

# The contribution of religious communities in promoting tolerance in the Republic of North Macedonia

Review  
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## Abstract

In our day we observe the need for the contribution of religious communities in promoting coexistence between different ethnicity, cultures, and beliefs. Especially in modern societies which underpin multi-culturalism, the need to build understanding is achieved through the process of tolerance and dialogue between civilizations. This work has been undertaken to achieve two important goals: the process of interreligious dialogue promoted by religious communities and its interrelation with politics with the aim of reaching a constructive debate between them and not the divisive debate.

The daily use of the terms "tolerance, harmony or interethnic and interfaith coexistence" is used more and more by civil society but also by politicians, but unfortunately, nothing is said about the theoretical and practical aspect of this phenomenon. Based on case studies, this paper tries to fill a symbolic space in this aspect.

*Keywords:* War in Macedonia (2001), Interfaith dialogue; Religious communities; Joint statement;

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## 1. Introduction

During the destruction of the former Yugoslavia, unfortunately many religious communities allowed themselves to be manipulated by others and to put more "fuel into the fire" of inter-ethnic and interfaith hate, while others felt they could not afford no special contribution to peace. In this fragile political and social period, "Macedonia was the only Republic of the former Yugoslavia whose religious leaders, in the outbreak of the 2001 war, formally asked their followers not to take arms against each other and at the same time call for the peaceful resolution of the conflict" (Sterland & Beauclerk, 2008, p. 22). The 2001 conflict in Macedonia was not primarily about religion, and while it was not a religious war, it was concluded that religious institutions are not the cause of war and are not the main guilty, but religion could play the key role in restoring peace and this task can be done better with the help of the religious communities. According to Professor Matevski: "These religious organizations are not completely free of responsibility. If they are not responsible for what they said, they are responsible why they did not say what they should say. This gives the impression that religious organizations in the Republic of Macedonia do not have enough power to speak in their religious language at a certain socio-political moment in which ethnocentrism becomes the ideology of modern times " (Matevski, 2007, pp. 55-56).

## **2. Joint statement for peace of the religious communities of the Republic of North Macedonia**

At a critical point and in the wake of the fighting between the army and the police on the one hand and the National Liberation Army (UÇK) on the other hand, based on their ethnic and religious division, the international factor wanted also to use the latest card, which is, by religious institutions to reduce the bloods of members involved in the fighting and eventual involvement of the rest of the population who had the chance to turn this collision into civil disasters, as according to them this card could restore peace in the country. They initiated a meeting between the heads of all religious institutions in the country to meet in Switzerland and issue a joint statement for peace and return to dialogue.

The institutions participating in this meeting were the five largest religious communities in the Republic of Macedonia: The Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Religious Community, the Catholic Church, the United Methodists and the Jewish Community. The meeting was initiated with the intervention of the European Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, placing at the top of the roundtable and hosting a person who knew the mentality of Albanians and Macedonians, Archbishop Anastasios, the Head of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, one of the Presidents of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches and President of the World Religion Conference for Peace.

In our opinion, the choice is not accident because according to the initiators, Anastasios being Archbishop in Albania was well aware of the Albanian mentality and being Orthodox was well aware of the mentality of the North Macedonian Orthodox.

The round table meeting among the members of the meeting entitled: "Meeting through the roundtable with the religious communities of the Republic of North Macedonia", which was held in La Longeraie of the city of Morges from 11 to 13 June 2001. List of participants in this meeting were as follows: from the North Macedonian Orthodox Church participants were Metropolitan Timotej, Metropolitan Naum, Archimandrite Nectorium, Ljupco Dvojakovski, Zoran Danev and Mr. Dejan Dimitrijevski; from the Islamic Religious Community participants were Mr. Jakup Selimovski, Mr. Ruzhdi Lata, Mr. Zejlula Fazliov and Mr. Bahri Aliu; from the Catholic Church of Macedonia were Dr. Kiro Stojanov and Rev. Marjan Ristov; from the United Methodist North Macedonian Church participant were Vilhelm Nausner and Mihail Cekov; from the Jewish Community in the Republic of North Macedonia participants were Mr. Viktor Mizhari and Isak Asiel; There were also representatives of the North Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCMS) based in the city of Skopje as co-workers in this meeting, with participants Sasho Klekovski and Mr. Kalin Babusku.

In the following we will present their common statement, while in the annex we will provide the original document in North Macedonian language:

*“Driven by the principles of our religion and educated to live and work together, as brothers and sisters, since we are all creatures of one God; Believing that the common elements of our religious*

*beliefs should represent the basis for mutual understanding, action for peace, and believing that the same Lord invokes us in this; Encouraged by the common concern of violence and clashes that are threatening to break our common harmony and democracy, which we build with patience; We, representatives of the North Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Religious Community, the Macedonian Catholic Church, the Macedonian Evangelical Methodist Church, and the Jewish Community in the Republic of North Macedonia, together with the World Council for International Cooperation, met in Morges, Switzerland, from 11 to 13 June 2001, to express our commitment and to pray to the only God for peace in our common country, so we give this Joint Declaration. We, as representatives of Churches and religious communities, strongly condemn violence and clashes, which instead of solving left only chaos and tragedy. Violence and clashes are not based on religion or religious differences, so we refuse to accept it as an act of religious intolerance, because religion cannot support violence. Our churches and religious communities are not involved and firmly refuse to allow themselves to be involved and abused by others, nor do they allow misuse of religious symbols and language for violent purposes. We condemn the violent expulsion as well as misuse of the water and the basic needs of the population and call our communities in respect for human rights, including the right to water and help, as a basis for lasting peace. We strongly condemn the misuse of sacred sites and sacred objects in warfare purposes, their desecration and destruction. We also severely judge cases of the mischief of religious leaders. The sacred nature of sacred objects should be respected as well as the personal integrity and dignity of representatives and officials of religious communities. Peace is paramount to be left only in the hands of politicians. Peace is also the responsibility of Churches and Religious Communities. We are firmly convinced that problem responses should always be demanded by open and extended dialogue, based on mutual respect and respect for the differences and values of other religious communities and traditions. This is the only path that stems from a God and no other way exists. We feel and accept the need, so we have agreed on concrete activities in this regard, both individually and as Church and religious community. We call and advise our believers guided by faith in God, to follow the path of non-violating and mutual respect, to promote peace and eternal stability, coexistence and prosperity for all of its citizens. We call upon the Churches and religious communities of Europe and the world to pray for us and to support our efforts for peace, among others through the support for the integration and empowerment of Churches and religious communities. We call upon the international community to support peace and integrity, strengthening European integration and supporting the peace, stability and prosperity of Macedonia and all over the region. God is with us. God encourages us. We know that we can find a solution with Him, but first we must have faith and trust in Him”.*

(Submissions of Representatives of Five Religious Communities and the World Council for International Co-operation).



- WCC Photo / Peter Williams, A7755-06, Geneva, June 13, 2001, Roundtable Meeting with Religious Communities in the Republic of North Macedonia: Signing a Joint Declaration.

In connection with this very important meeting for the cooperation of the religious communities in Macedonia we wanted to make more close observations of the meeting and this was only enabled through the interview, but given the fact that we did not have the opportunity to conduct an interview with every representative from the five largest religious communities in Macedonia decided to talk with the representative from the North Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCMS) who had the role of the co-worker in this meeting, and this was made possible with the help of Mr. Kalin Babusku, that we did a short interview (Babusku, 2015).

*What was your role at the meeting between representatives of Macedonian religious communities in Geneva?*

The MCMS (Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation) is a non-governmental organization was funded by the World Church Organization. As such, the MCMS is attended also by representatives of North Macedonian religious organizations. At the time of the conflict in 2001, the MCMS took an active role in calming tensions. A while before, I was trained by the Mediator's Network for Northern Ireland for mediation (mediation for all segments of social life), so my role in all this process was: Process Control; Mediating the process and; Communication between religious organizations.

*Did a positive or negative atmosphere prevail among representatives of religious communities?*

Throughout the process there was a positive atmosphere and maximum energy. The main reason for this was that the conflict from its very beginning was defined as total ethnic and not religiously promoted. Religious communities were ready to say publicly that religious communities in North Macedonia do not support and have nothing to do with the war.

*Do you think this joint statement had a positive impact on the coexistence among the citizens for the coming years in North Macedonia?*

With the fact that all religious communities stayed behind that joint statement, the same had the greatest impact on coexistence among the citizens in the coming years. I think that the same statement brought them later in their agreements and their maturing activities.

### **3. Joint statement about water conflict in 2001**

We will focus on one of the strangest points of this joint statement of the five representatives of the religious communities in North Macedonia. Part of the text may seem to be a bizarre ingredient in such a document, such as the part of the document dealing with water, namely:

*We condemn the violent expulsion as well as misuse of the water and the basic needs of the population and call our communities in respect for human rights, including the right to water and help, as a basis for lasting peace.*

This came not accidentally, because the National Liberation Army (UÇK), in particular on the occasion of their entry into the district of Lipkovo, where the Lake of Lipkovo and Glazhnja are located, took control of the water supply that supplies more than 100,000 citizens of Kumanovo and the suburbs its water flow from the city water supply was cut off for 12 days in a row. According to a media portal "after the five-day dispute, Albanian soldiers allowed the convoy, led by OSCE representatives, including water company expert teams to enter the village" and find that water is not poisoned by the KLA" (reliefweb.int, 2001). This information is also ascertained by experts on the issue of terrorism and water Gleick and Heberger, where, according to them "apart from the water flow in Kumanovo was interrupted for 12 days in the conflict between Albanians and Macedonian forces, water flow control equipment (valves) was also damaged on Lake Glazhnja and Lipkovo " (Gleick & Heberger, 2014, p. 196)

### **4. The result of the joint statement and next steps**

Surprisingly, this joint statement of the five religious community institutions did not have the proper effect. According to the authors Klekovski, Krzalovski & Hodzic (2004, p. 114) "although representatives of five religious communities in the Republic of Macedonia said they would attend some activities, these activities unfortunately never materialized". According to author Nesimi, "with the return of Switzerland, MOC, insists again for not changing the constitution, which is the crisis generator in Macedonia" (Nesimi, 2005, p. 124).

As war began to spread even more widely in the country, the US organization "World Conference on Religion and Peace" invited leaders of the two largest religious communities in the country on an official visit to New York, namely the North Macedonian Orthodox Church headed by the Archbishop Stefan and the Muslim leader Reis ul Ulema Erif Emini, with the intention that in the near future in North Macedonia will be organized more frequent interfaith dialogue meetings. But this meeting in New York did not succeed since religious institutions never took the initiative to make interfaith meetings without the presence of internationals, and as a result their doubts and tensions continued to increase (Mojzes, From Crisis to Post-crisis in Macedonia, 2002).

President Boris Trajkovski, at a critical point in the conflict, visited the United States of America and at all official meetings he found out the political crisis in Macedonia and therefore asked for help in peace-keeping in the Republic of North Macedonia (Daskalovski, 2004, p. 3). During his official visit to the United States, he was invited to make a presentation at the "American Institute for Peace". At that meeting, during the speech he asked for help in promoting interreligious dialogue as a tool for peace building in North Macedonia (Smock, 2006, p. 31). This was accomplished through Professor Leonard Swidler and Professor Paul Mojzes, who were leaders of the international dialogue of scholars and editors of ecumenical studies journals in Philadelphia, USA, and activists of the global organization of "International Scholars' Annual Dialogue" (ISAT- Jewish-Christian-Muslim) created in 1977.

The Dialogue of 2001 will be held under the auspices of President Boris Trajkovski, as he positively assessed the ISAT 2000 conference, held in Jakarta, Indonesia under the auspices of President Abdurrahman Wahid (Swidler & Mojzes, *The Study of Religion in the Age of Global Dialogue*, 2000, p. 1).

Mojzes and Swidler visited Skopje for the first time in June 2001. During the agenda they met with representatives of five religious communities and set the date for the conference in November of the same year. Through this dialogue, they hoped to have two main points: a) the inclusion of as many clerics in this dialogue as possible and b) the organization of seminars involving world scholars from three religions; and as a result, when local religious leaders in this dialogue will see international attention, they would accept the proposals of these meetings. Leaders of religious communities were initially distanced from this process by saying that it was a hasty and overly public act in these times of war, but the truth was that all religious communities needed international assistance to overcome the policy-driven stalemate. With the deterioration of the political and military situation in the country the dialogue was forced to be postponed further, but after the intervention of NATO that fall, Mojzes and Swidler visited Skopje once again in order to convince all the religious leaders again to continue with the dialogue.

In the end it was decided that the meeting would be held in May 2002 with the financial support of the American Institute for Peace and the Open Society Foundation. They organized a major international conference on Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue, attended by 50 world-class scholars from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions and 150 invited participants from Macedonia, including the President of the Republic of North Macedonia and the leaders of the Orthodox Church North Macedonian, the Islamic Religious Community, the Catholic Church, the United Methodists and the Jewish Community. Dialogue untitled "Building Confidence Between Cults and Religious Communities in North Macedonia".

During the conversation with author Swidler, we realized what were their methods to convince leaders of religious communities to join in a joint meeting, he said: "We persuaded the religious leaders of North Macedonia and other participants that the dialogue approach to building trust mutual respect was respected outside the country, especially in the West; they felt honored that a gathering of such magnitude was taking place in their country notably when the opening and closing of the conference was attended by the President of the state; They thought that such an

event of such magnitude was necessary to send a message to members of their community that were involved in the war. "

The main meeting was held in a neutral location, but further meetings and seminars were held at the North Macedonian Orthodox Faculty, at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, at the St. Cyril and Methodius University, at the Tetovo University, and other civic locations. During this negotiation process, the leaders of all religious communities, notably the Macedonian Orthodox leader headed by Stephen and the Islamic Religious Community headed by Reis ul Ulema Arif Emini, accepted the three approaches made by the participants of the conference, namely: 1) Establishment of a Council for Interfaith Cooperation with the participation of the heads of the five institutions of religious communities in the country; 2) The leaders of the institutions of the religious communities, especially the North Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Religious Community, to meet several times a year to discuss issues affecting the relations of their communities; and 3) the researchers of these communities, especially of the two larger ones, to exchange experiences and teach faculties of each other, i.e., to exchange academic experiences.

During the interview with Paul Mojzes (interview about functionality of the council for interfaith cooperation , 2016), we asked him about the functionality of the council, and he sent us a report that showed the progress of this council within the years. According to him: "this council for interfaith cooperation in the first years after 2001 has met several times with each other, sometimes with our encouragement, but in many cases with its own desire, but over the years their meetings are diminished, not to say have completely faded". For the attendance of these meetings and seminars they have received grants from the United States Institute of Peace, the Open Society Institute Foundation, as well as small grants from many American religious organizations.

Today, the Council of Interfaith Cooperation can be considered "lame." All religious communities, except the Macedonian Orthodox Church, have formally sent letters to each other. One of the reasons why the Macedonian Orthodox Church has not been very active in inter-religious correspondence and has marginalized this issue as secondary is that the conflict between the North Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church on the right of autocephaly seems to have exhausted many energies of the North Macedonian religious institution. The North Macedonian Orthodox Church is also very upset when during the negotiations to end the 2001 war with the Ohrid Agreement, the amendments voted in the North Macedonian Parliament that underwent constitutional changes deprived the privilege of being the only religious institution mentioned in the constitution, making it almost equal to other religious communities in the country.

## **5. Conclusion**

Today, when foreign leaders are not present, the Council for Interfaith Cooperation rarely meet with each other. Individually, religious community representatives have agreed to work with each other with the support of international funds (USIP), but the rhythm of their cooperation is distinctly different from what internationals want.

Despite the fact that these conferences have become part of government programs and the tradition for their organization has already been formed, they have deviated from their essence and initial vision, to be a catalyst of peace in the country and the region.

Even the fact that interfaith dialogue is seen with great suspicion in North Macedonia, however, if carried out in the spirit of equality and justice, it is able, to lead to an increase of confidence between communities. To achieve this, we recommend two paths that are potentially useful in expanding interfaith dialogue with relatively modest sources. The first would be female interreligious meetings at local or interurban levels, and secondly, the creation of interreligious youth activities, such as camping trips, excursions or perhaps joint humanitarian projects for the homeless.

## **6. Appendix**

The document that is presented in the annex is provided by the World Church Council's Archives after our request, although at first our application was accepted with countervalue of 20 Swiss francs but when we showed our purpose that it is not for profit purpose they sent us by email on April 22, 2015 with no cash equivalents and for this we thank them publicly. Their only requirement was that if we use the paper for scientific use we use this reference:

*List of Participants and Declarations: World Church Council Archives, Ref. Europe Desk, Macedonia 2000-2005, Macedonian Center for International Cooperation, Macedonian Roundtable with Religious Leaders, Morges (raw material 2015)*



Водени од начелата на нашата вера и обврзани да живееме и работиме заедно, како браќа и сестри, бидејќи сите сме чеда на едниот Бог,

Верувајќи дека заедничките елементи на нашите вероисповеди треба да претставуваат основа за заемно разбирање и акција за мир и верувајќи дека едниот Бог не повикува на тоа,

Поттикнати од нашата заедничка загриженост насилството и судирите кои се закануваат да ја уништат нашата заедничка хармонија и демократија, кои трпеливо ги градиме,

Ние, претставниците на Македонската Православна Црква, Исламската верска заедница во Македонија, Католичката црква во Македонија, Евангелско-методистичката црква во Македонија и Еврејската заедница во Република Македонија, заедно со Светскиот совет на црквите и Конференцијата на европските цркви, со поддршка на Македонскиот центар за меѓународна соработка, се сретнавме во Моргес, Швајцарија, 11 – 13 Јуни 2001 година, за да ја изразиме нашата посветеност и да Му се молиме на едниот Бог за мир во нашата заедничка земја Македонија, и ја испраќаме следнава

## ЗАЕДНИЧКА ПОРАКА

Ние, како претставници на нашите цркви и верски заедници најостро го осудуваме насилството и судирите, кои наместо решенија ќе остават само хаос и несреќа.

Насилството и судирите не се засновани на религија или религиски разлики и одбиваме да ги прифатиме како акт на верска нетрпеливост, бидејќи вистинската вера не може да поддржува насилство.

Нашите цркви и верски заедници не се вклучени и цврсто одбиваат да дозволат да бидат вклучени и злоупотребени самите, како и верските симболи и јазик за цели на насилството.

Го осудуваме присилното иселување, како и злоупотребата на водата и основните потреби на населението и ги повикуваме нашите заедници на почитување на човековите права, вклучувајќи го и правото на вода и помош, како основа на одржлив мир.

Остро ја осудуваме злоупотребата на светите места и сакралните објекти во воени цели и нивното сквернавање и рушење. Исто така, остро ги осудуваме случаите на малтретирање свештени и верски лица. Светата природа на сакралните објекти мора да биде почитувана, како и личниот интегритет и достоинство на свештените лица.

Мирот е премногу важен да се остави само на политичарите. Мирот е одговорност и на црквите и верските заедници.

Цврсто сме уверени дека одговорите на проблемите секогаш треба да се бараат со отворен и траен дијалог, темелен врз целосна меѓусебна почит и врз почитување на различностите и вредностите на другите верски традиции и заедници. Тоа е единствениот пат кој извира од едниот Бог и друг пат не смее да постои.

Ние ја чувствуваме и ја прифаќаме потребата и сме согласни на конкретни активности во тој правец, индивидуално и како цркви и верски заедници.

Ние ги повикуваме и им порачуваме на нашите верници водени од верата во Бога да го следат патот на човекољубието и меѓусебната почит, поттикнувајќи доверба и мирољубив соживот во Македонија, градејќи траен мир, стабилност и просперитет за сите нејзини граѓани.

Ги повикуваме црквите и верските заедници од Европа и светот да се молат за нас и да ги поддржат нашите залагања за мир, меѓу другото и преку поддршка на интеграцијата и јакнење на црквите и верските заедници.

Ние ја повикуваме меѓународната заедница да го поддржи мирот и интегритетот, со јакнење на европската интеграција и со поддршка на мирот, стабилноста и просперитет на Македонија и на целиот регион.

Бог е со нас. Бог не охрабрува. Ние знаеме дека можеме да најдеме решенија со Него, но мораме да имаме вера и доверба во Него.

#### Македонската Православна Црква

Митрополит Дебарско-кичевски Тимотеј

Митрополит Струмички Наум

#### Исламската заедница на Македонија

Јагуп Селимовски

директор за верски прашања

Зејнула Фазлиу

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