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# Religions as loci of conflict prevention: local capacities of Bosnia and Herzegovina's religious communities

By Julianne Funk, PhD <sup>211</sup>

## Introduction

Conflict and coexistence remain in a tense balance in the Western Balkans. Latent conflict, in which one's ethno-religious community denotes which side you are on, persist after the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. These frozen and potential lines of conflict were laid decades and centuries ago, when religious affiliation diversified. At the same time, these religious, ethnic and national communities have a history of *suživot*: everyday relations with one another, or coexistence. The close geographic proximity of communities makes functional relational systems, which determine when, where and how people tend to interact, a practical necessity.<sup>212</sup> As a result of this necessity to coexist, religions in the Western Balkans usually perceive 'decent', neighbourly behaviour and friendly relations with ethno-religious others as a sign of faith (Funk Deckard 2012, Funk 2013).

Both conflict and coexistence signal relationship; as the peace scholar-practitioner John Paul Lederach puts it, 'relationship is the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution' (1997, 26). In the post-war setting of Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, relationship with one's former opponents is generally unwanted and even avoided. Ethnic cleansing in wartime successfully segregated Bosnia and Herzegovina's ethno-religious communities in terms of geography and the violent methods produced emotional segregation. Social segregation, however, fails to engage the basic fact of relatedness within the state structure, not to mention a shared history and future. This choice to not relate may seek to avoid conflict, but it can also limit opportunities for change. Notably, the country is currently stuck in polarised, nationally oriented politics, hindering necessary reforms. Citizens and external observers commonly see these stalled reforms and oppositional politics as a major obstacle to the country's development and the well-being of all its people.

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<sup>212</sup> A well-known example is the practice of visiting neighbours and friends from other ethnic groups on their religious holidays. However, this practice requires particular care: Christians would make halal cakes for their Muslim visitors on Christian holidays or Muslims would attend the Christmas mass, but only after all their Christians neighbours had found space within the church.

### ***Trusted religions in a distrustful society***

On the one hand, relationship-blocking behaviours are often interest-based: a protectionist agenda pitting 'us' against 'them' is a proven strategy for maintaining positions of political and religious power. On the other hand, these behaviours are also based upon and supported by feelings and attitudes remaining from war experiences. A key one of these is a fundamental distrust that pervades the relations that do exist across communities, but also between people from the same ethnic group (UNDP 2009). As such, the social fabric is worn thin. The average local resists considering an 'opposing' perspective as viable and the context is polarised such that one often feels compelled to position oneself against the other or risk losing one's own communal belonging (Volkan 1997). Individual and collective trauma from the war left its imprint of fear and helplessness; some residents would rather cope with the indirect, structural violence of the current political and economic situation rather than risk a return to direct violence by protesting the status quo. Meanwhile, each community has developed and adopted a story of suffering and victimhood at the hands of the other(s), which further distances groups from engaging (Moll 2013).

This distrust extends to public institutions as well. In 2015, around half of Bosnia and Herzegovina's citizens continued to distrust government institutions, while 77.2% distrust political parties. On the contrary, religious institutions have the highest level of trust (65.2% of citizens surveyed), with NGOs following close behind (63.4%) (Analitika 2015). The salience of religious institutions, therefore, raises the potential for them to have impact and influence upon the post-war social context. The collectivist and protective characteristics of the three main religions in the Balkans, pointed out by religious scholar Paul Mojzes (2003), may explain this social trust. The collectivist characteristic, in which 'the main relationship is not of the individual with God but the collective with God' (ibid, 5), binds the believer to the community. The protective role of religious leaders being 'pastor or shepherd ... responsible for the flock's survival' (ibid) is likely to inspire profound trust.

### ***Lederach's call for relational reconciliation as conflict prevention***

This paper draws attention to the capacity of trusted and morally authoritative religions to support the necessary transformation of destroyed relationships in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It highlights local religious actors and initiatives working to transform these social dynamics by non-violently and constructively 'engaging' communities rather than 'disentangling' or 'minimizing' contact between groups (Lederach 1997, 26). Lederach's widely accepted assertion in peace and conflict studies/praxis, is that encounter is crucial for truth and reconciliation. An opportunity to not only express one's trauma, loss and grief, the pain of the memories and the anger at the injustice to the other, but also to be heard by the other can provide validation of one's story and emotions. Acknowledgement of the other's suffering 'represents the first step toward restoration of the person and the relationship' (ibid) and is usually missing after armed conflict. Too often such activities of personal expression and listening are limited to high-stakes court cases or public commemorations. Religious actors, on the other hand, are able to host low-stakes encounters without legal repercussions. The focus of sharing is on personal experience rather than collective narratives and positions, however, to avoid the danger of exclusive narratives about the past. Lederach therefore rejects the influential idea that separating parties prevents violence. While separation can provide crucial initial security from direct violence, it is not a sustainable, long-term method for positive peace.

Besides expressing and acknowledging the past, Lederach points further to the need to envision a shared future, since '[i]n all contemporary internal conflicts, the futures of

those who are fighting are ultimately and intimately linked and interdependent' (ibid, 27). Imagining a shared future is next to impossible without an acceptance of relationship and a willingness to relate, both of which require dealing with deep fears and vulnerable hopes. Lederach's 'reconciliation-as-encounter' claims that acknowledging the past (truth) and envisioning the future are 'the necessary ingredient[s] for reframing the present' (ibid). Religious actors and communities can provide a safe and trustworthy environment plus trauma-sensitive methods to foster a meaningful and hopefully transformative encounter. Transforming how residents of Bosnia and Herzegovina relate with each other should help break the cycle of violence, therefore preventing future violent conflict.

### ***Bosnia and Herzegovina's challenge to religious peacebuilding***

While religions are well placed and socially empowered to encourage relational reconciliation, they are also known to have endorsed wartime violence and some continue to shore up divisions and indirect violence through supporting national positions and agendas. Religious institutions rarely oppose national platforms and policies that structurally and culturally discriminate against ethnic others/minorities, even though all three groups' teachings prioritise treating one's neighbour with equal if not greater care and respect than one's own group members. For many secular actors working for peace, religious institutions and actors have therefore been highly suspect in their attempts at multi-ethnic, civic initiatives. Only recently has 'religious peacebuilding' been recognised by secular organisations and governments as a valuable contribution, primarily, again, due to the significant role religions play in people's lives and the trust they inspire.<sup>213</sup> What follows are a small study from Bosnia & Herzegovina of such relationship-building religious peacebuilding (see Funk Deckard 2012 for these and other examples).

## **Religious peacebuilding for conflict prevention in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

This section focuses on four cases of faith-based civil-society initiatives for peace located in an ethnically divided setting, where religions lie at the fault lines of conflict. The author focuses on these 'track three' or grassroots initiatives rather than elite level, track one phenomena primarily due to the all-too-frequent complicity of religious actors in national agendas that do not prioritise rebuilding inter-ethnic relations.<sup>214</sup> As Spahić Šiljak and Funk have noted (2018, 112), there seems to be an overall 'lack of interest among religious communities themselves' to develop religious peacebuilding. For example, the Islamic Community has no office of peacemaking nor does it educate its teachers or imams in conflict transformation, while the Serbian Orthodox Church requires a special blessing

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213 Other characteristics of religions are increasingly being explored for their positive contributions. One example is the benefit of religiosity or faith for resilience, or is the ability to bounce back emotionally and psychologically from extreme stress, which is key for mental health and recovering or healing from trauma. Another is the role of meditation or prayer (e.g. especially in Islamic prayers which include movement) for de-stressing. Yet another is the social connectedness and support that religious traditions and communities can provide. (See Hayward 2018; Taylor 2019)

214 Even at the civil-society level, faith-based actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina have nearly always chosen to situate themselves within secular organisations because of the stigma linking religions with conservative agendas and/or nationalism (and therefore, contrary to social cohesion, dialogue and human rights objectives).

(blagoslov) for any official link of the faith tradition with peace projects (ibid). ‘Practically speaking, therefore, religious peacebuilders must be in line with the church’s position, a position that does not promote peacebuilding and reconciliation’ (ibid.). Nevertheless, two institutional-level initiatives should be noted before moving to the four civil-society cases: one old, with questionable results, and one newer, exhibiting early signs of effectiveness.

The Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina arose soon after the war on the initiative of international actors,<sup>215</sup> (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009) with the idea that the heads of four of the country’s religions (Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish) would represent their communities in interreligious dialogue and negotiations as well as oversee local projects (ibid., 64). For many years, the Council has been known primarily to issue statements against violent acts and to appear together in the media. While not underestimating the significant symbolic power of these acts, the Council is not known for proactive efforts at rebuilding relations in the country. Additionally, as this article goes to print, the author has learned that top religious representatives (the Riyaset of the Islamic Community and the Metropolitan of Orthodox Dobro-Bosnia) have obstructed a USAID-funded local project to train religious teachers and priests/imams from the three main religious communities in peace education. Surprisingly, the Interreligious Council did not assist, intervene, or in any way facilitate the project, whose aims the Council shares, but instead declined to get involved due to the ‘sensitive’ nature of the situation.<sup>216</sup>

A new and promising initiative is a new master’s program on Interreligious Studies and Peacebuilding implemented jointly by three university theology faculties: the Faculty of Islamic Studies; the Catholic Theological Faculty at the University of Sarajevo and the Serbian Orthodox Faculty St Basil of Ostrog of the University of East Sarajevo. This project arose from a query made by the international head of Catholic Relief Services for how best to support interfaith peace in the country. Drawing MA students from a variety of disciplines, the classes are held at the three locations with theology and other professors of relevant fields (especially conflict and peace studies). The programme seeks to provide a ‘unique opportunity for a clear positioning of religions as sources and catalysts of peace and for religious institutions to profile themselves as advocates of a more just and better society’ (ESITIS 2019). One generation has graduated to date.

The rest of this article is dedicated to religious actors who, while not always speaking officially for their religious communities, have a clear influence at the local level and also through their international engagements and with their global religious communities. Given the lacuna at the institutional level, they provide the most notable faith-based activity with the aim of preventing conflict.

### ***A Serbian Orthodox Abbot builds trust in Herzegovina***

Father Danilo was sent by the Serbian Orthodox Church to the Herzegovinian village of Žitomisljić to reconstruct the 16th century monastery destroyed during the war and facilitate the ‘return of Orthodox priests to the Neretva Valley’ (Ramadanović 2011). However, he saw

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215 The World Conference of Religions for Peace was the initiator with the support of the Mercy Corps, the United States Institute of Peace, etc.

216 Another reason given was the level of ‘time and energy’ required with ‘a very questionable outcome’, despite the Council’s acknowledgement that ‘the idea is generally good and bearing in mind USAID’s support to our work’ (as per communication of the Executive Board to the local Country Director of the project).

this not only as a material task, but also recognised the key aspect of simultaneously building relationships within the local community, which carries a history of violence against its resident Orthodox Serbs during the 1990s and the Second World War. Contact between the majority Croats and minority Serbs of the village was consequently minimal to none when he arrived.

Fra Danilo pleasantly surprised locals by attending Roman Catholic Christmas and Mass, inviting Catholic priests to his Orthodox Mass, having Croats and Muslims at Orthodox Christmas and Easter celebrations, visiting the mosque for Bajram and even welcoming the Muslim muftija to speak at his church. These actions broke the status quo of distanced relations and non-interaction and have been generally welcomed. In Fra Danilo's words:

*From the first day we were open to everyone and we tried to make contact with all the people from the surrounding area, considering it the best way for the Church to be a witness. Today Žitomisljić is recognizable precisely by the fact that people are glad to come to here no matter to what religion they belong. ... I am most delighted with the fact that we are fully integrated ... and that people experience us as their own (Pavlović 2012).*

Fra Danilo's accessible Easter messages in Bosnian newspapers, explaining Orthodox traditions and the meaning of the holiday also encourage 'the previously common experience of knowing one's neighbor's religion and traditions and celebrating with him/her on holidays' (Funk 2019, 153). Such actions characterise the local flavour of coexistence called *suživot*, demonstrating engagement with rather than withdrawal from strained relationships. Fra Danilo recognises his influential role, saying religious leaders must be wise and responsible in their political engagement. '[T]he Church is faced with a great temptation, but also the challenge to use its only trump card, which is to be ... the declaration of the kingdom of heaven on earth. More than anywhere else, the Church in Bosnia should preach the gospel truths about the equality of all nations and people' (Pavlović 2012).

### ***Krajina imams engaging interreligious leadership and youth in transformation***

After their personal experience of wartime violence in Sanski Most, Vahidin Omanović and Mevludin Rahmanović have sought to turn it into a city of peace. The two imams' own stories of transformation from the pain, trauma, anger, and desire for revenge to openness, trust, hope and courageous activism are the backbone of their work at the Center for Peacebuilding (Centar za Izgradnju Mira, or CIM). For both individually, their Muslim faith was not only key to their individual transformations, but 'Islam and the revelation' continues to be the 'main source' and 'motivation' for their peace work. Mevludin claims he personally 'cannot see a difference between being an imam and doing peace work - except that this peace work is much more important'.<sup>217</sup> Both cite the Prophet Mohammed as an inspiration for non-violent social change and openness to others and the two aim to demonstrate Islam as a path of peace.

After years of effort, CIM initiated an Interreligious Council (with Catholic and Orthodox

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217 These quotes come from an interview with Vahidin and Mevludin over skype, 12 November 2015.

priests and the head imam) in Sanski Most. On the one hand, Vahidin notes that many people do not believe faith and peacebuilding are compatible, and yet when it happens, they are deeply impressed. 'Our example shows that it is not only possible, but [it] is even adding value to the peace work,' he reflects. Mevludin voiced the challenge of drawing non-Muslims into their work in a Bosniak/Muslim-majority town in the Federation. People outside are suspicious and resist. They find it 'hard to accept that we can fight equally for Serb, Croat and Bosniak rights.... [since the dominant] narrative is pro-Bosniak'. Distrust also seems to stand in the way of the Interreligious Council's current attempts to engage with religious leaders in the neighbouring Serb-majority town, Prijedor.

CIM's Peace Camps also stand out as events that are changing the post-war landscape of the country. These annual camps for youths from all ethnic backgrounds provide a safe space to interact across segregated nationalities, the opportunity to consider their own groups' stories, stereotypes and prejudices and also envision a new future of positive relationship. Of particular note is the explicit consideration of religious identity, which tends to function as an ethnic marker more often than as a sign of personal faith. The two imams explain their own, opposite relationships with religion as: a critical stance to ethnic belonging alongside a wholehearted and clear religious vocation for peace. As Vahidin expressed it to me in 2008, 'I believe this [peacebuilding] is one of the reasons why God gave me this breath of life'. CIM's Peace Camps are sustainable in that they not only engage the next generation, making them into leaders, but these young people are often transformed by their encounter with each other and the challenging topics they work through together. Every year, multiple peace activists emerge dedicated to their country and a life together and CIM follows up with them after they go home to continue to have an impact there.

### **A Bosnian Franciscan priest uses music as a 'bridge of souls' (Pontanima)**

Central Bosnian Franciscans have been recognised as the front-runners and 'most vocal faith-based peace activists' (Spahić Šiljak and Funk 2018, 112) in Bosnia and Herzegovina both during and after the war of the 1990s and Friar Ivo Marković is perhaps the most known religious peace activist. Fra Ivo understands the 'experience of conversion and the grace of God' as 'forgotten potentials for peace' within religions, because one can change direction to follow God's 'way of love, peace, forgiveness, goodness and good deeds' (Tanenbaum 2007, 116). Fra Ivo claims his own actions are 'a sign of the experience of grace'.

The 'core' of Fra Ivo's work is cooperating with faith-motivated people from different religious traditions 'to collectively promote peace and spiritual healing' (ibid., 115). This is fundamentally about engaging similarly peace-oriented people, providing a bridge through believers themselves into the ethnic communities.<sup>218</sup> For himself and these believers:

*Faith is a personal experience, and not the passion that comes from belonging to a group ... In my opinion, the tragedy of the Balkans stemmed from replacement of personal faith with the passions of belonging to the group. That is the fundamental question for the traditional Balkan religions of Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam' (ibid., 116).*

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218 The author has noted another such bridge formed through the regional network Vjernici za mir (Believers for Peace): <http://www.vjericizamir.org/>

Fra Ivo initiated the Pontanima Interreligious Choir during the war to bring together singers from all religious (and non-religious) backgrounds to sing religious music from various traditions. The choir has sung for audiences all over the world. Pontanima's concerts provide opportunities to hear and be touched by 'enemy songs'. According to trauma healing and peacebuilding experts Randy and Amela Puljek-Shank (2008, 147):

*In listening to the choir the healing enters in the space that is most sacred, i.e. religious identity. These songs create space for listening to the other that otherwise would not happen. The choir brings an especially strong message of healing when it performs in the towns and cities that have experienced massacres on a large scale.*

Fra Ivo claims that audiences are positively shocked when the feared unknown becomes intimate and prompts reflection (Conrad 2009, 5). The music provides a gentle but firm insistence upon the need to change attitudes that are inconsistent with the beauty of this 'mosaic of fine art' (ibid).

### ***A Sarajevo Muslim peace educator pushes believer activism into civil society***

Amra Pandžo became a peace activist during the siege of Sarajevo and her life's work is changing the common characterisation of Islam as violent to Islam as a religion of peace (Funk Deckard 2012). She points to the Arabic letters for Islam – s, l and m – as the same as those for the word peace, selam. 'Islam then means peacebuilding (as a verb), selam (as a greeting) means peace be with you, [and] to be a Muslim – means to be a peacebuilder' (Pandžo 2010, 4).

Amra sees her faith as not only a 'deep motivation and strength,' but she also believes her work for peace is 'the path to be saved' (Spahić Šiljak and Funk 2018, 114). However, like others working from a faith-basis, Amra has struggled against being marginalised in the civic sphere. 'Everything related to nationalism or, God forbid, religiosity was removed from civil society' she reports (Spahić Šiljak 2014, 290). Like others, her NGO 'Small Steps' is officially secular even though she and most of her staff are believers (Christians and Muslims). Like the two imams, Amra sees the mixing of faith and peace activism not only as complementary but something greater in combination, and she explores this in her practice and research.

Amra published a Manual for the Teachers of Islamic Religion on the Peaceful Dimensions of Islam (2008) in Bosnia and Herzegovina containing stories of non-violent action from the Islamic tradition, which she has distributed to more than 900 public school teachers of Muslim religious education along with training them in its classroom use. Her intention with this religious peace education tool is to expose young people to a 'peaceful interpretation of the sacred text of Islam' and encourage an understanding of 'faith as a bridge to others' (Pandžo 2010, 5). While this notable initiative seeks to deal with the controversial issue of confessional religion taught in public schools from within the Muslim community itself, the manual has unfortunately received no official support from the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Funk Deckard 2012).

Amra is also regularly engaged in interreligious projects outside the country. For example, the author discussed her own experience of being welcomed as a Christian to regularly attend prayers at a Sarajevo mosque with Amra's group of Albanian and Serb women from a divided town in Kosovo. We then visited a mosque and a church to learn about and feel comfortable in those spaces together. As such, Amra's work is primarily about relating and



bridging divides between people, in line with Lederach's theory that engagement is more effective at transforming current and preventing future conflict than minimising contact or segregation.

## **Conclusion**

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Highlighted here are the sustained efforts to develop relationships of trust by a Serbian Orthodox Abbot in Herzegovina, two imams from Krajina, a central Bosnian Catholic priest and a Sarajevo Muslim peace educator. Each of these cases demonstrates a method for turning conflict-avoiding behaviour into engagement; they facilitate safe, even healing spaces for encountering the 'feared other', through religious traditions, rituals, music and identities, and providing practices that empower the conflict-averse with non-violent strategies of relating. At the same time, they explain their actions according to their own religious frameworks, which support attitudes and behaviours of trust, forgiveness, and love. Consequently, we can see ways in which religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region as a whole possess a capacity for preventing violent conflict as well as the ability to drive conflict towards violence. As a wise story about two inner wolves reveals at its end, the one who wins this struggle is the one you feed.

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