Religion and culture between nationalism and democracy: interreligious connections for peacebuilding in the Balkans

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RELIGION AND CULTURE BETWEEN NATIONALISM AND DEMOCRACY: INTERRELIGIOUS CONNECTIONS FOR PEACEBUILDING IN THE BALKANS

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Abstract

The Balkans have been associated with ideology, political culture, democratization or interreligious dialogue for peacebuilding. The Carpato-Balkanic area is linked to major political and social changes, whose elements can be found in its history. Under these circumstances, the nationalism and the Christian Orthodox Churches have been considered as the fundamental characteristics of Balkan societies, through which culture and religion preserve the national integrity. Simultaneously, the Balkans shows a problem of globalisation of their cultural history and religious civilization, often used as an instrument for the accomplishment of political achievements. A controversial vision on political culture and religious democratization emerged after the communist collapse in the modern Balkans. Consequently, religious culture dialogue or interreligious dialogue for peacebuilding mediates the interhuman relations and the social cohesion, integrating cultural and religious identities into intergroup dialogue.

Keywords: religion, culture, Balkans, interreligious, peacebuilding, nationalism, democracy, ideology.

Introduction

The reconceptualising of the Balkans has been constantly associated with the realm of ideology, political culture and democratization or interreligious dialogue for peace building. Additionally, the end of the Cold War political bi-polarization on a global scale and the resurgence of various political and social changes significantly affected the cultural and religious determinations of the new world. Consequently, the Carpato-Balkanic region is linked to major political and social changes, whose characteristics can be identified in its history and actuality. In this context, the nationalism and the Christian Orthodox Churches have been considered as the quintessential features of Balkan societies and as the fundamental institutional frameworks through which culture and religion are to be exposed in countries like Romania and Bulgaria. In these

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places, cultural life not only reflected the religious attitudes, though it has been utilized as a powerful symbol conveniently located in the process of creating a cultivated civilization, keeping active the Christian values and traditions or understanding the new challenges of the contemporary globalization process.

In other terms, the strong connection between religion and culture in our highly politicized world becomes an important source of motivation and preservation of national integrity. In the recent history of the interreligious dialogue, the human communication between religious institutions (the Church) and culture helped mutual understanding and cooperation between different people who self-identify religiously. On these basic assumptions, the best exemplary practices of cultural and religious dialogue in the Carpato-Balkanic region have been represented when a top-down analysis has been complemented and mixed with interactions between mid-level clergy and laity from the different religious communities, including in particular rural areas or women and youth from the urban areas. In the end, leaders of the religious communities, however important the hierarchical structures are, cannot integrate cultural changes without systematic actions to cooperate with the laity.

The Ideological Realm of the Cultural and Religious Dialogue

Firstly, theoretically speaking, the cultural religion or the cultural and religious dialogue is an actual consequence of the religious pluralism, because we have to admit that in Romania and Bulgaria all the three monotheisms and the fundamental Christian Orthodox beliefs reflected their own attitudes since many centuries ago. This reality conducted to the necessity to understand and respect multiple traditions, to communicate and improve mutual recognition, thereby contributing to peacebuilding and to overcoming common challenges of the political and social history. Clearly, the plurality of religious and cultural identities is not a source of social conflict in the Carpato-Balkanic space. Nevertheless, after four decades of atheistic ideology created and promoted by the communist regimes, intolerance is still present within religious communities and cultural circles in post-communist countries, especially in the forms of dogmatism and fanaticism.

Secondly, the cultural religion is inherently related to the principles of toleration and traditional values. The social actors entertain and respect the value of their differences, trying to promote a positive attitude toward dialogue and to undermine a position of pragmatic non-interference with difference or negative tolerance.

Thirdly, an important obstacle to cultural and religious dialogue remains the inequality in social power and influence (for instance, majority versus minority religions, or rich institutional structures – the Clergy – and poor
communities – the Laity) and the construction of national and cultural identity around religious identification which can also involves politics.

Even though, the Balkan differences cannot simply define the epiphenomena of power politics, otherwise their specific characteristics would have vanished. In this respect, the ideological antagonisms in the Balkans can be represented as virtually mono-dimensional, expressed by the domination of nationalist ideology which is often perceived as religious culture or interreligious dialogue. The Carpato-Balkanic region and the fundamental relations between religion and its institutions, on one side, and various domains of life (political power, social life, economy and culture) on the other side, are conceived as inextricably intertwined in a concrete duality that accounts for nationalism – ordering cultural and religious principle of the history and actuality of the region – and its connections to the specific features that characterize Balkan societies: authoritarianism, the lack of democratic culture and institutions, violence, dogmatism and interreligious dialogue. In the same time, the Balkans display a period of globalization of their cultural history and religious civilization, sometimes used as an instrument for the accomplishment of political achievements. Occasionally, the past still dominates the present reality or the efforts towards liberation and reconciliation.

Political Culture and Religious Democratization in the Modern Balkans

A controversial approach on political culture and religious democratization emerged after the communist collapse in the modern Carpato-Balkanic region. More specifically, the reasons for this failure were identified in the behaviourial and subjectivist civic models which were described as being powerless in predicting and explaining the emergence of democratic values and cultural interreligious dialogue in the Communist Bloc after 1987. These practices underestimated the impact of political cultures and interreligious dialogue which didn’t follow the dominant civic culture model, and they were, consequently, ill-equipped to recognize the concrete expression of cultural and religious nationalism. Similarly, the political passiveness of the population towards the political system and their increasing interest towards cultural life and religious attitudes were misinterpreted, because it was considered a retreat from politics rather than a defence mechanism of the democratic values and traditions. As a result, competing political cultures were not considered at all and religious approaches in cultural attitudes or beliefs interacting in communist societies were misunderstood.

The development of different political cultures occurred in spite of the absence of autonomous institutions and authentic civil society. In fact, the communism strongly controlled the public life and radically transformed the
Social and economic structures of these societies, still they constantly situated themselves in search of new paradigms of political and cultural representations, which increasingly explain why complementary values as traditional culture and historical religion emerged so quickly after the communist collapse.

For instance, satellite states like Romania and Bulgaria achieved great economic growth with high industrial employment between the 1950s and 1970s, whose changes produces radical social and cultural changes as well: the urban population rose because the migration from the countryside was encouraged in order to exploit natural resources or to keep strict control over the population from small towns and villages, disposed to record traditional values. Accordingly, an important number of people had the opportunity to enter higher education, with illiteracy becoming drastically reduced from the 1950s. Simultaneously, this process unlocked the cultural and religious dialogue, despite the political dictatorship and the institutional censorship.

Under these circumstances, the way that historical actuality was transmitted in the Balkans was mediated during communist rule by its perception of traditional values and its ideological commitments, inhibited but not abolished in the state-building experience. Culturally, the values transformation accompanied the ideological inflexibility of the dictatorship, which identified the “capitalist enemy” inside specific political cultures promoting “otherness” or a particular set of attitudes different than the rigid cultural mentality sustained by the ideological homogeneity. We may mention the cases of the “indigenization” of Marxism introduced by Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania and of the Soviet orthodoxy and criticism towards Titoism in Bulgaria. In other words, despite multiple repressive evolutions, a new intellectual, cultural and religious elite emerged in the development of an underground society, despite its limited membership, anxious to identity, preserve and communicate its traditional values and attentive to Western considerations.

The set of instruments for socio-cultural and religious communication differed as well, being sustained by the development of international contacts, receptiveness towards Westerns trends, the augmentation of social and political structures, and in the end – particularly in the Bulgarian and Romanian cases – by the experience of the Soviet perestroika. In terms of religion, the Council of Religious Affairs of the Soviet Union incarnated a powerful state body that was officially intended to represent a connection between the state and the religious groups, in the Communist Bloc. Even though, it was exercising very extensive supervisory functions and it widely interfered in the appointment of the Clergy. In addition, the communist approach to religious manifestations was compulsory attached to an atheistic education and research, organized in several units in a sort of “scientific atheism”. This phenomenon created a broad network of Institutes of Scientific Atheism engaged in study, interviews and lectures, involving both cultural and economical effects: the new
atheist intellectuals had to become the “new clergy of the nation”, because, if abandoned, thousands workers would have been unemployed.

In the same time, religion appealed to traditional, cultural values, like identity and solidarity, in an attempt to interact with political parties and political cultures. In order to determine again the social thinking, official religious institutions sought to establish new bonds with state, population and territory. This approach was particularly observed in the case of Orthodox Christianity, contributing significantly to the process of historical and cultural re-legitimation and introducing, one more time, the holy and transcendental dimension of the nationalism.

Also, traditional values as national identity and social solidarity were politically encouraged apart from religion: the zadruga tradition in Bulgaria and sat in Romania, both expressing the rural patriarchal community, were utilized by the communist collectivism to stimulate the regime through loyalty and pride. However, the nationalism was later exploited for mass mobilization against minorities – for example against Romanies, Turks and Hungarians in Romania and Bulgaria – or in order to deny modern and Western economic practices, as privatization. Nevertheless, the end of communism did not necessarily imply the end of religious and cultural discrimination, but it rather involved new ideologies emerged from a severe nationalist political culture. Hence, the display of national symbols in the post-communist democratization.

For example, The Monument to 1300 Years of Bulgaria, also known as The Founders of the Bulgarian State Monument, was built in 1981 on a plateau above the city of Shumen, Bulgaria, to commemorate the 1300th anniversary of the First Bulgarian Empire. Unfortunately, the symbol of a nation-state continuity cannot be shared by all the citizens of the country, especially when it was built in a mixed area with large minorities of Turks and Romanies, and becoming, consequently, a source of social suspicions and cultural disloyalties.

Similarly, the Vasil Levki’s festival, celebrating the Bulgarian revolutionary and national hero of Bulgaria, who was hanged by Turks, does not encourage the principles of freedom and cohabitation between Turkish and Slavic populations.

In summary, the cultural and religious differences have been increased in the Balkans in the last decades, though they are not the basis of a typical patriarchal and dualistic antagonism, as suggested by the nationalist political culture. On the contrary, they persist within social groups and in specific individuals in order to create connections and to express various multi-cultural attitudes.

Religious Culture Dialogue for Peacebuilding in the Balkans

Religious culture dialogue or interreligious dialogue for peacebuilding constitutes a significant approach that situates the practice of communication
and social interactions in the center of political, social, cultural and religious reconciliation. Furthermore, it mediates the interhuman relations and enhances the social cohesion between several different agents, recognizing and integrating cultural and religious identities into intergroup dialogue, both locally and globally.

In this context, the meaning of the “religious culture” implies an emergent, advanced and adaptive structure of cultural and religious symbols (theories, myths, rituals, social practices, traditions, intellectual and ethical values) that configures the network of social and individual thinking in order to discover, record and transmit common acts. Moreover, the interreligious character is significantly linked to the social interactions between distinct human beings having particular cultural lives and religious attitudes, to overcome conflictual issues and to identify identical, fundamental roots.

Concerning the Carpato-Balkanic space, the development of a political, social and academic study of religions and culture was integrated in the secularization process which accompanied the modernization and democratization of societies after the fall of the Communist Bloc. In this respect, interreligious dialogue in the Balkans cannot be understood excepting historical, economic, social and political circumstances in which it has taken place. The coexistence of the different faith communities – Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Islam and Judaism – has created various manners of cultural and religious communication and a certain level of tolerance between them.

Particularly, in the Romanian and Bulgarian case, the fall of communism revealed a type of religious culture situated between theological and sociological polemics. The former, based on their new re-gained, traditional authority, claimed that the influence of religion in society should be performed exclusively by the Christian Orthodox theology, while the latter affirmed that the religious culture dialogue was insignificant in the circumstances of a secularized Romanian and Bulgarian societies. These communication problems are reflected even in the choice of names for the researched subject, from “Orthodox theology” to “sociology of religion”. Also, in Bulgaria, the creation of an independent nation state in 1878 provided important repressive actions against religious and ethnic minorities; in Romania too, the situation was characterized by intra-Christian tensions, mostly ethnically represented. This situation is generalizable to the majority of Eastern Europe societies, where traditional theologies are generically complementary with non-confessional, cultural approaches. Generally, the close interaction between religion and culture or the religious culture dialogue in the Balkans persisted and became a key element of the nations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Religious demography</th>
<th>Law on religion</th>
<th>Restitution of religious communities’ property</th>
<th>Confessional religious education in public schools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>7.7 million &lt;br&gt;82.64% Orthodox&lt;br&gt;12.2% Muslims (7.7% Alevi) &lt;br&gt;Less than 1% Catholics (including Eastern rite Catholics) &lt;br&gt;Less than 1% Protestants</td>
<td>Denomination Act 2002</td>
<td>Slow and partial Restitution Law 1992</td>
<td>Optional classes introduced in 1997 for the Orthodox children and in 2000 for the Muslim children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>22 million &lt;br&gt;86.8% Orthodox&lt;br&gt;4.7% Roman Catholics &lt;br&gt;1% Greek Catholics &lt;br&gt;Frequent instances of anti-Semitism. Law to combat anti-Semitism (2006).</td>
<td>No state religion, yet the Romanian Orthodox Church enjoys a de facto privileged position. Three-tier system of recognition: - recognized religions - religious associations - religious groups</td>
<td>Slow and partial Implementation of Law 501/2002 (religious property) began late, and is proceeding slowly. Greek Catholic Church claims remain unresolved</td>
<td>Optional classes introduced 1990. In 1995 classes were made mandatory for primary schools and in 1997 for all grades. Recognized denominations allowed to offer religion classes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The statistical data are based mainly on *International Religious Freedom Reports 2008*, with small additions based on other sources, such as national censuses. Ina Merdjanova, Patrice Brodeur, *Religion as a Conversation Starter (Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in the Balkans)*, Continuum International Publishing Group, London, 2009.

In the Bulgarian case, all cultural and religious communities were severely oppressed under the Communist Bloc. Finally, after its abolishment, the society started to reconstruct and reorganize its institutional and spiritual connections. Both the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community suffered several tensions and different structures.
Bulgaria does not have an individual state religion, though the Constitution designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the “traditional denomination”. In the same time, the Bulgarian state does not present the general intolerant attitude towards the new religious movements which appeared after the fall of communism, on the contrary, religious culture and communities are strongly connected, solving their own conflicts without external intervention.

As for Romania, the Romanian Orthodox Church was actively involved in the post-reconstruction of the Romanian nation and society, benefitting, consequently, from a privileged institutional and social position. During the communist time, the Orthodox Church institutions were strictly controlled by the State, even so its specific religious and cultural activities were somehow tolerated; on the contrary, the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Catholic Church supported severe repressions, the latter being abolished and obliged to integrate itself in the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1984. After the fall of communism, the relations between the Orthodox and the Greek Catholic Churches were tensioned, several church buildings and properties being still disputed. Anyway, the Romanian Orthodox community expressed their solidarity with the protest of the Hungarian Reformed community in Timișoara, when one of its religious ministers, Laszlo Tokes, was arrested by the communist authorities, just few days before the end of the Romanian dictatorship, in December 1989. Certainly, the Romanian Orthodox Church is defined as one of the major elements of the institutions-state relations, interreligious dialogue and the religious education itself being well represented in the public, secular, democratic space – Romania is the only country in the Balkanic area where the teaching of religion is mandatory for students of all grades. Additionally, Romania became the first predominantly Orthodox country to welcome the Roman pontiff with the 1999 visit of Pope John Paul II, marking a fundamental evolution in the interreligious and cultural dialogue of Orthodox-Catholic Churches.

Conclusions

The process of creating new structures for interreligious dialogue and religious culture in the Balkans has been essential for the social, political and economic cooperation of building a civilization of trusting communication and human connections.

The Carpato-Balkanic region became a dynamical location where various nationalist, cultural and religious ideologies were involved, challenging in multiple manners the functions of culture and religion and giving rise to confrontations expressed through a series of historical, political and social experimentations.

These particular ideological conflicts introduced diverse and competing articulation of the interreligious dialogue which identified its expression in the
terms of the religious culture. Communism, liberal internationalism, modern democracy and nationalism conceived the new historical circumstances and significantly affected the religious and cultural attitude of Romanian and Bulgarian peoples.

To conclude, religion in the Balkans has almost always been correlated with ethnicity, nationalism, traditional and cultural values. Religious paradigms, cultural behaviors and ideologies have represented fundamental elements in various social and political projects. Consequently, the religious culture and the interreligious dialogue can be often considered as real nationalist agents.

Additionally, in most of the Balkan states, Church-State connections already established the general specificity of interreligious relations, in some cases, the cultural and religious cooperation being promoted by the state itself or by the majority community in the respective countries. In Bulgaria, the recent formation of the National Council of the Religious Communities was, for instance, promoted by the Religious Affairs Directorate at the Council of Ministers. In Romania, the cooperation between theological institutions and socio-cultural bodies is initiated through church-related organizations, such AIDRom and several Ecumenical Institutes, as well through individual actions performed by priests and university professors. Also, the absence of a traditional civic engagement or social activism will significantly increase the influence of the religious leaders.

REFERENCES


