

UDC: 2-675-7(497.6)“2012/2019”

## THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Kuburić Zorica, PhD<sup>1</sup>  
Zotova Ana, PhD candidate<sup>2</sup>

*Abstract: The paper will show the results of a research on the role of religion in the reconciliation process that took place on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2012 to 2019. The first part of the paper will show the views of the general population from 2606 respondent. The second part will show a qualitative analysis of the content of the interview with the representatives of three traditional religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The interview was conducted from the summer of 2018 until spring 2019, with people who are prominent in their public role in society with professors of religious universities, religious school directors and religious teachers who were part of this sample, patrons of Orthodox, Islamic, Roman Catholic, Judaism and Protestant theologians. The results of the survey show that there are potentials for building a stable process of reconciliation. Primarily, the right to choose is for the common good of all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to create an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding and respecting differences of members of different national backgrounds and religious traditions. There are many ways to realize the process of reconciliation, and those that are recognized are open dialogue about the past, admitting and apologizing, recognizing the victims and respecting their religious identity, giving special attention to minority groups that feel vulnerable in certain areas. Religion has potentials for reconciliation if their believers accept both the differences and the commonalities of others. Religious leaders, more than lay people, are in a position to contribute to reconciliation.*

*Key words: Bosnia and Herzegovina, religion, politics, reconciliation*

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<sup>1</sup> University of Novi Sad, Srbija, e-mail: zoricakuburic@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> University of Belgrade, e-mail: anarzutova@gmail.com

## Introduction

Empirical research is crucial for scientists in the field of religion. Research provides the possibility to objectively view the attitudes towards religion (Kuburić, 2008). This paper represents the part of an empirical study on the project “Religion and Reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina”, which was conducted in cooperation between the Project on Religion and Ethics in the Making of War and Peace at the University of Edinburgh and the Center for Empirical Research on the Religion, Novi Sad – Sarajevo.

This is one of the largest studies on religion and public attitudes of the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina undertaken in recent decades. It is intended to be useful for those engaged with religious communities and with interreligious activity, both as subjects of study and for practical or professional concerns (Wilkes et al., 2013).

The aim of the research was to come up with ideas for models of reconciliation that could be used in other post-conflict societies after the conflicts of war, but also as a reconciliation as concept of peace that could have a preventive function.

The project started in 2012 with a pilot survey of a sample of 600 respondents in four cities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the next phase in 2013, the research team conducted the most extensive quantitative survey of citizens’ attitudes towards the reconciliation process in 13 local communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The survey included 2,606 subjects. The results were promoted at the end of 2013 and during the first half of 2014. The third phase of the survey followed from October 2014 to February 2015, when 26 events were organized in 13 local communities, including one focus group and one public event (Wilkes et al., 2012; Wilkes et al., 2013; Kuburić, 2013).

An interview was the fourth phase of the project. Between June 2018 and May 2019, we interviewed 78 stakeholders – representatives of different sectors of activity: information, politics, economy, education, religion and non-governmental sector of different fields of interest. The sample consisted of 26% actors in the field of religion, 22% in the field of education, 18% in politics, 13% in information, 9% in various NGO sectors, 7% in women’s NGO and 5% in transitional justice (Zotova et al., 2020).

Of the total number of interviewed persons (78) in the sample, 26% (20) are religious actors. By religious actors, we mean persons whose profession involves promoting or teaching about faith, while at the same time seeing themselves as religious actors as well as being recognized by others as representatives of a religious constituency for content analysis. Most of them are priests or imams, while religious education teachers and professors in religious universities make up a smaller proportion. A few interviewees act through NGOs in religious communities or in independent organizations oriented towards work with religious actors. We have not included sociologists of religion in this group; we have included them among actors focused on education, based on the extent to which they work as academics approaching religion from an external, scientific perspective. Out of 13 cities included in the research, we have religious representatives from 10 cities (Livno, Bihać, Tuzla, Trebinje, Mostar, Brčko, Bijeljina, Banja Luka, Teslić, Sarajevo). We have interviewed members of different religious, ethnic and theological

backgrounds. Thanks to that, we have hopes that the opinions presented may provide a broad picture of the experiences of different parts in the dialogue, and serve as a good basis for understanding differences of opinion (Kuburić, Zotova, 2019).

### **Different Approaches to the Role of Religion in the Reconciliation Process**

Answering the question on how they identify themselves in terms of nationality, 37% of the respondents said that they were Bosniaks; 32% Serbs, 24% Croats. Others either belonged to some national minority or they did not want to disclose their nationality. In relation to religion, 35% said that they belonged to Islam, 31% to the Orthodox and 34% to the Catholic faith. 2% identified themselves as agnostics, 3% as atheists, 2% as something else, and the remaining 3% did not want to answer.

Religious affiliation appears very important both in life of individuals and in familiar organization and state politics. In our survey, we find how important religion is today. According to answers of the respondents in the total sample, more than 73% answered that religion was very important or important on a scale that evaluates importance of religion in private life. It can be said for up to 11% of the respondents in the survey that they are not religious and that religion is unimportant to them.

Importance of religion can be also observed by asking how active they are in their religious community. According to the answers, 19% are regularly, actively and dedicatedly involved in their religious community. Somewhat larger number, 21% are sometimes active but regularly go to their religious community, while the largest number are, actually, traditional believers, who occasionally go to church but are not active in it, 39% (Zotova & Kuburić, 2018).

The most significant answer for the process of reconciliation is recognition of the importance of focusing the reconciliation process on mutual understanding and respecting differences among citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Immediately after comes mutual understanding and respecting commonalities (M=4.07). Answers like these indicate the importance of identity which demands respect for the other and the different, but recognizing commonalities allows even better understanding and closeness. Nevertheless, the emphasis is on respecting differences, because without them, there would not be distinctive identities (Zotova & Kuburić, 2018).

Interviewees took different approaches to the role of religion in the reconciliation process, because religious affiliation is closely related to the national and present divisions. Religious actors shared two positions bearing on the role of religion. One group thinks that the three main religions in Bosnia and Hercegovina should deal exclusively with the deepening of their adherents' faith and that they are making a mistake if they are not doing that. Others accept that these religions are also national protectors. It happens very often that members of the same religious community take different positions. We will give one explanation they advanced for the first and the second position. According to the first opinion, religions should be "ambiences of faith". This means that they are working on the deepening of faith, on the building of an

environment of a religious community, an ambient of living with God and his proximity, that they are producing meaning and re-socialization of values. There were plenty of arguments that the interviewers presented supporting the view that religions in BiH should not be national protectors. On the other hand, the interviewees did not express the need to explain or complement the view that religion should be seen as something that deepens faith.

It is a known fact that religious communities have a problem with nominal believers who declare themselves to be believers, and yet they do not attend religious services, even though they rely on their vision of religious identity. One of the interviewed priests asks the question: "Are religious leaders able to affect this mass of nominal believers, and how?" And he adds: "Maybe this should be something that religious communities should think about – how and in what way they can somehow educate their congregation, so they truly realize that the person next to them is not an obstacle or a disturbance or a threat, but that it is someone who is supposed to be an icon of God that you see in that person, and that person will be in you when communication and cooperation exist this way."

The problem that one interviewee sees in the fact that the three religions took on the role of national protectors is that this meant that they "extradited themselves to nationalists, to become an instrument of nationalistic manipulation. Religions produce the most sacred products; they are best used to heal man. And this most sacred content of religions is abused by nationalists to produce hatred and vulnerability." He added that for as long as they are national protectors, "nationalists cannot be removed from power." The so-called nationalists in BiH are thus provided with great assistance. "If our religions don't come to, and if they don't get out from the jaws of nationalistic politics, we are doomed." The interviewee believes that cultural and national institutions need to put effort into developing or building of national identity.

Some believe that linking religion to national issues is natural in these areas, because society is patriarchal: „Society in Bosnia and Herzegovina is patriarchal in its nature and tied to its religious communities, and I could say that society here ties its national identities to a certain religious structure." As a result, the institution of religious communities is often used as a tool to increase political influence.

One interviewee stated that religion has a homogenizing power that no other institution, or political option, or national option, has for Serbs today. This homogenizing power lies in Saint Sava's<sup>3</sup> philosophy of life. "We do not have even a single institution that could homogenize the Serbian people today. Today, we don't have a political option or a national option, or any other option that could bring the Serbs together no matter where they live, in any continent, and even on the territory of former Yugoslavia, except for the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Serbian Orthodox Church is the one thing that can bring the people together through its institutions and give the people meaning in jeopardized areas where they live. It can give these people a ray of light to stay and to

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<sup>3</sup> The first archbishop of the autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church

fight for themselves, but we have to understand that the highest-level Serbian people today cannot be guided by any political project but only by the Orthodox philosophy of life, Saint Sava's philosophy of life that carries with it the faith, new birth and fight for the common good, a patriarchal approach to family and faith in your country that you build and love. And a completely different relationship towards another is built from this greatness."

Religious education teachers are most inclined to think that religion does not contribute to divisions, especially those who have the experience of cooperation with religious education teachers from other religious communities. "Let's take my case as an example, considering that this is my profession and expertise. Primarily, I have studied Islam, [its] dogmas and thematic, but I studied in parallel and I also showed interested in Christianity, Judaism and other religions. I didn't find in any of the religions that they call for evil or that they call for bloodshed. Quite the contrary, every religion preaches that whoever saves one man has saved the entire mankind, all people. The one who kills, it is as if he killed all the people in the world. This is a foundation, so to speak, of the Ten Commandments, and so on. So, these are all elements included in all world religions. And I do not see at any moment that religious education speaks negatively about anyone else in their program, or their curriculum. Of course, there you can offer your value, the value of your faith, your religion. But never in any moment is there mentioned in a negative context anyone else who is not part of our religious community, religious group." Religious education complements the school system in a way that it works on raising children, moral upbringing, because in a majority of school subjects, the accent is placed on information and not on education (upbringing).

"When it comes to religion, I am aware that just like any phenomenon - maybe even more than all the phenomena - that this is a confused phenomenon that always brings violence with it. I read one of the authors for this doctorate of mine yesterday and he said, among other things, that each one of them – Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Jesus – they all had a violent death. Yes, their message was a message of peace, but they were all killed. So, violence is very close to that. Everything smells of violence. And when someone tells me that there is this good religion, [and there is also] bad [religion], that is an unrealistic image in my opinion. I mean, in a way, we cannot say that it can be separated from that [violence]. But we are entering a spiritual nature of the world here which states that this world has the most valuable – spiritual – things, next to the filthiest things. And that is this world, that is how we are living..." "What we are doing, what we are trying to do in our mission is to open people's eyes that it is possible for this to happen in this world. We do a lot of work with believers, trying to bring this religion to a passive state or even, which is even worse, to take it from something violent in a person and transfer it into the noble part of that person, the part where he stands up for someone else, where he is an activist, where he has to suffer for someone else..." "He is a holy being in the sense that he is special and wants to do something for someone else. Now, there are a thousand of things that disorient him in this effort, that repudiate, try to frighten him, make him focus primarily on the material things. And we are trying to

introduce him to a higher sphere of his being. In principle, we always connect the ideals of a religion with the ideals of a civil society, and we are trying to say that it is the same model, that we are in no conflict if we are believers with someone living next to us with another system of values”.

The next question we turn to is whether our religious interlocutors consider themselves responsible, or less powerful than it might be expected. The first impression we get from the interviews even with those people who are in power, with mayors and their deputies, with religious leaders, is that they have the power and yet it seems as though they do not, because they cannot do anything, and believe that the system and state organization stand in the way of changes. They did not demonstrate an awareness that they have media influence, but they did show awareness that they affect the people both through their example and through their words.

The power lies in actions to bring together young and ordinary people, educate and empower individuals for freedom (i.e. they have ‘convener power’). To give one example from an interview: “We do this through religion, teaching children that they have to make a sacrifice and we might even go hungry, but that the need for freedom is stronger than the need for food. This is what happened when he freed his people from slavery. As soon as they got hungry, they said ‘hey, this is all nice, but we are hungry’. If my children complain that the teacher is unfair to them, I tell them ‘why don’t you react? That is your right... he is unfair to you’. And they say ‘well, yes, but he will then hate me and he will have it in for me’. And his father acts the same way. Everyone complains about the representatives of religious communities, they also make complaints to me, but I got bored of saying: ‘I am not an instance for this. Go away’. ‘Oh, then I will understand. I am not the solution. This is also something, satisfying some needs. But if you think you deserve a decision from a special instance, that takes strength, character, and you will have to separate yourself from your personal need for something. Because, if we stand out, it is very possible that our existence will be jeopardized.”

According to another interviewee, those who obstruct reconciliation should be publicly called out in public appearances, and we should point out obstacles to integration and to social progress: “Well, someone said a long time ago that *evil does not come from the bully but evil comes from those who see the violence but keep quiet*. According to this, it means that the best opportunity is to publicly call out those who obstruct this reconciliation, this integration and those who are fine with the situation as it is. Then [there should be] constant mentions [of this] in all public appearances, in our mosques, public places, editions and so on, and directed attention to these obstacles, stating that they are the main brakes in integration and social progress. And I believe that this would bring results.”

One form of demonstration of the power of religion is that those at a higher level invite the people not to vote for nationalists. “If the religions would agree to publicly announce that the Cardinal states: “Please, Croats, Catholics, come to your senses, do not vote only for the nationalists, do not vote, they are not the best”. To get them out of power finally.”

There are those who take on greater responsibility: "I think that the main obstacles are the disorganized system, loss of the system of values. It is very important that the leaders – this intellectual elite of some sort – make an example here, both religious and political. I think that we are the main obstacles to this general reconciliation."

"I think that if we wait for the politicians, it will never come. Believe. And this is why: all religious communities, Orthodox, Catholic, Islamic religious community, they have a longer continuity than a country, than any political party in this region. And we have a vision for such future. You know, because we are working with all the people, regardless of their political party membership, regardless of their outlook, their material status – we do not need their political points. We do not need their power, you know... We need to sit down together, and I first of all believe that religious officials have the greatest responsibility here. No one else, believe me, but the clerics."

On the other side of the deliberation about the building of one nation's identity are debates about the ways in which religious actors help different nations in BiH to get closer to each other. Imams, priests and religious education teachers have an impact by reminding the believers about the common values they share with the members of other religions and about the value of reconciliation itself. Therefore, the priests and imams interviewed suggest that they use their services to send messages that the other person does not represent danger and that the other person does not have to be part of the same religion. The same goes for religious education teachers in the context of their classes.

The church has a role in healing peoples, combating hatred and bad memories with sermons on love and forgiveness. Interviewees see a problem in parts of BiH where people attend church rarely: „Now, 25 years after the war, I think (...) they [people] are very ungodly. I know that from reliable circles, because priests are sharing thoughts and reflections between themselves. And then where there is no church, where no-one is coming to church, one cannot hear sermons on love and forgiveness. If that person does not hear sermons on love and forgiveness, what will he hear? He will hear what television teaches him, what these various electronic media teach him and what is being said in one's immediate surroundings, in the village shops, pubs and so on, so there is no future there. At least here, in church, he will hear the basis of church vocabulary that is love and forgiveness." The interviewee believes that if every priest would call for love and forgiveness (and forgiveness means "forgiveness of everything that has been done", then it would lead to collective peace): „Well, if everyone forgives everyone for love and peace, it is a simple logic. And just as in Islam the main point is to call for love and forgiveness, so a Roman Catholic friar should call for love and forgiveness. And I don't think that practice is present [or that is not the case]."

Religious actors believe that religion also has a role in the process of becoming familiarized with others, including with those that are different, especially where religion is seen as the only thing that divides the people in BiH. One of the interviewees said that people in BiH have the same skin colour and that they do not differ from each other on the street: "... we have three national cores, we have three – as the Constitution states

– constitutive nations, but these are the same people. And the only difference between them is not even language anymore, because we do not even know which language we speak, regardless of the fact that we are all free to declare ourselves as speaking Croatian, or Serbian or Bosnian language. But it is obvious that we differ only by religion, it's the only thing that divides us.”

In order to get to know the other better, a number of interviewees believe that a serious and thorough study program should be introduced in theological studies, one that would deal with the study of other religious communities and their cultural and national foundations in order to train and empower their staff. “When we talk about coexistence in BiH, what stands out is the common life across different religions and nationalities in BiH that existed before the war. However, after the war, the question that arises is what coexistence was considering the evils experienced during the war? It is obvious that coexistence was not followed by adequate knowledge and familiarization with other religions and nationalities, or their history, culture and literature. One of the starting points should definitely be a repeated, but more serious and deeper mutual introduction of people who are nationally and religiously different. ... We in BiH lack a serious and thorough knowledge of the Other and their religion, culture and tradition.”

## **Conclusion**

The survey results indicate that there is a clear awareness among citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina that trust and reconciliation is an important segment of social life, based on experience. Respondents believe that the greatest power of reconciliation is first and foremost with the persons who represent the interests of all people and not just the groups they belong to. Citizens recognize the processes of ideological, political and media manipulation that are in the function of coming to power and remaining in power, but they also feel their own powerlessness in front of the political elite.

The results show that the type of religion and the type of religiousness are significant variables of trust in the social community. Devout believers are those who are most trusting of others. Considering religiousness in a family and social context points to the tendency of homogenization of space by religious and national identity both at the state and local levels. Religious identity is more significant as it is more in the border area of meeting with members of another religion.

The survey showed that the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina have ideas about ways to overcome mistrust, about ways that lead to a renewed community on new foundations in the context of forgotten traditions. Practical steps towards post-conflict reconciliation lead to mutual understanding and acceptance. Practical steps towards reconciling are the steps of the people in front of politicians who continue to hold power in the politics of national divisions.

Religious identity is one of many identities that a man has and that people cannot be reduced to ethnic and religious identity. For some interviewees, a special role in work on reconciliation was given precisely in work with people to expand their view of

identity (their identity vision) or transfer of their focus on humanity and harmonization considering some other personality characteristics.

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