

PREFACE

The scientific papers found in the first issue of our Journal entitled 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) and it covered the theme: The Role of Religion in Peace and Conflict. In doing so, we have shown our thoughts on the significance of this Conference in the affirmation of not only the Faculty of Philosophy and Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, but also of the entirety of the Republic of North Macedonia in Europe and in the world. The scientific and political elite should always be cooperating for the good of the country. I am very pleased to say that we have succeeded in bringing renowned professors, researchers and scientists from 17 European states studying the phenomenon of religion.

I take this opportunity to thank our esteemed 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 facing a crisis of moral, religious and even civilizational values. Many have talked about the moral decadence of Europe. Furthermore, European countries are constantly facing political crises. The European Union has not fully fulfilled the expectations of its member states. The ethno-religious mobilization of citizens and political parties in the Western Balkans is still present. In that respect, the role of religion and religious dialogue is realized in several directions. If the religious feelings of believers are abused or if religious teachings are brutally perverted, religion is then placed in the role of an amplifier of ethnic and political conflicts. This creates an illusion that these 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 Moscow-backed separatists in the eastern part of the country, it becomes much more difficult to separate the centuries-old 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.

Conversely, perhaps the greatest source of social conflict in contemporary Europe is the tension and violence involving people from minority groups of Muslim culture and Islamic faith. This is especially true in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Russia, Germany and the United Kingdom. Two completely different sources of current social tensions exist there. On the one hand, there is the social and economic discrimination against believers of Islam. On the other hand, there are the terrorist attacks inspired by the radical ideas of Islam. Although 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 social tensions between Muslim communities and the majority population in Europe are unclear. In certain cases, collective violence against minority Muslim communities has also emerged. Here the ethnic and religious aspects are interrelated. Because of this, today we are rightly talking about ethno-religious conflicts in Europe and the radicalization of European Muslim communities.

Ethno-religious mobilization is also largely present in the Western Balkans. All of these countries are currently in a post-conflict period, but little is needed for the latent conflicts to once again become direct clashes between members of different ethnic and religious groups. Religious identity has always been 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 Christian democratic political parties to inspire hatred towards the “ethnic and religious other” through powerful propaganda and unique mytho-history.

The pseudo democratic processes in Europe are a means of governing the majority, and the leaders of these processes succeed in manipulating the unthinking majority under the guise of Christian values. The religious viewpoint is the 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, primarily oriented towards traditional, national and patriarchal values, then the idea that they originate 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 set differently in different religions may cause some individuals, religious and political institutions to misunderstand that we are “us” because we are not “them”, 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 the one true God on our side, and as if we were on a battlefield, we stand against “them” who believe in a God that is not the one true God, we stand against heretics, atheists, agnostics and 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 resolving the aforementioned conflicts, whether they are of a religious nature or not. Religious dignitaries at the local level can and do prevent 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 mediation efforts between ethnic and political groups 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 peace process.

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 can 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 together all of the eminent and relevant experts from Europe, who study the phenomenon of religion from a sociological, anthropological, philosophical, historical, psychological and theological point of view. 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 on Religious Dialogue and Cooperation in early 2021.

ZORAN MATEVSKI EDITOR IN CHIEF

