

2019

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Recommended Citation

Doci, Ylli H. (2019) "The Interfaith Council for Social Cohesion in the Western Balkans," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 5 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol39/iss5/18>

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The Interfaith Council for Social Cohesion in the Western Balkans

Ylli H. Doci, PhD¹⁵²

Abstract

With the demise of the communist governments in the Balkan region in the early 1990s, we have entered a phase in which serious religiously related issues challenging the social cohesion of our societies need serious analysis and action at different levels. Interfaith councils as a way of engaging the different religious communities in one society are not new and not the same. Nor are they unquestionably accepted or easily dismissed as ineffective in addressing challenges of peacebuilding and social cohesion in a religiously pluralistic society. There are political, cultural, ethnic and national considerations beside religious and educational ones which figure large in the role of an interfaith council and influence its character and effectiveness, but their contribution to peacebuilding and the social cohesion of our pluralistic societies cannot be ignored. As such this paper will explore, from different perspectives, the role of an interfaith council as a helpful instrument for the wellbeing of our societies.

The virtues of an interfaith council discussed in this paper should give us hope for fruitfully addressing the challenge of different traditions in the same social space, but it remains to be seen if it can win the support of the majority culture's stakeholders with their concerns in providing for a peaceful and harmonious society. The Albanian context with its similarities and differences from the religious pluralistic context of the other countries in the region provides a good case study to evaluate the merits of an interfaith council as an instrument to facilitate tolerance and social cohesion.

Keywords: interfaith council, religious pluralism, peacebuilding, tolerance, social cohesion.

Introduction

The world we live in now in the third millennium is different from the one our parents lived in until 2001, especially with regard to the resurgence of religion in Eastern Europe and the Balkan region (Johnson, 2013), with predictions of secular modernity in need of adjustment

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(Appleby, 1994; Eggemeier, 2012). Our Balkan region has suffered long and even recently from conflicts between different ethnic groups, but the relationship of religion, ethnicity and nationalism deserves much more serious thought (Ruane & Todd, 2010; Poulton & Taji-Farouki, 1997).

Perhaps due to the lasting influence of communist ideology in our region, alongside other factors, it seems as if religion is not taken seriously by Balkan intellectuals and those in positions of leadership. The observation of John Micklethwait in another context sounds like an accurate description of our intellectuals as well: 'If you gather together a group of self-professed foreign-policy experts—whether they be neoconservatives, realpolitickers or urbane European diplomats—you can count on a sneer if you mention "inter-faith dialogue". At best, they say, it is liberal waffle; at worst it is naive appeasement,' (Micklethwait, 2007, p. 22).

Religious pluralism as a social reality is now here to stay, but tolerance as a necessary ingredient of social cohesion in this context is not a given because tolerance is a cultural achievement (Netland, 2001). We cannot afford not to pay attention to the religious dimension of life in our region. This does not mean we only need to empower the state again to deal with it – we perhaps know better than most what happens when the state is overbearing and oversteps its boundaries with regard to freedom of religion, yet the state needs to be involved.

In this paper I discuss the merits of the interfaith council as one important mechanism to engage religious dynamics to strengthen the social cohesion in the Western Balkan states. Methodologically, by virtue of analytic induction the argument of this paper is: (1) Balkan countries need to address their interreligious dynamics by more consciously including the different religious representative bodies within their societies; (2) an explanation for the general lack of enthusiasm for utilising the interfaith council in our region could be due to the dominance of one religion in the national identity and culture of each country; (3) the Albanian Interreligious Council, as an expression of acceptance by all religious communities in Albania of other religious communities as equals, is the dependent variable of the difference in the nature of the role of religion in the make-up of the national identity and culture.

This paper starts by highlighting the religious dimension of the tensions between different groups in our societies that need social cohesion, then describe the form, purpose and function of the interfaith council as a cooperation platform for different religious groups followed by probing its relevance to address the issues of peacebuilding and social cohesion from theological, political and peacebuilding perspectives, to conclude with one illustrative case in Albania observing some potential challenges in other countries of the region.

Profile of an interfaith council in fostering social cohesion

The interfaith council is not a new idea. The interfaith council is a reflection of the significance of belonging together to the same social entity, some form of a democratic sovereign state or a common society, in which we need to live together respectfully and harmoniously. This implies the prior commitment to a common vision of society defined by tolerance in pluralism, recognising and respectfully engaging religious others who are our next-door neighbours while they also are embodiments of 'the universe next door' (Sire, 1997).

The world's largest and most representative multi-religious coalition is called Religions for Peace (Religions for Peace, 2019). Their motto, 'different faiths, common action,' captures well the attitude of respect for people of different faiths seeking to advance the common goal of peace and wellbeing for all. Here we see the concern with ensuring the necessary basis for a cohesive society which is peaceful coexistence.

The vision, mission, principles, structure and method of the Religions for Peace coalition give a good picture of the kind of interfaith council this paper puts forward as a helpful instrument for our societies. The interfaith council or interreligious council (IRC) is the primary mechanism for interreligious cooperation envisioned by Religions for Peace network. I will try to briefly describe aspects of the interfaith council – what it is and what it does – but this is necessarily general, and I will illustrate this with the Albanian Interfaith Council as one concrete example in our region.

The vision or the desired reality for an interfaith council includes 'the vision of a world in which religious communities cooperate effectively for peace, by taking concrete common action' (Religions for Peace, 2019). The mission or the work such a council does which 'bears fruit in common concrete action' includes organising interfaith dialogue, but we should clarify that 'cooperation includes but also goes beyond dialogue' (Religions for Peace, 2019).

Every group that cooperates together needs to be clear on the undergirding principles of their cooperation and it is helpful when they are written down, so Religions for Peace holds up five such principles of interfaith cooperation: '[1] Respect religious differences; [2] Act on deeply held and widely shared values; [3] Preserve the identity of each religious community; [4] Honor the different ways religious communities are organised; [5] Support locally led multi-religious structures' (Religions for Peace, 2019).

With regard to structure, Religions for Peace is a network of self-led interreligious bodies, comprising representatives of the various religions who decide together on the specifics of their organisation with equal deciding power. The function that the council should perform necessitates that its structure is such that helps build trust in the members of diverse communities and thus those elected (or those the respective communities have already chosen as representatives) have the credibility needed to serve in the council as bridges between communities to reduce hostility and create new positive perceptions between them.

Before we look at the specific example of the Albanian Interreligious Council and its relevance for the wider Balkan region, it seems important to anticipate some questions and evaluate the usefulness of an interfaith council from three perspectives; theological, political and peacebuilding perspective.

The interfaith council evaluated from three perspectives

Because of a view of religion influenced by the previous period of communist indoctrination for over a generation, it may be difficult to convince people in the Balkans that religion is very important for the cohesiveness of our societies or that it has already played a much larger role than we thought possible in the conflicts that dismantled Yugoslavia. Part of the difficulty may also be, as Arthur Schneier (Schneier, 2002) indicates, that religion is never alone as a cause of conflict. Other scholars have explored in some depth the relationship of religion, ethnicity and nationalism (Gorski & Türkmen-Derviřođlu, 2013; Flora, Szilagy, & Roudometof, 2005; Duijzings, 2002) revealing the importance of religion in the mix.

The theological perspective

One of the most important aspects of any religion is its theology and the system of doctrines that governs the understanding of the world according to the specific revelation a particular religious group cherishes. When approached from this perspective, the function of the interfaith council is helpful in providing the safe space to explore different theological perspectives in order to better understand each other better. This perspective emphasises the importance of ideas and the power of ideologies to motivate action. It is not necessary to hold, and here I appear to disagree with Neufeldt, that those who approach the issue of peace and conflict resolution from the theological angle are blind to religion being a cause of conflict (Neufeldt, 2011, p. 348). Furthermore, they are more aware of the religious thought of the different traditions that contribute to peace and harmony, and that is why their perspective is invaluable in peacebuilding as the necessary basis for social cohesion and fostering cooperative action.

Some conscientious believers and religious leaders may be wary of interfaith councils because there is, in the minds of some, another goal for interfaith dialogue, namely 'active theology' (Panikkar, 1978; Kellenberger, 1993; Singh & Schich, 2001). The theological dimension of engagement in the context of the interfaith council, within the accepted boundaries where all feel protected in their specific religious identity, finds much room in the council interactions to develop friendships and appreciation for each other going much farther than just general respect. This effective dimension of the dialogue is very valuable and goes a long way toward finding solutions for problems that might arise in the future (Hanson, 1993).

In such a context of respect, the interfaith dialogue, which may ensue under the auspices of such an interfaith council, may arrive at a common language about shared values that can then be disseminated to the broader base of adherents with the credibility of the leadership that is represented at this level. Such is the value of joint statements that a council may produce in the course of time and events. Thus, from the theological point of view, the interfaith council is an important reference point for the respective communities of faith and helps build trust in being free to live and propagate one's faith, in conversation with the other views and with respect for others in spite of theological disagreements that will remain.

The political perspective

Politics had to deal with religion after 2001, and many international political peace efforts started then in different places, including our region, which considered the interfaith dialogue important (Mojzes, 2006). Looking at the usefulness of the interfaith council from the political perspective means that the evaluation keeps in mind the goal of peaceful coexistence of different religious communities in the same space. The politicians who have this goal are more pragmatically interested in the interfaith council as a means to an end, but in spite of those motivations and the danger of being used by politicians, the truth is that there is commonality with the political goal of social peace and harmony, and the council is well placed to mediate in the achievement of those goals.

Again, the interfaith council in this context would be very valuable because the representatives are officially recognised by their communities to uphold their exclusive view of reality (Omar, 2005). When such respected and trusted representatives take a moderating stance on a certain issue, they are best placed to communicate in the appropriate language, including through powerful symbolism and ritual, and to be much more effective in convincing members of their community than a political declaration

would be. They would also be better positioned to know how to interact with radicals inside their own communities and bring them along to a better path to live in peace with all by following their religion in an adjusted way.

The peacebuilding perspective

It bears repeating that our concern with social cohesion starts with the first step, peacebuilding. The conflict resolution typology framed by John Paul Lederach presents four levels where change can occur to create the necessary synergy for conflict transformation (Ledarach, 2003). These four levels include personal, relational, structural and cultural levels, and in each of these levels the interfaith council has a significant role to play. From the theological angle we can see how the focus is on both the personal and relational levels but much less on the structural and cultural levels. The political perspective naturally addresses the personal level less than the relational level, which means the adherents of one religion are motivated to relate more appropriately to the other. The political perspective also is concerned with the structural level, which means that it is possible that policies and processes may be influenced by religious leaders.

The third perspective, the peacebuilding perspective, seems to encompass all four of the levels of change because it seeks to develop or cultivate a culture of peace and tolerance in a sustainable way which can be seen as the basis for a cohesive society. Relating to the levels we discussed above, peacebuilding efforts imply a dynamic process including influence for change in perceptions, attitudes, behaviours and interests of persons and communities – thus addressing both the personal level and the relational level. But beside this level of change, the complex process of peacebuilding also seeks to address the underlying structures where causes of conflict are also found to perpetuate the problems. Religion is naturally seen as integral in this search for peace because there are also reasons to see it implicated in the problem of conflict, and therefore, either way, it cannot be ignored (Appleby, 2003).

The interfaith council provides a platform for joint action to address issues of concern and get to the causes of problems together as well as ways to move forward by mobilising different communities and actors in common action. The interfaith council, simply by virtue of bringing representatives of different religious communities together, is an important step toward the reality of living together in peace. The example set by representatives coming together is a signal of the furthering of the cause to address the perceptions of the religious other and to inform understanding about them.

Probably the most significant contribution of the interfaith council to social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts is its ongoing nature – continuous collaboration not just for occasional crises but as a way of life together, thus helping in different ways and at different levels to cultivate that culture of peace and tolerance that is needed for the social cohesion in our pluralistic societies.

Albania as a good case study of the interfaith council's role in social cohesion

From the discussion so far it may seem that there are no further concerns to hinder supporting whole-heartedly the creation and proliferation of interfaith councils in our region, but there is much more to deal with in the specific context of each of our countries which goes far beyond the scope of this paper. Overcoming these and other challenges accumulated throughout the uneasy history in the Balkans is not a matter of simple

acknowledgment of what is true and right, therefore we should seek to move forward consistently but with modest expectations from our efforts. It is in this spirit that the upshot of this paper – based on analysing the nature and usefulness of the interfaith council in the context of our need for interfaith dynamics in the region – is to suggest that the interfaith council can be an important factor for the cause of peace and tolerance by fostering social cohesion in our societies of the Balkan region.

As mentioned earlier, more analysis is required of the specific make-up of the situation in each country. Taking Albania as one example might be helpful to illustrate not only the value of the interfaith council in addressing the challenge of religious divisions within one country but also the importance of national dynamics in each case. In Albania there are five religious communities recognised officially by the government accompanied by a formal memorandum of understanding regarding the dynamics of cooperation and relationship. The Albanian Interreligious Council (KNFSh) was established on 22 October 2007 with representatives of four of the major religions in Albania – Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Bektashi. Since October 2018, the council's presidential board has also included Protestant Evangelical representatives on an equal footing with the other four (knfsh.al, 2019).

There have been several occasions when the leaders of the Interreligious Council of Albania have drafted important press releases related to different situations in the political climate of Albania as well as presenting common concerns to foreign heads of state at important junctures in our country's road toward EU integration. On such occasions, it has been important to recognise the way each community approaches the issue of belonging to Europe and what are understood to be European values.

Another occasion that highlights the importance of the council in coming to use a common language was in its expression of sympathy for victims of religiously based terrorism. The form of wording included some discussion of the differences in perspectives about the kinds and the portrayal of this kind of terrorism. Our religious backgrounds inform our perspectives, and it takes hearing how the other perceives the same event to modify and agree on common language in our joint declarations, which has a significant impact on the building of good will between our religious communities.

More important, it seems, is the message that is communicated to Albanians in seeing religious leaders together, visiting each other's centres in formal expressions of good will on occasions of specific celebrations for their communities. It sends a clear message to the broader population that we can live together in social harmony while we remain established in our individual religious commitments. These frequent contacts provide ample opportunity for friendship among the representatives and privately addressing sensitive issues of common concern.

On at least one occasion when the leaders of Albania's three main Christian denominations (Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical) expressed their concern with the unbalanced government support of events at certain religious celebrations, both the prime minister and the president of the republic responded positively and adjusted their policy to include the Christian request in their program of official events. As is also apparent from the website of the Albanian Interreligious Council, there are other activities and exchanges that are invaluable in fostering positive interreligious dialogue and understanding across the theological divides of the different communities in an atmosphere of respect and appreciation of the other's point of view.

Challenges for the interfaith council in the Western Balkans

Albania is a Balkan country, and we may assume many similarities with others in the region, but Albania is also somewhat different from most of our neighbours, and this may account for the existence of the interreligious council in Albania. Albanian national identity is understood by Albanians as less connected with any specific religion, while almost all of our Balkan neighbours would seem to have a hard time identifying an individual of their country as a member of the specific nation without the typical religious designation associated with belonging to their nation. An Albanian is not necessarily a Muslim, an Orthodox Christian, a Catholic, a Bektashi or even an Evangelical, and no one in Albania would doubt the Albanian identity of any Albanian-speaking citizen of any of these religious persuasions. This is very important, and it is both a blessing and a handicap. It also may help in understanding some aspects of the attitudes with regard to the interfaith council.

On the other side, in any other Balkan country the typical national of that country is generally considered to be of the majority religion of that country, most likely of a national Orthodox church (Anscombe, 2014, p. 237). Although the communist rule of the last half-century did much to blur the distinctions between nationalities based on religion, it was not difficult for the old distinctions to re-emerge with the resurgence of religion after 1990. This dominance of one religion in one country is also very much a blessing but also a handicap with regard to the cohesiveness of the society (Anscombe, 2014, p. 253).

The blessing of the Albanian plurality of religions is in the country's experience with accommodating the other that is different in the secondary aspect of religion, while being fully one and the same in another more significant or the primary aspect of nationality. The handicap is that, compared to the depths that religious sentiment can plumb in uniting people, there will always be a shallower level of cultural unity between Albanians of different religions. This means that it appears easier to accept the different religious people represented as equals around the Albanian table in the form of an interfaith council and at the same time also more important to facilitate good interaction between different religious communities to preserve a functional national society.

On the other hand, generally speaking for the rest of the Balkan countries, the blessing of a Balkan national is in having the opportunity of a much deeper union with the dominant majority of one's compatriots who also are of the same religion. But here as well, while the blessing is significant, the challenge for the social cohesion of the whole society that includes others of other religious minorities is also significant. In many Balkan countries, the typical perception of a citizen of the majority religion is that a minority-faith citizen of the same country, is twice as far removed from the standing of a typical national of that country; compared to the perception of belonging to the same nation that Albanian citizens of different religions consider as equal between themselves and any other Albanian of any religion. This may mean that it is more difficult to accept religious minorities as equals at the national table and less important in the eyes of the majority to risk giving more credibility to the religious minorities by including them as equals in an interfaith council, all the while imagining it easier to preserve a functional national society without much cooperation between majority and minority.

I insist on these oversimplified generalisations because of the strange juxtaposition between a social life that is deeply defined by religion at the culturally significant level of national identity in our Balkan region, and the apparent lack of urgency for serious interreligious engagement in the form of a helpful common platform such as the interreligious council (Mojzes, 2006, pp. 30–31).

The purpose of this paper was to indicate that the interreligious dynamic in the Western Balkans is significant for the social cohesion of our societies, and that the interfaith council is a valuable platform to include all relevant religious bodies for cooperation. The existence of the Albanian interreligious council, as yet a rare case in the Western Balkans, suggests that more light needs to be shed on the influence and interplay of the dominant religion and the national identity and culture of our societies to explain more fully the attitudes toward sharing a common interreligious platform in our pluralistic context.

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