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Darko Anev / Dejan Borisov / Dietmar Schon (Eds.)

Orthodoxy in Today's North Macedonia

Historical experience and current challenges

VERLAG FRIEDRICH PUSTET

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Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation between Faculties of Theology in Macedonia

Retrospect and Perspective

Aneta Jovkovska

1. Introduction

Interreligious dialogue in post-conflict societies represents a critical mechanism for reconciliation and sustainable peace-building. The Republic of North Macedonia, as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, provides a compelling case study for examining such processes within higher educational contexts. This paper systematically analyzes the development, implementation, and outcomes of interreligious cooperation initiatives between the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “St. Clement of Ohrid” in Skopje and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Skopje, spanning from 2003 to the present day. The cooperation between these institutions emerged as a response to the ethnic conflict that occurred in 2001, which, while primarily characterized by ethnic tensions between the Macedonian majority and Albanian minority, also contained underlying religious dimensions that required addressing through structured dialogue.

The socio-religious landscape of North Macedonia presents a unique context for this study. As a secular state with constitutional separation of church and state, North Macedonia nevertheless acknowledges the historical and cultural importance of religious institutions. Orthodox Christianity and Islam, representing approximately 98% of religious adherents in the country¹, maintain distinct educational systems for theological

¹ The religious landscape of North Macedonia, according to the most recent census conducted in 2021, reflects a diverse population with two predominant faiths. Orthodox Christianity remains the largest religious group, comprising 46.14% of the resident population. Islam follows as the second-largest religious community, with

training, with the Orthodox Faculty holding university affiliation while the Islamic Faculty operates independently. The convergence of ethnic and religious identities – with ethnic Macedonians predominantly identifying as Orthodox Christians and ethnic Albanians as Muslims – adds complexity to interreligious relations, making educational interventions particularly significant.

The theoretical framework for this research draws upon peace-building literature that emphasizes the role of educational institutions in transforming post-conflict societies. Religious educational institutions occupy a distinctive position in this context, as they simultaneously preserve theological traditions while potentially serving as bridges between communities. The initiatives examined in this study represent what might be termed “educational diplomacy,” wherein academic exchange becomes a vehicle for broader social reconciliation. Previous research has demonstrated that interventions targeting future religious leaders can have multiplier effects throughout communities, yet few studies have longitudinally examined the implementation and sustainability of such programs in the post-conflict countries.²

32.17% of the population identifying as Muslim. The census also revealed some interesting developments in the religious composition of the country. A significant portion of the population, 13.21%, identified themselves simply as “Christian” without specifying a denomination. This category was not present in previous censuses and may indicate a shift towards a more generalized Christian identity among some residents. Other religious groups make up smaller percentages of the population. Catholics account for 0.37% of residents, while various Protestant denominations, including Evangelical Protestant Christians (0.48%) and Evangelical Methodists (0.05%), are also present. It’s worth noting that 7.20% of the population was not directly surveyed during the census, and their data were taken from administrative sources. This group’s religious affiliations are not specified in the census results, which may slightly affect the overall religious demographics of the country. This diverse religious composition reflects North Macedonia’s rich cultural heritage and its position at the crossroads of various historical and cultural influences in the Balkan region (State Statistical Office, Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021 – first dataset [Skopje, 2022; published 30. 3. 2022], available at https://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSooptenie_en.aspx?rbtxt=146 [accessed on 10. 10. 2024]).

² Alan Smith, *Education and Peacebuilding: from ‘conflict-analysis’ to ‘conflict transformation’?* (FriEnt, 2011), available at <https://steps-for-peace.org/wp-content/uploads/education-and-peacebuilding-conflict-analysis-transformation.pdf> (accessed on 10. 10. 2024); Katrina Kester / Mary Abura / Changwoo Sohn / Eunjeong Rho, “Higher education peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies: beyond the good/bad binary”, *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development* 24/3–4

The primary research question guiding this investigation concerns the efficacy and sustainability of interreligious cooperation models between theological faculties in North Macedonia. Specific questions address the institutional frameworks supporting cooperation, pedagogical approaches employed, participant experiences, and factors influencing the sustainability of initiatives. This paper further examines how external support from non-governmental organizations and international foundations has shaped the trajectory of cooperation, and the implications of transitioning from externally funded to institutionally embedded programming.

Methodologically, this study employs documentary analysis of program reports and evaluations, supplemented by participant assessments collected during various cooperative initiatives. Particular attention is given to examining the “Bridging Religions in Macedonia” program (2003–2007), which established systematic dialogue between these institutions through lecture exchanges, institutional visits, and joint activities. The analysis extends to subsequent initiatives, including specialized projects focusing on religious education, comparative theological studies, and joint academic endeavors.

The significance of this research extends beyond the specific Macedonian context to contribute to broader understandings of how theological education can contribute to social cohesion in divided societies. By critically examining both the achievements and limitations of these initiatives, this study offers insights into sustainable models for interreligious cooperation within higher education. The findings hold relevance for policymakers, religious leaders, and educational institutions seeking to harness religious education as a positive force for social transformation while maintaining theological integrity.

(2022), 160–176; Ashley Tinker, *Peace Education: Theory and Practice* (All Azimuth, 2016), available at https://www.allazimuth.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2-Tinker-Peace-Education_All-Azimuth-Jan2016.pdf (accessed on 10. 10. 2024); Elizabeth Buckner, *Education, Equality and Peacebuilding in Conflict-Affected Contexts: A Synthesis Report* (Education, Equality and Peacebuilding in Conflict Contexts [EPPCT] 2014), available at https://educationanddevelopment.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/eepct_peacebuildingsynthesisreport.pdf (accessed on 10. 10. 2024); David R. Smock (ed.), *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: When Religion Brings Peace, Not War* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006), *Peaceworks* No. 55, available at <https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/56411337/ab1903c0-b5cf-46d6-8b68-05f8122c4f90/PWJan2006.pdf> (accessed on 4. 4. 2024).

2. Importance of interreligious dialogue in post-conflict societies

Interreligious dialogue plays a crucial role in fostering reconciliation and sustainable peace-building in post-conflict societies. This is particularly relevant in contexts where religious identities intersect with ethnic divisions, as is the case in North Macedonia. The significance of such dialogue can be understood through several key aspects:

- Conflict resolution: Interreligious dialogue serves as a mechanism for addressing underlying tensions that may have contributed to or exacerbated conflict. By creating spaces for open communication, it helps to dispel misconceptions and stereotypes that often fuel animosity between different religious groups.
- Social cohesion: In societies recovering from conflict, interreligious dialogue contributes to rebuilding social fabric by promoting mutual understanding and respect. It helps to establish common ground among diverse communities, fostering a sense of shared citizenship and collective responsibility.
- Peace building: Religious leaders and institutions often hold significant moral authority within their communities. Engaging these actors in dialogue can leverage their influence to promote peace and reconciliation at grassroots levels.
- Cultural preservation: Dialogue between religious communities can contribute to the protection and appreciation of diverse cultural heritage, which is often at risk in post-conflict settings.
- Educational reform: Interreligious dialogue can inform educational reforms, introducing “religious-ethical content that will convey the message of fruitful inter-religious dialogue and cooperation between different social groups”.³
- Addressing extremism: By promoting understanding and cooperation between religious communities, dialogue can serve as a bulwark against religious extremism and national-religious extremism, which, as the source notes, “is alien to any authentic belief in traditional religions”.⁴

³ David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter*, Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 1988, 87.

⁴ Biljana Popovska / Zhaklina Ristoska / Patrick Payet, *The Role of Interreligious and Interfaith Dialogue in the Post-Secular Society*, in: *Academicus* 16 (2017), 33–44.

- Civic engagement: Interreligious dialogue can encourage the active participation of religious communities in public life, countering the notion that religion should be confined to the private sphere.

In the context of North Macedonia, where the 2001 conflict had underlying religious dimensions, interreligious dialogue between Orthodox Christian and Muslim has been particularly important. The initiatives between the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences demonstrate the potential for educational institutions to play a pivotal role in this process, preparing future religious leaders to engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation.

3. Research objectives and significance

This study aims to analyze the development, implementation, and outcomes of interreligious cooperation initiatives between the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “St. Clement of Ohrid” in Skopje and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Skopje from 2003 to the present day. The primary research objectives are:

- To examine the institutional frameworks supporting cooperation between the two faculties.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of various pedagogical approaches employed in interfaith dialogue initiatives.
- To assess the impact of these initiatives on participants, particularly students and academic staff.
- To identify factors influencing the sustainability of interreligious cooperation programs.
- To analyze the role of external support from non-governmental organizations and international foundations in shaping the trajectory of cooperation.

The significance of this research extends beyond the specific Macedonian context, contributing to broader understandings of how theological education can foster social cohesion in divided societies. By critically examining both the achievements and limitations of these initiatives, this study offers insights into sustainable models for interreligious cooperation within higher education. The findings hold particular relevance for:

- Policymakers seeking to harness religious education as a positive force for social transformation.
- Religious leaders aiming to engage in constructive interfaith dialogue.

- Educational institutions striving to maintain theological integrity while promoting interfaith understanding.
- Researchers in the fields of peace studies, conflict resolution, and religious studies.

Moreover, this research addresses a gap in the literature by providing a longitudinal examination of interfaith cooperation programs in the Western Balkans region, offering valuable insights into the long-term effects of such initiatives on religious education and social cohesion.

3.1 Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze the interreligious cooperation initiatives between the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “St. Clement of Ohrid” and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Skopje. The research design combines qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the development, implementation, and outcomes of these initiatives from 2003 to the present.

3.2 Document analysis

Document analysis forms a crucial component of this study’s methodology. This approach involves the systematic review and evaluation of both printed and electronic materials relevant to the interreligious cooperation initiatives. The following types of documents were examined:

- Program reports: Detailed reports from initiatives such as the “Bridging Religions in Macedonia” program (2003–2007) were analyzed to understand the structure, objectives, and implementation of cooperation activities.
- Institutional records: Official documents from both faculties, including curricula, mission statements, and strategic plans, were examined to assess the institutional framework supporting interreligious cooperation.
- Participant evaluations: Feedback forms and assessments collected from students and faculty members who participated in exchange lectures, visits to religious sites, and summer camps were analyzed to gauge the impact of these activities.
- Published materials: Academic papers and conference proceedings resulting from joint initiatives were reviewed to assess the scholarly outcomes of the cooperation.

- Grant proposals and reports: Documents related to externally funded projects, such as those supported by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Ecumenical Initiative of Women, were examined to understand the role of external support in sustaining cooperation.
- Media coverage: News articles and press releases about interreligious activities were analyzed to assess public perception and the broader impact of these initiatives.

The document analysis process involved: identifying and collecting relevant documents; developing a coding scheme to categorize information; systematically reviewing and coding the documents; synthesizing the findings to identify patterns, trends, and key themes.

This method allowed for a longitudinal examination of the cooperation initiatives, providing insights into their evolution, challenges, and successes over time. The document analysis also informed the development of subsequent research methods, such as the evaluation of implemented programs and the analysis of specific activities.

3.3 Evaluation of implemented programs

The methodology incorporates a systematic evaluation of the implemented interreligious cooperation programs between the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “St. Clement of Ohrid” and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Skopje. This evaluation process focuses on assessing the effectiveness, impact, and sustainability of various initiatives from 2003 to the present. Key aspects of this evaluation include:

- Program structure analysis: Examining the design and implementation of initiatives such as the “Bridging Religions in Macedonia” program (2003–2007), assessing their objectives, activities, and organizational framework.
- Participant feedback analysis: Synthesizing and analyzing feedback collected from students and faculty members who participated in exchange lectures, visits to religious sites, and summer camps. This includes both quantitative data from evaluation forms and qualitative insights from participant testimonials.
- Comparative analysis: Comparing the outcomes of different program models and activities to identify best practices and areas for improvement in interreligious cooperation initiatives.

- Outcome mapping: Identifying and analyzing both intended and unintended outcomes of the implemented programs, with a focus on their contribution to broader social cohesion goals.

This comprehensive evaluation approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the programs' effectiveness, facilitating evidence-based recommendations for future interreligious cooperation initiatives in higher education settings.

4. Historical context

The historical context of interreligious dialogue and cooperation between theological faculties in North Macedonia is deeply rooted in the country's complex ethnic and religious landscape. North Macedonia, as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, has faced significant challenges in maintaining social cohesion and peaceful coexistence among its diverse communities since gaining independence in 1991.⁵ The simmering tensions between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians erupted into an armed conflict in early 2001.

The 2001 conflict in Macedonia had significant religious dimensions, despite being primarily characterized as an ethnic conflict between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. While the conflict's most visible aspects were ethnic, underlying religious tensions played an important role, as most ethnic Macedonians are Orthodox Christians while the majority of ethnic Albanians are Muslims. Several key religious aspects of the conflict include:

- Attacks on religious sites: During the conflict, there were reported incidents of attacks on churches and mosques, which escalated tensions and highlighted the religious divide.⁶
- Symbolic significance: Religious buildings and symbols often became targets due to their importance as markers of cultural and ethnic identity.

⁵ Ina Merdjanova / Patrice Brodeur, *Religion as a Conversation Starter: Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in the Balkans* (Continuum Advances in Religious Studies), London/New York (NY): Continuum, 2010, 56.

⁶ Gjoko Gjorgjevski, "Nurturing the Culture of Dialogue: A Macedonian Experience", *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 6 (2020), 385–412, 399.

- Post-conflict reconciliation: The religious dimension became more apparent in post-conflict reconciliation efforts, as there was a recognized need to address inter-religious relations as part of the broader peace-building process.⁷

In response to these issues, several initiatives were launched to promote interreligious dialogue and cooperation:

- The “Bridging Religions in Macedonia” program (2003–2007) established systematic dialogue between religious institutions through activities like lecture exchanges and institutional visits.⁸
- Cooperation between the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences began in 2002 as a direct response to the need for positive examples of inter-religious cooperation.
- International conferences on interreligious dialogue were organized, inspired by the late President Boris Trajkovski’s initiatives.⁹

These early steps towards interreligious cooperation laid the groundwork for more sustained efforts in the following years, establishing Macedonia as a proponent of interfaith dialogue in the region.

5. The “Bridging Religions in Macedonia” program (2003–2007)

The “Bridging Religions in Macedonia” program was a pioneering initiative launched in 2003 to foster interreligious dialogue and cooperation in post-conflict Macedonia. The initiative was designed to address the need for systematic dialogue between religious institutions, particularly focusing on the two largest religious communities in Macedonia: Orthodox Christianity and Islam.

⁷ Interreligious Dialogue in North Macedonia: The Ohrid Framework Agreement in light of the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020–2025, available at <https://europrospe.ra.org.mk/interreligious-dialogue-in-north-macedonia-the-ohrid-framework-agreement-in-light-of-the-eu-anti-racism-action-plan-2020-2025/> (accessed on 5. 4. 2024).

⁸ Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation (MCIC), Bridging Religions in Macedonia, available at <https://mcms.mk/en/our-work/programmes/107-megureligiska-sorabotka-vo-makedonija.html> (accessed on 5. 4. 2024).

⁹ Paul B. Mojzes, “Fourth World Conference on Dialogue among Religions and Civilizations in Macedonia 2016”, Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, Vol. 37, No. 1, Article 4 (2017), available at <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol37/iss1/4> (accessed on 4. 4. 2024).

5.1 Program structure and objectives

The “Bridging Religions in Macedonia” program was structured as a collaborative effort between multiple stakeholders. It was implemented by the Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation (MCIC) in partnership with the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “St. Clement of Ohrid” in Skopje, the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Skopje, and five religious communities (Macedonian Orthodox Church, Islamic Religious Community, Catholic Church, United Methodist Church, and Jewish Community). Financial support for the program came from the Danish and Norwegian governments, in cooperation with Danish Church Assistance (DCA) and Norwegian Church Assistance.¹⁰ The program’s primary objectives were:

- To increase understanding among religious communities in Macedonia.
- To educate the Macedonian public about religious diversity.
- To establish systematic dialogue between religious institutions.
- To target students and professors from theological institutions, recognizing their potential role in promoting peace and respect for differences.¹¹

The program established offices at both the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, each staffed by a part-time graduate theologian to coordinate activities. This structure ensured consistent implementation and facilitated regular interaction between the two institutions.

By focusing on future religious leaders and educators, the program aimed to create a lasting impact on interreligious relations in Macedonia. The structure and objectives of the “Bridging Religions in Macedonia” program reflected a comprehensive approach to fostering dialogue and understanding between different religious communities in a post-conflict society.

¹⁰ Gjorgjevski, *Nurturing the Culture of Dialogue*, 403.

¹¹ John Beauclerk / Neda Maleska-Sacmaroska / Milan Gjorgjevik, *Bridging Religions in Macedonia (PRM) 2003–2004: Final Report of the External Evaluation* (INTRAC, November 2004), available at <https://mcms.mk/images/evaluations/final-report-of-the-external-evaluation-2004.pdf> (accessed on 4. 4. 2024).

5.2 Key activities: lecture exchanges, institutional visits, joint projects

The “Bridging Religions in Macedonia” program implemented several key activities to foster interreligious dialogue and cooperation:

- Exchange lectures: Professors from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences delivered lectures at each other’s institutions. This initiative allowed students to learn directly from experts of different faiths, promoting mutual understanding. The exchange lectures were well-received by both students and faculty, with the number of lectures gradually increasing over time.
- Institutional visits: Students and faculty members participated in visits to each other’s educational establishments. These visits provided opportunities for direct interaction and helped break down stereotypes. Participants reported that these visits were instrumental in changing preconceptions and fostering friendships across religious divides.
- Religious site visits: The program organized visits to various religious objects and services. These experiences allowed participants to gain firsthand knowledge of different religious practices and cultural traditions. Many participants noted that these visits enriched their spiritual and cultural lives.
- Summer camps: Interfaith summer camps were organized, combining learning through visiting speakers with opportunities for students to build friendships across religious boundaries. These camps were praised for their effectiveness in bringing people from different religions closer together.
- International study trips: The program facilitated visits to positive examples of interfaith cooperation abroad.¹²

These activities were designed to create systematic dialogue between religious institutions and promote mutual understanding. The program’s evaluation indicated that these “relatively simple” interventions were particularly effective in building confidence and fostering cooperation between different religious communities in Macedonia.¹³

¹² Ibid., 31–32.

¹³ Xhemail Çupi, *The Contribution of Religious Communities in Promoting Coexistence Between Different Ethnicity, Cultures, and Beliefs*, in: *Republic of North Macedonia Review* (2023), 162–167.

6. Post-2007 initiatives

The period following 2007 saw continued efforts to foster interreligious dialogue and cooperation in North Macedonia, building upon the foundations laid by earlier programs such as “Bridging Religions in Macedonia” (2003–2007). These initiatives aimed to address the evolving challenges in maintaining interfaith harmony and promoting mutual understanding in a diverse religious landscape.

6.1 Role of external organizations (e.g., Konrad Adenauer Foundation)

External organizations have significantly contributed to fostering interreligious dialogue and cooperation in North Macedonia, particularly in the post-2007 period. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) has demonstrated a long-term commitment to promoting interfaith understanding and cooperation.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation gained the trust of the management of both faculties to organize an annual interfaith dialogue workshop. This workshop involved students and professors from both the Orthodox and Islamic faculties, featuring lectures by professors from both institutions followed by discussions on the lecture topics, in which students actively participated.

Within the framework of cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, interreligious classes were also conducted in 2018 – one at each of the two faculties – attended by students from both the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences. This cooperation continues to the present day, with potential for future continuation, as it is well-received by both the students and teaching staff of both faculties.¹⁴

The Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups offered the latest opportunity for cooperation between the facul-

¹⁴ Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *Interreligious Classroom*, published on 20.12.2017, available at <https://www.kas.de/veranstaltungsberichte/detail/-/content/interreligioeseklassenzimmer-v1> (accessed on 11.1.2025); Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *Interreligious Classroom*, Foundation Office North Macedonia, published on 26.11.2024, available at <https://www.kas.de/en/web/nordmazedonien/veranstaltungsberichte/detail/-/content/interreligious-classroom-7> (accessed on 11.1.2025).

ties. On their initiative, at the end of 2023, a friendship group was established between the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Religious Community. Students and professors from both faculties are members of this friendship group. However, we are still awaiting the logistics and activities that will be undertaken within the framework of this initiative.¹⁵

However, it is important to note that while external support has been crucial, there are potential limitations to this approach. As observed in the case of the Council for Interfaith Cooperation, meetings between religious communities often occurred with external encouragement rather than internal initiative, raising questions about the sustainability of such efforts without continuous external support.¹⁶ There is a recognized need for greater institutionalization of these efforts within the religious communities themselves to ensure long-term sustainability.

6.2 Individual faculty-led projects and activities

Recognizing the importance of interreligious cooperation, individual professors from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology have initiated several projects in recent years:

- A 2011 study visit to the Netherlands for students and professors from both the Orthodox and Islamic faculties, focusing on researching religious life. This project was authored by Dr. Aneta Jovkovska and financially supported by the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women.
- Joint visits to religious sites for students and professors from both faculties in 2012 and 2019. The 2012 visit was organized by Dr. Aneta Jovkovska with financial support from the Foundation Ecumenical Initiative of Women, while the 2019 visit was led by Biljana Petkovska, M.Sc., also supported by the Ecumenical Initiative of Women from Croatia.
- Publication of “The Faith of Women in the Holy Scriptures” in 2014, a comparative study co-authored by Dr. Aneta Jovkovska and Hafsa

¹⁵ Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups, A ‘Friendship Group’ was formed between MPC-OA and IVZ, available at <https://www.kovz.gov.mk/ns-newsarticle-se-formirase-grupata-na-prijateljstvo-pomegu-mpc-oa-i-ivz.nsp> (accessed on 10. 1. 2025).

¹⁶ Čupi, *The Contribution of Religious Communities*, 165.

- Xemali M.Sc. This electronic book, published in Macedonian and Albanian, examines women mentioned in the Bible and the Quran.¹⁷
- An Interreligious Forum of Women Theologians in 2019, bringing together female theologians from various Christian denominations in North Macedonia. This event was organized by Biljana Petkovska with financial support from the Ecumenical Initiative of Women from Croatia.
 - Annual guest lectures on Islam in the history of religions classes at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, provided on a volunteer basis.
 - Participation of Islamic Sciences professors in academic events organized by the Orthodox Theology Faculty, such as the 2018 scientific debate on Politics and Religion and the 2019 Saint Clement's Conference.

These faculty-led initiatives demonstrate a grassroots commitment to interfaith dialogue, complementing the efforts of external organizations. They highlight the potential for sustainable cooperation when driven by internal motivation within academic institutions.

7. Analysis of cooperation models

The analysis of cooperation models between the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “St. Clement of Ohrid” and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Skopje provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of various approaches to fostering interreligious dialogue and understanding. This examination is crucial for identifying best practices and areas for improvement in interfaith initiatives within higher education settings.

7.1 Effectiveness of different approaches

The effectiveness of various approaches to interreligious cooperation can be assessed through the outcomes and participant feedback from different initiatives:

¹⁷ Aco Girevski, In Search of a Virtuous Woman (Review of the book, *The Faith of Women in the Holy Scriptures*, by theologians Aneta Jovkowska and Hafsa Xhemali), Faculty of Orthodox Theology “St. Clement of Ohrid” – Skopje, available at <https://pbf.edu.mk/verata-na-zenite-od-svetite-spisi/> (accessed on 18. 11. 2024).

- Exchange lectures: This approach proved highly effective in promoting mutual understanding. Students appreciated learning about other faiths directly from experts, while lecturers valued the opportunity to engage with counterparts. The steady extension of exchange lectures over time indicates growing acceptance and effectiveness of this initiative.¹⁸
- Institutional visits: These visits were particularly impactful in breaking down stereotypes and fostering personal connections across religious divides. Participants reported that these experiences helped “ease up the hatred between the Macedonians and Albanians” and provided opportunities to learn about each other’s laws and customs.¹⁹
- Religious site visits: These experiences enriched participants’ spiritual and cultural lives, helping to “draw the people closer and raise the level of understanding and communication”. Such visits were especially valuable in a country where interfaith exposure is limited.²⁰
- Summer camps: The combination of learning through visiting speakers and opportunities for building friendships across religious boundaries made summer camps highly effective. Participants noted that these experiences could help “change the mentality and eliminate fanaticism”.²¹
- Joint academic projects: Collaborative efforts, such as the co-authored book “The Faith of Women in the Holy Scriptures,” demonstrate the potential for sustained academic cooperation. Such projects provide a platform for in-depth exploration of shared themes and differences.
- Workshops and conferences: Annual interfaith dialogue workshops organized by external partners like the Konrad Adenauer Foundation have been well-received by students and faculty, indicating the effectiveness of structured dialogue sessions.

The analysis suggests that approaches combining personal interaction, academic exchange, and experiential learning tend to be most effective in fostering interreligious understanding and cooperation. However, the sustainability of these initiatives remains a challenge, particularly when reliant on external funding and support.

¹⁸ Beauclerk/Maleska-Sacmaroska/Gjorgjevik, *Bridging Religions in Macedonia (PRM) 2003–2004: Final Report*, 31–32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

7.2 Factors influencing sustainability

Several key factors influence the sustainability of interreligious cooperation initiatives between the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in North Macedonia:

- Institutional commitment: The level of proactive engagement from faculty leadership significantly impacts the longevity of cooperation programs. Sustained commitment from both institutions is crucial for institutionalizing activities and ensuring their continuity.
- Financial resources: The availability of funding plays a critical role in sustaining cooperation. The cessation of the “Bridging Religions in Macedonia” program in 2007 led to a reduction in activities due to limited financial resources from faculty budgets. This highlights the need for dedicated funding streams to support ongoing initiatives.
- External support: Organizations like the Konrad Adenauer Foundation have been instrumental in maintaining interfaith dialogue workshops when institutional support waned. While external support can be beneficial, over-reliance may hinder long-term sustainability if initiatives are not internalized by the institutions themselves.
- Student engagement: Involving students more actively in creating and implementing interfaith activities can enhance sustainability. Providing small grants for student-led interfaith projects could foster ownership and ensure continuity.
- Curriculum integration: Incorporating interfaith dialogue and cooperation into the regular curriculum of both faculties could ensure its sustainability. For instance, including subjects like diaconia and social-humanitarian work in the curriculum could provide a foundation for ongoing cooperation.
- Joint academic outputs: Collaborative research and publications by professors and students from both faculties can create lasting partnerships and contribute to the sustainability of interfaith cooperation.²²
- Addressing contemporary challenges: Focusing on common issues faced by both religious communities, such as responding to secularism or addressing social problems, can provide ongoing relevance and motivation for sustained cooperation.

²² Aneta Jovkovska / Gjoko Gjorgievski, “Christianity and Islam in the Context of Contemporary Culture: New Perspectives on Dialogue and Mutual Understanding”, *Religious Dialogue and Cooperation*, No. 3/2022, Vol. III (Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje, 2022), 52–60.



- Legal and policy framework: A legal framework, which permits state funding for higher education institutions with religious affiliations, can potentially support sustainable interfaith initiatives.
- Cultural and social context: The multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of North Macedonian society underscores the ongoing need for interfaith dialogue, potentially supporting the sustainability of such initiatives.
- Evaluation and adaptation: Regular assessment of the impact and effectiveness of cooperation programs, coupled with the willingness to adapt approaches based on feedback, can contribute to their long-term sustainability.

Addressing these factors comprehensively can help ensure the sustainability of interreligious cooperation initiatives between the theological faculties in North Macedonia, contributing to broader social cohesion and interfaith understanding.

8. Impact on students and academic staff

The interreligious cooperation initiatives between the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “St. Clement of Ohrid” and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Skopje have significantly impacted both students and academic staff. These programs have enhanced mutual understanding, fostered personal connections, and influenced religious education in North Macedonia.

8.1 Increased mutual understanding

Participants reported gaining deeper insights into other faiths. As one student noted: “The fact that I have learnt more about the religion and culture of the other people enriches my spiritual and cultural life”.²³ Institutional visits helped dispel misconceptions; a student remarked: “No Christian would go to the Faculty of Islamic Studies or the Islamic High School if there were no visits of this type [...]. They would continue to have the wrong idea about them”.²⁴ Participants identified shared values, fostering an environment conducive to open dialogue and intercultural communication, which contributes to broader societal cohesion.

²³ John Beauclerk et al., *Selected Participant Assessments of the Exposure Activities*, 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

8.2 Building personal connections

Initiatives like summer camps facilitated friendship formation across religious divides. A participant noted: “The summer camp was the right thing for bringing people belonging to different religions closer”.²⁵ Institutional visits challenged stereotypes, fostering personal relationships. A student stated: “Both schools should cooperate, because we could learn a lot from each other, thus become conscious that we could become friends, not antagonists”.²⁶ These connections have the potential to improve multi-ethnic relations and reduce hatred.

8.3 Long-term effects on religious education

These initiatives have led to curriculum enhancements, pedagogical innovations, and academic collaborations. The inclusion of interfaith dialogue in curricula and discussions on contemporary societal issues has made religious education more relevant and socially engaged. Students developed greater interfaith competence, preparing them for leadership roles in a diverse society. As one participant noted: “With the experience gained at this summer camp I could help in changing the mentality and eliminating fanaticism”.²⁷

9. Future perspectives

The interreligious cooperation initiatives between the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “St. Clement of Ohrid” and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in North Macedonia have demonstrated significant potential for fostering mutual understanding and dialogue. However, to ensure the sustainability and expansion of these efforts, it is crucial to consider future perspectives and strategies. This chapter examines recommendations for deepening cooperation, potential new structures and activities, and opportunities for joint academic and research projects.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

9.1 Recommendations for deepening cooperation

To enhance and sustain interreligious cooperation between the theological faculties, several key recommendations emerge:

- Institutionalization of activities: There is a need to encourage faculty management to be more proactive in institutionalizing cooperative activities, moving beyond ad hoc initiatives.
- Student engagement: Providing small grants for interfaith projects led by interested young people from within and beyond the faculties could foster greater student involvement and ownership.
- Curriculum integration: Including diaconia and social-humanitarian subjects within the faculty curriculum could ensure long-term sustainability of interreligious cooperation.
- Joint publishing activities: Encouraging co-authorship of scientific papers by professors and students from both faculties and jointly editing publications could strengthen academic collaboration.
- Addressing contemporary challenges: Focusing on common issues such as protecting traditional moral norms, countering aggressive secularism, and addressing social problems could provide relevant topics for ongoing dialogue.
- Advocacy in education: Jointly advocating for the inclusion of religious-ethical content in broader educational programs could promote social cohesion and cultural progress.
- Financial sustainability: Encouraging religious communities to finance cooperation activities themselves, rather than relying solely on NGO support, could move the cooperation to an advanced level

These recommendations aim to deepen and sustain interreligious cooperation, ensuring its relevance and effectiveness in the evolving social and academic landscape of North Macedonia.

9.2 Potential new structures and activities

To enhance and expand interreligious cooperation between the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in North Macedonia, several potential new structures and activities can be considered:

- Interfaith Student Council: Establishing a joint student-led council with representatives from both faculties to plan and implement interfaith activities. This council could organize regular dialogue sessions, community service projects, and cultural events.

- Joint Research Center: Creating a collaborative research center focused on comparative religious studies and interfaith dialogue. This center could facilitate joint academic projects, publications, and conferences.
- Interfaith Leadership Program: Developing a certificate or minor program in interfaith leadership, open to students from both faculties. This program could include courses on religious literacy, dialogue facilitation, and community engagement.
- Digital Interfaith Platform: Launching an online platform for virtual interfaith discussions, webinars, and resource sharing. This could expand participation and facilitate ongoing dialogue beyond physical meetings.
- Interfaith Service-Learning Initiative: Implementing a joint service-learning program where students from both faculties work together on community projects, applying their religious values to address social issues.
- Faculty Exchange Program: Establishing a formal faculty exchange program to promote cross-pollination of ideas and teaching methods between the two institutions.
- Joint Curriculum Development: Collaborating on the development of courses or modules that explore interfaith themes and can be offered at both faculties.
- Interfaith Conflict Resolution Center: Establishing a center dedicated to training students and faculty in interfaith conflict resolution techniques, which could also serve the broader community.

These new structures and activities aim to institutionalize interfaith cooperation, promote student engagement, and create sustainable platforms for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between the two faculties.

10. Conclusion

This study examines the development and outcomes of interreligious cooperation initiatives between the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in North Macedonia from 2003 to the present. The “Bridging Religions in Macedonia” program successfully established systematic dialogue, leading to increased mutual understanding and personal connections across religious divides. However, financial

constraints have challenged sustainability, with activities reducing in frequency after externally funded programs concluded.

Despite these challenges, individual faculty-led projects and external organizations have maintained interfaith engagement. There is a recognized need for greater institutionalization of interfaith cooperation within faculties' structures and curricula to ensure long-term sustainability. Balancing religious integrity with interfaith dialogue remains a challenge, requiring careful navigation of doctrinal differences while fostering mutual respect and understanding.

The study highlights the importance of integrating interfaith dialogue into theological faculties' curricula and promoting institutional commitment. Student engagement through project opportunities and addressing contemporary challenges are crucial for sustainability. Interfaith dialogue in higher education should incorporate interdisciplinary perspectives and balance academic rigor with practical application.

These initiatives have broader implications for social cohesion in North Macedonia, contributing to conflict prevention, cultural bridge-building, and addressing societal challenges. They help counter extremism and advocate for constructive religious participation in public life. Overall, interreligious cooperation in higher education holds significant potential for fostering peaceful coexistence in North Macedonia's diverse society.

Future perspectives include establishing a Joint Research Center, Interfaith Leadership Program, Digital Interfaith Platform, Interfaith Service-Learning Initiative, Faculty Exchange Program, Joint Curriculum Development, and Interfaith Conflict Resolution Center. These new structures aim to institutionalize interfaith cooperation, promote student engagement, and create sustainable platforms for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between the faculties.