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OVERHAULING INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE FOR PEACEBUILDING¹

By Ina Merdjanova

Dr. Ina Merdjanova is a senior researcher and an adjunct assistant professor at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College, Dublin. She has published widely on religion and politics in post-communist society and has held visiting fellowships at various academic centers such as Oxford University, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC, the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the Aleksanteri Institute at Helsinki University, among others. Her most recent book publication is *Rediscovering the Umma: Muslims in the Balkans between Nationalism and Transnationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2013; paperback 2016). Her articles appeared previously in OPREE.

Abstract

During, and especially since the end of the Yugoslav secessionist wars in the 1990s, interreligious dialogue became a central tool in the continuous efforts to promote peaceful coexistence in the multicultural and multireligious societies in the Balkans. Presenting the major points in a sociological theory of interreligious dialogue for peace building (IRDPB) which I developed together with Patrice Brodeur in *Religion as a Conversation Starter: Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in the Balkans* (published with Continuum in the UK in 2009 and subsequently translated into Bulgarian in 2010 and into Bosnian in 2014), in this paper I revisit some of the arguments of the book. I argue that IRDPB should address more explicitly political and economic concerns and issues related to poverty and various forms of inequality and exclusion. I also suggest the need for a gender-critical perspective on IRDPB.

¹ Some of the arguments in this paper were developed during my visiting fellowship at the Aleksanteri Institute, the University of Helsinki, in September-October 2014, and my thinking on the topic benefitted from the feedback I received from other fellows during the presentation of my work-in-progress. Earlier versions of the paper were also presented at the panels organized for the launch of the Bosnian translation of the book *Religion as a Conversation Starter: Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in the Balkans* at the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo on 5 March 2015, and at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Foca on 6 March 2015, as well as at the conference “The East-West Dialogue: Philosophical and Politological Interpretations” at Blagoevgrad University “Neofit Rilski” in Bulgaria on 30 October 2015.

The book *Religion as a Conversation Starter: Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in the Balkans* was a product of an innovative methodology which I and my co-author, Dr. Patrice Brodeur of the University of Montreal, decided to use. We combined library research with analysis of both our own experience as dialogue-for-peace activists and our fieldwork in different Balkan countries between 2005 and 2009. We mapped various developments related to the rise of identity politics in the region after 1989 and the collapse of ex-Yugoslavia, focusing on peacebuilding activities which used interreligious dialogue as a core methodology. Importantly, we developed a sociological theory of interreligious dialogue for peacebuilding (IRDPB). We provided a narrow and broader definition of interreligious dialogue (IRD). According to our narrow definition, stemming from how interreligious dialogue has often come to be seen in the context of its recent history, **IRD is human communication between religious leaders for the primary purpose of clarifying theological/philosophical similarities and differences.** Our broader definition described IRD as **all forms of human communication both through speech and shared activities that help mutual understanding and cooperation between people who self-identify religiously** (p. 3).

While admitting that the narrow definition seems to have often prevailed in both popular and scholarly understandings about the nature and goals of IRD, we emphasized that the forms of IRD it describes exclude or greatly reduce the participation of laypeople and of women in particular, and we clearly stated our preference for the latter definition. Our elaboration of this broader definition came as a result of our own experience as activists promoting such dialogue, worldwide in the case of Brodeur (who is a long-standing member of various IRD organizations with global outreach), and Balkans-wide in my case (between 2004-2010, I directed the Center for Interreligious Dialogue and Conflict Prevention at Sofia University, and organized some 15

IRD workshops in Bulgaria and throughout the region; nine of these workshops were held together with Brodeur). In our book, we noted that IRD has various levels (top, middle and grassroots) and dimensions (intrareligious, interreligious and interworldview dialogue). In addition, it can be oriented toward a particular group, defined in terms of age (for example youth dialogue), gender (for example dialogue between women), or occupation (for example dialogue between theologians/monastics/clergymen/lay people/scholars of religion). These diverse forms complement and reinforce each other, and often overlap in various ways (pp. 3-4).

Further, we defined **peacebuilding** as **all social mechanisms a society develops in order to promote greater understanding and cooperation towards peace** (p. 24). Consequently, **IRDPB** amounts to **all forms of interreligious dialogue activities that foster an ethos of tolerance, non-violence, and trust**. It is based on three principles: self-conscious engagement, self-critical attitude (awareness of own biases and limitations), and realistic expectations vis-a-vis IRDP (the need to see it as a long and uneven, step-by-step, “incremental” process, as emphasized in the notion of “incremental peacebuilding” by Mark Gopin).

One of our basic assumptions, which was supported by our research, was that IRDP is particularly effective when a top-down approach (prioritized by most of the international NGOs promoting dialogue in the Balkans) is complemented by, and creatively combined with, grassroots interaction between mid-level clergy and laity from the different religious communities, including in particular women and youth.

The book was published at the end of 2009. Obviously, six years later, it is fair to say that if we were to write it today, it would be a different book. Not only because there certainly have been various new events and initiatives; even new organizations have appeared promoting IRDPB in the region despite the severely decreased funding after the international donors turned

their attention to the Middle East, Africa, and other places of instability, violent conflict, and war. But also because we have developed further our thinking on the subject, our conceptualization of the nature and purpose of dialogue, of the role of religion in conflict and peace, of the achievements and limitations of IRDPB.

In a recent analysis of Kosovo's bleak post-war situation, the fading of the euphoria of the 2008 self-declared independence and the disillusionment among the ordinary people that expresses itself in mass emigration, Chris Deliso notes a "systemic failure on the part of the international community, complemented by a chronic tolerance of various negative influences."² One of the many lamentable developments has been the misuse of interreligious dialogue. "Gradually," writes Deliso, "keeping in line with global trends, the country's leaders also turned heavily towards to inter-faith dialogue route, that has further enriched specimens like Tony Blair."³ Deliso's account corroborates our own findings about the political and pragmatic manipulation of IRD not only in Kosovo, but virtually everywhere in the Balkans. I have recently started to think of a rather paradoxical development in the field of IRD. On the one hand, we see a political instrumentalization of IRD and its closely related notion of tolerance by turning them into a technique of "governmentality" (I am referring here to both Foucault's concept of "governmentality" as a set of discursive practices used by political elites to acquire and maintain power, and to Wendy Brown's notion of tolerance as a neoliberal form of governmentality).⁴ On the other hand, we see how the rhetoric of IR tolerance, reconciliation and

² Chris Deliso, "The five phases of post-war Kosovo – a retrospective view," *Transconflict*, 2 March 2015, <http://www.transconflict.com/2015/03/the-five-phases-of-post-war-kosovo-a-retrospective-view-203/>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Michael Foucault, "Governmentality," *Ideology and Consciousness*, Vol. 6, 1979, pp. 5-21; Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). In a similar vein, Kaya, for example, unmasked the mistreatment of ethno-cultural and religious minorities in Turkey

peace has served to effectively reduce what is political, social and economic to what is cultural and religious.

In our book, we emphasize that IRD is more than just talk about theological similarities and differences. It is not only a verbal communication, but a shared action in the pursuit of identified common needs, in which people engage across religious and ideological boundaries. Furthermore, we consider peacebuilding not only as a post-conflict mediation, reconstruction and rebuilding of society, but also as a work to prevent future conflicts. In short, we wrote, IRDPB is about social change. Our thinking thus corroborates Luke Bretherton's call to "reconceptualize interfaith relations as a civic rather than religious practice and common action between different faiths as directly political rather than as a humanitarian service provision."⁵

I believe that we need to pay a close attention to manipulations, cooptation and reduction of IRD and to firmly root its theories into analyses of the economic and political conditions, which define in so many ways how a dialogue shapes and develops and whether it generates a positive change. A robust exploration of how the disastrous overlap in the Balkans between war destruction, post-conflict reconstruction, post-socialist neoliberal restructuring, and rampant nationalist politics affected people's lives and identities can help us reconsider, recalibrate and rearticulate the priorities and goals of religious dialogue for peacebuilding. To my mind, IRD has to address more explicitly political and economic concerns and issues related to poverty and various forms of inequality and exclusion. Furthermore, it needs to provide space and incentives for the dominant religious communities (Islam, Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism in

behind "the myth of toleration." See Ayhan Kaya, *Europeanization and Tolerance in Turkey: The Myth of Toleration* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁵ Luke Bretherton, "A Postsecular Politics? Inter-faith Relations as a Civic Practice," *JAAR*, 79(2), 2001, 346-77.

the case of the Balkans) to self-critically address their own role in the rise of the identity politics in the region, on the one hand, and the perilous effects of ethnopolitics on the universalistic messages of peace and justice they claim they carry to the world.

Secondly, I would like to argue that theories of IRDPB need to incorporate a gender-critical dimension. It is often forgotten that when the communist regimes suppressed religion and rendered it into a private affair, consigned to the sphere of household, women of all faiths were those who kept performing the traditional family customs and rituals associated with their respective traditions, and passed on to their children and grandchildren the basics of religious creeds. This development inadvertently fostered a new role for women as primary, though unofficial and unrecognized, guardians of religious tradition, for the Muslim and Christian communities alike. The fall of the communist regimes propelled religion back into the public sphere, which went hand in hand with the reemergence of the male-dominated religious establishments. The linkage of national and religious identities in the region further reinforced the place and role of religions in the post-communist polities dominated by nationalist discourses and practices. Unsurprisingly, the status of women was reformulated according to the agendas of the ramping nationalist projects, backed up by religious ideologies. Female marginalization included diminished labor market access, increased vulnerability to crime, loss of family oriented social benefits, and a drop in the already low parliamentary representation.⁶

The often negative reversal of the overall status of women in post-communist society dovetailed with women's growing participation in the life of their religious communities, once the freedom of religious practice was reestablished. Women have been active in various cultural,

⁶ See, among others, Swanee Hunt. "Muslim women in the Bosnian Crucible," *Sex Roles* 51 (2004): 4.

charitable and educational initiatives, particularly after religious schools reopened and allowed for women to study theology alongside with men. However, women were not given any credit for their contribution to the survival of religious faith under communism. Furthermore, they were barred from participation in the decision-making of their respective religious institutions, and were deterred in various ways from teaching core theological disciplines in the institutions of higher religious learning.

Despite all these negative processes, our experience when doing the research for the book showed that women participated and excelled in dialogue and PB activities despite their persistent marginalization within virtually all religious communities in the Balkans. The context of the Balkans demonstrates the limitations in gender-neutral definitions of IRDP. Therefore, I want to argue for the development of a gender-critical perspective in the theory and practice of IRDP which can challenge and deconstruct unjust gender systems both within the religious communities and in the larger societies.

Thirdly, in predominantly secular societies, such as those in the Balkans, it would be crucial to expand the understanding and practice of IRD into interworldview dialogue, comprising people of various religious and non-religious outlooks. In our book, we briefly pointed to the need of interworldview dialogue, and it is immensely important to develop further this line of thought by explicating its interface with the understanding of IRD as a civic practice seeking to contribute to the building of a more just and inclusive society.

Last, but not least, it is important to radically “democratize” IRDPB by going beyond binary representations and hierarchically assigned roles in it. IRDPB needs to critically engage with culturally and politically produced dichotomies, such as Christianity versus Islam

(specifically in the case of the Balkans), and religious hierarchies (the invariably male clergy and leadership) versus lay people (men and women) in both Christian and Muslim communities throughout the Balkans.⁷

Highlighting the significant role and contribution to IRDR of laity in general, and of women in particular, and pointing to the historically and contextually defined unequal positions of the distinct religious groups/communities which participate in it (especially majority-minority relations) will serve to re-describe definitions of IRDP in a more inclusive and participatory way. Emphasizing the interrelatedness rather than polarity of men and women, Christians and Muslims, laity and clergy, will help recalibrate theories and practices of IRDP. Only by unmasking and effectively countering patterns of exclusion and subordination can IRDP foster the transformation of the material and symbolic conditions for intolerance, conflict and violence, and generate positive social change.

In other words, I am making the case for a repoliticization of IRDPB. By repoliticization I do not mean its further unhealthy alignment with political forces. Rather, IRDPB needs to articulate and act upon visions of peace and politics that critique unequal and unjust structures of power, address social grievances, oppose gender inequalities, and advance inclusive and active citizenship beyond religious, ethno-nationalist and other identitarian boundaries.

⁷ Of course, we need to take into account the different conceptualizations and status of clergy in Islam and Christianity as well as the different conceptualizations of priesthood in Christianity itself. In the Orthodox and Catholic traditions, the ordination into priesthood is a sacrament which structures hierarchically the community into clergy and laity, and which is inaccessible to women. The Protestant churches have de facto obliterated the polarity between clergy and laity through the concept of universal priesthood; furthermore women can serve as pastors.