

## RELIGION AS A BOUNDARY BETWEEN “US AND THEM” AND “US AND OTHERS”

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### Abstract

Post-conflict societies often see religion as a destabilizing and differentiating factor in society, a phenomenon that is well-emphasized in the territory of Kosovo. Such concepts, in social environments, cause apparent differentiations and are reflected in ethnical and religious differentiations between Albanians and Serbs. As a consequence of this worldview the discourse “Us and Them” and “Us and the Others” came to existence. These are concepts that exceed religious framework as well. At the same time, these are symbols of social dynamics where the religious identity is used for political legitimacy and national narration. Collective identity was worn through dichotomy “Us and Them” and “Us and the Others” which through public debate on the influence of religion in society is actual in Kosovo, particularly during the period from 2000 to 2020. This modeling of identity during this period is the subject of this work. The research of this study begins from the hypothesis that this religious discourse doesn't only function as an element of cultural and spiritual identity, but as well as a tool of political positioning and social differentiation in post-conflict context. This work at the same time, through analyses deals with religion as a differentiating mechanism in Kosovo society which, even though a formally secular, it has an important influence in modeling of religious identity, that influences the relationship between “Us and Them” and “Us and the Others”, taking into consideration from one side the perception of Islam as Orient sourced religion that is possible to deprive us from the Occident, and Catholicism from the other side that can bring us closer to the West. A particular focus of this work is pointed to the relationship of the secular and academic Elite towards religion and the way how this discourse is placed to the opinion. Methodological hypothesis is based on descriptive of the content, placing a special emphasis to the influence of the actors of institutional religions through political elite and media content. The purpose of this work is to emphasize through analyses that religion often functions as a part of the identity, where at the same time it is emphasized the difference within religious and ethnical communities, and that as a consequence we might come to conflict situations, not excluding the possibility to have potential for dialogue and compliance between religions.

*Keywords: post-conflict society, inter-religious dialogue, religious differentiation, Kosovo, Ethnical relationship, religious discourse*

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### Introduction

Kosovo society is not uniformly secular. It is highly influenced by different elements that are deeply rooted from historical, political and cultural factors. Oriental judgment, as we can find at Edward Said, one of the most distinguished theorists of the concept of Orientalism in western literature on the East, is the base of relationship to religion. According to this concept, Islam is considered as something strange, and at the same time far from the West, whereas Catholicism is qualified as close to the West. This initial discourse, places Islam and Orthodoxy nor for same reasons in opposition to western values. As a consequence these two are characterized as the “enemy” of the Western world. This approach complicates more the relationship between the national identity and religion where the narration “Us and Them” and “Us and the others” offers the basis to nation's establishment where religion is used as a tool to religious and ethnical construction and detachment.

If we admit that secular framework of the country is not absolute, than we should take into consideration that this framework is often based in compromises that would always follow the historical and geopolitical movements. However, in this case we often face with problems that are influenced by ideological influences and the progress of regional political movements. It complicates even more the position of religion, which somehow reflects the private and public life.

Having into consideration these differentiations in the name of religion, particularly when we talk about Kosovo, the understanding of secularism as a social phenomenon need a multi-disciplinary approach, where we should divide political aspects, and analyze social narrations in the context of modeling of religious perception as well as the influence of religion in the contemporary context. Methodological work is understood through qualitative analyze of the discourse, it researches the secular, academic and political statements that all together establish the religious identity.

## **2. Religious identity and geopolitical orientation**

It is well-known that Kosovo society is not fully secular, therefore religious relevance functions as bases to collective identity establishing the dualism “Us and Them” and “Us and the others”. If we refer to the definition of Said on the oriental judgment (2009) and his orientation towards oriental concept, Islam seen from the European concept is shown as culturally different or even less accepted as a reality, while Catholicism is symbolically seen closer to the Western civilization. The dichotomy presented here cannot be seen as only a cultural one, but as a geopolitical one as well because using its mechanisms it offers ideological boundaries that possess possibilities to model the relationship within ethno-religious communities. Looking at Islam and Orthodoxy, here we identify another relationship which might be considered in opposite to Western values. Such a statement might cause a more instrumentation of religious identity for political reasons. (Huntington, 1993) The political category is particularly dominant to cultural category, mainly apparent in Balkan region. (Bieber, 2003) From this point of view, we can say that Kosovo territory is the best case for illustration, where dominant religions can be used to highlight the way how political and national identity is constructed. As we could notice from during the discursive process, this process is manifested during the establishment of a country and its alignment by the side of allies in international level. The secularism, formally apparent of society character, cannot be seen as an absolute category. It is exposed to influences and changes that keep it safe through historical tradition and geopolitical tensions that are evident in contemporary societies. (Burbaker, 2012) Taking into consideration the circumstances, Kosovo religious identity, determines the necessity of multidisciplinary research that is urged by the complexity of global developments and the relationships that are influenced by regional policy and global influences. In this case establishing boundaries between “Us and Them” and “Us and the others” is deepened into the discourse which offers a new political and sociological aspect of religious identity.

The direct religious identity is often seen as a perception of Islam towards European integration, which at the same time is the challenge of contemporary policy that the Europe leads with the political identity. Academic debates pose the problem of the complexity of Islam with secular and democratic values. These values are considered as the base of political movements in Europe. Bassam Tibi (2001) in his works states the difference that exists between “Euro-Islam” and “Islamism”. According to him “Euro-Islam” is related to the reformative concept which aims to integrate Islam within the European cultural values through what is known as cultural relativism. The notion “Islamism” according to him is in opposite to European values, insisting on policization of religion. This approach has been criticized by different Muslim authors for lack of sensitivity toward Muslim community to implement the so called “lived religion” or the

religiosity implemented according to the tradition that is supported based on doctrinal religious origin. This approach has caused wide debates on the understanding of the religious discourse in public opinion. Basic interpretation of understanding of Islam and the manner of religiosity lived in the everyday life. Islam as an identity position, political categorization and cultural expression, as a spiritual need is tempting to find ways to get included into the political discourse within the framework of the European integration.

“Deculturation” of Islam by Oliver Roy (2004) has been analyzed from the viewpoint if the phenomenon shown on the identity of Islam in Europe, which is considered as a conditional consequence, by an abstract system of faith, present outside social traditional structures. With this Islam is not only a cultural determiner, but also a mechanism for modeling the new global identity. Seen from the viewpoint of the consequences “deculturation” of Islam creates additional tensions which appear between the secular Europe and Islam, so that Islam is presented as “the other” in opposite to European tradition. The perception of Islam is also seen as a barrier to European integration. A political narration is established, which is often focused on the viewpoint that Islam is the barrier that keeps us disintegrated or security threatened. For this reason, some authors such as Bassam Tibi (2010) witness some paradoxes that beside the fact that many Muslim communities mainly in Europe accept democratic values, they however face the structured marginalization. This is mostly evident in the case of Turkey and its membership to the European Union because the European identity is often considered a contrary to Islam and it results excluded from the values of the Union. (Gole, 2015)

*2.1 Catholicism as symbol of Western values and its influence in Kosovo:* The discussion on Catholicism within the Albanian environment, besides the spiritual need, is being more and more positioned on the dimension of how religion can be instrumented to collective identity, and can be used for political domination with the consequence of polarization between ethnical and religious communities. In the public discourse this discussion has been followed by negative impacts for communities in general. In most of the cases the discussion on Catholicism is deeply related to commitment, modernism and democracy. Historical roots of such a perception can be found particularly in Balkan countries, where Catholicism is represented as a bridge that connects Euro-Western culture with political structures and local communities. In Kosovo the influence of Catholic Church has been evident since the Middle Ages than during the Ottoman Empire and to the contemporary European integrations, a fact that causes more deepness and complexity.

The researches that follow historical studies show that Catholic Church has had a huge influence in Kosovo, particularly during the Ottoman rule. During this period the Catholic Church has served as a mediator between Christian people and the Muslim reign. According to the researcher Noel Malcolm (1998), the Catholic Church was the main factor in keeping the cultural relations of the Albanian local community with the centers of Western powers, despite the marginal position in relation to Muslim and Orthodox population. Besides political and diplomatic support from European nations, particularly from Austro-Hungary, that saw Catholicism as an opportunity for refusing the Ottoman and Orthodox influence in Balkans, the Catholic identity had gained an additional importance by the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Shwander Sievers & Ficher, 2002). Today, in Kosovo, Catholicism keeps being considered as a representative of Western ideals, deeply connected to the discourse that urges European integration. The fact that Catholic Church is considered as the protector of European identity and democracy is apparent. Arguments regarding to this have been mentioned in many statements of political leaders who continuously mention the support of Vatican in achieving the independence (Elsi, 2010).

There are many opinions as well that state that even though the catholic community is minority in Kosovo, it has many political privileges, compared to Muslim and Orthodox communities,

all this because of their vicinity to Westerners. This phenomenon can be interpreted as an occurrence that puts the religion in function to determination for political and cultural identifications, where Catholicism serves not only as a religious category but as a feeling of belonging to particular civilizational regions as well. According to the researches made by religious communities in Kosovo, the Catholic Church has played an important role in establishing the narration of Western orientation of the country, in particular when we talk about the national identity. This can clearly be noticed through the connections that this community has with the USA and the European Union (Krasniqi, 2011)

*2.2 Orthodoxy as an Eastern heritage in political and media discourse:* Orthodoxy in cultural – political discourse is mainly positioned on the side of Eastern heritage, and in particular we could say so about Balkan countries. Orthodoxy, not only is not considered as a religious identity, but represents an important influence in the division of civilizations between “the West and the East”. This determines the way how Orthodoxy is treated in the public opinion, because in many cases it is interrelated with authoritarian political systems, traditionalism and non-liberal ideals. (Markides, 2012)

According to analyses from media reports, particularly in the global plan, orthodoxy is presented more and more as the opposite of occidental modern ideas and democracy. The Orthodox Church in many cases is presented as a political actor that inhibits European integration. Orthodox communities in Western media are often treated through nationalist aspect and social traditional and conservative values, mainly after the fall of Yugoslavia (Perica 2005). The Serbian Orthodox Church in the public discourse is progressively considered as a factor that contributes in keeping up the ethnical and traditional ideological partition in the political context of Serbia and Serbian Republic. The ethno-nationalist narration of SOCH (Serbian Orthodox church) is remarkably emphasized. According to the point of view of the local media, the orthodoxy is considered as the protector of traditional and national identity, which in many cases is used for political instability. Media discourse on orthodoxy in local media is mainly based on the influence of SOCH, which takes over the duty of institutional protector of the “Serbian national being” (Radic, 2005). The best reflection of this can be seen in Kosovo where the Serbian Orthodox Church is represented as the most protective pillar of Serbian spiritual and cultural heritage.

Political discourse considers Orthodoxy as an instrument through which the geopolitical orientation is defined. The double influence of Orthodoxy in post-socialist countries of Europe begins from two points: On one side it has been considered as a protector against “the aggressive secularism” and the influence of European culture, whereas on the other side its vicinity to authoritarian regimes has always been subject to criticism. (Agadhanin, Rousselet, 2010). Euro-integration process in particular pays attention to this political discourse, where the orthodox identity is used as an argument to slow down the European integration process. Serbian ethno-nationalist is often used as an anti-integration argument. The opposition between political leaders as well represents a well-known discourse which emerges from deriving the facts that orthodoxy is a tradition which protects the society from “liberal values of the West” (Ramet, 2014). On the other hand, within western politicians, the narration on Orthodoxy is defined as a wide eastern concept strongly influenced by Russia, which politicizes even more the religious identity.

*2.3 Secularism and the elites:* Secularism in political theory is considered as a dynamic process that influences the interaction between religious communities in state institutions, and not only as a lack of religion in public life (Casanova, 1994). Political and intellectual elites’ statements are important particularly because in many cases with their behavior they establish the model and range of secularism in society. Different countries and their elites practice secularism

differently, referring to the historical context and political tradition. In order to limit religion only into private sphere, the French model suggests a rigid division between religion and state. Apart from this, the American model of secularism allows a considerable presence of religion in public discourse keeping the institutional diversity of the state. (Roy, 2012) Secularism in post socialist societies of Eastern and Southeastern Europe is often attributed to atheist heritage of the policy of socialist countries, which establish the perspectives of elites and their relationship towards religion. (Ramet, 2014).

In many secular societies, political elites treat religion as mechanism to legitimating of some national and ideological narratives as well as an instrument for political mobilization. There are also other cases where the influence of religion has been minimized by secular elites. Here, we deal in particular with countries have a strong liberal tradition (Kuru, 2009). In addition to what was mentioned so far, in conservative political environments, political elites use religion and religious rhetoric so that they can exert their influence, with a possibility to correlate it with the national identity. (Fox, 2015). Post-socialist countries have had numerous changes regarding to political elites on religion, from extreme confrontations to the unification with the narrative of national identity.

Intellectual elite, particularly in media and academic circles, makes a wide debate regarding to religion and secularism. From one side liberal and democratic societies, promote and represent pluralism, the division of religion from the state, and on the other side within the traditional society support models according to which religion should have a prominent role in politics and culture (Berger, 1999). Intellectual elites evidently emphasize religion in their discourses, mainly when the secularism, modernism and pluralism are part of the discussion.

### **3. Religious discourse in political and public life in Kosovo**

In Kosovo region, the relationship between politics and religion, the influence of state institutions and even the international factors and political actors play an important role in configuring the inter-religious reports. The Islamic community of Kosovo has an important impact in the socio-political life, nevertheless there are cases when its activity is contested, mainly regarding to the inner political dynamics, the relationship with the Islamic world and European Integration. There are numerous factors, as we can mention, the juridical status of religious communities, political narratives as well as foreign factors, that can be subject to analyses of these debates. The function of religious communities is regulated with formal juridical framework in Kosovo. It is legally framed within the religious rights guaranteed by the constitution, where it is clearly defined the protection of religious freedom and the division of the state from religion. Some think that Islamic community possesses a particular status in comparison to some other minor Islamic organizations that have a peripheral impact, knowing the fact that the only Islamic institution accepted by the state institutions is The Islamic Community of Kosovo. (Krasniqi, 2017). It is realized that this status gives the Islamic Community of Kosovo institutional representation for the Muslim Community of Kosovo. On the other hand, within the public debate on religion, this institution is included as well in discussions related to Islamic radicalism and the place of religion in politics.

Political personalities in Kosovo use Islamic community in different cases, depending on the political environment. It happens that religion is used for legitimating of local political power. Islamic Community of Kosovo is often invited to be part of formal state organizations, serving symbolically as a manifestation of the relationship between the state and the most dominant religious community. (Elsie, Destani, 2019)

On the contrary, the discussions in public opinion more and more emphasize the influence of Muslim population in Kosovo, through their support for religious organizations. During the recent years, after the war, the construction of mosques, and financial aid in the field of

education for Kosovo Muslims came from Turkey and Saudi Arabia, a fact that from political fractions has been seen as a challenge to secularism (Rexhepi, 2020). This narrative is used by political parties with Western orientation declaring the importance of keeping the division of the state from foreign Islamic influences while other conservative groups call for increasing the presence of religion in public affairs.

In some reports of the European Commission for integration of Kosovo we can find suggestions about the need of secularizing the society and enforcing the institutional capacities in the war against the abuse with the religion for political reasons (European Commission, 2021).

In this context the influence of Islamic Community is considered to be the commitment to cooperate with secular institutions and to protect the European values of religious tolerance.

Media and political discourse often tempt to model the public perception of the Islamic Community of Kosovo. Researches show that media in Kosovo in many cases establish narratives that relate Islam to potential radicalism, something that can contribute to stigmatization of religious communities (Likaj, 2019). There are cases when even politicians use religious affairs in order to get the support of some social groups, and this has brought to politicizing the religious discourse. As a proof to this we can take the parliamentary elections (of 2019-2020), when some of political actors and political parties have clearly been positioned to religious causes. Some parties have followed the extreme secularizing course while others have included religious values in their environments. In such background with such different discourses on the approach of religion and politics, the Islamic Community of Kosovo has intended to be neutral despite the fact that some declarations in media regarding to the influence of religion in education have caused many controversial opinions (Rexhepi, 2020)

*3.1 Differentiations within Kosovo and ethnic heterogeneity:* Kosovo society is a multiple and diverse entity, where historical developments, ethnical difference and religious division have a great impact. While ethnical Albanians compose the majority of the population, there are inner variations in many social dimensions. These differences have an important influence in establishing the identity, placing political and institutional relations and expressing the social conflicts. The differentiation within Kosovo society can be analyzed through the aspect of ethnical, religious, regional and socio-economic elements.

The population of Kosovo is mainly composed by Albanians, with 92%, followed by a number of Serbs, Bosnians, Turkish, Gorani, Roma and Egyptians. Kosovo has done a great job in integrating and socializing the national minorities. However, this diversity of ethnical minorities has influenced the emerging of rapports that draw attention to not having segregation in institutions, education and economy mainly stressing the complicated relationship between Albanian and Serbian population. The majority of Albanian Muslim population is of Sunni orientation, although within this huge religious community we can face differences in interpretation. Catholic community, which is mainly concentrated in the region of Dukagjin, makes the minority. However, these religious community remains of a particular importance for political consumption regarding to the political and cultural identity, as it has been constantly mentioned the relationship of this community to Western values. (Malcom, 1998).

On the other hand, Orthodox Christianity is the main religion within Serbian population, who built their identity keeping the relations of the Orthodox Serbian Church. In two last decades, the new religious movement within the Islamic community, Wahabism, has a wider influence in society urging great discussion regarding to the religious discourse in public (Rexhepi, 2020). Kosovo society as well as many other societies lacks the homogeneity in the aspect of religious identities. Historically the central and southern parts of Kosovo including Prishtina, Gjilan and Prizren, have been more influenced by Ottoman culture which were closer to Islamic tradition. By contrast, western parts such as Peja and Gjakova, have been more related to Catholic tradition as they have stronger relations to Albania (Malcom, 2009). When the religious

differentiation is seen from the political perspective, we can find differences regarding to the support for political parties. For example, The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) has got a strong support in the central Kosovo while The democratic league of Kosovo (LDK) has traditionally been supported by the eastern and urban regions (Visoka, 2019). The Self-Determination Movement (LVV) which in its program includes national unification and radical reforms in institutions, gains a great support from the youth and urban population.

When we talk about Serbian community, it is mainly represented in the north of Mitrovica and in other enclaves, therefore it is mainly supported by the state institutions of Serbia. At the same time, according to the report of European Commission (2021) it is necessary to enforce institutional framework which would fight possible implication of religion for political reasons, and to keep the secular character of the society. In this case it is particularly mentioned the establishment of perception of Islamic Community of Kosovo which is able to cooperate with all secular institutions in promoting European values and religious tolerance. But, there is another truth, which in practice and mainly influenced by media and political discourse establish the perception of the Islamic Community of Kosovo with a negative narration relating the Islam in Kosovo with the dangerous radicalism. This discourse as a consequence stigmatizes religious communities. (Likaj, 2019). The attempt to use religious affairs by politicians often influenced the polarization of inter-religion dialogue.

Kosovo also faces the lack of economic development like every western Balkans country, with a high level of unemployment, and in a visible dependence on remittances of Diaspora. The economic inequality impacts the social stratification, an element that influences the social differentiation, where the rich that are close to the political elite have an enormous influence in economy and the management of the sources. Social differentiation in Kosovo does not derive only from ethnical differences, but as well as from complicated religious, regional and social and socio-economic aspects. Despite the formal mechanism that exists and that really guarantees the rights of various groups, deep social differences however exist, and as a consequence they complicate the process of integration and building an inclusive society.

*3.2 Secular elite of Kosovo and its influence in establishing the public perception:* Secular elites in Kosovo play an important role in forming the social opinion, particularly when it comes to modernism and secularism. This influence can be seen through their support to secular values, reforms in the system of education, and the promotion to public policy that aims to divide religion from state structures. If we refer to the very essence and definition of secularism, it means reduction of the level of religious influence in contemporary society and liberation of institutions from the religious control. It is well-known the ascertainment which sees doubtfully the cultural element in Islam as part of the national identity in integrating project. This has influenced that in public discourse we find a negative statement to the urban oriental motivated culture itself. In particular cases we find negligence even to the ottoman architecture in public areas, certainly because modern buildings for commercial reasons. In addition to this, cultural programs and events more and more favor national and western characteristics, while oriental aspects are minimized and marginalized. Educational policy is very important in this process. We know the educated secular elite in Kosovo also through their attempt to promote such perceptions through different political activities, influencing cultural and social behavior. (Aleksic, 2018).

In important impact in developing the cooperation and border crossing in culture and bringing peace in Balkans, has the educational and professional elite, not excluding the academics and intellectuals. With their activity, they should contribute to establishing new narratives which would have promoted tolerance and understanding that is very important for post-conflict societies such as Kosovo. We could say that the process of secularism in Kosovo has not been developed uniformly. Social classes and groups have reacted in different ways. These reactions

have brought complex dynamics between traditional religious worldview and modern aspirations. Secular elite, with its commitment has attempted to keep the balance between these two worldviews, supporting values that enforce the democratic development and human rights. What can be mentioned here as a disturbing statement is the perception that effects the establishment of a religious discourse with negative opinions that contribute in emergence of tensions within ethical and religious communities, which is developed through avoidance from some traditional oriental elements in Kosovo culture which have been inherited by the long presence of the Ottoman Empire in this region and which are apparent in architecture, music and other aspects of everyday life. Such an attitude is confused with misunderstanding of modernism which risks damaging true values. Recently, there have been tendencies to marginalize these Islamic cultural elements, not excluding cultural and educational policies of the institutions of Kosovo.

We can state that elite cultural circles that make cultural policy in Kosovo after 1999, are focused on establishing a national identity which is far away from the oriental heritage. Educational curricula in schools and universities are oriented towards national and cultural history, avoiding or minimizing the importance of oriental influence. This approach might interrupt getting knowledge on the oriental cultural heritage, that may influence more in its marginalizing.

## **Conclusion**

From what has been mentioned so far in this work, we can state that religion in Kosovo is possible to be used as a separation boarder between ethnical communities, as well as between different layers within Kosovo society itself and Albanian society in general. Secular elites, in most of the cases support Western values and Catholicism as a cultural tradition. They make the dominating discourse, while Islam and Orthodoxy often remain marginalized because of oriental stigmatizations and prejudices. Understanding this discourse is essential to highlight how identity processes can get complicated in Kosovo society and influence the establishment of relationship with the West.

Scientific researches that have studied the relationship between religion and society in Kosovo show a complex dynamics. In these studies are included different historical, political and cultural elements. Secularism is not a monolith. It depends in many aspects that are related to geopolitics, cultural, identity, ethnical belonging and social structures. The research attempts to suggest that religious belonging is highly important in establishing the boundaries between “us and them”. In this case we can see how religion can get factorized in political and social changes. It is very important to state the importance of contextualization of religion in establishing of national identity and integrating European processes. Islamic cultural traditional elements in Kosovo often have been understood as obstacles in European integrating process. This discursive analyzes and debates often include secular intellectual and academic elites. From another ankle, the Catholic culture, Catholicism is represented as a symbol to western values and cultural relationship with Europe. As a result of the historical past with Ottoman Empire and historical Serbian-Albanian tensions, Islam and Orthodoxy are considered as part of “eastern” heritage, influencing so, in its social image. These positions place religion as a narration for political and geopolitical categorization, considering it a cause to deep ideological differences that influence the public discourse and political decisions.

In Kosovo society, we can face with differences in religious practice, depending whether these communities live in rural or urban centers. Urban areas are keen on secular values while rural communities are keener on traditional way of living. In the era of digitalization and screen culture, these differences are being minimized. Political influences and cultural narratives model the perception of oriental components within the identity of the Albanian man. These

oriental cultural components, in most of the cases are not taken into consideration in cultural and educational projects. This mentality can be explained as part of a wider process of establishing of a new identity that depends on western and national values.

Despite the debate about the impact of religion in society, religion remains an important element of social developments in Kosovo. Its role is often conditioned by different political, economic and cultural influences. Further future studies would be oriented towards deeper analyzes that would offer clearer view of the mutual influence between secular and religious worldviews. It would be nice if through these studies we could find out how secularism and religion influence the public environment, public life and cultural habits in Kosovo.

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