

RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIVISM IN THE MODERN MACEDONIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract: Religious exclusivism is one of the biggest problems shaking the global world. Many ethnic, political, and economic conflicts take on the appearance of religious conflict. That is one of the reasons that multiculturalism, as a static concept, is increasingly outdated in Europe. That is why interculturalism as a dynamic concept is becoming more current. R. of North Macedonia, which is unfortunately still in a post-conflict period, is trying to build a strategy for one society for all and develop interculturalism. In such a society, all citizens, regardless of their religious, ethnic or political affiliation, will have equal access to the labour market, social, cultural and political institutions. This will overcome religious tensions and conflicts. The two largest religious organizations in the country, the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA) and the Islamic Faith Community (IFC), play a crucial role in developing the religious dialogue and cooperation. They still do not do this satisfactorily, because of their extreme closeness to political parties, which leads them to religious nationalism. Consequently, R. of North Macedonia is experiencing the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics. Instead of engaging in a process of religious dialogue, the dignitaries of the MOC-OA and the IFC often poison the believers with hate speech and religious exclusivism.

Key words: religious exclusivism; religious nationalism; interculturalism; religious dialogue

Introduction

Religious exclusivism, or exclusivity, is the doctrine or belief that only one particular religion or belief system is true (*Wainwright 2005*). This is in contrast to religious pluralism, which believes that all religions provide valid responses to the existence of God (*Chad 2008*). A number of Christian denominations assert that they alone represent the one true church – the church to which Jesus gave his authority in the Great Commission. The Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Oriental Orthodox communion and the Assyrian Church of the East each understand themselves as the one and only original church. Muslims believe that Islam is the original and primordial faith, or fitrah, that was revealed by Muhammad. Muslims maintain that previous messages and revelations have been partially changed or corrupted over time and consider the Quran to be the unaltered and the final revelation from Allah. Religious concepts and practices include the five pillars of Islam, which

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are basic concepts and obligatory acts of worship, and following Islamic law, which touches on virtually every aspect of life and society, encompassing everything from banking and welfare, to warfare and the environment (Esposito 2002). Although most Jews are pluralist or inclusivity some Jews believe that the God of Abraham is the one true God. The Jews believe the God of Abraham entered into a covenant with the ancient Israelites, marking them as his Chosen People, giving them a mission to spread the concept of monotheism. Jews do not consider their closeness to be a mark of superiority to other nations, but a responsibility to be an example of behaviour for other nations to emulate (Pelaia 2019). Buddhist religious exclusivism may be seen in the implication that those who do not accept the teachings of the Buddha, such as the Eightfold Path, are destined to repeat the cycle of suffering through endless reincarnations; while those who practice the true way can reach enlightenment. Neo-Buddhist groups sometimes consider their tradition the true path to enlightenment and engage in strong evangelical efforts to influence those they consider to be in darkness. Several sects associated with Nichiren Buddhism may be included in this category. However, many followers of Eastern religions are not exclusivist. For example, there are millions of Buddhists who would also consider them to follow Confucianism or Taoism (McDermo 2005).

Exclusivism and religious pluralism are two opposing ways of looking at world religions in relation to one's own faith. Most people in the world probably take an exclusivist position: they believe that their religion, and only theirs, is completely true. Most believe that their God communicated universal truths by special revelation given to their spiritual ancestors or patriarchs. This knowledge has been passed on to present-day humanity, often in the form of religious texts. People hold tenaciously to their particular faith, believing it to be God's revealed wish for all humanity. They view the Gods of other religions as false. Some may even view other faith groups or denominations within their own religion to be false. Exclusivism, the belief that one's religion is true and that all others are false, can develop into hatred of other faith groups and their members. Religious exclusivism is often a major cause of much of the world's civil unrest, civil wars, mass crimes against humanity and genocide.

If we wish to define religious exclusivity according to the example of Christianity, we can do it in this way. Christianity is a religion, which excludes when it calls for its believers to dedicate all of their lives towards God, and not to the polytheistic gods. On the other hand, Christianity does not exclude when it urges its followers that if they cannot accept the God of their neighbours, then they should accept their neighbours. If they cannot accept their faith, they can accept that they are faithful. However, religious institutions frequently endeavour to exclude other believers from Earth and Heaven, because they are different from them. They

have distorted history for this purpose. Their ideas are clear: we have an exclusive historical right to a certain religion, which is unavailable to you. For example, Jews on the foundations of Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Jacob and David were the blessed nation of God, who were supposed to spread the truth of the one God (Jehovah), but instead of using this blessing and spread the truth to all peoples of the world, as time passed they made an unbreakable wall between them and other peoples. They simply told the neighbouring people: I am sorry, but we are the historical descendants of Abraham, Moses and David, and as such, our God is not your God.

Religious exclusivism in the Holy Books of the great world religions

If we analyse the Scriptures of the world's major religions, we can conclude that the principle of not killing the other religions is very intense. Hinduism expresses the idea of non-violence (ahimsu) to humans and animals. Buddhism says that hatred does not diminish with hatred, but with love for the other. In Taoism, it says: „Where the army sets soy camps, there are thorns growing. Weapons are a malicious tool and they are disgusting to everyone. The one who understands Tao does not accept violence” (Lao Ce). In Judaism, in the Old Testament there is a command: „Do not kill!” (Genesis 5:17). In Christianity Jesus commands: „You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment” (Matthew 5: 21). Jesus also said: „If someone strikes you on one cheek, And if someone takes your cloak, do not with hold your tunic” (Luke 6: 29). The Qur'an is dominated by the idea that Islam requires its believers not to kill, unless there is good reason for it.

However, unlike Christian pacifism, which rejects the Tallinn principle of the Old Testament („eye for eye, tooth for tooth!”), Islam adheres to this principle: „Oh you who have believed, prescribed for you is legal retribution for those murdered - the free for the free, the slave for the slave, and the female for the female. Nevertheless, whoever overlooks from his brother anything, and then there should be a suitable follow-up and payment to him with good conduct. This is alleviation from your Lord and a mercy. However, whoever transgresses after that will have a painful punishment. And there is for you in legal retribution [saving of] life, Oh you [people] of understanding, that you may become righteous” (Qur'an 2: 178-179). „And we ordained for them therein a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and for wounds is legal retribution. But whoever gives [up his right as] charity, it is an expiation for him. And whoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed - then it is those who are the wrongdoers” (Qur'an 5: 45).

In this context, it is very important to explain the concept of the holy war in Islam, as the youngest major world religion. One of the most controversial issues today is the interpretation of the term jihad. It essentially has a much wider meaning than the holy war. The great jihad identified with the Prophet Muhammad is actually a struggle to overcome human passions and instincts that lead to evil. It is an extremely complex and sophisticated concept that is explained in detail in the Qur'an. Through the great Jihad the believer through material and spiritual struggle with himself realizes the messages of God revealed by word in the Qur'an. Moreover, early Islam in the time of the Prophet Muhammad and long after that was extremely tolerant of members of other religious denominations. European Christians and Jews were free to confess their faith in countries that came under Muslim rule. Religious organizations retained their churches and synagogues along with their properties, with religious leaders largely respected by Muslim rulers at that time. They obeyed the messages revealed in the Qur'an.

As an example, we will cite the following suras: „And we have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming that which preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it. So judge between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their inclinations away from what has come to you of the truth. To each of you we prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all together and He will [then] inform you concerning that over which you used to differ., (Qur'an 5: 48). „And do not dispute with the followers of the Book except by what is best, except those of them who act unjustly, and say: We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our God and your God is One, and to Him do we submit (Qur'an 29: 46). Had your Lord willed, everyone on earth would have believed. Will you compel people to become believers?“ (Qur'an 10: 99). „There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. Therefore, whoever disbelieves in Taught and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing“ (Qur'an 2: 256).

But the key problem arises when certain suras and verses in the Koran are read that justify the violence. There are more of them, but I will single out the next part of the Koran as the most characteristic: „Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed Allah does not like transgressors. And kill them wherever you overtake them and expel them from wherever they have expelled you, and fitnah is worse than killing. And do not fight them at al-Masjid al- Haram until they fight you there. But if they fight you, then kill them. Such is the recompense

of the disbelievers. And if they cease, then indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful. Fight them until there is no [more] fitnah and [until] worship is [acknowledged to be] for Allah. But if they cease, then there is to be no aggression except against the oppressors. [Fighting in] the sacred month is for [aggression committed in] the sacred month, and for [all] violations is legal retribution. So whoever has assaulted you, then assault him in the same way that he has assaulted you. And fear Allah and know that Allah is with those who fear Him” (Qur’an 2: 190-194). And now, when we consider the activities of extreme Islamic groups and organizations, it is clear that the interpretation of certain parts of the Qur’an is of great importance.

For this occasion, it is sufficient to warn of two things concerning the ignorance and misunderstanding of Islam. First, most Islamic believers are from Arab countries, but only 20% of them live in that part of the world, while 80% reside and work outside the Arab soil: Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Turkey. The influence of Islam from Asia, Africa, and Europe is stronger than the influence of Islam from the Arab world. Secondly, Muhammad expressed his pleasure in returning from one minor war to another, which is waged in the soul of every single believer: jihad means effort, struggle and war in overcoming demons within, and the demon is common to all human evil (Шушњић 2007).

From the foregoing, we can conclude that there are seemingly opposite principles in the holy books regarding violence. But it should be borne in mind that all these quotes should be placed in the context of the universal teachings in the sacred books of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that are with a message of love, peace, love and respect for one’s neighbour and forgiveness. It leads to a free life and equality for all people. It is therefore crucial to have a proper interpretation of the Scriptures in accordance with these universal principles and religious values. This is particularly highlighted in the Christian blessing for peacemakers: „Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5: 9). Also in Islam it is particularly important greeting „Selam Alejkum” and the message:” There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. Therefore, whoever disbelieves in Taught and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing. Allah is the ally of those who believe. He brings them out from darkness’s into the light. And those who disbelieve - their allies are taught. They take them out of the light into darkness’s. Those are the companions of the Fire; they will abide eternally therein” (Qur’an 2: 256-257). That is why today, as in the past, evil is justified by the abuse of faith and the gross forgery of religious teachings. There are many reasons for believers and religious organizations to move away from these religious foundations. Islam in particular suffers from such distortions, though one of

its fundamental tenets, as in Christianity and Judaism, is that violence against peace is essentially violence against God. The heart of the problem of misinterpretation of the Holy Books lies in the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics. The selective approach to religious teachings and the misuse and counterfeiting of religious principles are the basis of the concept of a holy war.

Religious nationalism and religious fundamentalism

Against liberal and Marxist expectation, ethnic nationalism is increasing. Ethnicity as such is not necessarily bad and may meet human needs for recognition in an increasingly impersonal global society. However, the desire for separate and exclusive nationhood for ethnic groups such as we are seeing in Second Yugoslavia is divisive and damaging whether religion plays an important role in maximizing or minimizing ethnic exclusiveness. It notes that in fact religious and ethnic conflicts are closely linked in many places. There the collapse of a previous ideology, the threatened failure to hold together a society of different ethnic groups, and the strong religious beliefs of ordinary people, Yugoslavia is a particularly shocking example of ethnic separation. It is unlikely that the ethnic conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina will become as explicitly a religious conflict. But concepts of exclusive salvation and religious rivalry in Yugoslavia are mirrored in many right-wing groups in South Africa. These groups are therefore likely to be as non-amenable to rational, political or economic considerations as the Serbs, Croats or Bosnians (Nicholson 1994).

In modern societies there is a new phenomenon called religious nationalism. It is a substitute for (post) ethnic nationalism. It occurs at a time when believers and religious organizations are not satisfied or disappointed with secular or secular nationalism. The nation is the only legitimate foundation of the modern state. The little unity that has remained in modern societies is a nation-state that finds its own rituals and values in nationalism. Religious nationalism is a particular social phenomenon that requires an institutional approach to better represent and affirm collectivities (Gellner 2003).

According to this, religion is the basis of national collectivity and the source of its values and ultimate social goals. Religious nationalism is a form of politicized religion, in which politics is a religious obligation. In its work, it is very similar to religious fundamentalism, as it offers a concept for the radical change of social, cultural, political and economic relations in modern societies. But there is also a qualitative difference between religious fundamentalism and religious nationalism.

Fundamentalist movements according to their doctrine are universal and apply to all individual believers who belong to a particular religion regardless of their place of residence and activity, ethnicity and citizenship. In contrast, religious nationalists are speculative and their doctrine refers to a specific ethnic group. They have a dual exclusivity. For one thing, they have an extremely negative approach to members of other religious and ethnic groups. Second, they exclude all those who profess to be atheists, agnostics, and unbelievers.

Religious nationalism today calls for the right to govern politics, as it is one of the important factors for the creation of ethno-national policies in certain countries. It is in the function of manipulating the historical past, in the function of daily political events. During the 2001 conflict, both the MOC-OA and the IFC were politicized. God occupies the inferior world. It does not interfere with the political problems of the people. That is why religion should never be confused with politics. Religion is a community of people with God and the state is a community of people between them. Because of their political engagement on a religious basis, religious fundamentalism and religious nationalism have become political ideologies. Individuals and groups can reach out to religion to provide a unique but endangered sense of identity. But at the same time, they can also abuse religion to assert the superiority of the individual or social group over the “others.” Global society is a threat to them (Gauchet, 1997). Religion contributes to both social conflict and cohesion. In many respects, the aspect of conflict is merely the obverse of social cohesion. Some conflict is an integral part of what holds groups together. A tendency in our society to think of conflict, in the abstract, as “bad”; cohesion, in the abstract, seems „good”. Yet when we examine some concrete instances of cohesion and conflict, we see that we evaluate the content, not the process, as good or bad (McGuire 2002).

That is why the crisis of identity makes religious fundamentalism the most current and most controversial ideology of modern times. The claim of Universalist religions that the world was created by one God does not lead us to the conclusion that religion is one of the most significant driving forces of globalization. Christianity and Islam have proven to be the most effective globalizing forces, especially because of their mission. It is most explicitly expressed in Islam. The secular purpose of Islam is to establish a community of believers in which the practices set forth in the Quran will be followed consistently and engaged in a militant version of the Holy War against infidels. It is believed that the demographic growth of Muslims is already saying that Islam could be a religion of globalization. Yet fundamentalism is only an answer to the challenge of globalization.

From here, the question arises where the relevance of religious fundamentalism originates and what does its revitalization mean at the beginning of the 21st century? We could give two contrasting explanations to this question. From the first point of view, fundamentalism is an essential deviation, a symptom of the adjustment that societies take when they are accustomed to modern, secularized culture. Proponents of the second view hold that fundamentalism is of lasting importance and are convinced that it is a consequence of the failure of secularism to satisfy the constant human desire for spiritual values and spiritual truth. Although Shiite fundamentalism in Iran has produced the most fervent commitment, yet Islam in general is a means of expressing anti-Western aspirations by creating antipathy primarily to globalization as a world process. This was quite evident in the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and jihadist groups (such as al-Qaeda) for whom the spiritual quest for religious foundations and traditions has become synonymous with militant politics and armed struggle. There are several important factors for the spread of religious fundamentalism in the global age. First of all it is the crisis of secularization and de-secularization of the world in Berger's sense (Berger 1999).

Nevertheless, as we have previously pointed out, globalization is the most important factor for the re-actualization of religious fundamentalism. This is especially true in parts of the world where people's ethnic and religious identity is threatened and constantly challenged. One of the essential features of fundamentalism is its opposition to the modern world. The crucial question now arises: what are the reasons for religious fundamentalism, which is basically a positive political ideology, to turn into a negative phenomenon that relies on aggression in pursuit of its goals? As an example, reflecting the uncertainties following 1989 can be discovered in the Balkans where, in the tragic events of the 1990s, newly acquired and fragile nationalities sought in a variety of ways to bolster their positions with appeals for religious justification. On such action, ethnic cleansing or the purification of territory is an obvious consequence of such policies. Once again it fits the analysis of fundamentalism already offered, manifesting in particular the desire for clear-cut solutions, in this case for unambiguous boundaries, territorial or otherwise (Davie 2008).

There are several sources of fundamentalist militancy. Most important: those who act in the name of religion believe that the goals they pursue are given by God. Secondly, fundamentalism is a form of collective identity. Identity politics, whether based on political, social, ethnic or religious specifics, tends to divide people into „ours” and „others”. Ethnic and religious „other” can be targets of violent behaviour. And third, extreme fundamentalists make a sharp distinction between good and

evil. In that sense „we” are a chosen people and representatives of the good, and „they” are sinful and the embodiment of evil. In contrast to the exclusivity of fundamentalism that demands solutions once and for all, ecumenism proposes an idea by which tolerance and dialogue can be guided by universal values. To this should be added the spread of religious fanaticism, which is inclined to individuals in all so-called traditional religious communities. And all this is accompanied by hatred that is dangerous to both the one who hates and the one who is hated. And to spread hatred, it is necessary to spread fear about them and their faith. Of course, we must not forget the violence in response to the repressions carried out by the ruling regime. This model of violence is most common in societies that have not established and enabled the equality of all religious communities (Cvitković 2005). As we look to the future, we need to be aware that fundamentalism will continue to be with us regardless of region, regardless of what religion is dominant in the culture. Fundamentalism will not go away. Fundamentalism is not a theology such as Islamic theology. It is an ideology (Johnstone 2001).

When religious exclusivity reaches its highest momentum and when relations between different religious groups reach a boiling point, then we can talk about religious wars. Such types of conflicts in the global modern world are: clashes between Catholic Christians and Muslims in East Timor; Jews and Muslims in the Middle East; Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland; Muslims and Hindus in Kashmir and the Indian state of Gujarat; Hindus and Sikhs in India; the Taliban’s and members of other religions in Afghanistan; monophysite Christians against Eritreans and Somali Muslims in Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda; Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka; Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Chechnya; Christians and Muslims in Ivory Coast and Sudan; Armenian monophysite Christians against Muslim Azeri’s in Nagorno Karabakh. This also happened in the territories of former Yugoslavia where Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Catholic Christians clashed with each other.

Whereas religious wars have been fought largely by religious wars in the past, this type of conflict is now fought primarily for national, political, ideological, state, or business reasons. In contemporary conflicts, religions often play an important role, especially when it comes to states or groups that differ in their ethnic and religious, cultural and even civilization differences. There are three major processes happening globally today. First, it is the strengthening of fundamentalist tendencies in major world religions. Second: the essential role of the Christian Churches in radical change in certain European countries, primarily in Poland and Ukraine. Third: strengthening the ecumenical processes. This has consequently increased the role of religion in resolving conflicts and building peace. But this positive role of Religious

Organizations can most often be felt when it comes to individual forms of aggression and violence. When it comes to conflicts of a mass nature or wars between states, then it is usually the religious organizations that unfortunately stand by.

Religious exclusivism in R. of North Macedonia

A key parameter by which the intensity of religious exclusivity in the Republic of North Macedonia can be measured is the religious communities and religious groups. The biggest influence in modern Macedonian society is on the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA) and the Islamic Faith Community (IFC). What is the relationship between the religious and political elite in the state? Religious communities can practice religion in various ways, from preaching religious tolerance and religious dialogue to non-acceptance of one another and inciting hate speech. Religious exclusivity is often used as a means of attaining certain church interests and as a means of manipulating the religious feelings of believers in the state. Contemporary Macedonian society is beset with social-political and ethnic-religious crises and conflicts. The most common and most difficult issue to resolve after the 2001 conflict is how to improve relations between different ethnic and religious groups. The role of religion and religious organizations in addressing this issue is enormous. Religion is a lifestyle and religious values shape the personalities of citizens as they are. But often, as elsewhere in the world, religion and religious sentiment are abused to make it easier for people to reach and manipulate them for the sake of achieving political, economic, ethnic, and other goals. For ISIL, for example, religion is a major discourse in the pursuit of their interests in power and money.

The 2001 conflict ended without a winner, and the Ohrid Framework Agreement does not offer definitive and once and for all closed issues. That is why everything that is politically different is brought about in a religious context. Most of the political and religious elite do this wisely because they obviously fit into a divided Macedonian society on all grounds. Religion in itself is not a problem, because historically, religious diversity in Macedonia has been respected. The problem comes from political and religious centres of power. In the foreseeable future, no dramatic change is expected either in the direction of modernization of religious organizations or in the direction of substantial democratization of the political parties in North Macedonia. Especially considering that patriarchy is still a dominant ideology in Macedonian society. That is why in the statements of religious leaders we rarely find statements that speak of respect for all human rights (including

religious), and reactions to cases where they are not respected or severely violated. Such messages can have a profound impact on believers in building community and eliminating discrimination and exclusivity. For example, Pope Francis' affirmative statement regarding the LGBT community has strongly influenced the respect for all differences by the faithful, including of course the religious here. Also on one occasion, the head of the Bosnian Islamic Community, Reis-and-Ulema Jemaludin said: „I thank God for giving me this quality of being unable to hate”. Religious exclusivity, without undermining other forms of exclusivity, has generated the biggest problems in the world. Faced with this, religious leaders have tried to overcome this state, which at worst can lead to bloody conflict. In one interview Pope Francis said: „A secular state, unlike other states where religion is imposed on everyone, can allow any believer a chance to believe in his God. All people are equal as God's sons and daughters and creators of their own dignity. Everyone has to have the freedom to practice his or her own religion, within the religion he or she belongs to”.

We will now turn to the statements of religious leaders in R. of North Macedonia. There are many controversial statements by the head of the IFC Reis-ul-Ulema Suleiman Redzhepi. „God's will is to unite all Albanians in one country”. Rexhepi sent this message in an interview with the Albanian-language daily Zurnal Plus in November 2012. „The union of the Albanian countries is God's will and we have an obligation to return it and thank God for it,” Rexhepi says. The head of the IFC calls for „unification under the same flag and in the same country where God determines the borders”, the Albanian-language portal Zurnal Plus reports. „The unification of the Albanian countries is God's will, and therefore we have an obligation to restore them as they were before. The unification of the Albanian people's forces at all levels will become a reality, and Albania will have a single God-created frontier”, Rexhepi says. He adds that the IFC, with all its capacities, is „ready to contribute to the national cause and respond to any kind of call for the unification of all Albanians. I am very concerned about the position of the Albanians, because one cannot imagine people living in five states. It is unacceptable for you to live here, for the father to live in the home country, and for the brothers to live outside the borders”.

This is further evidence that the IFC and the DUI are working on the practical implementation of the idea of albanizing religion in Macedonia. In addition, in his statements about the unification of Albanians in one country, the Head of the IFC has voiced the idea of a Greater Albania that is extremely dangerous for the region in a post-conflict period. The Albanian intellectual circles do not interfere, because they simply do not want to confront the IFC. In February 2014, he posted on his Facebook profile: „Yesterday, in a motorcycle accident the last of the participants in

the burning of the mosque in Prilep was killed. Thirty have already lost their lives. The next one to pay is the Mayor Marjan Risteski. All those who participated in the burning are dead, but the Mayor will be punished by Allah”.

During the ceremony of laying the cornerstone of the mosque in the village of Arnakia, Skopje, in April 2019, Sulejman Redzepe addressed the faithful with the following words: „We do not mind building churches, but we will never remain silent when they interfere with the building of mosques, when their construction is not approved. We will never allow this work. We will never remain silent. We hope with the Lord ahead that better times will come. We have people and places everywhere. In the village of Lazec, Bitola, there have not been any mosques for more than 100 years. Imagine what kind of wild people we live with. These are exemplary wild people, so they have no identity and never will, no matter what we want to help them. It does not help; the soulless one does not wake up”.

To this the Bishop of Povardarie Agathangel replied: „Mr. Rexhepi is a spokesman and of national and religious intolerance and at the same time a dedicated defender of pernicious terrorism and violence. He is a typical representative of the immorality, lethargy, contradiction, and madness that have plagued and disrupted our society for years and spread the disgusting stench of hellish desolation. Sulejman Rexhepi is the black angel of divisions, so he feeds on extremists whose only sanctuary is bloodshed all over the white world. The statement by Mr. Sulejman Rexhepi hurts not only the Christians, but also the Macedonian Muslims, as a large part of the IFC. Are they wild and without identity? If he were a true spiritual leader, he himself would have asked the Orthodox bishops to work together to increase the mutual trust and understanding. Unfortunately, Sulejman Rexhepi also missed this opportunity by becoming, consciously or unconsciously, a tool in the hands of people profiting from the conflict and using the census in Macedonia as an excellent opportunity to realize their destructive and evil intentions. Further, insulting the state of Macedonia in a derogatory way, in his column he highly instructs us on the mission and role of religious leaders in society. I fully agree with his statement that we should fully adhere to religious principles, not engage in daily politics, preach and encourage peace, kindness, tolerance, and mutual respect, and not lead people to unrest. But the fact is that the Islamic religious community does just the opposite”.

All of these statements by the Head of the IFC are at least scandalous and cause Muslims in the country to be intolerant to Orthodox believers, ethnic Macedonians and all Macedonian citizens as a whole. The statements are a typical example of religious exclusivity and religious nationalism. Also the statement of

the Bishop of Povardarie and the other Bishops of the MOC-OA Synod are fairly rigid and exclusive. They rightly criticize the views of the IFC, especially its head, but show no willingness to criticize the actions of Orthodox Christians leading to Christian nationalism and fundamentalism. The two largest religious organizations in the country have no readiness for religious dialogue and cooperation. It should be very interesting to point out the role of the MOC-OA and IFC during the conflict in R. of Macedonia in the year of 2001. It is undisputable that both the religious and the political circles do not have enough courage for a thorough analysis of the causes, motivations and the consequences of that conflict. This can be done only by the scientific circles. The scientific analyses show that the 2001 year conflict does not have typical characteristics of a religious conflict. As in many other cases and circumstances the religious feelings were abused for political goals. The future analyses will show whether, at what extent and in what way the religious feelings of the citizens of both the Christian and Islamic religion have been abused.

In this context, it will be interesting to answer the question whether MOC-OA and IFC by means of their practical actions do settle down or, on the contrary, they stir the ethnic issues and misunderstandings even more. Since they are separated from the government, they cannot be direct culprits for all of the interethnic problems in R. of Macedonia. The Government and the political parties that act in it are responsible for these issues. If it had been a matter of the structures of both the MOC-OA and IFC, then there would not have been ethnic conflicts in R. of Macedonia. These conflicts are present, because the religious communities have never been consulted. However, this does not make them free from any responsibility: if not for what they have said then, at least, for the things that they have never mentioned, but which they should have. One can get an impression that the largest religious organizations in R. of Macedonia do not have enough strength to begin to talk on their own religious language, but rather at the given socio-political moment they use the collective language of their own environment where the ethnocentrism becomes an ideology of the new time.

Although the conflict in 2001 was not as intense as the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the religious elite of the MOC-OA and the IFC did not show any readiness for religious dialogue and cooperation in the post-conflict period in R. of North Macedonia. In contrast, the religious organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last few years have been intensively cooperating and fighting together against religious and ethnic intolerance in a state that is maximally divided on all socio-political and cultural grounds. We can conclude that religious tolerance among the largest religious organizations in North Macedonia has the following characteristics:

- There is a practical tolerance,
- There is no dogmatic tolerance,
- There is a dosing tolerance,
- There is a declarative tolerance,
- Religious tolerance is a condition for an expected entrance of R. of North Macedonia within the EU and NATO structures,
- The religious tolerance has been directly related to the democratization of the Macedonian society.

Now the question is why this is so. In order to give a deeper assessment of the practical operation of the MOC-OA, the position of the Orthodox ecumenical authority on this issue should be taken into consideration. Because the Synod of the MOC-OA does not act in isolation, it is in collusion with other Orthodox churches and in particular with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Russian Orthodox Church, and even the Greek Orthodox Church (because most of the Macedonian bishops were ordained to Mount Athos). In the name of Orthodoxy the MOC-OA takes into account the view that military conflicts are a bad phenomenon to be condemned for violating God's Commandments. However, the Church is aware that in the present circumstances violence cannot be avoided in certain situations. That is why violence is endorsed in such situations. That is why certain bishops such as Agathangel, Pimen and Peter often say that if religion was to be separated from politics it would be fruitless and politics will become heartless and selfish. We can therefore conclude that the processes of secularization and desecularization in North Macedonia are between Nietzsche's „God is dead” and Dostoyevsky's „If there is no God, then everything is permissible” (Bogomilova 2005).

Conclusion

Today, religion often feeds nationalism or nationalist aspirations. Occasionally it is captured by them. Ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia, for example, is organized more along religious than along other lines. This is not because the Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians are particularly religious people, but because their formal religious allegiances have become the only salient division between them. Serbian identity is historically tied to Eastern Orthodoxy, Croatian identity to Roman Catholicism, and Bosnians identity to Islam (McGuire 2002). The 2001 conflict in Macedonia had similar characteristics. According to the influence of internal and external factor, Macedonian and Albanian ethnic collectivities are developing

as independent and clearly distinct communities, which stress their difference of positions with the growing clarity. With unnoticeable intensity, the religious collectivities practice mutual exclusion, closure, self-sufficiency, ignorance and indifference to other confessions, which necessarily leads to further disintegration of the confessional community, which does not open possibilities to overcome opposition between them, but instead contributes to growing radicalization (Цацаноска 2002).

Islam and Christianity are part of the Eastern faiths, but they do not exclude each other. Judaism, Christianity and Islam use different names for same God. Probably, that is because they want to show and prove their difference. But, also they allow young believers of different religions to pray and confess in the same Holy Temple. Unbelievably, problems appear when internal misunderstandings and conflicts occur inside these religious and ethnic communities. Due to economic, political, social and cultural reasons, problems and difficulties that cannot be solved inside the community do appear. In that moment as a kind of rule, they seek for the scapegoat. Who would that be? Certainly, in these cases, they are searching for the victim in someone from the members of an ethnic community that is near them. In that way real reasons for social crises are successfully hidden and also dislocates the attention of its members who are really guilty and should be expelled and punished. Therefore, highly accepted maxim is the one that says that one, who cannot converse, humanly with the believer of its own religion, would be even less able to do it with the member of another faith.

The Orthodox Church and the Orthodox state act according to an agreement, they disillusion any danger that might endanger the world order that was granted by God, no matter if this danger comes from internal or external emperor's enemies or from the blasting effects of the church heresy (Остроропски 1969). This union between the saint and the worldliness has been established in order to retain the social order. However, in the modern states, besides the dominant religion i.e. religion of the majority, there are also other religions of the minor ethnic groups. Therefore, mutual perseverance and tolerance are extremely important. It enables them to exist one by another, maintaining their mutual balance and limiting them.

While on the level of religion there are some common traits and similar scale of values in terms of human life (peace among people, respect for family and property) based on which rules can be established for coexistence of people with different religious affiliation (if they stick to the teachings of their faith), on the level of religious organizations that follow the logic of their interests we can easily observe sources of conflicts. Religious organizations have their own worldly interests and pursuit of power, especially in relation to other groups or religions. Following these

interests and goals, they estimate the position of their group over the others. Based on the estimates and the interest of preserving the identity and the participation in the power, sometimes religious teachings and often sermons and actions of priests encourage and incite aggression and conflicts over secular interests. Therefore, the two largest religious organizations in North Macedonia, MPC-OA and IFC should strive for true original religion and religiosity and prevent its ideologization and interference with earthly interests. It should be insisted especially on those features of religion that are positively correlated with the principles of tolerance, pluralism and interculturalism. But also in their sermons, they should especially strive to highlight the ethical principles and fundamental values of religions in the name of which they act, and that would reduce deviant actions in the contemporary Macedonian society.

In a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society such as North Macedonia, which is still in the process of building trust between the Albanian and Macedonian ethnicity after the 2001 conflict, it is very important the heads of the major religious communities to be careful and moderate in the statements they give to the media and the sermons for their believers, especially if those statements concern the religious “other”. Dogmatic intolerance is transmitted also as intolerance among believers regarding the religious “other”. For the development of religious and ethnic tolerance in ethnically and religiously heterogeneous societies, the proper representation of the tradition of others, inside of “our” religious and ethnic community, is especially important. In such a representation the decrease of significance or denigration of religious and cultural traditions of others should be completely avoided. To be tolerant of other cultures means to be civilized. The attitude towards the different is important for coexistence. We should learn to have a dialog, to collaborate and learn from those who are different from us.

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