

Dimension of Interfaith Harmony in Albanian Culture

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ABSTRACT: In its general meaning, “culture” is defined as a spiritual non-material world in the life of different societies, while civilization is defined as, a material world reflecting cultural values. Sociological sciences, particularly during the twentieth century, have given a broader meaning to the concept of culture. In addition to artistic, scientific and philosophical creativity, the contemporary sociological concept of culture includes the totality of activities and of the ways of living of its society members (Dervishi 2003, 5). The concept of culture is one of the most used notions in sociology. Culture consists of the values that members of a group own, the norms they respect and the material goods they possess. Values are abstract ideals, while norms are defined principles or rules which people must follow. Norms determine what should and what should not be done. According to sociologist Giddens, culture consists of lifestyles, clothing, ceremonies, traditions, and customs and so on. Culture as a concept is distinct from society; however, there are close ties between the two notions. Society is the system of mutual relationships that connect individuals of the same culture. No culture or society can exist without each other (Giddens 2007, 43). In the traditional Albanian culture, stand out values such as patriotism and devotion, self-sacrifice in the cause of homeland, humanism which can go up to extreme altruism, the desire to be educated, generosity and honesty. In the system of values of the traditional Albanian culture, the most prominent values, the ones that distinguish it from other European cultures and beyond, are *Besa* (pledge of honour), hospitality and religious tolerance (Dervishi 2003, 31).

KEYWORDS: Albanian culture, civilization, interfaith harmony, *Besa*, interfaith dialogue

Introduction

The way of value exchange between civilizations is present among Albanian people. In this aspect, among Albanians there two levels of interaction of values can be mentioned: the relations between Albanian subcultures influenced by Christianity, Islam, and the relationships of Albanian culture with the culture of its neighboring peoples, which have coexisted within the Albanian people since the XIV century. They are present in the lives of Albanians and therefore require objective and deep approach by competent professionals, as they have left deep traces in various fields of scientific disciplines and in the lives of Albanian people in general. This coexistence is found in art, architecture, language, beliefs, and so on.

For example, only experts in the respective fields can study and explain properly the different colours in Muslim art, the various shapes in Byzantine art, the decorations of religious cult objects, the external forms of residential buildings, the design of bridges or public fountains, and the shelters for chance passers-by. Only an expert can investigate and explain the decorative and architectonic illustrations in Albanian territories, the cross and the crescent together, the sun, and so on.

Thus, Durham noticed drawings of the sun and the crescent on tombstones, drawings of the crescent on chairs in Dukagjin, cravings of the sun and the crescent in a Muslim house in Vuthaj and in tattoos on the Catholics of Shkoder (Durham 1928; Salihu 1990). Interestingly, Durham encountered these illustrations only in Albania, while in Bosnia she found only illustrations of the sun and the cross.

The illustrations Mark Tirtja mentions in his work *Elements of Illyrian culture among Albanians* talk about an exchange between the Illyrian culture and civilization and the culture and civilization of the peoples of the East (Tirtja 1978, 267-288).

In these illustrations, we find the six-pointed star in different shapes, carved on wood and house doors in Martanesh, Kruja, Postriba, and so on. The figure of the six-pointed star is present in Kichevo, especially on coffers of new brides' trousseaus. The so-called Star of David (now a Jewish symbol) symbolized the power of Prophet David in Muslims. It can also be found in the architecture of mosques in particular and that of Islam, in general, in the constructions of the Ottoman rule period.

The two religions of Albanians during this period developed normally and were always united for the protection of the Albanian national integrity. To illustrate this finding, let us consider the letter of Luigj Bumçi addressed these words:

“Excellency, all the missionaries of the Albanian mission in Paris, and most of whom are Muslims, sent me here and all in one voice beg you to use your moral power... to save two Albanian provinces, Korça and Gjirokastra, from the danger of a violent accord” (Mehdiu 2016, 57-58).

Multiculturalism and Albanians

As academician Feti Mehdiu states in his book *The religions of Albanians are Islam and Christianity*, the fact that Albanians belong to two religions, Islam and Christianity, that is, in their national culture cooperate two cultures from two holy books, from the *Gospel* and the *Qur'an*, should not be understood in any way other than it is found in the *Holy Scriptures* and the *Qur'an*.

It is an undeniable fact that Albanians are not the only people with two or more religions. Their religious affiliation has never led to national disintegration because, in principle, the two religions do not incite hatred, but understanding and tolerance.

Professor Mehdiu is convinced that if we adhere to the definitions of our renaissance, who treated the issue of religions among Albanians within the framework of the two holy books, the Gospel and the Qur'an, because the religions of Albanians are based on these books, we will make a greater contribution to national integrity and will narrow the path to disintegrating tendencies to divide Albanians in the name of religion (Mehdiu 2016, 43).

He also says that “we are a people with two religions but we are not a people with Bartholomew”. Any manipulation of religions, identities, tolerances, conversions, continental and regional affiliations, and so on, which endeavors to disguise and pretend that they contribute to the resolution of the Albanian problem in the United Europe, is out of historical and geographical context and is an illegal wave to the future of the Albanian people.

It is the merit of the holy books that the followers of the religions who rely on these books have coexisted to this day. The Balkans have been and still are the most important bridge for the connection between the East and the West, and, for this reason, it has served the holy books.

Finally, based on the history and experience of the development of civilization and culture of Albanian people, especially during the last six centuries, we can say that the Albanian people have also cultivated subcultures influenced by different religions. This readiness for dialogue between these two cultures has been demonstrated not only among the Albanian people who speak the same one language and belong to the same one nation, but also in relation to other peoples who have a different culture. Cultivation of these subcultures without illusions, without overlooking, and without contempt for one or the other guarantee a bright future for the Albanian people.

If the experience of the past is not used and if some evaluations of the past and some actions of the present are not corrected, without analyzing the steps to be taken in the future and without accepting the historical responsibility that belongs to us, there will be no bright future. Nermin Vlora has said that civilizations come and go. Cultures remain sealed in time just like real light that never goes out over centuries.

According to Lubonja, Albania is in a sense a miniature of global issues, due to its existence in a geopolitical and cultural place, which has also constituted a crossroads of

civilizations. Addressing this global issue, Habermasi says that economic globalization and migratory movements are creating a “global society” composed of “different civilizations that respond differently to the same challenges posed by homologous dynamics of economic modernism. He asks what the relations between these civilizations should be. Should we think of them as aligned in alliances that conflict over alternative visions of good and evil inspired by religions? Or should we imagine that these civilizations will cultivate an “intercultural” discourse over the principles of peaceful coexistence between equals?

The European secular reason thus returns, - according to Habermasi, - to the centre of attention as a model of configuring what might be the intercultural ethos of a world society in which different civilizations meet.

This would also be the best model of the 20th century Albania, whose historical destiny has made Islam, Christianity and some other cultures coexist, intertwined with each other.

Albania has intercultural discourse, but this variety is an asset that should be preserved rather than a danger that must be eliminated (Lubonja 2008).

Therefore, many foreign researchers would be amazed to see that in a multi-subcultural and multi-religious society, such as the Albanian one, the specific weight of volunteers primarily engaged in practical activity to avoid manifestations of religious intolerance, is very low, 3.18% (Dervishi 2004, 197).

Sami Frashëri’s concept of civilization

With the word civilization, Sami Frashëri understood man’s efforts to discover the secrets of nature and his achievements in this respect, as well as the efforts to put these achievements of science, knowledge, industry and trade in his service and in the service of the entire mankind (Sami 1996, 523).

With its emphasis on the pragmatic aspect of this notion, Frasher’s scientific definition of civilization has taken its place in modern Turkish dictionaries; he also authored the first encyclopedia in Turkish. They define civilization as the totality of achievements made through efforts to rule nature and to live as well as possible as human beings and as a society (Dogan 2003, 891).

As it can be seen, in Sami Frasher’s scientific works we encounter a modern definition of this concept. It clearly and fully reflects the essential elements of every past and modern civilization, the basic elements on which are placed the totality of the social, cultural, scientific, material, religious, aesthetic phenomena that constitute and complement the said concept. Even nowadays the definition provided by Frashëri can hardly be further clarified. The great scholar has left no room to add anything substantial or any new elements associated with the concept. You are convinced of this as soon as you start browsing modern dictionaries not only of Turkish, on which he had a great influence, but also of any language.

Meanwhile, in one of the French dictionaries, civilization represents the totality of common characteristics or qualities in broad developed societies or the totality of achievements of human society. In another case, it is defined as the set of genuine characters of the intellectual, artistic, moral and material life of a country or society.

The word civilization, as explained in a Russian dictionary, means the degree of social development and material culture, typical of this or that socio-political formation. The totality of achievements in the field of material and spiritual culture and social development, which characterizes a socio-economic formation or a particular people or country, as a high degree of this development, is the definition of civilization in the dictionary of Albanian language (Thomai et al. 2006, 886).

Civilization, according to the definition of English lexicography, represents a degree or system of advanced social development (The concise Oxford dictionary of current English 1998, 181).

These dictionary quotations show that despite the paraphrases, Sami Frashëri's definition of the term civilization is in essence, the one that still prevails in the world of science.

Shemsedin Sami Frashëri's scientific definition represents an argumentative opposition to those "prophecies" foretelling that mankind is facing a "clash of civilizations". In this context, efforts are being made to provide a new definition of the term civilization.

Civilization, according to authors like Huntington, is cultural identity. Civilizations rise above cultural heterogeneity.

"Civilization is defined by both common cultural elements such as language, history, religion, customs and traditions, as well as people's subjective identification" (Huntington 2004, 48-69).

This author further emphasizes that civilizations differ from each other in history, language, culture and traditions, and, most importantly, in religion.

Regardless of what is happening round the globe today, it can be said that our world may be under many threats, but the threat of clash of civilizations cannot be existent. Dark and dangerous forces that are currently a threat to the world are not part of any modern civilization. In other words, it can be said that civilizations have not clashed with each other; they have inherited each other.

Sami Frashëri competently materialized his scientific concept of the unique and progressive development of civilizations in the history of mankind in his major work, his six-volume encyclopedia, a universal dictionary of geography and history, *Kamus-ul-alami* (Encyclopedia of the Worlds), well-known not only in Albania and Turkey, but also in a wider scholarly circles, especially among Orientalists.

Although they found themselves at the crossroads of the Middle Age Crusades and the most recent wars of our time, Albania and Albanians have never experienced religious wars. Rather, it is a land on which several religions have coexisted and continue to coexist in harmony.

Interfaith Dialogue - a national necessity too

As it is widely known, Albania is a multi-religious country due to the existence of four major communities which have believers of different ages and provinces. Another reason is the fact that there exist various religious denominations and sects, which have recently entered the country, and, which have numerically small communities of believers.

In contemporary Western philosophy, there is great deal of concern regarding the conditions and circumstances of dialogue between individuals and social groups belonging to different religions, cultures, languages, traditions, races, and nations. Particularly in today's globalized world, this aspect takes on a special significance due to the fact that as a result a mixing of populations, which previously lived somehow isolated, nowadays due to internal migration, which comes as a result of massive rural movements, but also as a result of an influx of migrants abroad, individuals of different ethnic backgrounds live within the same region, urban area or city.

In the conditions of democratic societies, as the Albanian society is aspiring to become, it should not be forgotten that interfaith dialogue brings both a great advantage and a big risk. The advantage has to do with the fact that all communities and individuals now have ample opportunity to freely and unrestrictedly express their ideas, their faith and their culture. However, on the other hand, there is the risk of creating great socio-cultural and community divisions within the same society; there is the risk of creating misunderstandings and different borrowings within the same city, the same nation, the same neighborhood, and why not, even within the sub-culturally mixed families.

Researcher Artan Fuga points out that for decades Paul Lazarsfeld, one of the most well-known representatives of 'Columbia School' managed to make the great discovery that the individual in today's modern societies does not respond to daily facts, to political events and to

the media simply and only individually (Fuga 2006). Individual attitude is a fact that comes from the democratic status of everyone who enjoys individual rights and freedom; however, this does not mean that even realistically, in terms of the sociological plane, individuals share attitudes, beliefs and reactions that are simply individual and that can totally disregard the values of professional, familiar, regional or religious communities of the group to which they belong.

Studying the behavior of these primary groups, which include religious communities too, Lazarsfeld says that the individual has a psychological tendency to identify with the values of the community in which he lives because he needs to stay away from individualistic anxiety; that is, he often tends to depart from an independent judgement gaining collective security within his group of affiliation, as he put it, even by paying for it with conformism.

Lazarsfeld did not fail to talk about “the benefits of conformism”. From this point of view, consideration should be given to the fact that after the fall of communism in Albania, with the construction of new social ties and with the presence of new political, economic and demographic trends, many previous socio-professional and provincial groups disbanded, while the individual started to experience a detachment from his primary group such as the family and the work collective, or even from the public opinion of the close circle in which he used to live and work. Meanwhile, religious communities were born, or rather revived, and started to gain the right to free expression of religious affiliation.

Scholar Fuga underlines that in this plan, as Lazarsfeld points out, the individual in a democratic society finds himself in a double, or even contradictory, situation. On one hand, he is the citizen with individual rights and a democratic state requires such a thing, On the other hand, precisely due to a democratic social environment, the individual is more and more identified with and reacts based on the values of his group, including his religious affiliation or traditions, in the case of believers.

Thus, it is necessary to keep in mind the tension created between the judicial and political status of the individual and his collective status as a member of different communities. Exaggeration of the individual dimension leads to an individualism, which undermines everyone’s moral values and atomizes society; meanwhile, exaggeration of the communitarian dimension, whatever it may be, carries the risk of communitarianism, in other words, the closure of the individual within his close circle of the group to which he belongs.

Sociological data show that in the Albanian society religious affiliations have not led to a close and exclusive connection of different believers determined by their religion.

Research has demonstrated that for various reasons, which can be debatable, general interpersonal connection among Albanians does not remain fragmented within certain religious and social affinities that different individuals have with one another. Survey data show that only 13.7% of the respondents living in urban suburbs and 8.7% of those living in urban areas report weak or rare relations with individuals from other faiths (Fuga 2006). Others believe that despite their beliefs, their professional, social and neighborly interaction does not end within a narrow community circle.

Seen from this angle, it can be said that although today’s Albanian society has not experienced religion-based enclaves, various communitarian attitudes are also observed; they usually tend to confine the individual within the close circle of his religious group. In addition to pushing the individual to the common reaction to the religious spiritual values, they keep under pressure even attitudes to issues of the profane world such as politics, social relations, marital status, and manner of dressing, as well as seek to superimpose themselves on to rights and freedoms that the democratic constitution guarantees exclusively to the individual.

According to this study conducted by Artan Fuga, 40.35% of the respondents who report going to a religious institution every day state that if a friend or relative of theirs would think or want to change their religion, they would consider this a shame and disrespect for their ancestors and traditions and would exercise their influence to prevent this. The relationship between religions turns into a relationship between shame and honor; in other words, it turns from a

dialogue into a moral relationship, imposing a denigrating moral label on the other. Not only does this labelling block interfaith dialogue at the individual level and beyond, but, according to Fuga, it replaces argumentative debate with the process of stigmatizing the other morally, psychologically and socially, thus creating the conditions for interfaith dialogue to turn into a frozen relationship and to strengthen the boundaries of spiritual community through psychological pressure, paving the way for communitarian tendencies, and, finally, drawing lines on which a certain social conflict can be built (Fuga 2006).

All of these are gradual steps and nuances that begin with religious and cultural differences, which constitute an invaluable social asset for our society and if not properly understood, they can gradually lead to a fragmentation that might not only prepare the conditions for a social conflict, but also begins to show signs of opposition to individual rights within a state governed by the rule of law.

From the philosophical point of view, as many western philosophers such as the American philosopher Richard Rorty or the Italian culturologist Umberto Eco argue, the bridges of interfaith dialogue can be built on sound foundations only if we accept that reading any type of text or written moral order, therefore, including the sacred ones, as well as the classical philosophical books, the laws or any norm codified according to various discourse parameters, allows room for different interpretations.

If we were to put it in philosophical terms, every text allows for more or less wide space and serves as a pretext for different interpretations.

Without taking the position of a sick methodological relativism, which dispels all references, from the philosophical perspective today it is unquestionable that even moral values, religious teachings, and different texts, faithfully maintaining their origin and absolute values, contain a prominent interpretative dimension depending on time, concrete conditions, as well as special and new circumstances brought by time and social development.

If we consider the situation from a broader international perspective, we shall see that within all kinds of beliefs, the discussions and debates are not about the interpretation of theological bases, but about their application regarding social problems such as political systems and relations or problems related to contemporary situations such as wars, peace, family planning, diseases such as AIDS, the way some life acts such as marriage and family are performed, the ways of constructing religious symbols in the form of clothing or other characteristic signs, the child-parent relationships, etc.

Interreligious dialogue is not just an intra-religious phenomenon. It also includes an understandable and quite natural debate between believers and nonbelievers, secular people and atheists, it is about problems related to understanding the world, the society and man himself. Neither science nor philosophy can claim that they possess the exclusivity of accurately treating these problems just because they can be only interpretative judgements. All these forms of thinking and constructing spiritual values aim to create the conditions of peace, understanding and consolidation of man's position in the world and his preparation to face challenges related to life or even to death. This role belongs to religious leaders.

We must not forget that from a philosophical-religious point of view, religion and science are no longer conceived as separate and hostile to each other, but as two different complementary registers of understanding the world, and as two complementary ways of reading man and the world.

As they say in their writings, statements and interviews, as sociological research shows, or based on what we read about statements of religious leaders or prominent theologians of today's world, despite their differences, religions have common features. Belief in mysticism, in the idea of the Almighty and in the immortality of the soul, and above all, insistence on preserving and consolidating moral values such as honesty, respect for the other, tolerance, forgiveness, and so on, which are all features of religions, constitute the basis for different religions as well as for

philosophers, journalists, sociologists, believers and nonbelievers, sceptics and even atheists, to create a wide space not only for sound dialogue but also for cooperation and deep understanding.

As prominent theologians of our time or of the past point out, it is clear that cooperation and dialogue do not exclude or infringe on the loyalty of any believer, clergyman, philosopher, scientist or ordinary citizen to the principles of his religion. It is not, therefore, a matter of erasing differences in beliefs, for this would create a very sad and uniform world; it is a matter of that great principle which various personalities have explained so well; in other words, it is a matter of dialogue with the other, of finding common ground in the differences in the perception of the world and mysticism, of cooperation between differences in perspectives, of a public opinion space, where everyone, while fanatically preserving the principles of his particular worldview, knows how to find in the other the points that unite them in a unique whole, which appears to them in different forms.

Albanian society, especially its massive school learning system, has much to do in order to break from the misunderstood and overly vulgarized materialism, especially of the years 1945–1990. There is a wide field of cooperation even between different faiths for the sake of the moral soundness of our society.

Interfaith dialogue, like any other form of social dialogue, is damaged if its participants are completely isolated within their system of values and their own worldview. Prominent thinkers in the field of philosophy, anthropology and communication such as Gregory Bateson of the Paolo Alto School in California, state that any individual or community isolated within the realm of its own values becomes incapable of understanding the other, and furthermore, loses the ability to understand himself because he “judges himself according to himself”, while it is well-known that the best self-knowledge is acquired through the other.

In this way, as French philosopher Jacques Derrida put it, the other, openness to the other, and the attempt to accept and understand the other, are a condition for possibility to understand oneself. The self is understood through the other. Respecting and maintaining a dialogue with each other, in the sense of an individual or a group adhering to other religious and cultural beliefs and values is the main means of not being locked within inclusive cultural obsession, which would then cause another total disorder of anyone’s relationship with the world and with himself. Data show that religious discussions occupy a balanced place in other debates among Albanians. About 16.43% of respondents report that the topic of daily conversations with other believers of the same religion is one of a predominantly religious nature (Fuga 2006).

Seen in this light, it is considered important that individuals of different religions generally live in mixed social, professional and neighborly spaces, which is also a product of the entire history of our people.

On the other hand, though, in some peripheral areas with large urban centers, due to massive and somewhat accelerated exodus, there are gatherings of people, families and individuals with kinship and regional ties, and consequently, with a common identity of faiths. Participants in the survey respond that as a result of recent demographic changes they live closer than before to believers of the same religion.

While 23.85% of the respondents living in such urban peripheral areas reported living closer than before to believers of the same religion, only 19.05% of the respondents living in urban centers report a similar situation (Fuga 2006). In order not to isolate citizens within somehow homogeneous symbolic spaces and to facilitate horizontal dialogue between them, even of a religious nature or topic, it is time specialized bodies took into account this primary data in their framework of territory administration and regulation policies.

Analysis of opinions of participants in the 2010 study *Road to interfaith dialogue in Albania*, revealed that interreligious relationships are at a satisfactory level; the level of conflict appears low and the prospect is not pessimistic. It should be noted that only 5.17% of the respondents report that relationships between religions in Albania are conflicting, while 54.01% of the respondents claim that today’s interfaith relations in Albania are tolerant. The rest of the

respondents are less optimistic than the latter, but in all cases, they do not fail to emphasize that for them Albanian society is not currently endangered by any particular religious conflict (Gjoka 2010, 87).

Thus, 28.64 % of the respondents of Muslim faith report the existence of interfaith cooperation, while Catholic and Orthodox believers report a lower level of such cooperation. Only 24.39 % of Catholic respondents and 20.79 % of Orthodox respondents report that interfaith cooperation exists. When asked if various religious symbols (crosses, monuments, clergyman busts, etc.) can be placed in public spaces such as streets, schools or squares, without causing religious disagreements, 64.87 % of the respondents stated that such a thing would lead to conflicts (Gjoka 2010, 88).

According to researcher Rasim Gjoka, conflicting tendencies in the field of interfaith relations, whether open or hidden, should not be overestimated, neither should they be overlooked. It would be more appropriate to identify and find contemporary forms and mechanisms for their peaceful treatment and resolution (Gjoka 2010, 99).

Many authors such as Çelebiu, Shuflaj, Arnoldi, Delvina, Xhelili, Thëngjilli, Fuga, Dervishi, Sinani, Rama, Lubonja, Frashëri, Hysi, Çami, and Kruja have written about the important phenomenon of interfaith tolerance and harmony. From research on this fundamental phenomenon, we can single out a quote from J. Barns, who writes:

“A tolerance to be envied characterizes the relationships between Muslims and Christians in Albania in all other respects” (Hysi 2006, 228).

Conclusions

The rapid development of modern civilization at unprecedented rate has transformed it into a plurality and a community of civilizations. Contrary to what has happened throughout the human history, civilizations do not surpass one another; they coexist and interact with one another. Herein lies the power of modern civilization. In such circumstances, it should not be forgotten that dialogue is a characteristic and an internal need of every civilization. The duty of people and scientific, cultural, artistic, religious, and especially, political institutions, is not only to avoid suppression of this natural tendency of true civilizations but to leave free space for such an essential characteristic of every civilization to unfold.

Multi-religious societies such as ours have the beauty of a variety of subcultures, faiths and rituals, which come from the depths of history, but which also carry the risk of sectarian divisions which can take different forms and degrees of sharpness.

Renowned authors in the humanities and philosophy have long addressed this problem. Life experience shows that in almost no case do conflicts between believers of different religions have a religious origin or basis (Dervishi 2004, 198).

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