Oct 27th, 3:15 PM - 4:45 PM

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Faith-Based Peacebuilding Challenges in the Republic of Kosovo

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Abstract. Conflicting inter-ethnic relations have usually had a negative impact on inter-religious relations; in Kosovo, due to the close association of ethnicity and religion, the animosities have resulted in destroyed or damaged sacred objects. Despite the fact that no one can deny the role of religion in political processes, the role of Faith-Based Peacebuilding and tolerance among communities has not been taken into account. We argue that a participant, consensual, moralistic and even civic political culture - including the participation of religious actors - supports enabling a tolerant dialogue and potential peaceful coexistence between conflicting communities. This is important to be emphasized while Kosovo and Serbia are negotiating to normalize their relations under the European Union mediation.

Keywords: Faith-based peacebuilding, Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, political culture, tolerance.
1 Faith-based organization

Religion and religious actors, among other relevant factors, can help in reducing tensions among conflicting populations and even resolve conflicts. In this paper we will focus on the role of religious actors in building peace in Kosovo by answering the following question: to what extent could religious actors make a valuable contribution to increasing tolerance, resolving conflicts, and rebuilding peace? Even though “with symbolic policies and practices, faith-based initiatives have the potential to reshape political alliances” (Sager, 2010, p. 11) there are remarkably few faith-based peace-building initiatives being carried out in the Balkans and even less so in the state of Kosovo. Faith leaders have focused more on such worldly concerns such as their legal and constitutional status, and the return of former land and property, with a great deal of attention focused in inter-institutional building programs. This is why they are not up to date with the political events in the country even symbolically.

Faith-based organizations are mostly involved in (1) public policy debates and associated political contests concerned with national and international development (Clarke, 2008, pp. 24-25) and also in: (2) social and political processes that impact positively or negatively on the poor; and (3) direct efforts to support, represent or engage with the poor. In this paper we will discuss only the sociopolitical organization, which interprets and deploys faith as a political construct, organizing and mobilizing social groups on the basis of faith identities but in pursuit of broader political objectives rather than their missionary role - the spread of religion.

The example of The Community of Sant’Egidio is a good illustration on how religious organizations work and may contribute to solving conflicts. It is a Catholic-oriented civil society movement founded in Rome in 1968, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965, by a bunch of high school students led by the then 18 years old Andrea Riccardi. According to De Simone (2017, p. 117) “the core activities of this organization are: a) dissemination of the Catholic message, and b) assistance to people in need. Its c) involvement in preventive diplomacy/conflict resolution, peace-making and development cooperation abroad came later, only in the 1980s”. The Sant’ Egidio leadership in Rome works exhaustively to identify, initiate, and coordinate relationship-building partnerships with its members in different parts of the world (especially in regions experiencing violent conflict), thus providing a more amplified contribution to local conflict management and reconciliation initiatives (Tyler, 2009, p. 88). In the figure below we also depict the way in which this organization functions, namely the division of operational strategies and most importantly, the separation of synergic paradigms. What we can see is that there are three ways (track) of action: the first step (Track I) is to involve the elite decision-making, which has historically been proven not to be effective without direct involvement of the other two tracks due to prejudices from local actors, the second way (Track II) is to involve influential people, such as academics, religious leaders, etc. through calls for interfaith and intercultural conferences which has been proven to be effective in rare cases, and the most effective path (Track III) to this organization is the involvement of local actors and local organizations.
Following its remarkable success in places like Lebanon, Iraq, and Mozambique, the Community of Sant’ Egidio has been solicited to participate in the mediation and transformation of a variety of other intercommunal conflicts, from Guatemala to Kosovo (Tyler, 2009, p. 85). The case of Mozambique is one of the most common cases of interference from abroad. There, the internal actors requested the intervention. According to De Simone (2017, p. 199) “when actors realized that a certain degree of government’s involvement was necessary to build a credible and effective peace process – as one of the two Mozambican parties itself had started to request at some point – the state foreign policy machinery agreed to work together with the NGO”. As stated in the official website of this organization (santegidio.org, a.d.) its most notable success in conflict transformation and reconciliation through the official channels of Track I dialogue was in the Mozambican civil war, which lasted sixteen years (1976-92) and caused immeasurable infrastructural destruction, created widespread starvation, displaced countless families, and cost nearly one million lives. After 27 months of undulating dialogue and negotiations, encouraged and mediated by Sant’ Egidio, a peace agreement was reached and “the Community asked different governments and the United Nations to send their representatives in the final phases of the negotiations, as observers, guarantors of the peace accord”. Clearly the greatest success of this organization was the achievement of peace in Mozambique, but we encounter other successes as well; therefore the question arises: is there any unique formula for action that is used anywhere based on Mozambique’s success, or does each country have its own specifics and methods of action? We get an idea from the statement of one of Sant’ Egidio’s long-time members and peace activists: What we have learned is that there is no one model for our Community. What worked in Mozambique will not work in Algeria, Kosovo, Guatemala, or El Salvador (Tyler, 2009, p. 86).

In the case of Albania, after an energetic mediation activity, in June 1997 the Community was able to broker an agreement between contending political factions called “Pact for the Future of Albania”, that allowed regular elections to take place after a few days. When in the first half of 1997 the Albanian financial and political crisis broke out, also with violent street demonstrations, Sant’Egidio suggested the idea of a pre-electoral ‘guarantee’ pact between the two main opposing parties, i.e.
the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party. There is also another case of the preventive diplomacy effort conducted by the Community, namely when its action in Kosovo between 1993 and 1999 resulted in the “Educational Agreement”, signed on 1 September 1996 by the Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic and Ibrahim Rugova, the Albanian leader of Kosovo, in their respective cities, without meeting each other in person. Unlike the initiative in Albania, the activity in Kosovo was only a partial success, because for a number of reasons – the “Implementation Protocol” was signed only in March 1998, shortly before the political situation significantly changed and violence broke out during the summer of that year. However, what at first sight may appear as a dialogue forum and a technical deal in education, it turned out to be the only negotiating table where Serbs and Albanians started some form of direct dialogue (De Simone, 2017, p. 122-124).

As a conclusion of these cases, rather than committing itself to a single track of peacebuilding, working in tandem with, but nonetheless independent from other levels of diplomacy, Sant’ Egidio espouses a synergetic model for conflict resolution that permeates the fluid boundaries of multi-track peacebuilding (Tyler, 2009, p. 85). The “mediations are more likely to be successful if there is adequate institutional support founded on up-to-date information and effective lines of communications with all interested parties and supporters” (Gentili, 2013, p. 9).

2 Why include religion: a short background to the conflict

In this paper we will argue that: (1) the war between Albanians and Serbs (1998-1999) has never had completely a religious background, (2) that despite this, politics (sometimes even with the help of religious institutions) has misused religion for incitement of violence and therefore the aspect of religion cannot be entirely overlooked, and (3) religious actors can be utilized in the current peace-building efforts.

International attention on Kosovo has returned recently as a result of the intensification of negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia with European Union (EU) mediation. While Serbia is blocking Kosovo’s membership at United Nations, Serbia needs “to normalize” relations with Kosovo for EU integration: finding a way forward is at the core of these negotiations. Kosovo has considered this ongoing EU-facilitated dialogue as an important move towards its recognition from Serbia. On the other hand, “Serbia’s Government has explicitly denied recognition and has interpreted the current negotiations as part of their constitutional obligations to improve the conditions of Serbs living in Kosovo” (Visoka, 2017, p. 185). From the EU, the dialogue is seen differently, namely as: “an attempt to move from ungovernable peace to a normal peace […] it initiated the facilitation of the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo through a structured and open-ended technical and political dialogue. It replaced the discourse of peacebuilding with normalization to dissociate it from the negative legacies of top-down peacebuilding in Kosovo” (Visoka, 2017, p. 17). Still the “barriers between the two communities are likely to continue, even if the agreement is fully implemented. Most of the questions as flags, symbols, emblems, the protection of cultural and religious sites are not [yet] even touched upon by the
agreement and need to be addressed. Otherwise, conflict can erupt very quickly, fully undermining the entire peace process (Guzina & Marijan, 2014, p. 11).

Religion and religious actors should be part of this normalization. Religion has never lost its positive communitarian value in everyday life. Moreover, as a result of the involvement of religious actors in political processes, they are now becoming increasingly important in today’s policy agenda. As Carrette and Miall (2012, p. 1) say “whether liked or disliked, religious actors shape governance issues in a global world and awareness of their involvement, value, and contribution are vital for justice, peace, and reconciliation on a wide range of policy issues (Haynes, 2014, p. 1). But even though worldwide “international policy attention for religion is growing” (Bouta, Kadayifci-Orellana, & Abu-Nimer, 2005, p. 1), in Kosovo the situation is completely different in that “everything is consistently linked to the political development and religious issues are decided by politicians” (Merdjanova & Brodeur, 2009, p. 113). In addition, the main focus has been placed continually at the “conflicts between the two [ethnic Albanians and Serbs] groups…during their long and shared history, particularly exacerbated during the last century (Little, 2007, p. 123)”.

Despite the dominance of the ethnic narrative in existing research, various observers argue that the recent conflicts in the Balkans cannot be fundamentally understood without the religion dimension. These observers often draw on Samuel Huntington’s views on clash of civilizations (Khüle & Bagge, 2006). In particular, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is categorized by this research as ethnoreligious warfare because “while the three groups involved in it were generally categorized into three religious groups (Orthodox Christian Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Bosnian Muslims) it would be wrong to classify this as a purely religious conflict. Indeed, religious groups had coexisted and intermarried for centuries, but a cohesive shared identity did not develop. Rather than fighting about religion, nationalists used ethnoreligious identity as a rallying mechanism to unify their populations” (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2013). In Kosovo’s war the conflict was between ethnic Serbs and Albanians, but since Serbs are Slavs and Orthodox while most of the Albanians are Muslim there were attempts to present it with a religious character.

After the war, the most dramatic event was oriented towards religious sites and took place in 2004, when Kosovo was under UN administration. As news of Albanian children drowned in Mitrovica were televised, immediate violent riots on the Albanian side erupted. According to Možes (2008, p. 18) “over 110 Orthodox churches and monasteries had been destroyed or damaged and the destruction of the Orthodox heritage was continuing”, while the Albanian side had not yet forgotten the consequences of war on their religious cults since “according to the ICK, approximately 200 of the more than 600 mosques in Kosovo were damaged or destroyed during the war, along with Sufi lodges and Islamic schools, archives and libraries (Krasniqi, 2010, p. 14).

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) remains a highly nationalistic church, probably more nationalistic than any other religious organization in Yugoslavia (Ramet, 1989, p. 23). The regime has been happy to put the nationalism of the SOC to work in Kosovo in the past, and has even asked the other religious organizations to get politically
involved (Ramet, 1989, p. 317). On the other side “Albanian religious life [showed] no indication of a renewal because of the repression, and because Islam is not associated with national revival” (Irwin, 1989, p. 387) but this can not deny the fact that “religious institutions in Kosovo, both the Catholic Church and the Islamic Community of Kosovo (ICK), also became part of the Kosovo Albanian movement and took a role in the efforts to unite Albanians in Kosovo and transcend inter-group differences” (Krasniqi, 2010, p. 11).

Nowadays, interestingly “the Serbian President has stated as part of the dialogue [with Kosovo] the need for protection of the Serbian religious and cultural heritage, the protection of the rights of the SOC and of the ethnic Serbs living in Kosovo, including in particular the property rights of the Church and of the Serbian citizens of Kosovo (Moschopoulos, 2018, p. 18). On the other hand, the Albanian side sees “linking cultural and religious heritage with a single ethnic group…as an attempt to re-colonize Kosovo and express Serbia’s claim for territorial control…[thus for example], LVV (Lëvizja Vetvendosja) has considered the treatment of Orthodox monuments as not only belonging to Serbs but to all Kosovo citizens as evidence of historical peaceful co-existence and common usage of religious sites throughout history in Kosovo.” All these facts and position point to the argument that there is some relevant connection between ethnic struggles and religion, enforcing one-another.

3 Efforts for interfaith dialogue in Kosovo

But drawing on the example of The Community of Sant’Egidio, what kind of international religious actors can we see in Kosovo, have they applied similar strategies, how they cooperated with local actors, what have the local religious organizations (faith-based) done in the promotion of cooperation and inter-religious dialogue by themselves? The brief evidence below suggests a very limited international presence and involvement of the local religious actors in building tolerance.

The first interreligious conference regarding Kosovo, just prior to the NATO bombing of former Yugoslavia in 1999, was inititated by the Appeal of Conscience Foundation from New York. It took place in Vienna in March 1999 and was followed after the war by the formation of the Interreligious Council of Kosovo in April 2000 with the assistance of the Interreligious Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the World Council of Religions for Peace (Mojzes, 2008, p. 19). The conference had been organized by a Jewish American peace NGO The Appeal of Consciousness and funded by the Austrian government. At the conference Bishop Artemije (SOC in Kosovo), Mufti Qemajl Morina (ICK) and Bishop Marko Sopi (RCC) issued an appeal to all communities condemning the escalating violence, inter-ethnic hatred and the destruction of religious sites in Kosovo (Sterland & Beauclerk, 2008, p. 20).

A couple of months later, the same actors met for the second time in Pristina on the occasion of a visit to Kosovo by the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina and with their help they created the Interreligious Council (IRC) of Kosovo and Metohija on April 13, 2000. In the statement issued to announce the formation of this
council, the spiritual leaders reiterated their condemnation of all violence and any infringement on human rights and promised to continue the cooperation between themselves and their respective communities (Steele, 2003, p. 146). A third meeting of Kosovo religious leaders in Oslo in September 2001 was organized and sponsored by the Norwegian Church Aid. At this meeting, a plan of action was endorsed to promote dialogue and reconciliation among the citizens of Kosovo, which was to be overseen by the working committee of the IRC (Merdjanova & Brodeur, 2009, p. 68).

At one such meeting, the Council succeeded in endorsing a plan or action to promote dialogue and the process of reconciliation among the inhabitants of Kosovo (Sterland & Beauclerk, 2008, p. 20) and with the support of the international organization meetings continued until February 2003, when the participants concluded that they no longer wanted to meet unless their senior leaders could meet in Kosovo (Merdjanova & Brodeur, 2009, p. 68). The disturbances of 17 March 2004, when nineteen people lost their lives and numerous Serb Orthodox churches were severely damaged or destroyed effectively drew a line under the IRC’s work. The IRC failed to act in unison in condemning the violence and indeed the reluctance of individual leaders to address their own community in an appropriate manner deepened the mutual grievances of the religious leaders (Sterland & Beauclerk, 2008, p. 20). This made clear the nonfunctioning of this council so the SOC blocked all further official contacts between members of the SOC and their counterparts from other faiths of the Albanian community.

A fourth IRC meeting took place at the medieval Orthodox monastery in Peja (Pec), Kosovo on 1-2 May 2006, hosted by the SOC, financially and organizationally co-sponsored by Norwegian Church Aid and involving several outside dialogue experts. The representatives of the SOC were Metropolitan Amfilohije (Radovic), Bishop Irinej (Bulatovic), Bishop Jovan (Mladenovic), and Vicar Bishop Teodosije. The Muslim representatives were Mufti Naim Trnava, head of the ICK, and Rexhep Boja, dean of the Islamic theological school in Pristina, as well as representatives of the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish communities (Mojzes, 2008, p. 20). The conference was made possible by the direct involvement of Patriarch Pavle and the SOC authorities who from 2005 began publicly to adopt a more conciliatory position over Kosovo than Bishop Artemije (Sterland & Beauclerk, 2008, p. 21-22).

However, since then limited efforts have been seen by religious leaders towards peace. In some cases, religious Orthodox leaders such as Amfilohijem, the Metropolitan of Montenegro, invited to the annual organization of the SOC in Gazimestan (Gračanica), called for war (klankosova.tv, 2018), while the ICK has recently closed itself in the fight and discourse against the so-called Islamic radicalism. Therefore, despite intensified political negotiations we have not seen inclusion of the religious based actors and their cooperation has not increased or turned relevant.

Similarly, in a larger than country level case, World Vision International (WV) supported some inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs early after the war in the city of Mitrovica. Its projects were directly focused on engaging members of civil society to advocate for peace and justice within their communities. In 2001, it even initiated the first multi-ethnic organization titled
“Community Council for Peace and Tolerance” (Kajana, 2010). According to this organization, WV supported several “weeks of peace” activities between Serbs and Albanians including trainings, seminars, round tables, sports events, humanitarian activities, etc. oriented towards peacebuilding. However, most of these activities have taken place years ago and their results have not changed the reality of the divided city in Mitrovica (Lushta, 2018).

4 Conclusion

Despite efforts of certain individuals and international religious organizations, dialogue among religious leaders is absent in Kosovo and the main reason for this is the lack of critical, visionary religious leadership educated in the spirit of tolerance. This is despite the fact that one cannot overlook the inertia resulting from centuries of suspicion, hatred, wars and oppression driven by destructive politics. However, faith-based organizations have a role to play in raising civic awareness and to promote reconciliation and peace among people and political leaders should not underestimate the role of faith-based actors in the context of political negotiations and actions towards building peace. Relevant actors should undertake additional efforts to identify local religious vices for peace-building between communities in Kosovo. In line with Visoka’s thesis (2017, p. 227), we believe that this peace in Kosovo would be possible “only when Kosovo citizens from all ethnic groups would promote post-ethnic politics and form joint commitments to peace to compensate for the failures of top-down peacebuilding”. The first step towards this emancipatory peace, tolerance, and coexistence between communities is the need for accepting truth. If Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo could agree on what happened in the past, including on religious heritage and how it interlinked with ethnic animosities, it would be a major step towards a more peaceful and sustainable future.

6 References

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