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FROM ANCIENT TOLERANCE TO CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS: INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERETHNIC RELATIONS, GLOBAL SECURITY, AND THE BALKANS

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Abstract: *This paper examines the evolution of tolerance from its mythological and philosophical roots in the ancient world to its contemporary role in interreligious and interethnic relations. It argues that the Balkans, far from being a perpetual zone of conflict, represent a microcosm of coexistence in which religious diversity has shaped identity, culture, and politics. Combining comparative historical analysis with empirical data collected among university students in North Macedonia, the study explores how religion continues to function as a fundamental marker of belonging even in secularized societies. Drawing on religious studies, sociology, and security theory, the paper analyzes the dual role of religion—as both a force for peace and an instrument of political mobilization—and identifies education and religious literacy as among the most sustainable paths toward peacebuilding and global security.*

Keywords: *tolerance, religion, identity, Balkans, global security, interreligious dialogue*

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1. Introduction

Religion is one of the most enduring and influential cultural phenomena in human history, shaping not only the spiritual horizons of individuals but also the social, cultural, and political structures of communities. Throughout history, it has appeared both as a source of ethical values and collective solidarity and as a symbolic resource that, in certain historical contexts, can be instrumentalized for political and identity-related purposes (Durkheim, 1995, pp. 34–44; Casanova, 1994, pp. 3–7). This ambivalent nature of religion, both as an ethical tradition and as a potential instrument of power, constitutes the central analytical framework of this study.

The research is grounded in a long-term historical perspective that traces religion from its earliest syncretic forms to contemporary interreligious relations and conflicts. Ancient religious systems, particularly within the Mediterranean cultural sphere, were characterized by a high degree of syncretism and openness toward diverse cults and beliefs, while religion functioned as a cosmological and cultural framework closely connected to natural cycles and social organization (Eliade, 1959, pp. 20–65; Assmann, 2010, pp. 1–18; Duev, 2010, pp. 25–33).

With the emergence of institutionalized monotheistic religions and their gradual association with political and state structures, religion acquired a new historical dimension, becoming an important factor of political legitimation, collective identification, and social organization (Weber, 1978, pp. 212–215, 399–406). This dynamic is particularly visible in regions with complex historical and religious layers, such as the Balkans — a civilizational crossroads where ancient, Christian, and Islamic traditions have coexisted and interacted for centuries (Todorova, 1997, pp. 13–20, 183–190).

In such a context, religion often functions as a marker of collective belonging, closely connected to ethnic and national identities. Contemporary research in sociology and religious studies suggests that religion rarely acts as an autonomous source of conflict; rather, it frequently serves as a symbolic framework through which deeper political, social, and economic tensions are articulated (Norris and Inglehart, 2004, pp. 5–12; Casanova, 1994, pp. 211–218). This perspective is further supported by empirical studies of post-communist societies, which show a significant increase in declared religious belief after the 1990s, often accompanied by relatively low levels of regular religious practice, indicating a gap between belief and practice (Agadjanian and Roudometof, 2005, pp. 13–14). Hence, the problem does not lie in religion as a spiritual system per se, but rather in its historical institutionalization and political instrumentalization.

Methodologically, the paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines the history of religions, comparative religious studies, and the sociology of religion. Within this framework, religion is understood as a complex cultural phenomenon encompassing multiple dimensions — mythological, ritual, ethical, and social — which helps move beyond reductionist interpretations of religion as merely private belief or as a direct source of conflict (Smart, 1989, pp. 11–21). In addition, the methodological foundation builds upon the Socratic concept of epistēmē — 'knowledge' as a prerequisite for a proper understanding of religion and religious tradition.[4]

The central research question of this study may be formulated as follows: What are the historical roots of contemporary interreligious intolerance and the political instrumentalization of religion, particularly in the Balkan context, and can these be understood through an analysis of ancient models of religious syncretism and cultural continuity?

The main thesis advanced here is that religion, in its essence, functions as an integrative cultural and ethical tradition, whereas its conflict potential emerges primarily when it is transformed into

[4] The concept of epistēmē — 'knowledge' as a prerequisite for a proper understanding of ethical and cultural traditions — originates from the Socratic–Platonic philosophical tradition, where a distinction is drawn between *knowledge* (epistēmē) and *opinion* (doxa) (Plato, Republic, 476e–480a; Meno, 97a–98a; Vlastos, 1991, pp. 45–80).

an instrument of political mobilization and identity exclusivism (Kepel, 2002, pp. 3–25; Huntington, 1996, pp. 28–45). This ambivalent relationship between religion and conflict may also be interpreted within the framework of peace studies, which distinguishes between direct, structural and cultural forms of violence embedded in social systems and symbolic frameworks such as religion and ideology (Galtung, 1996). Contemporary research in the sociology of religion further demonstrates that religious traditions themselves rarely generate violence independently; rather, religious symbols and narratives often serve as frameworks through which political, social, and cultural conflicts are articulated and mobilized (Juergensmeyer, 2003, pp. 3–15; Roy, 2004, pp. 1–20). Consequently, the long-term overcoming of interreligious tensions cannot be achieved solely through political and security mechanisms, but above all through a deeper knowledge of religions, their history, internal diversity, and cultural role within societies.

Within this theoretical and methodological framework, the study pursues a dual objective: first, to trace the historical development from ancient syncretic religious models to institutionalized religious systems; and second, to analyze contemporary interreligious relations in the Balkans as an example of the complex interaction between religion, cultural identity, and security challenges in a globalized world. This study contributes by integrating historical perspectives on religious coexistence, Balkan identity dynamics, and contemporary empirical evidence on religious knowledge into a unified analytical framework.

2. Empirical Evidence of Religiosity and Religious Knowledge

Understanding contemporary interreligious relations requires not only a historical perspective, but also an analysis of empirical indicators of religiosity and religious knowledge in modern societies. In contemporary Europe, religion remains an important element of cultural and identity consciousness, yet its role as an institutionalized practice has undergone significant transformation. Comparative data show that a majority of the population identifies as religious, while regular participation in religious services remains relatively low, indicating a gap between declarative and practical religiosity (Davie, 2000, pp. 38–55; Norris and Inglehart, 2004, pp. 5–12). Contemporary European religiosity is characterized by an ambivalent dynamic: it remains present as an element of cultural self-understanding and collective memory, while its institutional and practical role has significantly declined. Grace Davie conceptualizes this process as "believing without belonging," referring to a growing separation between religious belief and institutional affiliation (Davie, 2000, pp. 38–55). However, this thesis has not been universally accepted. Some authors argue that the decline of religious practice does not necessarily imply genuine belief, but may instead indicate a broader secular cultural framework in which religion functions primarily as a symbolic resource rather than as an existential commitment (Bruce, 2002). In this sense, European religiosity can be interpreted as a form of "cultural Christianity," that is, belonging without deep theological engagement.

This phenomenon is confirmed by comparative European studies, according to which approximately two-thirds of Europeans identify as Christians, yet a significantly smaller proportion regularly attend religious services (Pew Research Center, 2017; 2018). Comparative analyses based on European Values Study data likewise highlight the considerable diversity of religious structures across Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, reflecting different historical trajectories of church–state relations and confessional traditions (Zrinščak and Črpić, 2017). European Values Study data also indicate that religion in Europe increasingly functions as a cultural and identity phenomenon rather than as an institutional practice (European Values Study, 2017; Halman et al., 2023; Polak and Rohs, 2023). These findings suggest that secularization does not necessarily imply the disappearance of religion, but

rather its transformation into a symbolic and cultural framework of collective belonging and historical memory.

Generational differences represent an important indicator of the transformation of religiosity. Research shows that younger generations tend to be less institutionally religious, though not necessarily less interested in spiritual or existential questions (Voas and Crockett, 2005, pp. 11–30). In post-industrial societies, a process of "existential security" emerges, whereby religion gradually loses its role as a system of social control while remaining significant as a cultural and moral reference framework (Norris and Inglehart, 2004, pp. 129–152). At the same time, simplified secularization models have been criticized. According to these critiques, modernity does not eliminate religion but instead creates "conditions of belief" in which religion becomes one of several possible life options (Taylor, 2007, pp. 1–22). This perspective is particularly applicable to younger generations, among whom religion often appears as a matter of personal choice rather than inherited necessity.

Contemporary empirical analyses based on the European Values Study also demonstrate that religiosity consists of several dimensions—belief, religious affiliation and religious practice—which do not necessarily evolve simultaneously and may differ across generations and social contexts (Reynolds, 2017). In the Balkan context, this process acquires a specific form: religion does not disappear but is transformed into cultural memory and a symbol of historical continuity. It is frequently perceived as part of tradition and national heritage rather than as a strictly institutionalized faith. This variation is especially visible across different European regions. Empirical data from the European Values Study indicate that a majority of Europeans still identify with a religious denomination, while regular religious practice remains significantly lower, pointing to a gap between belonging and practice (Heiser, 2020). While Western and Northern Europe have experienced deeper processes of secularization, Eastern and Southeastern Europe retain higher levels of religious identification and symbolic importance of religion (European Values Study, 2017; Pollack, 2008; Ramet, 2014, pp. 1–5). Western Europe underwent gradual modernization and individualization of religion, whereas in Eastern Europe religion was often suppressed by state ideologies during the communist period, which led to its symbolic strengthening after the collapse of those regimes. These findings are based on large-scale longitudinal survey data collected across Europe (European Values Study, 2022).

Comparative mapping of European values further reveals significant regional differences in value orientations and religious patterns, indicating that Europe represents a diverse and internally differentiated cultural landscape shaped by distinct historical and civilizational experiences (Krause, 2012; Halman et al., 2023). This diversity is particularly evident in post-communist societies, where significant differences exist not only in levels of religiosity but also in confessional structures and church–state relations (Zrinščak and Črpić, 2017). Balkan countries—North Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and others—display significantly higher percentages of populations that consider religion an important part of life. These findings confirm that religion in these societies performs a strong cultural and traditional function even when it is not always actively practiced (European Values Study, 2017; Pollack and Pickel, 2007). This is particularly evident in Orthodox-majority societies, where religious belonging often functions as a marker of cultural identity rather than strictly doctrinal commitment (Gauthier, 2021).

In the Balkan context, religion has traditionally functioned as a marker of ethnic belonging, and therefore its "return" should also be interpreted as a process of cultural reaffirmation (Todorova, 1997). This reflects broader processes in which national and cultural identities are closely interconnected, shaping both social cohesion and divisions within Balkan societies (Babić, 2020). Studies focusing specifically on the Western Balkans likewise emphasize that religion frequently plays an important role in identity formation and social cohesion, particularly in societies emerging from decades of communist secularism.

Empirical data for Balkan countries indicate that religion remains a strong element of collective identity. The percentages of individuals identifying as religious are relatively high: North Macedonia – 88%, Kosovo – 83%, Romania – 77%, while Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and Greece range between 70% and 72% (European Values Study, 2017; Davie, 2000; Coutinho, 2016). These indicators point to the significant cultural and identity role of religion in the region. However, these high percentages are not always accompanied by regular religious practice or deep religious knowledge. Such patterns suggest that religiosity in many contemporary societies is shaped not only by doctrinal belief, but also by the need for social and symbolic belonging, whereby religious identity may persist even when regular practice declines (Day, 2011). This interpretation is also supported by empirical data from North Macedonia, where high levels of religious identification coexist with relatively low levels of regular religious practice, indicating that religion often functions as a cultural marker rather than a system of everyday practice (KOVZ, 2020).

Similar patterns have been identified in comparative European surveys, where religious identification often remains relatively strong while regular religious practice and doctrinal knowledge decline (European Values Study, 2017; Halman et al., 2023; Polak and Rohs, 2023). Additional insight into contemporary religiosity is provided by a survey conducted by the State Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups. The findings indicate that a significant proportion of respondents (around 69%) express interest in learning about other religions, while levels of actual interreligious interaction and knowledge remain uneven (KOVZ, 2020).

However, the research also reveals significant gaps in religious knowledge. When asked about the birthplace of Jesus Christ, 42.5% of respondents incorrectly answered "Jerusalem," while only 18.72% correctly identified Bethlehem. These findings indicate a clear gap between religious identification and religious knowledge, supporting the thesis of predominantly cultural rather than theological religiosity (Prothero, 2007). Similar discrepancies between declared religiosity and actual religious knowledge have been identified in surveys among younger populations, where religious identity is often expressed symbolically rather than through doctrinal understanding or regular practice (KOVZ, 2019).

Within this broader European context, the authors' own study of student religiosity provides valuable insight into the ways religious identities are shaped among younger generations. Particularly important for understanding contemporary religious tendencies are the results of the study "Attitudes toward Religion among Students: Gender Differences and Dimensions of Religiosity", conducted by the authors of this article on a sample of 301 students from various faculties in North Macedonia using a structured questionnaire. The sample was convenience-based, and the findings should be interpreted with caution in terms of generalization. The results show that 76.7% of students identify as Orthodox Christians, indicating strong religious identification among the younger population. However, only 29.5% regularly attend religious institutions, confirming that practical religiosity is significantly lower than declarative religious belonging. Furthermore, 53.8% of respondents have never read a religious book, suggesting limited religious knowledge and the predominance of cultural rather than theological religiosity. Correlation analysis reveals a significant relationship between the frequency of religious rituals and the perception that religion plays an important role in life ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$), as well as between belief in God and feelings of security ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$). These findings suggest that religious practice, rather than declarative belonging alone, represents a key factor in shaping religious attitudes.

This pattern corresponds with findings from broader European surveys, which demonstrate that religious practice tends to influence moral attitudes more strongly than nominal religious affiliation alone (Halman and Sieben, 2023). Additionally, t-test analysis shows that students raised in religious families significantly more often consider religion important in life ($t = 4.72$, $p < 0.001$) and associate it with moral values ($t = 3.91$, $p < 0.001$). These results confirm the classical sociological insight that

religion is internalized through primary socialization (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). At the same time, the findings indicate that religiosity among young people has a hybrid character: it is simultaneously cultural, shaped by family socialization, and partly individualized.

Summarizing the empirical indicators, contemporary religiosity in the Balkans appears to be rooted primarily in cultural tradition, family socialization, and historical memory, as well as in the role of religion as a marker of collective identity. These factors allow religion to persist as an important social and symbolic element of public life, yet they do not necessarily ensure a deep level of theological knowledge. On the one hand, cultural religiosity may contribute to tolerance and social cohesion. On the other hand, limited religious knowledge may increase susceptibility to simplified or politically instrumentalized interpretations of religion (Prothero, 2007). In post-communist societies, these changes reflect not a simple revival or decline, but a transformation of the religious system in which different elements evolve simultaneously (Tomka, 2011).

To understand this dynamic more fully, it is necessary to move beyond contemporary empirical observations and consider the long historical development of religious traditions. In particular, the religious systems of antiquity—characterized by syncretism, cultural interaction and flexible boundaries between cults—offer an important perspective for understanding how patterns of religious coexistence and cultural continuity were historically formed.

3. Ancient Religious Models: Syncretism, "Natural Religion," and Cultural Continuity

Ancient religious systems, especially in the Mediterranean and Balkan cultural space, were characterized by a pronounced syncretic nature and by openness to the integration of different cults and beliefs (Duev, 2010, pp. 25–33). Unlike later dogmatic religious systems, ancient religion was not organized around a single theological truth, but represented a complex network of myths, rituals, and symbolic practices that expressed the cosmological and social vision of the community (Burkert, 1985, pp. 3–12; Eliade, 1959, pp. 20–65).

Within this framework, religion functioned as an integrative cultural system that enabled the coexistence of different local cults. New deities did not replace the old ones, but were identified with them or incorporated into existing mythological structures. This process of religious syncretism created cultural tolerance and religious flexibility, which constituted an essential characteristic of ancient societies. In the Hellenic and Hellenistic world, the identification of local deities with the Panhellenic gods, as well as the integration of Eastern cults during the Roman period, demonstrate this religious openness (Burkert, 1985, pp. 231–246).

In the Balkan and Aegean region, syncretism has deeper prehistoric roots, which can be seen in the overlapping of Minoan, Mycenaean, and Indo-European religious layers. Archaeological and mythological analyses show that many Hellenic deities contain elements of older pre-Hellenic cults, indicating a long-term process of religious integration and cultural continuity (Duev, 2010, pp. 25–33). One of the earliest layers of religious experience in the Balkan and Mediterranean world may be described as "natural religion" — a religion arising from the immediate relationship between human beings and nature. This type of religiosity was based on reverence for the forces of nature, the cycles of fertility, birth, and renewal, as well as on the sacralization of the earth, vegetation, and the animal world (Eliade, 1959, pp. 68–102). Central to this religious matrix were the cults of the Great Mother Earth and of the god of vegetation, who symbolized the eternal cycle of life — birth, death, and rebirth. These cults were not confined to a particular ethnic context, but represented a universal symbolic system present in different cultures of the ancient world. In the Aegean and Balkan region, traces of such natural religiosity can also be discerned in later folk beliefs, customs, and rituals related to fertility, sacred trees, springs, and mountains (Duev, 2010, pp. 47–63; Duev, 2016).

This layer of religiosity points to a profound cultural continuity, in which religion was not merely a theological system but also a way of cosmologically understanding the world. As comparative studies show, natural religion thus emerged as an archetypal form of the sacralization of nature that persists even in later religious traditions (Assmann, 2010, pp. 1–18).

One of the fundamental religious concepts in ancient religions is the idea of the sacred marriage (hieros gamos), that is, the mythological union between Heaven and Earth. This motif expresses cosmic harmony between male and female principles, as well as between the divine and the natural. It creates a symbolic framework for understanding both the world and the social order (Eliade, 1959, pp. 150–173; Duev, 2010, pp. 85–112). The sacred marriage is not merely a mythological motif, but also a religious model that legitimizes the social structure and the idea of cosmic order. In ancient cults, this symbolism was often reflected in ritual practices connected with fertility and the renewal of nature, which further emphasizes the link between religion and the natural cycle of life. In Hellenic mythology, the mythical unions of Zeus with various goddesses reflect precisely this cosmological function of divine fertility (Burkert, 1985, pp. 172–189; Duev, 2019).

The cultural apex of the so-called "Old Europe" may be recognized in the Minoan civilization of Crete, where religious symbols and cults were closely connected with nature and the sacred landscape (Duev, 2017). Mountain sanctuaries, sacred trees, caves, the bull, the double axe (labrys), and the horns of consecration represent key symbols of this religious cosmology (Burkert, 1985, pp. 36–54). These symbols were not dogmatically systematized, but functioned as part of a religious practice that emphasized harmony between human beings and the natural world. Minoan religion represents a syncretic system in which different local cults were integrated into a shared cultural context. Research on the religious symbolism of the bull in the Aegean world shows that these cults were linked to fertility rituals and to cosmological representations of the renewal of life (Duev, 2017).

With the migration of the Indo-Europeans in the Late Bronze Age, they also brought with them the cult of the Heavenly Father, Dyeus Pater, the god of the bright sky, the "father of gods and men," who became the supreme god in the Hellenic pantheon and is also mentioned on the Mycenaean tablets (Duev, 2008; West, 2007, pp. 166–173). This deity symbolizes heavenly authority, cosmic order, and the connection between the divine and the human. His name, as Di-we, is also mentioned on the Mycenaean tablets (Duev, 2008). The myth of the birth of the god Zeus in Crete, attested in early epic poetry, as a beardless Boy and god of vegetation, in contrast to the image of Olympian Zeus, the bearded father and king of gods and men, is generally interpreted as syncretism with a local god of vegetation and as an attempt by the conquerors to assimilate foreign deities in order to strengthen their authority over the indigenous population. This also reflects the merging of two principal religious concepts in antiquity: the cult of the Great Mother and the sacred marriage, whereby the supreme god acquires characteristics of a vegetation deity. This process also clearly demonstrates the mechanism of religious syncretism, whereby new deities do not eliminate the old ones, but are identified with them and incorporated into existing mythological structures (Duev, 2010, pp. 25–33).

Despite the dominance of later institutionalized religions — Christianity and Islam — the older religious layers of natural religion continued to survive in the folk culture of the Balkans. Many Christian sanctuaries were built on sites that had previously possessed sacred significance in pre-Christian cults, indicating a continuity of the sacred landscape (Eliade, 1959, pp. 367–387). This dynamic creates a two-layered religiosity: on the one hand, an official institutional religion with clearly defined dogmas and rites; on the other hand, a folk religiosity based on traditional beliefs, symbols, and rituals connected with nature and the local cultural context. This form of folk religiosity represents a key element of cultural continuity in the Balkan region (Duev, 2010, pp. 47–63).[5]

[5] An illustrative example of the persistence of natural religiosity in the contemporary Balkan context is the so-called "trudno drvo" ("pregnant tree") located within the courtyard of the monastery of the Holy Mother of God

Ancient religious systems, especially in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, were characterized by a high degree of syncretism, which enabled religious coexistence among different cultures and peoples. Different deities could be interpreted as different aspects of the same divine principle, which reduced the need for religious exclusivism and conflict (Assmann, 2010, pp. 18–27). This syncretic model represents an important historical reference for contemporary discussions on religious tolerance. It shows that religion, in its early form, functioned as a cultural system of integration rather than as an instrument of demarcation between communities.

With the emergence of the monotheistic religions, the religious scene in the Mediterranean and Balkan world was gradually transformed from a syncretic and flexible system into an institutionalized religious structure based on dogmatic truth and clearly defined boundaries of belonging (Assmann, 2010, pp. 45–63). Unlike the ancient polytheistic systems, which allowed religious translatability and the coexistence of different cults, the monotheistic religions established clearer theological and identity boundaries. Nevertheless, such processes did not mean the complete disappearance of earlier religious layers. In the Balkan region, one may trace the continuity of folk religiosity, which continues to integrate pre-Christian symbols, cults of nature, and local sacred places within the framework of the new religious traditions (Duev, 2010, pp. 25–33; Vrazhinovski, 2015). Thus, a two-layered religious model is formed: official institutional religion and parallel folk religiosity based on cultural continuity.

This historical transition from syncretic to institutionalized religious systems represents a key turning point for understanding contemporary interreligious relations. Whereas ancient religious systems were characterized by fluid boundaries and syncretic integration, institutionalized religions also became a factor of collective identification and political legitimization, especially in the Balkan historical context (Weber, 1978, pp. 212–215).

4. Historical Transformation: From Syncretic Systems to Institutionalized Religions

The historical transition from ancient syncretic religious systems to institutionalized monotheistic religions represents one of the key turning points in the history of religion. In the ancient world, religion largely functioned as an open cultural system in which different cults and deities could coexist and be mutually identified. With the emergence of monotheistic religions, more clearly defined dogmatic structures, canons, and institutional hierarchies developed, altering the nature of religious belonging (Assmann, 2010, pp. 45–63; Duev, 2010, pp. 25–33). This process did not constitute a sudden replacement of the older religious forms, but rather a gradual transformation in which the new religions integrated and redefined existing symbols and beliefs, creating a long-lasting cultural continuity (Eliade, 1959, pp. 367–387).

The Roman Empire represents a turning point in the transformation of religion. Rome inherited Hellenistic syncretism and integrated the local cults of conquered peoples into its own religious system, thereby creating a model of religious coexistence. At the same time, through the imperial cult, a form of "political religion" developed that strengthened loyalty to the state and legitimized authority (Price, 1984, pp. 235–262; Beard, North and Price, 1998, pp. 348–376). In this way, religion acquired

(Sveta Bogorodica) in the Skopska Crna Gora region, near the village of Banjani. Although situated within a Christian sacred complex, the tree itself functions as a locus of popular religiosity associated with fertility, attracting women who perform simple ritual acts such as touching the tree and leaving votive offerings. This coexistence of institutional and folk religious practices illustrates the layered structure of the sacred in the Balkans and may be interpreted as a continuation of archaic fertility cults within later religious frameworks (Eliade, 1959, pp. 265–290; Vrazhinovski, 2015; Duev, 2010). This example further illustrates the spatial coexistence of institutional and popular forms of religiosity characteristic of the Balkan religious landscape.

a new function: beyond cultural and ritual practice, it became a means of political integration and ideological cohesion within the empire.

The emergence of Christianity within the Roman Empire marks a new religious paradigm. From a persecuted religion, Christianity gradually became institutionalized and eventually the official religion, whereby it acquired a central role in defining the social and political order (Brown, 1981, pp. 1–28). Christianity introduced a universalist theological vision based on the idea of a single truth and a community of believers transcending ethnic belonging, but at the same time it created categories of orthodoxy and heresy, thereby reinforcing clearer boundaries of religious belonging (Boyarin, 2004, pp. 23–41).

In the Byzantine Empire, a model of close connection between state and ecclesiastical authority developed, often described as a "symphony" between the emperor and the Church. Religion became a fundamental element of the state order and of the cultural self-awareness of the community (Dagron, 2003, pp. 213–240). Religious belonging gradually came to be identified with political and cultural belonging, contributing to the formation of communities increasingly defined through faith, which would have a long-term impact on the peoples of the Balkans.

The period of the Great Migrations of peoples complicated the religious map of the Balkans. The new ethnic communities accepted Christian forms, but also retained their own traditional beliefs, creating new syncretic forms of religiosity (Vrazhinovski, 2015, pp. 55–78). Religion in the Balkans thus developed as a layered phenomenon in which official religion and folk religiosity coexisted and intertwined, which represents a key element for understanding later identity processes.

With the spread of Islam, the religious landscape of the Balkans acquired a new dimension. Islam introduced its own legal and cultural system, but at the same time created conditions for the coexistence of different religious communities within the Ottoman millet system (Inalcik, 1994, pp. 65–89). In local contexts, forms of cultural interaction and practical tolerance developed, especially in urban centers, indicating that institutionalized religions may also generate forms of coexistence, particularly in specific historical and social contexts.

In the Ottoman and post-Ottoman periods, religion in the Balkans gradually became one of the principal markers of collective belonging. Religious identification became linked to ethnic and cultural self-awareness, creating a complex network of identity categories (Todorova, 1997, pp. 13–20). In this context, religion came to be experienced not only as a spiritual system, but also as a symbol of shared historical memory and political belonging.

With the processes of secularization and the creation of national states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a new model of the relationship between religion and politics was established. Religion retreated from direct political power, but remained embedded within cultural and national frameworks of self-understanding (Casanova, 1994, pp. 211–218). In the Balkans, a specific model developed in which religion and nation remained interconnected, emphasizing its role as a marker of collective belonging.

From a sociological point of view, religion cannot be analyzed in isolation from broader social structures. Max Weber emphasizes that religious ideas are closely connected with economic, political, and cultural processes in society (Weber, 1978, pp. 212–215). This perspective suggests that religious conflicts are rarely purely theological; most often they are connected with questions of power, resources, and social domination.

The historical transformation from syncretic to institutionalized religious systems created a complex religious landscape in which religion came to function as a central factor in structuring collective identities. This process is especially pronounced in the Balkans, where different religious traditions have coexisted, clashed, and influenced one another for centuries. Therefore, the Balkans may be considered as an intersection of religions and identities, a region in which religion functions not only as a spiritual practice, but also as a central element of cultural and social self-awareness.

5. Religion and Identity in the Balkans: Cultural Continuity, Belonging and Ambivalence

The Balkan Peninsula represents one of the most complex religious and cultural spaces in Europe, where throughout the centuries different civilizational traditions have met and intertwined: the ancient polytheistic heritage, Byzantine Orthodoxy, Latin Christianity and Islamic civilization. This long historical interaction has created a specific cultural and religious landscape in which coexistence and conflict exist simultaneously, depending on historical and political circumstances (Todorova, 1997, pp. 13–20; Duev, 2010, pp. 25–33). Therefore, the Balkans cannot be understood as a space of simple religious dichotomy, but rather as a region of complex religious stratification. In this context, religion functions not only as a system of belief, but also as a cultural code and form of historical memory (Eliade, 1959, pp. 367–387).

One of the key factors explaining the strong role of religion in the Balkans is historical memory. Throughout long historical periods—from Byzantine rule, through the Ottoman era, to the formation of modern nation-states—religion became a carrier of cultural continuity and collective remembrance (Assmann, 2010, pp. 45–63). Religious festivals, sacred sites, local cults and traditional customs function as symbolic bridges between the past and the present, transmitting cultural patterns from generation to generation and creating a sense of historical belonging that often transcends the purely theological dimension of religion (Vrazhinovski, 2015, pp. 55–78). In such a context, religion often functions as a symbolic reference point, closely connected to ethnic and national identities. Contemporary research on religion in Southeast Europe confirms that religious affiliation frequently operates as a symbolic framework of collective identity rather than solely as an expression of theological belief (Agadjanian and Roudometof, 2015, pp. 3–12). Studies of post-communist societies further show that religion often becomes intertwined with historical narratives and political transformations, shaping the ways communities understand cultural continuity and collective belonging (Zrinščak and Črpić, 2017, pp. 45–63; Gauthier, 2021, pp. 28–39). This process results from historical circumstances in which religion served as a foundation for organizing communities and distinguishing them from other groups (Weber, 1978, pp. 212–215; Todorova, 1997, pp. 183–190). Thus, religious affiliation often becomes closely intertwined with ethnic or national consciousness, contributing to the formation of the collective self-understanding of emerging states.[6]

However, this transformation does not imply that religion in the Balkans functioned exclusively as a factor of division. On the contrary, everyday life for centuries was characterized by practical coexistence among different religious communities. In urban environments, trade, craftsmanship and shared social practices created forms of spontaneous tolerance and cultural interaction that enabled the relatively peaceful functioning of multi-religious societies (Inalcik, 1994, pp. 65–89). This perspective suggests that religious differences do not necessarily lead to conflict but can be integrated into a shared cultural context (Casanova, 1994, pp. 211–218). Although the historical accuracy of such interpretations may be subject to scholarly debateF, its symbolic meaning reflects the popular perception that religious traditions can coexist and intertwine within a shared cultural space, which corresponds to broader patterns of religious syncretism in the region (Duev, 2010, pp. 59–84). Such interpretations correspond to broader patterns of symbolic structuring of sacred space in the Balkans, where religious meaning is shaped through layered historical and cultural reinterpretations (Ćirić, 2017, pp. 320–321).

With the formation of modern nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, religion acquired a new role in processes of nation-building. It became integrated into national narratives

[6] For a detailed analysis of the complex and multidimensional identity formation among Balkan Muslim communities, see Stojanovski and Marolov (2015).

as part of historical memory and cultural tradition, contributing to the formation of the collective self-understanding of emerging states (Hobsbawm, 2012; Casanova, 1994, pp. 211–218). In this context, religion becomes a symbolic resource for defining national identity, which may strengthen belonging but also create boundaries between different religious and ethnic communities. Contemporary theoretical perspectives offer contrasting interpretations of the role of religion. One perspective emphasizes that cultural and religious differences may become significant factors in modern conflicts, especially when linked with collective identities and political mobilization (Huntington, 1996, pp. 28–45). In contrast, another perspective argues that religion in modern societies does not disappear but rather transforms and re-emerges in the public sphere as part of cultural and identity processes (Casanova, 1994, pp. 3–7). These contrasting interpretations point to the ambivalent nature of religion: it can function as a bridge connecting communities through shared cultural practices and values, but also as a boundary separating them when associated with political or national ideologies (Assmann, 2010, pp. 45–63; Casanova, 1994, pp. 211–218). Such ambivalence does not arise from the spiritual essence of religion itself but from the ways in which religion is interpreted and utilized in specific historical and social contexts.

Because of its historical and cultural complexity, the Balkans may be viewed as a microcosm of broader global religious relations. Processes of syncretism, coexistence, identity mobilization and periodic conflict observed in the region resemble dynamics that have been discussed in broader debates on global religious relations (Huntington, 1996; Casanova, 1994), though such interpretations remain subject to significant scholarly critique. Thus, the analysis of the Balkans as an intersection of religions and identities demonstrates that religion plays a significant yet ambivalent role in shaping collective self-understanding and defining boundaries between communities. It can function as a factor of cultural cohesion and dialogue when understood as part of a shared cultural heritage, but it can also become an instrument of ideological and political mobilization when reduced to an exclusive marker of identity.

6. The Problem of Tolerance and Intolerance in the Contemporary World

In the contemporary globalized world, religion continues to play a significant role in shaping cultural and identity processes, but at the same time it becomes the subject of contradictory interpretations. On the one hand, it is presented as a source of ethical values, solidarity, and mutual understanding; on the other hand, it is often associated with phenomena such as religious intolerance, fundamentalism, and violence. This duality does not arise from the intrinsic nature of religion, but from its position within contemporary social and political contexts (Casanova, 1994, pp. 3–7; Kepel, 2002, pp. 3–25).

In contemporary religious studies literature, it is increasingly emphasized that religion often reinforces and legitimizes conflicts whose roots are broader than religion itself. Rather, religious symbols often serve as frameworks through which deeper political and social tensions are articulated (Casanova, 1994, pp. 211–218; Norris and Inglehart, 2004, pp. 5–12). Research on the Balkans similarly demonstrates that conflicts interpreted as religious frequently reflect broader processes of political mobilization and identity construction. Historical analyses of the region further illustrate how religious narratives have often been integrated into national discourses and collective memory. Analyses of contemporary interreligious conflicts suggest that religion rarely acts as the primary cause, but rather as a secondary factor that reinforces and legitimizes existing tensions (Weber, 1978, pp. 399–406). It provides a symbolic framework in which conflicts are presented as struggles for values, tradition, or spiritual survival. As a result, they acquire additional emotional and moral weight, which makes their rational resolution more difficult.

One of the key challenges in the contemporary world is the political use of religion, that is, its use as a means of political mobilization and legitimization of certain ideological projects (Kepel, 2002, pp. 12–25). In such situations, religion is transformed from a spiritual and ethical tradition into an ideological system that justifies exclusivism and strengthens the lines of division between different communities. When religious affiliation becomes identified with ethnic or national self-awareness, religion ceases to be a universal ethical system and becomes a symbol of group exclusivity (Huntington, 1996, pp. 28–45). In such a context, every conflict between communities can easily acquire a religious dimension, even though its real causes may be political or economic. While such interpretations are often framed in terms of civilizational differences, in the Balkan context conflicts are more convincingly explained by the historical intertwining of religion, nationalism, and political power (Perica, 2002). While most religious traditions contain universal ethical principles that transcend cultural and ethnic boundaries, in specific historical and political contexts these principles may be reduced to particularistic identity frameworks, in which religion functions primarily as a marker of belonging rather than as a universal moral system. Such a transformation facilitates the use of religion in processes of political mobilization and strengthens symbolic boundaries between communities (Matevski and Duev, 2023). However, comparative research on religion–state relations shows that the public role of religion does not necessarily undermine democratic systems, but may vary depending on institutional arrangements and historical context (Driessen, 2014).

In contemporary societies, religious symbols are often used in political discourse as a means of mobilizing collective emotions and strengthening group cohesion (Casanova, 1994, pp. 19–39). This phenomenon is especially pronounced in periods of crisis, when religion may be presented as a key element in the collective defense of identity. Such developments do not necessarily imply an inherent incompatibility between religion and democracy, as different models of church–state relations may allow religion to remain publicly relevant while maintaining democratic frameworks (Driessen, 2010). At the same time, transformations of religious symbols and sacred spaces may acquire strong political and cultural meanings, reflecting broader processes of power, identity negotiation and the symbolic affirmation or denial of communities (Lombardini, 2024).

Contemporary forms of religious fundamentalism represent an extreme expression of such instrumentalization. Fundamentalist movements often invoke the "pure" or "original" faith, but their interpretations are selective and ideologized, aimed at creating homogeneous and exclusive communities (Kepel, 2002, pp. 45–70). From a religious studies perspective, fundamentalism may be understood as a modern reaction to the processes of secularization, globalization, and cultural insecurity (Norris and Inglehart, 2004, pp. 13–29). In conditions of rapid social change, religion appears as a stable source of identity and security, but at the same time it may be reduced to simple and dogmatic formulas that do not allow critical reflection and dialogue.

One of the most significant factors contributing to religious intolerance is religious illiteracy, understood as the lack of basic knowledge about one's own and other religious traditions. Studies of interreligious relations in Southeast Europe demonstrate that insufficient knowledge about religion frequently reinforces stereotypes and social distance between communities (Matevski and Duev, 2023, pp. 7–11). Recent research on the Western Balkans further suggests that intolerance is reinforced not only by religious illiteracy, but also by deeply rooted stereotypes and prejudices transmitted through early childhood socialization, family experience, schooling, media, and religious environments (Angelovska, 2024). In this context, religion often operates less as a direct cause of conflict than as a subtle framework through which inherited anxieties, collective memories, and exclusionary identities are reproduced and maintained. At the same time, such socio-psychological explanations, although highly valuable, cannot on their own fully explain the persistence of interreligious tensions in the Balkans. These tensions are also shaped by long-term political structures, unequal power relations, and historical legacies embedded in processes of nation-building.

Globalization creates new contexts in which religion once again acquires an important role as a source of identity and cultural stability (Norris and Inglehart, 2004, pp. 30–45). In a world of intensive migration, cultural contacts, and economic change, religion may function as a means of preserving cultural continuity. At the same time, religion does not merely react to these processes but actively participates in them, functioning as a medium through which global transformations are interpreted and negotiated within specific cultural contexts (Agadjanian and Roudometof, 2005, pp. 1–3). However, these same processes may also lead to the strengthening of identity tensions, especially when different cultural and religious traditions come into direct contact. In such situations, religion may be interpreted as a "boundary" defining the difference between "one's own" and "the other," which further emphasizes its ambivalent role in the contemporary world (Huntington, 1996, pp. 125–150). At the same time, recent studies emphasize that the concept of tolerance itself is often insufficient to address complex interethnic and interreligious tensions, as it may imply merely "putting up with" the other rather than fostering genuine understanding and dialogue (Limani et al., 2024).

In the Balkans, contemporary interreligious tensions are often interpreted through religious categories, although their essence is far broader. As Babić points out, in the Balkan context national and cultural identities are deeply intertwined, functioning as mutually reinforcing categories that shape political culture and often contribute to the persistence of divisions and identity-based tensions (Babić, 2020, pp. 173–174). Historical heritage, political transformations, economic inequalities, and processes of nation-building create a complex network of factors influencing interreligious relations (Todorova, 1997, pp. 13–20, 183–190). However, while the communicative approach proposed in these studies offers an important corrective to purely normative understandings of tolerance, it may risk underestimating the structural, historical, and political dimensions of interreligious tensions in the Balkans. Communication alone, therefore, cannot fully account for asymmetries of power, economic inequalities, and long-term historical legacies that continue to shape intergroup relations in the Balkans.

While religion can be instrumentalized as a means of division, it can at the same time also be a source of tolerance and mutual understanding. In their essence, most religious traditions contain ethical teachings about love of neighbor, respect for difference, and the peaceful coexistence of human beings (Smart, 1989, pp. 120–135). The problem of tolerance, therefore, is not exclusively religious, but cultural and educational. It depends on the manner in which religion is interpreted and transmitted in society: whether as an open ethical tradition that connects people, or as a closed identity system that separates them (Casanova, 1994, pp. 215–218). Hence, the long-term overcoming of interreligious tensions cannot be achieved solely through political or legal mechanisms, but above all through the development of religious literacy and a critical understanding of religious traditions as part of the common cultural heritage of humanity (Norris and Inglehart, 2004, pp. 290–300).

7. Education and Religious Literacy as a Long-Term Solution

The analysis of the historical and contemporary aspects of religion shows that the problem of interreligious intolerance cannot be resolved exclusively through political, legal, or security mechanisms. Although these instruments are necessary for managing conflicts, they do not address their deeper cultural and cognitive roots. In this sense, education may be understood as a key long-term factor in developing a culture of tolerance and mutual understanding. Contemporary theories of pluralism emphasize that tolerance is not a spontaneous social outcome, but a cultural competence acquired through education and socialization (Habermas, 2006, pp. 1–25). Education about religions does not imply the promotion of a particular faith, but rather a scientific and critical acquaintance with religious traditions as part of the world's cultural heritage. Such an approach makes it possible

to overcome stereotypes and prejudices, creating a basis for dialogue among different religious and cultural communities (Jackson, 2004, pp. 45–63). In contrast, reductionist educational models that ignore religion as a cultural phenomenon may lead to the creation of generations with a limited understanding of religious diversity, which indirectly increases susceptibility to ideologized interpretations of religion (Berger, 1967, pp. 2–18).

The concept of religious literacy refers to the ability to understand the basic teachings, symbols, rituals, and historical contexts of different religious traditions. This knowledge is not merely academic, but also has an important social function: it enables individuals to recognize similarities among religions and to perceive their shared ethical message. Research in comparative religious studies shows that knowledge of religions reduces the tendency toward stereotyping and cultural exclusivism (Prothero, 2007, pp. 1–18). When religion is studied from a historical and comparative perspective, it ceases to be perceived as an exclusive system of absolute truths and comes to be understood as a complex cultural phenomenon that has developed across different civilizational contexts (Smith, 1991, pp. 7–22). On the other hand, there are also views that excessive relativization of religious traditions may lead to the loss of their normative ethical force. This perspective suggests that religious literacy should not lead to cultural relativism, but to an informed and critical understanding of differences (Taylor, 2007, pp. 473–504).

The history of religions clearly shows that religious traditions did not develop in isolation, but in constant interaction and mutual influence. From ancient syncretic systems to contemporary global religious contacts, religion has always functioned as part of a dynamic cultural dialogue (Assmann, 2010, pp. 45–63). This historical perspective calls into question the idea of "pure" and isolated religious traditions. Instead, it shows that many religious concepts — salvation, moral law, the sanctity of life — have parallels in different cultural contexts (Eliade, 1959, pp. 7–18). In this sense, comparative approaches to religion demonstrate that serious engagement with other traditions does not weaken theological reflection, but may deepen and refine it through informed interreligious learning (Clooney, 2010). Nevertheless, some authors warn that the historical interpretation of religion as cultural dialogue should not neglect the real moments of conflict and exclusivism in history. This ambivalence confirms that religion is neither exclusively a factor of peace nor exclusively a source of conflict, but rather a complex historical phenomenon (Armstrong, 2006, pp. 3–15; Appleby, 2000, pp. 25–45).

This analysis suggests that religion may be understood as a repository of ethical values that connect people across different cultures and historical periods. Universal categories such as love of neighbor, mercy and justice are present in most religious traditions and create a common moral foundation (Küng, 1991, pp. 55–72). When religion is understood in this ethical perspective, it can function as a factor of reconciliation and social cohesion. But the opposing view points out that religion may also become an instrument of exclusivism when it is reduced to an identity symbol and linked to political or national ideologies (Juergensmeyer, 2003, pp. 5–22). It is precisely this dual nature — ethical and ideologized — that explains the ambivalent role of religion in contemporary interreligious relations.

Universities and academic institutions play a key role in developing religious literacy and in promoting a scholarly approach to religion. Interdisciplinary studies linking the history of religions, anthropology, and sociology make possible a more objective understanding of religious phenomena (McCutcheon, 1997, pp. 1–19). Such a scholarly approach prevents the reduction of religion to simple ideological categories and creates space for rational dialogue. At the same time, academic analysis shows that religion is rarely an autonomous source of conflict, but functions as a symbolic language through which broader social tensions are articulated (Casanova, 1994, pp. 211–218).

Alongside education, interreligious dialogue plays a significant role in overcoming interreligious tensions. Dialogue enables the creation of common platforms for cooperation in areas such as social justice, human rights and cultural exchange. This distinction suggests that mere coexistence of dif-

ferent cultural groups is insufficient, as it often results in parallel and weakly connected communities, whereas more interactive and integrative approaches are necessary for overcoming social distance and fostering genuine dialogue (Kester, 2024). Contemporary studies on interreligious dialogue emphasize that structured encounters between religious communities can significantly contribute to peacebuilding and social cohesion in plural societies (Kester, 2024). Research focusing on Southeast Europe likewise highlights that sustained dialogue between religious communities can reduce prejudice and strengthen democratic culture in societies marked by complex historical and religious diversity. From the perspective of political theory, pluralist democracies do not exclude religion from the public sphere, but integrate it as part of public discourse (Habermas, 2006, pp. 8–14). Nevertheless, critical views warn that dialogue may remain superficial if it is not accompanied by real social equality and institutional parity among religious communities (Taylor, 2007, pp. 473–504). Empirical analyses further suggest that different models of church–state relations can sustain democratic systems without fully privatizing religion (Driessen, 2010).

At the global level, education for religious understanding is increasingly discussed as a key strategy for preventing conflicts and promoting a culture of peace. In the conditions of globalization, migration, and cultural diversity, religious literacy becomes an indispensable competence for intercultural communication (Norris and Inglehart, 2004, pp. 290–300). Summarizing the historical and contemporary analyses, it may be concluded that religion is not a static system, but a dynamic tradition that transforms depending on historical and social contexts. When understood as cultural continuity and ethical tradition, it contributes to dialogue and tolerance; when reduced to an ideological instrument, it can become a factor of division and conflict (Juergensmeyer, 2003, pp. 5–22). These observations suggest that long-term reduction of interreligious tensions depends on deeper cultural and educational processes, particularly the development of critical understanding of religious traditions as part of shared cultural heritage.

8. Scientific Contribution

This study makes several contributions to the fields of religious studies and the sociology of religion by developing an analytical framework that links ancient religious syncretism with contemporary interreligious dynamics, thereby bridging historical and sociological approaches. It empirically demonstrates the discrepancy between religious identification and levels of religious knowledge, contributing to ongoing debates on cultural religiosity and "believing without belonging." Furthermore, it positions religious literacy as a central explanatory and practical concept for understanding and addressing interreligious tensions, particularly in post-communist and Balkan contexts. Finally, the study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions on religion and security by framing religion not as a primary source of conflict, but as a symbolic resource shaped by broader socio-political processes.

Conclusion

A long-term historical analysis — from ancient syncretic religious models to contemporary interreligious relations — shows that religion is not by its nature a source of conflict, but rather a complex cultural phenomenon whose social role changes depending on the historical and political context. At the same time, it functions both as a bearer of cultural continuity and ethical orientation, while also being shaped by broader socio-political processes.

Ancient religious systems demonstrate a high degree of flexibility and cultural openness, enabling the coexistence of different cults and beliefs. The transition to institutionalized monotheistic

religions introduced a new paradigm in which religion became more closely linked to state structures, political power, and collective identity.

The Balkan region, as a civilizational contact zone, confirms the ambivalent nature of religion: throughout history, both conflicts and forms of practical tolerance and cultural syncretism can be observed. This indicates that religion does not act in isolation, but as part of broader processes of historical memory, nation-building, and political transformation.

Contemporary empirical indicators of religiosity further confirm this complex dynamic. The high level of religious identification, often not accompanied by corresponding religious knowledge, creates space for simplified and ideologized interpretations of religion. In this way, religion becomes a powerful secondary factor legitimizing existing social and political tensions, rather than their primary cause.

This leads to the central theoretical insight: the conflict potential of religion does not arise from its spiritual essence, but from the way it is interpreted and socially used. When religion is understood as cultural heritage and ethical tradition, it contributes to dialogue and social cohesion; when it is reduced to an exclusive identity marker, it can become a means of division and mobilization.

The key role belongs to education, especially to the development of religious literacy and a critical understanding of the history and cultural role of religions. Only through such an interdisciplinary approach can religion be seen as part of the common human heritage rather than as a factor of exclusion.

From this perspective, religion appears not as an inevitable source of conflict, but as a potential bridge of cultural dialogue and ethical understanding. Thus, the central conclusion of this study may be formulated as follows: the degree of tolerance in society depends not so much on religion itself as on the degree of knowledge about it. Knowledge of religions, their history, and their cultural function remains a key prerequisite for the development of dialogue, peaceful coexistence, and stable democratic societies.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that strengthening religious literacy, alongside inclusive policies and intercultural dialogue, can contribute to more resilient and cohesive societies.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for both education and public policy. The identified gap between religious identification and religious knowledge highlights the need for introducing structured and academically grounded education about religion within public education systems. Such education should not promote particular religious beliefs, but rather foster a critical understanding of religious traditions, their historical development, and their cultural significance.

Furthermore, policymakers should support initiatives aimed at strengthening interreligious dialogue, particularly among younger generations. Educational institutions and universities can play a crucial role in developing intercultural competencies and reducing stereotypes. In this context, promoting religious literacy should be understood as part of broader strategies for enhancing social cohesion, democratic resilience, and conflict prevention.

Future Research

Future research should expand the scope of this study in several directions by including more diverse and representative samples across different age groups and social categories in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of religiosity. Longitudinal approaches are needed to examine how religious attitudes and identities change over time, particularly in the context of globalization

and digitalization, while qualitative methods—such as interviews and focus groups—could offer deeper insight into how individuals interpret religion in their everyday lives. In addition, comparative cross-national studies in the Balkans and beyond would contribute to a better understanding of how different historical and political contexts shape the relationship between religion, identity, and conflict.

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