, but are also viewed as an independent factor. When it comes to individuals, human sins and evil that cause the negative sides and passions of human nature, then religious organizations in a large number of cases fight against individual manifestations of aggression and violence. However, when it comes to mass phenomena such as religious and nationalist movements and wars between states, which are justified by religious or similar reasons, these same organizations are often on the sidelines and tacitly justify the conflicts.

Violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, including in their most egregious manifestations, whether crimes against humanity, war crimes or even genocide, are not issues left behind in 2022, or in the past. Early days of 2023 already show that such violations will continue. This is because the perpetrators continue to enjoy impunity. Equally, because we still do little, if anything, to address the drivers of such violations and act to prevent. As proof of all that in Afghanistan, religious or belief minorities are disappearing. Many members of religious or belief minorities were evacuated from Afghanistan as the Taliban were taking over the country in August 2021. Many religious or belief minorities, including Afghan Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, and nonbelievers had to flee as they were unable to express their faiths or beliefs openly as doing so meant certain death, if discovered by the Taliban. Those who remained had to go underground. Religious minorities such as the Hazara Shias are subjected to constant attacks, including bombings of predominantly Hazara districts, schools, and places of worship. In 2023, and as nothing has been done to address the serious risk, the situation of the Hazara will only deteriorate posing an existential threat to the community.

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