

## PREFACE

The scientific papers found in the first issue of our Journal Religious Dialogue and Cooperation was presented at the First European Conference on Religious Dialogue and Cooperation. The conference was held in October 2019 in Struga (Republic of North Macedonia), on the topic: The Role of Religion in Peace and Conflict. Thereby, we have shown our thoughts on the meaning of this Conference as an affirmation of not only the Faculty of Philosophy and Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, but also of the Republic of North Macedonia as a whole in Europe and in the world. The scientific and political elite should always be cooperating for the good of the country. I can say with great pleasure that we succeeded in bringing reputable professors, researchers and scientists from 17 European states, who study the phenomenon of religion.

I will use this opportunity to thank our respected colleagues from: Jagiellonian University in Krakow, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and University of Applied and Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw from Poland; Sapienza University of Rome, and CESNUR in Turin from Italy; University of Novi Sad and University of Prishtina, Kosovska Mitrovica from Serbia; South-West University «Neofit Rilsky» in Blagoevgrad from Bulgaria; University of Szeged from Hungary, West University of Timisoara and Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi from Romania; University of Lapland in Rovaniemi from Finland; MONTAIGNE University of Bordeaux from France; Catholic University of Leuven from Belgium; Firat University in Elazig from Turkey; Lancaster University and Aston University in Birmingham from United Kingdom; ORLIR in Vilnius from Lithuania; Stranmillis University College in Belfast from Northern Ireland; International Institute of Social Studies in Hague from Netherlands, University of Cyprus in Nicosia from Cyprus; Mogilev State Kuleshov University from Belarus and Gauhati University in Guwahati from India. Of course, I would also like to thank my dear colleagues and friends from Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Goce Delchev University in Shtip, State University in Tetovo and FON University in Skopje.

Today, Europe is faced with a crisis of moral, religious and even civilizational values. Many have talked about the moral decadence of Europe. Furthermore, European countries are constantly faced with political crises. The European Union hasn't fully fulfilled the expectations of its member states. The ethno-religious mobilization of citizens and political parties in the states in the Western Balkans is still present. In that respect, the role of religion and religious is realized in several directions. If the religious feelings of believers are abused or if religious teachings are brutally perverted, then religion is placed in the role of an amplifier of ethnic and political conflicts. Then a certain illusion is created that those are in fact religious conflicts. Such is the conflict in Ukraine, which many call "a battle for religion". When you analyze the conflict between the Ukrainian governmental forces and the separatists supported by Moscow in the eastern part of the country, it becomes much harder to separate the century-long ideological and religious tensions from the current political and military conflict. This became even more intense

when the movement to form an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church was supported by the Ukrainian president Poroshenko.

On the other hand, perhaps the greatest source of social conflicts in contemporary Europe is the tension and violence in which people from minority groups of Muslim culture and Islam faith participate. This is especially present in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Russia, Germany and the United Kingdom. Two completely different sources of current social tensions exist there. On one hand, there is the social and economic discrimination towards believers of Islam. On the other hand, there are the terrorist attacks inspired by radical Islam ideas. Even though they are different, these two sources of societal tensions are dynamically linked and freed from one another. No matter the frequency or absence of terrorist acts, which are in turn more or less individualized, the societal tensions between Muslim communities and the majority population in Europe are unclear. In certain cases a collective violence against minority Muslim communities also appears. Here the ethnic and religious aspects are interlinked. Because of this, today we rightly talk about ethno-religious conflicts in Europe and the radicalization of European Muslim communities.

The ethno-religious mobilization is in a large part also present in the states of the West Balkans. All these states are currently in a post-conflict period, but little is needed for the latent conflicts to once again become direct clashes between the members of the different ethnic and religious groups. Religious identity is always present in the antagonisms that have fragmented the Balkans for centuries. Religion and nationality overlap here much more than in any other region in Europe. This allows right-wing demochristian political parties through powerful propaganda and unique mytho-history to inspire hatred towards the “ethnic and religious other”.

The pseudo democratic processes in Europe are a means to rule with the majority, and the leaders of these processes succeed in manipulating with the unthinking majority under the disguise of Christian values. The religious viewpoint is a foundation through which the masses are mobilized and society is fascistized wherein Christian values become nothing more than stocks in neoliberal capitalism. If the basic teachings of the political right in some countries in Europe are directed towards defining society as an organic national, ethnic and racial whole, which is above all oriented towards traditional, national and patriarchal values, the idea that they come from Christianity is problematic, and one could say that they falsify Christianity as their source. In the case of Europe, the division of people between “us” and “them”, produces violence based on a totalitarian understanding of faith. The idea that God is one, and that the belief in Him is differently placed in different religions can in some individuals, religious and political institutions bring about a wrong perception that we are “us” because we are not “them”, and therefore we can remain “us” if we eliminate “them”. Because of this, religious exclusion leads to violent ideology: we are the true believers and we have on our side the one true God, and as if we were on a battlefield, we stand against “them”, who believe in a God, who is not the one true God, against the heretics, atheists, agnostics and against religious deserters.

However, the rise of ethnic and political conflicts with a religious background should also recognize the specific contribution of some religious leaders or religious communities and groups in solving the aforementioned conflicts, be they of a religious nature or not. Religious dignitaries at the local level can and do stop the development of violent conflicts through their everyday activities. They can also encourage dialogue between different religious communities. Religious groups and individuals are sometimes involved in the efforts to mediate ethnic and political groups that are in conflict. In some cases, local religious powers are involved in peacemaking efforts. Religious groups and individuals, led by their religious values, are successfully involved in the process of making peace.

We can say, without underestimating the effects of other types of exclusion that religious exclusion has generated the largest problems in Europe. Faced with this fact, contemporary religious leaders are trying to overcome this state, which can in the worst-case scenario lead to bloody conflicts. In an interview, Pope Francis said: “the secular state, contrary to states in which a single religion is forced onto everyone, can give every believer the opportunity to believe in God. All people are equal as God’s children and as creators of their own personal dignity. Everyone should have the freedom to practice their own religion, in the culture that he or she belongs to”. On the other hand, some Islamic religious leaders have clearly let Europe know that the prophet Muhammad saw the so-called Islamic nation in his visions as a religiously pluralist society, which guaranties the right of religious freedom to all its citizens.

To answer all of these questions and dilemmas we have tried to bring all of the eminent and relevant experts from Europe, who are studying the phenomenon of religion from a sociological, anthropological, philosophical, historical, psychological and theological point of view, to one place. Ten papers presented at the First European Conference on Religious Dialogue and Cooperation will be published in the Cambridge scholars publishing book. Twelve more papers have been selected for this issue of the Journal. The remaining papers presented at the Conference will be published in the second issue of the Journal Religious Dialogue and Cooperation, in the beginning of 2021.

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