Believers for Social Change: Bridging the Secular Religious Divide in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Faith can serve as a source of social change and can bring different groups around common ideas and the common good. Its role can be formal through official faith institutions and informal through the work of individuals who are engaged in civil society organizations. Faith has driven activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) to work on bridging and linking believers from various religious traditions, but also non-believers who share similar ideas and concerns for the social wellbeing in their communities. The paper discusses the secular-religious divide through faith-based activism in BiH and how “relational dialogism” can help in overcoming these divisions. The International Minimum Inhibitory Concentration (IMIC) Initiative “Three Monotheistic Voices” and TPO’s initiative “A *Weltethos* in School” can serve as examples of how faith-based activists use religious arguments in secular non-governmental settings to pursue dialogue, peace and social change in their communities. Both initiatives gather scholars and practitioners of varying ethnic, religious and non-religious identities from the Balkans. Some of the activists are laity and theologians, while some are scholars and activists who recognize the power of religion to translate ideas of peace, dialogue and development into social and political life.

Keywords: religious, secular, faith-based, relational dialogism, social change

Introduction

Becoming a human being is an adventure and a pilgrimage. It is an adventure because we receive life as a space to search for ourselves. It is a pilgrimage because we have to constantly re-discover the holy place of our own being... (Jadranka Brnčić).

Secular-religious divide is deeply embedded in the post-secular era, and according to Erin Wilson dualism biases operate on three dichotomies: (1) institutional (religious)/ideational (secular); (2) individual (religious)/communal (secular); and (3) irrational (religious)/rational (secular). It leads to confining religion to privacy, and irrational thinking that should not be a part of public domain, as Westphalian treaty designated religion as a private matter, and secularization theory continued to support it believing in its decline and disappearance. This dualism is also part of Eurocentric Western power position, which allows the West to neglect less powerful and less privileged perspectives and worldviews. As West is not monolithic category, religion also is not static and monolithic, and we need to overcome limitations and biases of secular and religious dualism. To go beyond the imposed secular dualism, Willson (2012) proposed a “relational dialogism” (p. 21) in international politics, which can be also applied more broadly to social and political life affairs in local communities and societies to bring social change. Relational dialogism is a framework, which open a

possibility to understand religion and politics not as two separate and completely divided spheres of life, but two spheres that constantly change and make shifts and produce impact on each other with inter-relationships between their different elements and dimensions.

Globally, there has been a growing interest in collaboration between secular and faith organizations, communities and individuals who communicate ideas of peace, dialogue and reconciliation with religious arguments (Moksnes & Melin, 2013). They bring spiritual capital to broader discussion about development of social capital, which helps people to better understand each other and build more productive connections crucial for social change.

However, in the Balkans the gap between secular, primarily neoliberal and religious understanding of human rights, freedom of speech, reconciliation and development is still enormous, and there was not so much collaboration and employment of religion as driver of change in resolving national and global issues (Popov, 2012). Through several initiatives of religiously inspired individuals the paper discusses the role of faith and faith-based activism in challenging ethnic divisions, religious dogmatism and status quo polity in the Balkans societies. The main goal is to demonstrate that: faith-based activism fosters further development of civil society and peace-building; and that spiritual capital brought by faith-based activists moves beyond mere bonding between members of the same faith communities, and enables bridging the secular-religious divide. For the purpose of this paper, I analyzed the work of the two NGOs in BiH: TPO Foundation Sarajevo and International Minimum Inhibitory Concentration (IMIC) Zajedno Sarajevo, where I have an insider's position, because I worked in both organizations for years and learned from the firsthand how their activism in secular sphere involved faith as a powerful tool of social change.

Spiritual Capital for Social Change

Faith is not taken seriously in social capital formation discussion and is not exploited enough in pursuing dialogue and peace. Social capital is generally understood as any form of social relations that enables groups of citizen to work together and accomplish common goals (Smidt, 2003, p. 2). To achieve any goal people need to develop and nurture relationships, across various social, political and cultural circles. John Field (2003) summarizes his thoughts about social capital in two words: relationships matter (p. 1). John P. Lederach (2005) also finds relationships as central part of the constructive social change in peace-building and reconciliation.

There are different types of relationships, and for the social change and community development Alison Gilchrist offers three types: (1) bonding—between members of family and groups with strong mutual commitments with multifaceted relationships; (2) bridging—connections between individual and groups that have less in common, but may have overlapping interests; and (3) linking—connections beyond peer boundaries and reaching resources outside regular circles (Gulchrist, 2004, p. 6).

Faith plays an important role in bonding their own members, but organized religions as Putnam suggest in his study on Catholicism in Italy (Putnam, 1993, pp. 107-109), are not always productive for social capital formation, because they are self-centered and sometimes they do not find themselves as part of civil society, but more as its alterative. It is the case with faith-communities and churches in the Balkans. Faith institutions also do not go beyond bonding level, because as Scott Appleby notices, religious leaders failed to employ their potentials for peace-building in local communities, because they think that their role was about maintaining institutions and taking care of their own flock (Thomass, 2000, p.129).

Organized faith communities in BiH were pre-occupied with their own issues to re-build destroyed

mosques and churches and provide comfort and support for their communities. Some of them remained silent because they supported war criminals and ethnic divisions (Ognjenovic & Jozelic, 2014), and collaborated with ethno-national political parties in pursuing their common agendas (Andjelic, 2003; Sells, 1996; Mojzes, 2011). Some churches even ostracized those who stood firmly for freedom of speech and critique of the silence over crimes committed by their ethnic group (Brnčić, 2014). However, lack of interest, resources and capacities to deal with peace-building, reconciliation and development was not the only problem. Foreign donors found it hard to make allies and partners with faith communities in building peace right after the war in the Balkans, because of the controversial role of religious institutions and churches during the war and their open support to ethno-national politics (Neven, 2003), and because “foreign donors sought partners among their secular civil and human rights organizations...” (Spahić-Šiljak, 2014, p. 24). It was changed after the last decade due to the influence of World Council of Churches on local institution and because international donors started to recognize faith-communities as partners and part of civil society scene. Initial programs were supported via Interreligious Council of BiH, but today individual churches and faith communities apply for grants like any other non-governmental organization.

Having this in mind, first human rights and peace-building initiatives were not driven by religion and many did not want to use faith as argument in peace-building, but over time women’s human rights activists as well as some men engaged in peace-building organizations and academic institutions started to use faith to pursue peace and dialogue (Spahić-Šiljak, 2014). Rare exceptions were organizations like IMIC Zajedno Sarajevo, established in 1991 to gather primarily families from confessional mixed marriages.

Some scholars and faith-based activists stood firmly against ethnic and religious divisions and Marko Orsolić, Bosnian friar, Ivo Marković and his colleague were among the rare faith-based activists who permanently underlined this message and criticized the churches and communities for hypocrisy and lack of willingness for reconciliation (Clark, 2010, p. 689). Two younger colleagues also against Catholic theologians, Alen Kristić and Drago Bojić published numerous articles and books to challenge “masqueraded or simulated faith” and “nationalized faith” (Kristić, 2014a) that reduced universal messages of faith to daily politics.

However, their critique was not mere apologetic endeavor, and these scholars and activists went far beyond mere criticism and academic work. They launched dozens of initiatives and programs in secular NGOs where they found fertile ground and freedom to work without pressure from the church hierarchies and ethno-nationalists in state institutions. The programs they initiated promoted dialogue and gathered secular and religious organizations believers and non-believers to work together. They brought religious vocabulary into conversation about human rights, education and dialogue between different worldviews, secular neoliberal, and religious.

Through the two local initiatives: “Monotheistic Three Voices” by IMIC Zajedno and “Weltethos in School” by TPO we can see how relational dialogism function when faith-based activism enable fluidity of understanding of religion and secular, and show the power of religion in translating the idea of peace, dialogue and development into social and political life.

Monotheistic Three Voices in a Secular Context

IMIC Zajedno is a faith-based initiative that promotes intercultural and multi-religious dialogue¹. In order to

¹ International Multi-religious and Intercultural Center (IMIC) Zajedno. Retrieved from <http://www.imic.ba>

contribute to re-building of the ethnically divided society in BiH, IMIC Zajedno with its leader, Franciscan priest and professor of political science, Marko Orsolić who is considered as a person-institution of multi-religious dialogue and reconciliation initiated a variety of gatherings, prayers and cultural manifestations. Although religion is the main foundation of its work, IMIC also uses secular arguments and approaches and gather both believers and non-believers. The overarching principle of IMIC is that: “people can be differentiated by religion, but they cannot be divided by religion”. Great proclamation, but it is very challenging to apply in the post-war divided society in which religion played a very divisive role and still serves more for ethnic homogenization than spiritual advancement and accountability.

IMIC *weltanschauung* was primarily informed by the religious teachings of love, respect, compassion and justice; by the contemporary theological and philosophical legacy of Germany where Marko studied, by the Franciscan tradition of building connections and living with and among people and by the local Bosnian tradition of *komšilik* or neighborliness and nurturing close ties with neighbors (Funk Deckard, 2012). Although IMIC has more formal members who coordinate certain activities, most of the work rests on the informal groups and individuals who make a chain of connections in the social network and social change. Almost in every city not only in BiH, but in the region Marko developed personal connections with organizations and activists and this semi-structural work sometimes seem chaotic and disturbing, but proved to be the best way for knitting stable and reliable connections. IMIC does not have a database of all its members, but there are hundreds who will identify with IMIC idea of multi-religious and intercultural living, together (*zajedno*). I personally met and worked with many of them, and sometimes that informal network was more efficient than any other formal structure with rigid procedures.

The social capital of connections and networks that IMIC built over the course of 20 years contributed to secular-religious dialogue and collaboration around many issues in BiH. These informal connections built strong social networks, which Julianne Funk found in her research about religious peace-building in BiH with extraordinary individuals who pioneered changes in their communities (Funk Deckard, 2012, p. 44). Social network theory identifies these individuals as “connectors” or boundary “spanners” or how Marc Gopin describes them as: “people who have the courage to move beyond their immediate closed network and reach out to others” (Gopin, 2009). Marko was an artist of ties, connecting inconceivably different societal and religious groups and individuals from different fields: from journalists, filmmakers, artists and writers to clergy persons, civil servant, human rights activists, and business persons. Personal encounters mattered the most, and he firmly believed that once you get to know somebody, she or he will change and in most of the cases it did happen. Fifteen years ago while the war wounds and memories were still fresh, I personally experienced positive development from the personal encounters with people who were reluctant to communicate across ethnic and religious lines. One of many anecdotes is about the Orthodox priest in a small city in Northern BiH taught me that we should not give up from dialogue even if the person is not friendly during the first encounter. The priest we met was not friendly and he terrified me when he said to Marko: “I guarantee that her hair would remain on her head, but I am not sure about her head”. Two years after the first unpleasant meeting we met again at started taking and getting to know one another and became friends. What I learned from that encounter was that the priest also was terrified and I was the first Muslim woman he met and had more profound conversation beyond mere greeting of his neighbors.

Besides the fieldwork and multi-religious encounters and education, IMIC structured its vision into the program: “Monotheistic Three Voices” (*Monoteističko troglasje*). Marko Orsolić thinks that “three

monotheistic religious traditions can play a beautiful symphony together, and the best and safest space is secular arena with its civil society organizations”.² As Franciscan priest and part of the Franciscan order he realized that if he wanted to pursue this idea he should have started it outside the Church and enable citizens both believers and non-believers to come together in a more neutral space than the church. Different worldviews learned to appreciate a beautiful music, art, and universal messages about humanity, dignity, love, compassion, justice, and equality contained in the sacred texts of the three monotheistic religions. He explains that traditional way of conveying these messages primarily in churches and faith-communities through rituals and religious ceremonies, excludes a significant number of citizens who may be believers or not: “It is particularly important to include and embrace those who live in confessional mixed marriages, because after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, they are excluded and neglected”.³ Gathering those who were and are still minority in ethnically homogenized communities in BiH, Marko was perceived by many in the Catholic church as somebody who is saving communist children (Pilić, 2006), or as “red priest”. He wanted to follow his calling and be on the side of those who suffered, and who were condemned and attacked by ethno-nationalists on power. He was blatant in his statements against ethno-nationalism.

...I would not be a member of the Democratic-Christian Party even if the Pope himself were its leader, because my vocation of priest can only be universal. Like Jesus who died for all people, a priest also must be for all people... Regrettably, to be an anti-fascist here automatically entails being proclaimed a communist, which is needless to say, one of our many follies.⁴

His calling was to serve not only Christians, but all people, which is not well-received in the Catholic Church that expected him to primarily serve, and help Catholics. What Marko and other Franciscan like Ivo Marković who established the first Inter-religious Pontanimachoir did, “were not instances of individual peacemaking... they mirrored the ideals of the Bosnian Franciscan province as religious institution (Jakelic, 2010)”. That ideal was to be there for those who need help and who suffer whether they are Catholics or not. Marko went beyond the mere help and support, he was knitting a web of relations in BiH, primarily with civil society organizations to encourage believers to be good citizens and work together for the well-being of all, not only one particular group.

He employed “relational dialogism” to go mere bonding of members of the same church. He wanted to bring together all citizens of BiH, whether they observe religion or not, whether they have personal faith or not, around this beautiful symphony of the three religious voices.

“Monotheistic Three Voices” performance was organized either on the Day of Peace in September, or the Day of Human Rights in December or the Anti-fascist day in May in the premises of theatre, or other public spaces. In collaboration with Antifascist movement of BiH, artists and the Parliament of BiH, Marko wanted to send a message how to present spirituality and beauty of monotheistic religions in public arena. Although the content of these performances were primarily religious (reading selected sacred texts), the form was secular—theatre performance with music. Many opposed this kind of presentations of religions as syncretic, but it was just one form of “civil religion” (Bellah, 1992), in public space. IMIC stands for church and state separation, but do not support confining religion to private life. Religion, like art and sport should be present in

² Author’s interview with Marko Orsolic, Sarajevo, December 27, 2014.

³ Author’s interview with Marko Orsolic, Sarajevo, December 27, 2014.

⁴ Interview with Marko Orsolic, Munich. (December 28, 1993). Retrieved from <http://www.aimpress.ch/dyn/trae/archive/data/199312/31228-004-trae-sar.htm>

public and can be useful in making fostering civil society dialogue and collaboration, as Marko pointed out: “There will be no democracy without contribution of faith. It is important to make believers accountable for the destiny of humankind, therefore they should participate as citizens in modern democracy”.⁵

The challenge was however to make universal message of God available to broader audience, without formal religious rituals. Therefore, IMIC initiated both academic programs, published relevant works and provided education on dialogue and peace-building. Following its vision contained in the symphony of three monotheistic voices, IMIC played a crucial role in establishing the first program of Religious studies in South-East Europe, at the University of Sarajevo.⁶ The idea of monotheistic three voices was reflected in the design of all courses that included Jewish, Christian and Islamic perspective in addition to sociological, anthropological, historical, philosophical points of view. Another stream of this vision appeared in the IMIC collaborative project on religious education in public schools. Since it was designed as doctrinal education for each religious tradition IMIC in collaboration with Goethe Institute, University of Sarajevo and TPO Foundation designed the textbook for multi-religious religious education tuned to the spirit of the Bosnian multicultural legacy. More about the religious education will be discussed in the next section.

“Relational Dialogism” in Formal Education

In the post-socialist context of the Balkans religion remained a powerful tool of ethnic, social and political mobilization of all three main ethnic/religious groups and one of the important channels to stretch their impact is religious confessional (teaching doctrines) education in public schools. Faith communities used the momentum during the war and introduced religious education (Kuburić & Moe, 2006, p. 1), for the four prevailing religious communities: Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Protestant and Islamic. Religious education was understood as a victory against atheist ideology of communism, but it also served as comfort and security in the wartime destruction.

Religious education *per se* is not a problem, and most European countries offer it in public schools, but it depends how much it is inclusive and overcame divisions and differences. Space for others from the mainstream teachings is quite limited and religious textbooks produce and re-produce stereotypes and biases that further deepen mistrust and more profound social distance. Religious instruction curricula and the textbooks designed by each religious community still portray their own religious tradition as those who exclusively possess the “truth” and offer a path to salvation. The textbooks barely mention other religious groups and when they do so, they often refer to them with stereotypes and biases (Kuburić & Moe, 2006).

Under the pressure of international organizations the textbooks of religious education, history, geography and mother tongue were changed and biases were reduced, but ethnic segregation persist in some schools. Ethno-nationalism sometimes goes so far that support apartheid—equal but different, such as two schools under one roof—the phenomena in Croat majority cantons in BiH (Madacki & Karamelic, 2012).⁷

Constitutionally education in BiH in comparison with Serbia and Croatia, is not regulated by the state, but by entity and cantonal units, which entails a huge administrative apparatus that spend most of the budget for its

⁵ Jelena Jorgancevic, Interview with Marko Orsolc, Paljenjesvjetla, *Vreme*, Beograd. Retrieved from <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1046313>

⁶ MA in Religious Studies at the University of Sarajevo was established as linkage program of Arizona State University, Sarajevo University and IMIC Zajedno in 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.cips.unsa.ba>

⁷ Supreme Court of Federation of BiH issued a verdict against two schools under one roof, and requested integration, but segregated school still exists.

own maintaining. In such fragmented education landscape, religious education contributes to further divisions and gives spiritual and political legitimacy to it. Religious communities, parents and students choose religious education and defend it as their human rights and freedom of religion, while opponents advocate for more inclusive religious education, such as cultural studies, ethics and history of religion (Alibašić, 2009). Both sides have their arguments, but there was not enough willingness to resolve this, in particular from religious communities that are afraid of losing the power over religious education they have in public school system.

The dichotomy between private/religious and public secular still prevail, and the only way to overcome existing divisions and exclusions is to adopt “relational dialogism” approach proposed by Erin Willson. But, in the ongoing debate of religious education in Bosnia and other Balkans countries should stretch relational dialogism not only to underpin secularist dualism that defined religion as irrational, institutional and individual, but also religious biases that perceive secularism as godless, profane, materialistic, and self-centered. Both perspectives should allow reconceptualization of understanding both of secularism and religion, and being ready to transcend obstacles that serve dualistic polarization. Neither secularism, nor religion has recipes for every problem in a society and since they both serve people and care for their well-beings they can fulfill their mission if they work together without diminishing and undermining of each other’s roles.

An important part of relational dialogism is to start with self-criticism and open cathartic windows for one’s own community, but also come up with concrete solutions. Religiously inspired activists criticized “religious godlessness” (Kristić, 2014b) in churches and religious communities, gender discrimination (Jadranka, 2011), violence against women (Spahić-Šiljak & Jadranka, 2009), lack of freedom of speech (Brnčić, 2014) and reconciliation initiatives (Sremac, 2012). They raised their voices against politicized religion, rigid dogmatism, and puritanism that serve to keep the power of hierarchies while the core religious principles of faith: love, care, compassion and justice are betrayed. Since the initiatives from churches and religious communities were scarcely present, some religious inspired activists engaged in civil society decided made first steps believing that religion has potential for social change and social capital formation. They also believe that churches and faith communities have responsibility to work together with all social and political actors to make social change possible. Faith-based activists tried to open dialogue between proponents of confessional and non-confessional religious education and gather them together around global ethical issues in the classroom.

One of the proponents of multicultural education was TPO Foundation, a secular NGO with mission to promote human rights, gender equality and peace-building, which also uses religion as one of the arguments in pursuing its human rights agenda.⁸ Several successful projects employed religion as the argument in promotion of women’s rights and equality in education and in this way, TPO Foundation attempted to bridge the gap between secular organizations and faith communities (Raudvere, 2012). Since religious education was an option for majority of children, there was a need to bridge the gap between the rights and desires of parents and children and factual ethnic divisions that are even more deepen with segregated religious classes. A group of intellectuals from BiH and Serbia, including myself, designed and published the Textbook: “Monotheistic Three Voices: Introduction to Judaism, Christianity and Islam” in 2009 (Spahić-Šiljak & Abazović, 2009). The textbook was designed for high-school students and with good reviews both from religious authorities and sociology of religion scholars, but ethno-national politicians in ministries of education rejected it as official

⁸ Trans-cultural Psychosocial Educational Foundation (TPO) Sarajevo. Retrieved from <http://www.tpo.ba>

textbook, although they do not have an alternative even today. One of the reasons might be the influence of radical voices from religious communities on political establishment and educational institutions, because they did not want anything to be printed and distributed that was not fully under their control. Another reason might be the very nature of ethno-national administrative order in BiH that does not want anything that might overcome ethnic/religious division.

The idea of multi-religious education continued to live through other initiatives pursued by the same group of scholars and former graduate students from the Religious Studies Program at the University of Sarajevo who were engaged in TPO Foundation through various programs. It was important to continue dialogue and negotiations of religious and secular binary positions towards one another.

The Weltethos (Global ethic) initiative was one the programs that proposes re-pairing the society with acceptance of global ethic as a framework that can embrace both religious and non-religious worldviews and can remind the divided people what they lost and forgotten that could help them to heal wounds, establish communication, understanding and respect. Weltethos project does reaffirm the ancient radical idea of the “golden rule” nurtured in all religious and non-religious traditions, but provides more nuanced understanding of religion and secularism through opened communication and reconciliation of differences, in building new social, economic and political culture. In searching for common ground in the divided society, the program seeds the idea of global ethic in educational system of BiH. In 2013 the Initiative “Weltethos in School” (Kristić, 2014c), was officially launched and it based on global ethical values from religious and non-religious perspectives. They approached ministries in the Federation of BiH and got permission to work in several cantons with pedagogical institutes and teachers.

Weltethos idea comes from the prominent catholic theologian and philosopher, Hans Küng from Tübingen in Switzerland who launched the “Declaration Towards a Global Ethic”, which is signed in Chicago in 1993 by the Parliament of World’s Religions.⁹ The key message of the Declaration is that humankind has common set of core values rooted in religions and these values are bases for global ethic. As ethical beings, men and women are responsible not only for themselves but for each other, because everything is interconnected and has reflections on each other’s lives. This initiative is formally received by the Catholic Church, and other religious communities, while its application like the application of all other international documents is very weak and sometimes even completely neglected.

The Global Ethic in a School: “Integrating a Global Ethic into Educational Structures and Processes in Bosnia-Herzegovina”, is a pedagogical project that makes a platform for dialogue with the key lesson of overarching humanity of all human beings that precedes any other identity. It rests of four main pillars: (1) a culture of peace and common life; (2) a culture of solidarity and a just economic order; (3) a culture of tolerance and truthfulness of life; and (4) culture of equality and partnership of man and woman.

TPO Foundation’s team designed the training materials and run trainings of teachers of secondary schools with the goal to sensitize them to a global ethic issues, which should be integral part of various social science and humanities courses. Part of this program is newly launched Global Ethic web portal “Initiative ETOS”¹⁰ that serve teachers in BiH and the region to exchange relevant material, upload their work, discuss some issues and attend online classes.

⁹ Retrieved from http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/_includes/FCKcontent/File/TowardsAGlobalEthic.pdf

¹⁰ Initiative ETOS. Retrieved from <http://www.etos.ba>

Conclusion

Through the programs of TPO Foundation and IMIC Zajedno Sarajevo religiously we could have seen how work on bridging the religious and secular divide and dualisms inherent both to secular and religious domains. Their programs help to overcome or at least to soften ethnic animosities and isolation that mark the lives of people in the post-war Bosnian context.

Faith-based and non-faith-based activists alike invested their spiritual capital and knowledge to build and re-build relationships between different communities across religious and ethnic lines. They demonstrated that relationships matter and that they are the key element in bridging gap and linking those who otherwise would never come together. Integration of the teachings of global ethic in schools within broader framework of Values of Education is another example of successful relational dialogism in quite disenfranchised educational system and the society in BiH. Multi-religious and intercultural approach that gathers not only three monotheistic voices, but all other voices (gender, ethnic, and racial minorities), including non-religious ones is crucial for building new connections across the imposed dualisms. Believers and faith-based initiatives launched in the secular local NGO in BiH demonstrate that faith can be a powerful tool for dialogue, peace and development.

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