

Conference Session 4.3: Media – Creativity
Interreligious Dialogue In Albania - Challenges And Practices

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The issue of religious dialogue or religion in general, brings out very disparate feelings in the Albanian society. This is firstly because it is not clearly defined or understood; secondly, the half-century-long efforts to wipe out religion in Albania has left room for ignorance and thus opened the door for doubts and prejudices. However, after 22 years of transition our country faces new realities, which require attention, but above all understanding of the challenges ahead. The Albanian society came under a particular political pressure on the religious aspect during the period of monism. Education was another factor that probably played a crucial role in reducing the transference of religious faith to younger generations. Not only did the educational structure change from being predominantly supported by religious movements to one that was entirely laic, but it actively worked to undermine and disparage religion. Such a thing started with young children in the first grades and reached its highest point in the secondary education, where the subject of Marxism-Leninism was taught for four years and continued throughout tertiary education. The modern Albanian was expected to fight against and root out all traces of religious waste. To what extent was this achieved?

I am honored to bring my modest experience as an associate professor - I have been teaching “Interfaith Dialogue and Media” only for a few years- of the Department of Journalism and Communications at the University of Tirana to the 10th Doha Conference for Interfaith Dialogue. The contribution to interfaith dialogue is for me, obviously multidimensional, but one of the most important links is and should be education. It plays an important role in preparing the new generations for their future professionalism as well.

It is an already known fact that in Albania interfaith dialogue is an important value the Albanians take pride in, and try to preserve and bequeath.

During the academic year 2008-2009 “Interfaith Dialogue and Media” was added for the first time to the university curriculum of the Department of Journalism and Communications at University of Tirana.

I have had the opportunity to teach “Intercultural and Interfaith dialogue” at the Department of Journalism of the Albanian University of Tetovo and Skopje (Macedonia). In addition, I am teaching the same subject to master students at Beder University, Tirana.

Initially, it proved a hard task for me to chose the literature and compile the syllabus for the class because my references were almost all foreign and I did not have an Albanian model. Moreover, the largest bulk of literature is offered exclusively in English because publications in Albanian have been prolific only recently. Nevertheless, the more I studied the topic, the more I was drawn to it. My students felt the same way too; since the first lectures they showed an incredible level of interest and commitment. Such interest, in fact was due to the lack of subjects of history and communication between religions in pre-university and higher education curricula. Clearly, an important part of the curriculum for journalism students has to do with the presentation of religion-related information. As it is already known, media plays a significant role in the presentation of information- and any other genre- related to religion. Not needing to delve far away in the past, allow me to just mention some events since 2004; such as the film “Submission”, the publication of Mohammed cartoons by Jollands Posten, the many

controversies regarding the publication of “The Da Vinci Code” by Dan Brown or recently the “Innocence of Muslims” and reactions surrounding this film. Thus, on one hand there are theoretical courses on the subject and then immediately we move to clear examples from the international but also the Albanian media.

As already mentioned above, Albania is reputable for its interreligious harmony and dialogue. But just as everywhere else, in our country challenges deriving from globalization, specific historical and social approaches have given new dimensions to the interfaith dialogue.

On one hand, the transitional economic, political and social developments and the development of religious communities in Albania on the other have shifted the ratio between faith and religious practices in the country. As result of a painful history, until 1990 it was impossible for the Albanians to freely practice their religions and belief in God. The communist regime banished all religions and faith; it imprisoned, persecuted and executed many representatives of the Albanian clergy. It also destroyed a great deal of religious objects. After 1967, when Albania was declared the first secular country in the world, the Albanians’ relation with their faith would become entirely secret. At the same time, the transfer of religion to the future generations became very difficult, if not impossible; taking into account the anti-religious propaganda happening in kindergartens as well.

Nevertheless, Albania could not escape the political events surrounding the Balkans. The 1990s offered a new panorama for Albania and the Albanians.

On November 11th, 1990 the first public mass since 1967 was improvised in a cemetery of Shkodra by Dom Simon Jubani. The November 11th mass gathered over 50,000 people.

According to Archbishop Zef Simoni, the date signified the beginning of freedom of religion in Albania, which paved the way for freedom of speech, thought, press, political pluralism, peace and harmony.

On November 16th, 1990 Hafiz Sabri Koçi (Head of the Albanian Muslim Community 1990-2003; served 20 years, 4 months, 18 days in prison) organized the first ceremony held in Mosque Square. Hafiz Sabri Koçi explained the significance that this event marked for Islam: it further strengthened the belief in the true God who says in his holy book “Infidels wish to try by every means to extinguish the light of the divine belief in the hearts of men, but God has decided that it can never be extinguished” (the Qur’an, Surat-Tawbah chapter 9 verse 32).

The November 16th, 1990 ceremony was not only religious, but after the rebirth of religion took an open political character, Hafiz Sabri said: “There is no greater crime than to close another soul door, the door of conscience and memory of the Great God”. The opening of Lead Mosque in Shkodra was a landmark event for the Albanian Muslim Community; after 23 years the Azaan were sung and worshipers were forgiven on Friday. Also in the same place a meeting was held, during which the creation of the “Albanian Islamic Community was decided” and approved as an association on January 23rd, 1991 by the Ministry of Justice.

The abovementioned events are useful examples in showing how despite the extreme pressure of the communist regime the people had been able to preserve the love for God and their religion.

However, the 1990s generations did not have a lot of knowledge about religion. In numerous occasions ignorance about whichever religion, was observed. Hence, there were many stereotypes and prejudices. Precisely for this reason, I have devoted a considerable part of my work to the communication between Christianity and Islam in the world and Albania in particular, with special attention to the 1990s and more specifically post 2001 events.

During the transition period, apart from many other political, economic and social problems, the media has often exposed problems of the religious communities in Albania (Muslim, Bektashi,

Orthodox Church and Catholic Church). But what is most important is seeing how religious knowledge is presented in the curricula (later on I will be speaking about the efforts of different religious communities to introduce the subject of religion in schools).

Up to now, three master students' cohorts have graduated from the Department of Journalism and Communication, having as part of their curriculum interfaith communication and dialogue in the media; some of them are now working as journalist while many others are part of public institutions such as ministries, municipalities or PR offices of the religious communities. It is also to be noted that the department has at least three doctoral candidates researching for instance aspects of the interfaith dialogue in Albania during the transition or the development of the religious media during this period. Thus, there is a growing academic interest with respect to interreligious communication.

Have there been any results so far? I am happy to say that even with such a short experience, the major part of the students, who have studied or are studying the subject, are now more skilful in dealing with religious problems. At the same time their positioning in several public or private institutions is helping in the further improvement of a sustainable harmonious climate between religions in Albania.

One very interesting experience has been the tackling of this subject by the State University of Tetovo and Skopje (founded in 1994). Among other subjects, the University also offers courses in journalism, where the majority of my students were Albanians and Turkish of Muslim religion. Owing to the specific social problems between the Albanian and Macedonian ethnicities, it seemed that the Albanians were somewhat closed when it come to the communication with the Macedonian majority. They seem to communicate more with Turkish and Bosnians rather than the remaining Christian population. Thus we can say that the religious belief is what's hampering the communication between ethnicities in the country. During my first meeting with the students, one of the questions I asked was whether or not they had any Macedonian friends. Most of them replied "a few or not at all", while only five out of 35 students in the class, said they had a total of 4 or 5 Macedonian friends. This is a very significant fact in understanding the communication between Albanians and Macedonians, where the religious and ethnic aspects are very much intertwined. Clearly, I had to reorganize my lectures putting enough focus on Christianity. I have to point out that the Albanians living in Macedonia or Kosovo have a stronger bond with their religion than the Albanians living in Albania. In my opinion, this specificity owes to the fact that from after World War II until 1990s, the countries have undergone different processes. While in Albania, the regime declared an open war to religion, in Kosovo and Macedonia, Albanians preserved their religion as a means of identification from the rest of the Slavic Christian population. Hence, by identifying with their religious belonging, they were trying to protect their ethnic identity as Albanians. This, I believe is the reason why my students had none or very few Macedonian friends. Apart from the historical aspects of the communication between the Muslims and Christians, a great deal of importance is given to the representations of typical stereotypes and prejudices about Islam and Christianity in the media. However, when by the end of my cycle of lectures (15 weeks), I asked the same question, I was pleasantly surprised to hear that many students had now started friendships and communication with other students, who belonged to a different religion. Furthermore, I noticed that the students did reflect upon the ungrounded prejudices they had about the rest of the population, just because they were "strangers" to them. This served to further strengthen my conviction that we cannot break stereotypes and prejudices by keeping a distance from "the other"; rather we need to come closer and communicate. There cannot be collaboration, unless we accept "the other". To do so,

of course first we have to raise knowledge, in which case education in families and schools, plays an absolutely irreplaceable role. If education is lacking, then hopes for dialogue are nonexistent.

Occasionally, in the Albanian public space there have been debates concerning the legislation that has to do with education. The most recent of these debates occurred on April 25th 2012, regarding the introduction of religion classes in schools. This proposal was presented to the Parliamentary Commission on Education and Public Information by the representatives of religious communities such as Teuta Bula – coordinator, Andon Merdani – Episcopo of Kruja helper of Anastas - Orthodox Community, Ali Kurti president of “Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania”, and Bujar Spahiu deputy-director of the Islamic Community of Albania.

The Evangelical Brotherhood researched the possibility of some lessons: Knowledge about religion, in which historical problems of religion in Albania during the last 2000 years are discussed. The evangelical Brotherhood argued that while in schools we have been learning the evolution theory for decades, even though it has not yet been confirmed, religious viewpoints must also be considered. The Evangelical Brotherhood referred to the experience of many countries of Western Europe (for example in the German constitution it is stipulated that religion is part of the school curriculum).

The Orthodox Church proposed that students below university level must be given some instruction about Albanians' beliefs, their religious history, and principles that offer an essential moral and ethical education.

The Muslim community asked that all students in both private and public schools should be taught to know who they are, where they came from, and what is expected of them and suggested means of providing that knowledge in non-denominational classes for students of all religions. The religious communities believe that this is for the good of our country and that the role of religious education is very important; they are committed to protecting such religious training in every case. In doing this we do not want to cause pain or reopen old divisions, we want to close these deep wounds from our past and not to open them anymore. Our state is democratic and free, and it has every possibility to resolve every problem. Basically all communities are equal, so we feel proud of our nation.

As we know the religious communities wish to include religious subjects in the educational pre-university curriculum so that the students may know their history and development. As I mentioned before, this is a concrete proposal that should be taken in consideration by the Ministry of Education (the minister, Myqerem Tafaj supported this proposal).

However, this proposal is difficult for the Albanian public to accept. It has generated much debate, but these discussions are largely based on distorted explanations of the proposal. The negative reactions which arise from a society with a history as a secular state add to the misinformation and biases in this discussion. We do not wish to pass judgment on how the media is representing this proposal; we wish only to assert that the knowledge of Albania's religious history and culture is of the utmost importance for young students below the university level. On this note, allow me to briefly present a research project our department in cooperation with the UNESCO Chair, Faculty of Journalism and Communication at University “St. Kl. Ohridski” Sofia, Bulgaria intend to carry out. The project, which consists in studying the existence of hate language in relation to religious and ethnic themes by the media aims at understanding whether the media is exacerbating or improving ethnic and religious conflicts in the region.

We think that through this subject Albanian students can learn basic knowledge regarding the history of religions, their creation and the development of the religions through the centuries.

This is necessary because through this knowledge the students will have the possibility to know more about cultures and different civilizations from the ancient until the present times. Students will also learn about the development of the religions in Albania, learning about Christianity, Islam, and the significance of religious faith during the Albanian Renaissance of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the role of religion during the reign of King Zog, the war against religion during communism and the contemporary situation of religion in Albania. Children have access to information on the internet, but this kind of information (and disinformation) is uncontrolled, making it difficult for young minds to separate the truth from error or falsification. For this reason teaching religious subjects in the school as part of the curriculum is likely to be more authoritative and accurate. Through this method the children and youth would not tend to create stereotypes and would not be taught religious prejudice or bigotry because of lacking or erroneous information. Therefore they will learn broad-mindedly from their teachers and, it is important to express strongly that their cultural formation will be more complete. Albanian society has always valued interreligious dialog and harmony we think that, this is one of the important values that we have as a people. This is very good for the improvement of our image as a country and for the country's integration. Researchers of the field of interfaith dialogue know better than anyone else the importance of religious education. The issue is still under discussion and maybe in the future it will be solved in the best of ways. Finally, I think that in the pre-university curricula, but also in specific university programs it is very important to address interfaith communication topics. The globalization process as well as multi-cultural companies have further highlighted issues of interfaith dialogue. If younger generations are educated and more knowledgeable about "the foreigner", "the other" pertaining to a different religion, then it will be much easier to communicate with each-other. Nowadays, everyone has the right to believe in his/her God, his/her religion. But special and indisputable attention should be paid to the education of journalists and communication specialists. The more educated they are about religious topics; the better these themes will be represented in the media. At the same time the journalists will be better prepared to reject prejudice and religious stereotypes and discriminatory language. The more they are informed about different religious beliefs, the fewer cases of ethical breaching and violation of the freedom of expression there will be. This precious value should be cherished and nurtured further, because this value has identified our long efforts toward integration into Europe. So we think that this harmony and dialog between religions in Albania might be strengthened and carried forward if the children and youth are educated in this tradition. As a result, they will be prepared to see themselves and others as members of a multi-religious community, and this will positively affect the dimension of religious beliefs as Albanian society moves into the. Only through this education can the Albanian Nation have a stable future of religious harmony and interfaith dialogue.