

Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

POLICY MEMO

ON THE PARTICIPATION OF CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE IMPROVEMENT OF INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN SERBIA

The nongovernmental organisations, Belgrade Open School and the Christian Cultural Centre, supported by the Delegation of the European Commission to the Republic of Serbia, conducted the Project “Strengthening Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia”, in the period December 2008 – February 2010. This policy paper is one of the Project’s results.

Religious and ethnic identities in the contemporary world

The relationship between religion and ethnicity is as complex as human nature, hence its analysis demands multi-disciplinarity. The universality of most world religions’ teachings has not prevented churches and religious communities having to face the challenges of their ethnification. Relationships between religiosity and ethnicity are categories highly interrelated with universal values based on beliefs, which are present in the experience of all individuals and groups – belonging, identity, and views about himself/herself, the world, the supra-natural and the spiritual. The social and political component of the individual also implies belonging to a certain community, usually an ethnic one, and consequently, the acceptance of certain living practises and systems of values that are not universal like religious ones, but do express and protect interests of certain communities and individuals. Universalistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, include all people within their projects of salvation, regardless of their race or ethnicity, while ethnic identity implies a certain exclusivity. Problems appear with the ethnification of religious identity, which occurs through the establishment of close connections of doctrinally universalistic churches and religious communities with structures of political power. Religious and ethnic belonging can coexist without mutual identifications, which are inappropriate for religious universalism, but only with the preservation of religious and universal identity and its dominance over the ethnic and particular one, whose specific elements sometimes need to be partly decomposed.

Faith and identity are extremely complex constructs and important determinants of human life. Identity is always defined in a certain context, most frequently a cultural one, which primarily defines one’s ideology, worldview, patterns of community, thoughts and experiences, forms and contents of cognition, and value-based referent framework which defines what is desirable and what is not acceptable in given culture. Identity is, therefore, largely defined by social categories, which define a person’s individual orientation. Identity, however, is also acquired through out life and partly depends on free choice. Individual aspects of identity are set according to the principle of difference in relation to other and respond to the question “Who Am I?”. In contrast, collective aspects of identity are founded on the criteria of similarity with others, answering the question – “Where Do I Belong?”. Individual identity is unique and unrepeatably, while collective identities are diverse (gender, professional, class, social, cultural, religious, national, ethnic, etc) and can interweave and complement each other in one person. Depending on the social circumstances, stronger emphasis is put on specific collective identity, and national/ethnic identity suppressed almost all the others at the end of 20th century on the Balkans.

Throughout history, religion has been offering mankind a picture of the world, helping to find

Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

the final answers on questions relating to human existence, with the consciousness of person's own limits, as well as defining person's main tasks, types of their accomplishment, awards in case of success and punishments for failures. Objective aspects of religion (Holy Scriptures, tradition, rituals, symbols, teachings, habits and practises) are easier to analyse and compare than subjective ones (experiences, attitudes, motivation, thinking, faith, etc). Authentic religiosity includes not only practicing rituals, but also directing of the entirety of human existence – spiritual, soul and body, towards the accomplishment of faith's content in a moral, cognitive and habitual sense. In faith, the life of a person is constituted from the Divine, supra-human, which is primary and founding, and a believer practises this postulate in individual and collective aspects of life. There is no compromise on religious identity; it is defined by normative framework of religious documents. However, there are number of drifts from this imperative in practice.

Ethnification is a process of gathering certain social group in an ethnic-identity based system. Ethnic and national as terms are often treated as synonyms, even though nation is just one ethnic-based form of society's organisation. Almost all armed conflicts up to the 17th century were marked by religious causes, but ever since this point profane causes (national, ideological and state) have been dominant. Until the secularisation of western society it was difficult to separate ethnic from religious identities and systems of values, although their sources and transmission patterns were different (deduction is used for religious ones, by accepting announced teachings, while ethnic values are reached starting from experience).

Pluralistic society carries risks of relativistic equalisation of all social values, but also opportunities for the expression, preservation and development of religious and ethnic identities, defining their relations and for sincere dialogue and meeting with the 'other', an option which is being open for religions practically for the first time in history with such intensity. None of various sources of experience, values and worldviews is predominant over the others, but they all coexist without a common theoretical-practical principle which to structure them, and which would make all of them easily conceivable and understandable. Even today, religion articulates what is missing for an individual and helps maintain forms of social and personal common living, for example the family, damaged by technological improvement and social rationalisation. According to Habermas, this caused "melancholy of contemporary individual" which pluralistic society should overcome with as harmonious as possible coexistence of "religiously musical and unmusical" thinkers.

Secularisation, separating the sacral from profane and religion and faith from ethnos, people and nation, enables a clearer definition of related cognitive and value systems, as well as the mutual enrichment of religion and ethnicity. This is usually done through *enculturation*, a process in which an ethnically founded culture fills religion with content, while the enrichment of ethnic elements with religious ones can primarily be seen in acceptance of universal spiritual values. Culture is a field of possible fruitful encounter and interweaving of religion and ethnicity. Culture is one of the most powerful tools for expression of religion, and its mediation role is often supported by its ethnic foundation. National cultures are examples of this. They often have capacity to unite the universal and the particular without melting. Christian and Islamic cultures modified elements from earlier polytheistic societies, giving them new meanings and dimensions, which testify on the capacity of religion to productively change and sustain culture, although there are other examples in history. Disharmony of religious with cultural values, patterns and practices often complicates the role of culture as a medium between religion and ethnic communities, sometimes causing formal acceptance of universal religion, which factually adjusts itself to ethnically founded culture, instead of opposite process. Forms of religion and ethnicity have been changeable through history, hence they have to be studied objectively, being researched again and again, in order to identify their constant conceptual cores, show that religion is a far more universal

Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

phenomenon than ethnos and set an adequate hierarchy of values among them, so culture could play natural role of bridge between religion and ethnicity.

In the modern epoch, the nation overcame other forms of ethnic identification and organisation, from which it differs by its unavoidable politicisation, i.e. the relation to the national state, movement or ideology. These nation's components carry risk of political-ideological instrumentalisation of national culture, even religion, which led to interethnic conflicts, sometimes recognised as inter-religious ones. Certain populations' religious belonging was occasionally transformed into identities developed in modern epoch, which sometimes, by the strength of their influence, overcame religious beliefs ("profane religions"). Modern totalitarianism and authoritarianism are often validated by the attitude that they logically emerge from teachings and organisational structure of the majority of churches and religious communities, which neglects the individual's right to free choice in democratic society to accept or not, the authority of God and religious leaders, a right that does not exist in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in relation to their ideologies and leaders. Strengthening cultural over political components of the nation increases its inner cohesion, but also brings it closer to other nations. This process is supported by the weakening political relevance of nation-states, economic and cultural globalisation and regional integrations, such as the development of the European Union, as a community in which are reconciled the concept of nation as primarily cultural and identity-based community and supra-nationally regulated politics and economies.

Churches and religious communities frequently interact with other actors today. This fact supports harmonised social relations, but carries certain risks, in powerful inflow of understandings and methods typical for secularism in religious consciousness of believers and clerics, which they often accept and transfer. The reason for this is most probably the need for churches and religious communities to preserve social relevance and adapt their rhetoric to communication with other actors. This also questions the compatibility of forms, style and methods of sending messages to believers, as well as their persistence and authenticity. Inter-religious dialogue itself can also have these effects, if churches' and religious communities' communication is led according to non-religious actors' models. As a consequence, the number of formal believers is rising, those having theoretical attitude that God exists, but do not feel the need to practice their faith, especially through deeds and asceticism. According to some thinkers, monotheistic religions have ontologically liberated people from naturalistic and societal illusions, but, during time, sacral dimension disappeared from that liberation and social one prevailed. Today is, therefore, predominant false, secularised religion.

Religious and ethnic identities on the Balkans and in Serbia

The Balkans was often a place of tragic religious and ethnic animosity, lack of dialogue and ignorance of the other. But it was also a place where various communities, which have been surviving in this region for centuries, coexisted. It is often called the "European Middle East", since Judaism, Christianity and Islam have long historical backgrounds in this region, although not as long as in the Middle East itself. Periods of peaceful coexistence of three monotheistic religions in the Balkans have interchanged with periods of conflict, more dramatically than in almost all other parts of Europe. Both coexistence and conflicts were more intensified in the Balkans. Experience as a border area of Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity and Islam left both positive and negative consequences for societies here. National messianism in the Balkans is usually a consequence of the aspirations of elites of most of Balkan nations to appear as avant-garde of their faith expansion, in eyes of centres of church/religious community to which majority of their nation belong. This decreased their

Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

abilities to realistically understand the position and situation of societies they lead and contributed to entrenching fear from other and feeling of own vulnerability.

Living in the Balkans and task of building tolerance are challenges, but it is questionable if border area's have the capacities for adequately dealing with them. Border areas offer fewer opportunities for social and individual development, so human and other capacities are less developed and less used than in religious and other centres of power, which often do not understand the needs of border areas, whose capacities they sometimes use for their own interests. The position of minorities is particularly difficult, and for a number of minorities' members their minority status is the main determination of their opportunities. A positive consequence of the border position is a tendency for authentic practicing of faith as this is its most efficient defence, although it carries a risk of focusing on ceremonial and folklore religiosity and resistance to all innovations.

The experience of the Balkans often testifies to the potentials for conflict of interweaving religion and nation/ethnicity, since the communist suppression of both traditions from public life strengthened already existing tendencies of their unification. Ending of communist ideology and system in former Yugoslavia brought a "shock of revealing of tradition", and an uncritical and undifferentiated adoption of religious and national/ethnic heritage and the strengthening of religious attitude to nation, without authentic religiosity in wider circles. Prompt adoption of suppressed identity for large number of people was "refilling the ideological vacuum" created after the disappearance of ideology. It often led to overemphasising the differences between ethnic and religious communities, up to the extreme.

These processes were intensified by the violent crash of a state framework, which many characterise as religious conflict, even though the ethnic component predominated over the religious one. Both components were drastically abused for accomplishment of political and economic goals. Despite these events and their consequences, Serbia is still a highly multiethnic and multi-confessional country with the issue of relationship between majority and minority being highly relevant. In the process of regulation of these issues, already developed international concepts should be used, with adjustment to conditions and needs of society in Serbia, such as solidarity of majority towards minority and positive discrimination.

Complaints about the position of minorities in Serbia are mostly based on their participation in relevant institutions and on stereotypes still present in public, the media and educational curricula, with appeals for their overcoming. Harmonious relations of religious and ethnic communities in medieval Serbia are sometimes stressed as an antipode of current problems, which are seen as a consequence of secularisation of religion and distancing of genuine religious and ethnic values during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Churches and religious communities and ethnic communities can significantly improve their relations by cooperation with the media and the education system. Despite the challenges they are facing in the process of transition, globalisation and informational revolution, the media and education system still have significant responsibilities for forming social values, even those related to inter-religious and interethnic relations. Therefore, they should, in cooperation with churches and religious communities and ethnic communities, promote coexistence, understanding and authentic values, instead of the former and current conflicts. There are examples of good interreligious and interethnic relations in Serbia even during the recent wars in the country and its neighbourhood. During the wars, despite the closeness of the conflict area, there were no armed conflicts between Serbs and Bosniaks in Sandzak/Raska region, which is enriched with both monuments of Orthodox Christian and Islamic heritage. The absence of conflicts between territorially dispersed Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants in Backa was combined by the experience of high ethnic and linguistic

Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

heterogeneity of the Catholic Church, which has been successfully preventing possible conflicts in this field for a long time. In both regions, interreligious relations and dialogue are constantly being improved for years now, which is in line with authentic teachings of all churches and religious communities.

How to improve interreligious and interethnic relations in Serbia?

It is necessary to initiate institutionalised, continuous *dialogue* of competent representatives of churches and religious communities, ethnic communities, authorities, civil society and other relevant interested structures and actors on all levels, with the participation of decision makers and the public, as authentic, open, fair and constructive discussion on important and concrete issues and problems, aiming to solve them for the benefit of actors and society as a whole. Dialogue should be directed towards overcoming existing tensions and preventing new ones, affirming common values and respect of others. Preconditions for successful dialogue are realistic and specific goals, well-known and clear rules and procedures, full equality of rights and obligations of all actors, all have to be deeply rooted in their own background, mutual knowing and acceptance, overcoming of prejudices, lack of imposing one's own understandings and acknowledgement of one's own mistakes and weaknesses. Dialogue among churches and religious communities and between them and other actors should be supported by the establishment of an *interreligious body*, which should initiate the dialogue, conduct it and increase the relevance of their results by its reputation.

All mentioned actors should promote the Balkans as an area of encountering of religions, nations and cultures, aiming to support full usage of potentials that arise from such a position, for building connections among them and offering solutions for conflicts in other parts of the world, based on local experiences, but also pointing out the specific risks for border areas. The media should be sensitive, professional and responsible in reporting on churches and religious communities and ethnic communities, avoiding sensationalism and focusing on conflicts, and instead promoting the spirit of benevolence, solidarity, meeting, understanding and acceptance of the other, and reporting on cases of this kind.

Churches and religious communities and the media, including religious ones, should participate in numerous common educational, debating and other activities, aiming to practice mutual learning and overcoming existing misunderstandings. The education system should introduce content that promotes the religious and ethnic diversity of Serbia and excludes discriminatory ones and those contributing to negative stereotypes.

Civil society actors should strengthen the process of democratisation of society, protection of human rights, including religious rights, promotion of interreligious and interethnic tolerance and coexistence, peace building and conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Authorities should take a fair approach towards all churches and religious communities and ethnic communities and provide them with equal opportunities through an adequate legal framework and appropriate and efficient institutions. Churches and religious communities should lean on state assistance only in solving issues they cannot resolve themselves, but also cooperate with authorities for the benefit of society, primarily in the field of charity.

Churches and religious communities should clearly approach their believers and the wider interested public, present the essence of religious values, heritage and tradition and their difference in comparison to nonreligious (social, institutional, identity-based) framework that follow them, which is often seen as the most important aspect of faith, even though it is usually caused by its secularisation. Churches and religious communities should educate on differences between religion and faith, on humanistic aspect of religious teachings, their relation to human freedom and on the betrayal and functional understanding of fundamental religious values and principles as main reason for religious conflicts. Churches should make

Religious and Human Rights for Democratic Serbia

dialogue with others massive by instructing believers in its values and desirability. Legitimate representatives of ethnic communities should develop a consciousness about the authentic values of their identity and culture, but also should respect the religion, culture and tradition of others, in order to enable their members' insight into the common interests of citizens of Serbia and understand the differences as a comparative advantage for religiously and ethnically plural communities.

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