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The Sound of the Sun: Religious understandings of peace and the role of religious leaders in peacebuilding—a qualitative study in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract

This article discusses the different roles of religious leaders in peacebuilding processes, and their specific understanding of peace. It is based on analysis of 75 in-depth interviews with Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim religious leaders from Bosnia and Herzegovina, conducted in the period from 2015 to 2017. In the first part, peace is analyzed as a concept that contains elements of *giftness, spirituality,* and *praxis.* Arguing for the relevance of all three elements, the article warns against possible misunderstandings that can come when peace is assessed only through directly measurable indicators. In the second part, peacebuilding activities of religious leaders are divided into three groups: 1) before conflicts, 2) during conflicts, and 3) in post-conflict phases. In those scenarios, religious leaders play *preventive*, *reactive*, and *transformative* roles, respectively. The preventive role comprises all activities related to the development of moral character and social ethics that promote non-violence. The reactive role includes activities related to humanitarian assistance, spiritual and emotional accompaniment, denunciation of crimes, and promotion of alternative social visions to those of group-separation. Lastly, in the post-conflict phase (the transformative role), peacebuilding is inseparable from the challenges related to the legacy of past violence, especially those of forgiveness, reconciliation, and memory of conflicts.

Keywords: *peace, peacebuilding, religion, religious leaders, bosnia and herzegovina*

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The Sound of the Sun: Religious Understandings of Peace and the Role of Religious Leaders in Peacebuilding: A Qualitative Study in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Stipe Odak

In his poem entitled *The Sound of the Sun,* George Bradley (1986) describes the tonality of an inaudible phenomenon that can be only imagined, constructed as a function of seeing "light rushing to darkness, energy burning towards entropy, towards a peaceful solution, burning brilliantly, spontaneously, in the middle of nowhere." The sound of the sun serves me as a powerful metaphor for activities that seemingly produce no noise while achieving a slow yet continuous change. The metaphor also helps us to visualize peacebuilding. Although there are some phenomena that can be observed and measured, the full scope of peacebuilding is not entirely visible; it needs to be imagined.

The differentiation between visible and invisible; audible and inaudible; detectable and undetectable are not foreign to religious language. Peace, as one of the central religious concepts, is characterized by a number of seemingly paradoxical oppositions: It is both individual and collective; internal and external; received and produced. In major religious traditions, peace is not merely a result of disinterested detachment from the world in which every "noise" would disappear. While peacebuilding involves active engagement, it would be premature to reduce it to a prescribed set of actions. In this article, I would like to address the complexities related to religious understandings of peace and peacebuilding that often create confusion when used in other disciplines.

Methodology

My discussion will draw from a set of two rounds of interviews that I undertook with 75 Islamic, Orthodox, and Catholic religious leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the period from 2015 to 2017. Participants were selected through purposive sampling within the pool of religious leaders that resided and worked in that country. Although nonprobability sampling was used, it was guided by the "maximum variation" principle in a way that ensured that the interviewees reflected a wide spectrum in relation to geographical location, age, education, confessional belonging, involvement in war, and proximity to the occurrence of mass tragedies. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, all interviewees were granted full anonymity throughout the entirety of the project. Before the research began, the research protocol was discussed within the research group at the Université catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain) and subsequently by two independent methodology experts at KU Leuven and UCLouvain. As completely anonymized research, it was exempt from the IRB review.

To facilitate informed consent, all of the participants were given full information on the design, the objectives of the study, and the organizational affiliation of the researcher before the interviews began. They were also given the choice to decide on the location of their interviews and had an option to leave questions unanswered or withdraw from the project at any time. The interviews were conducted in the native language of the participants, audio-recorded, and additionally documented by extensive hand notes. All the names of the interviewees in this paper are changed. Transcribed interviews and notes were then analyzed in NVivo 11 software. The initial round of inductive coding aimed at discovering leading concepts. Those codes were subsequently organized under broader categories and finally connected and elaborated in a theoretical model, in line with Grounded Theory methodology. Instead of starting with a set of testable hypotheses, the research begins with observations and aims at developing a coherent theory firmly grounded in empirical data (cf. Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 2006 [1967]). Grounded Theory is based on abductive reasoning, which starts with observations and subsequently makes theoretical conjectures. However, unlike pure induction, it constantly re-evaluates those claims in view of new data moving back and forth between the data and hypothesis formation (Charmaz, 2006, p. 103).

Data Presentation and Analysis: Faces of Peace

Often perceived as one of the primary sources of violence, religion has been criticized as antagonistic to peace—either as a dogmatic system of thought that impedes open discussion and rational resolution of conflicts (Ginges et al., 2007; Rorty, 1999); as a closed inward-oriented community system that contributes to tribalism and distrust towards outgroup members (Atran & Ginges, 2012); as a fountainhead of violent images, symbols, myths, narratives, and moral imperatives (Aho, 1981; Schwartz, 1997). Some critics argue that religion provides mental models for creating artificial scarcities (Avalos, 2005) or frames contingent struggles in cosmic terms (Juergensmeyer, 2000), thus making negotiations and concessions difficult. Especially after 9/11, religion was also perceived as the central pillar of civilizational differences and—consequently—conflict fault lines (Huntington, 1993), or simply as an irrational and premodern system that is not capable of grappling with contemporary challenges (cf. Powers, 2010, p. 317).

More amicable critics underline the ambiguity of religious traditions, seeing them as potential inspiration for both violent and prosocial actions (Appleby, 2000). The latter elements are receiving increasingly more attention, not only in scholarship but also in the field of civil activism and high-

level political decision-making, visible in the creation of the *United Nations Alliance of Civilizations* and similar initiatives.

The link between religion and peacebuilding, already demonstrated in many concrete actions around the world (Toft et al., 2011), can be comprehended in different ways. While some authors emphasize the social engagement and pragmatic contribution of religious NGOs in the field of humanitarian actions (Barnett & Stein, 2012; Barnett & Weiss, 2011), others are focused on the spiritual, organizational, and human resource aspects present in religious communities. When it comes to religious leaders, the emphasis is most often placed on the role of high-profile individuals and institutions, such as Desmond Tutu, Dinis Sengulane, the Dalai Lama or the Community of Sant'Egidio.

What is often left outside the scope of academic scrutiny is the vast majority of "lower" level religious servants who are directly linked to their grassroot communities. In my analysis, I will therefore use data collected from that population of leaders who are in daily interaction with believers. My focus on religious leaders is further motivated by their privileged role as opinion makers, community representatives, and moral authorities who can potentially advance nonviolent alternatives to resolution of disputes (Annan, 2002).

Unlike secular actors, they also have the advantage of using theological references to warrant their visions of justice and human dignity. Religious rituals and services give them access to large groups of people, including marginalized groups. Additionally, the relative stability and continuous presence of religious institutions incentivizes long-term commitments to a community and supports trust building. Finally, religious leaders are one of the rare actors who have access to different social strata (at least in countries where religion plays an important societal role). Since religious services are generally attended by different groups of people, both elites and "ordinary" citizens, they have access not only to large but also heterogenous populations. This is not to neglect potential misuses of those positions for contrary purposes such as sectarianism and religiously inspired violence. The article will, however, focus primarily on positive potentials that religious leaders have at their disposal when engaging in peacebuilding.

Before speaking about peacebuilding, however, it might be useful to delineate what peace as a concept represents. While the notion of peace seems self-evident, its common use can be a source of profound confusion and, occasionally, misdirected expectations. For instance, religious leaders are sometimes criticized for their lack of engagement in peacebuilding, while the measures for

peacebuilding are based on socio-economic or developmental indicators that do not constitute the core of their religious life (Clark, 2010; cf. van den Berg et al., 2008). It is, therefore, crucial to clarify how semantic networks of peace overlap and differ from each other in religious/theological and non-religious discourse.

I would like to argue that religious understandings of peace, based on my interview data, can be organized within and understood along with three main categories: giftness; spirituality; and praxis. *Giftness* suggests that peace, in the most essential theological sense, is not an invention but rather a gift that needs to be accepted as a part of the order of creation (Fine, 2015, p. 91). *Spirituality*—a reflective relationship with the source(s) of religious revelation—is a practice through which the gift of peace is accepted and nourished. The spirituality of peace, in other words, is primarily a personal encounter with the gift of peace that precedes it. *Praxis* of peace simply means that peace is not just an idea, a mental image, or a pleasurable feeling of harmony. On the contrary, the gift of peace and the spirituality of peace are linked with intentionality to enact one's internal peaceful inclination to the external world.

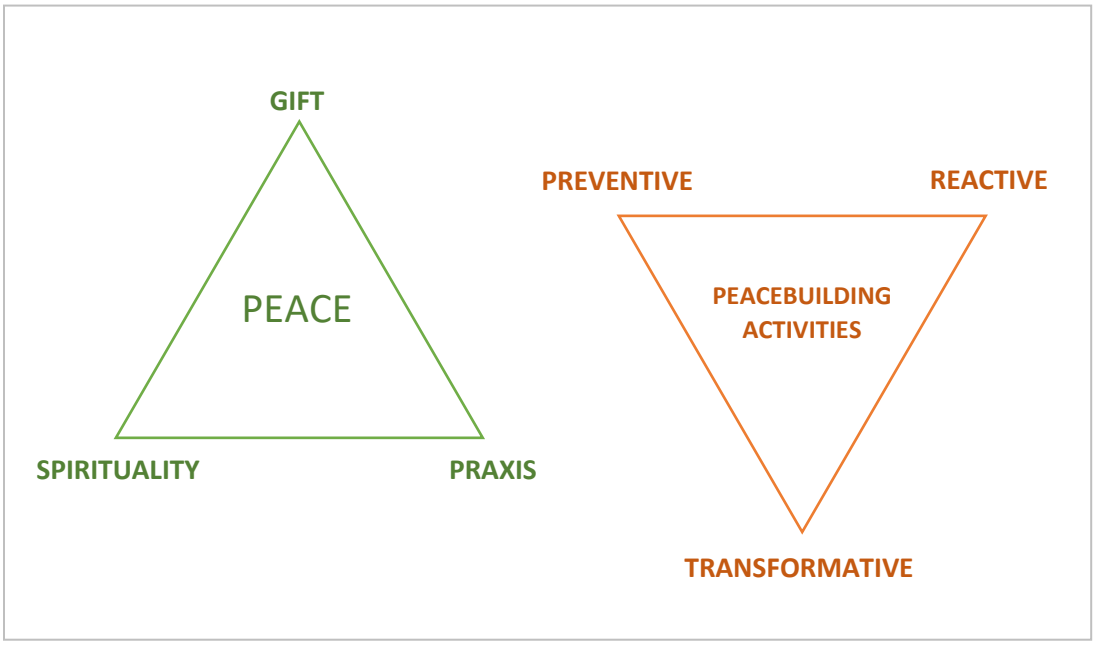
Aside from this initial triangle of giftness, spirituality, and praxis, I suggest an additional conceptualization that divides peace into three categories based on its relationship to conflict and action: preventive; reactive; and transformative. *Preventive* action comprises all spiritual and practical activities that lead to the development of robust moral character and religious knowledge among people as a bulwark against mobilization for violence. *Reactive* activities include every response to violations of justice during conflict, as well as mitigation of practical problems and grievances. And finally, *transformative* actions are activities aimed at the reconstruction of life, and the transformation of the legacy of conflicts (see Figure 1).

This conceptualization takes a broader approach to peace and peacebuilding. Moving beyond the concerns over institutionalization and security, it includes social, cultural, and even spiritual elements. This shift in the conceptualization of peacebuilding is reflected in scholarship as well as various policy documents. Analysis of United Nations documents over time indicates that the idea of peacebuilding moved from a pragmatic concern about preventing relapse to violence (Boutros-Ghali, 1992, § 21) to broader interests in the foundations of peace, even those "on the far side of conflict," and the desire to build upon those foundations "something that is more than just the absence of war" (UN Panel on Peace Operations, 2000, § 13). In this way, the former emphasis on the

institutionalization of peace after comprehensive settlement agreements (cf. Boutros-Ghali, 1995)

Figure 1

Understanding of peace and peacebuilding activities among religious leaders



subsequently expanded towards structural and cultural pillars of a peaceful society, including the focus on development and human rights (UN Secretary General, 2018, § 18; United Nations, 2010, p. 45). Although the understanding of peacebuilding actions has broadened over time, the principal safeguards of peace are still, in the United Nations's view, functioning states assisted by international organizations (cf. United Nations, 2008, pp. 25-29). Peace scholars, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of cultural and social aspects in achieving and maintaining peace. In Galtung's (1976) influential essays, peacebuilding is different from peacekeeping and peacemaking in that it does not represent ad-hoc activities but systematic efforts to detect and remove the causes of conflict in order to provide "alternatives to war in situations where wars might occur" (pp. 297-298). Lederach (1997), another influential peace scholar, offers a more comprehensive concept of peacebuilding that "involves a wide range of activities that both precede and follow formal peace accords" (p. 20). Lederach's (1997) vision of peacebuilding is multifaceted and involves not only the socio-political but also psychological and spiritual elements (p.75). The author speaks about the "infrastructure for peacebuilding," which is "oriented toward the building of relationships that in their totality form new patterns, processes, and structures" (Lederach, 1997, pp. 84-85). Peacebuilding therefore requires not only a rebuilding of the old social structures but a "moral imagination" that visualizes inclusive social

networks that facilitate the rapprochement of former adversaries (Lederach, 2005, p. 22). In my approach—which involves preventive, reactive, and transformative activities—peacebuilding takes place even in the absence of direct dangers. Alongside the standard practices of peace diplomacy and conflict resolution, this tri-partite model incorporates elements such as education; character building; ritual; development of hope; and strengthening the sense of community, into the process of peacebuilding. In viewing peace via this model, I believe that the contribution of religious actors to peacebuilding can be better understood, appreciated, and supported. In the following sections I will address each of the aspects of peace, as outlined above, in turn.

Peace as a Gift

Giftness assumes that peace, in its most essential sense, needs to be accepted and re-created, rather than created *ex nihilo*. Interreligious theologian Raimundo Panikkar (1995) underlined this element strongly in his book *Cultural Disarmament*: *The Way to Peace*, stating that,

> [t]he nature of peace is grace. Peace is a gift. We dis-cover peace, we unveil it. Peace is a discovery, not a conquest.…We accept a gift; but we also do something with it.…It is *Gabe* and *Aufgabe*, gift and responsibility. (p.18)

A belief that peace comes as a gift from God often surfaced in my interviews. Muslim religious leaders tend to link the notion of peace to the nature of God and the general purpose of religion. Christian leaders grounded a similar conviction in their notion of salvation through Christ, and the role of the Christian faithful to carry out peace. In both cases, peace is understood as something given, a phenomenon that springs from something greater than the works of humankind.

"Miloš," an Orthodox priest and theologian from the Drina Valley region, underlined a parallel between the notion of God as the beginning and the end of all creation and God's commandment to bring peace: "As Christ is the Alpha and the Omega of everything, the peace for all, peace should have a pride of place for us." A senior Imam from northwestern Bosnia, "Jasmin," mirrored that sentiment in the following:

> The Prophet Mohamed says literally: "God has 99 beautiful names, call him by those names." And He also says, "Who makes his life in accordance with those names, that person will enter the paradise." What does that mean? If God is called "the Merciful one," you should also be merciful, if God is the "Compassionate one" then you should also be compassionate. That represents living God's names in real life. One of God's

> names is “Selam” [Peace] and if a believer understands God’s word in an authentic way, that person must find peace with oneself and with others.

In his perspective, peace is therefore not something that humans create, but something they emulate. Peace first exists as a divine characteristic that is revealed and given to people to follow. Religion, as an interpretation of the Revelation should be, by implication, a work of peace. That seems to be a conviction behind “Nedim’s” explicit statement that “faith is in fact, peace.” Nedim works as imam in north-western Bosnia and Herzegovina. His statement was, obviously, not an empirical one, considering the number of conflicts that take place even within a single religion. It is rather a theological axiom about the nature of faith and its connection to the transcendent reality. Miloš recognized this paradox between actual states of affairs and theological reality of peace by underscoring that Christian churches, while preaching and living peace, are still divided among themselves. In his view, that discrepancy only accentuates the difference between their fundamental mission of peace and their failures to serve it.

This distinction between “divine” peace and the “earthly” dimension of peaceful coexistence is rather important in religious imagination. The belief here is that visible reality has its spiritual dimensions, which complement it and serves as a model towards which people should strive. Such belief can inspire very different outcomes. On the one hand, the belief that peace is a divine gift can be translated into a set of optimistic attitudes that can motivate people to engage continuously in the work of peace. Namely, if peace is not only a human creation that can be damaged in an irreparable way but also a divine phenomenon, then the work of peace is meaningful even in most dire conditions. An alternative outcome of that same belief might be a passivistic one: if peace will always exist as a divine gift, then individuals do not need to be overly concerned about it. This illustrates the ambiguous nature of religious symbols that can be articulated in sometimes diametrically opposite forms of “political theology” (Toft et al., 2011, pp. 9-15).

Peace as a Spirituality

Peace as a spirituality primarily signifies individual alignment with the giftness of peace. “Velimir,” an orthodox priest from the central Drina Valley region thusly said:

> In my view, peace means a peaceful conscience. If I am reconciled with God, if I am reconciled with myself, if I corrected some things that create unrest, then that peace can be transferred to other people, even if I do not say a single word.

The work of peace, in other words, begins with spiritual discipline, with being at peace with God. Spirituality is, therefore, an activity that ensures a wholesome connection between the divine gift of peace and religiously inspired peacebuilding.

From a theological perspective, an attempt to create peace without that spiritual link would amount to hubris and, potentially, to a failure. "Bogdan," one of my Orthodox respondents from western Herzegovina, contrasts two forms of peace—the earthly one and Godly peace. Bogdan noted that the source of peacebuilding should be found in seemingly paradoxical words from the Gospel, which reads, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). He then clarified that the purpose of the sword from the quotation is:

> to cut the biological, animalistic, and primitive needs of every human being. … Animals are equally attached to their offspring and their family—there is nothing beyond that. But Christ tells us that we should attach ourselves to the heavenly peace…

In his view, peace built solely on pragmatic or earthly considerations is perforce a temporary truce because it is rooted in biological and social belonging. On the other hand, divine peace, for him, is based on cutting off inborn, conditioning ties—not to destroy them, but to transcend them. In that sense, being at peace with God for Bogdan would mean the following: "[T]o love every human being, without conditions… not to love someone just because of some privileges, but as an icon of God." Therefore, the spirituality of peace would require recognition and acceptance of a specific form of spiritual belonging, construction of an identity which is above inherited categories of one's group.

Spirituality also seems to be essential for renewing and preserving motivation in the quest of religiously inspired peacebuilding. When speaking about their sources of hope, my respondents often mentioned a belief in the ultimate victory of good. Aside from pragmatic concerns for the betterment of current human conditions, creating peace was in their view, strongly grounded in a spiritual vision of all things fulfilled, i.e., the eschatological view of the redeemed world. Miloš, for instance, stressed the difference between the ordinary form of memory that is based on the recollection of the past and the liturgical memory, which is called "anamnesis." In Miloš's explication, the anamnesis starts from the future vision of the eschatological reality and then re-reads the past from that standpoint:

> [Normally,] we cannot remember something that has not happened, but only things that have taken place in history, in accordance with human categories. However, as Christians [we can] easily find an answer as to why and how is that [anamnestic

> memory] possible. It is possible thanks to the grace of the Holy Spirit, which transcends the limits of the past, present, and future. In that way, both past and future become the eternal present in our liturgical experience. That is the liturgical anamnestic memory, which we Christians, who participate in Christ's mysteries, experience and live. Other, profane memory, the one outside the liturgical context, perhaps could not be called anamnesis, because it is always a memory of the past. However, I would invite us to reflect a little, so that we include in that historical memory also the memory of the future, for the sake of a happier future, so that our memory does not remain encapsulated and framed only within past tragedies. Instead, we should remember, in an eschatological way, the brighter future that awaits us.

What seems to differentiate the eschatological view from a utopia is an understanding that eschatology always remains outside the realm of history; it cannot be achieved only by human efforts, nor can it be based on already-existing categories of human social life. That does not mean, however, that the ultimate vision of peace is detached from historical reality. On the contrary, human efforts within history remain inspired and motivated by the "moral imagination" (Lederach, 2005, p. 22) that the eschatological vision offers.

The elements of giftness and spirituality usually create confusion and dispute when it comes to operationalization and evaluation of peacebuilding activities. No matter how essential the practical activities of peacebuilding are, it is always important to remember that religious views on peacebuilding represent a specific paradigm, which cannot be directly translated in measurable indicators. In the interest of better understanding, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is a certain interruption between those theological and socio-political views on social reality. In Boeve's (2007) conceptualization, interruption stands as a middle way between direct continuity and a rupture (p. 9). While continuity either assumes a possibility of one, single, unifying narrative (or at least a chance of a comprehensive translation of one narrative to another), rupture emphasizes a discontinuity, an incommunicable distance between the two. Interruption as a paradigm, conversely, operates with the idea that different worldviews are similar to languages; while languages can be compared, they are incommensurable. This does not mean that no communication is possible, but only that no perfect translation is possible. In other words, there is always some surplus of meaning that remains present in every narrative that needs to be acknowledged.

Speaking concretely of peacebuilding, the central premise of religious traditions is the existence of a transcendent order that is the horizon of the ultimate peace. That final, eschatological vision thus serves not only as an inspiration, but also as an effective motivational force. It functions similarly to a promise which—although placed in an undetermined future—is already effective at the current moment. In that sense, the horizon of peacebuilding activities is much broader than those envisioned by social scientists and peace scholars. No matter how broad and flexible those models are, they are necessarily tied to the idea of practical, goal-oriented activities, with measurable outcomes. Religious worldviews do not negate the value of those activities, but their framework is generally much broader. This can sometimes create a fundamental confusion, as was explained by "Bojan," an Orthodox priest living in the Sarajevo region. Discontented with frequent questions about his Church's position on numerous policies, he objected to tendencies of NGOs and foreign representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina to reduce the Church to yet another NGO. Bojan argued, instead, that his primary goal was to live his religious calling and vocation, not to develop policies and agendas. While horizons of religious and non-religious peacebuilding do overlap, Bojan suggested that they are not the same. Even if one's religion is centered around the idea of peace, that peace is a numinous reality that can hardly be translated into social and political policies.

"Ivan," a Franciscan priest from Sarajevo, who is generally an active public person, during a lunch break conversation at a symposium objected to the overtly utilitarian orientation of religious communities. In his view, religious communities have forgotten one of their important missions: pointing to the beauty. Although this can sound surprising, religious communities have always been contemplative places; they were corners of aesthetical appreciations, houses of prayer, meditation, and serenity. As Bojan and others hinted, prayer, religious service, and contemplation are all legitimate peacebuilding activities, although they can all be carried out in intimate settings and therefore escape direct external measurement. Moreover, religious prayers are frequently offered for communities that are affected by conflicts in other parts of the world. While not a single individual from that community is physically present during the prayer, members of congregations see their prayers as valuable and effective. The element of spirituality is, in short, a necessary condition for a practical peace-work which even in the absence of practical activities still contributes to peace.

Peace as Praxis

Finally, the elements of giftness and spirituality find their expression in praxis. As the editors of a recent volume of *Conflict and Multimodal Communication* have stressed, "despite being a gift,

peace is a costly process made up of steps that hardly ever respond to the laws of gratuity" (D'Errico et al., 2015, p. v). Peace as praxis, broadly speaking, would involve all external activities of building peace, manifested though actions and gestures. They can vary from small everyday contacts to ceremonial meetings. "Ahmed," imam, lives in a religiously mixed city with a history of interethnic violence in the central-western part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and said at one point during our interview:

> [M]y way of life with people here is… I would call it an infiltration. Entering into every pore of life is my way of creating peace. Stipe, here I am a high-school teacher, a sportsman, a farmer, I am everything, just to become close to people.

By being close to people, Ahmed contributes to a certain normality of life. He shows closeness and goodwill where others might expect confrontation and suspicion. His everyday life is, therefore, peace-praxis, which requires significant emotional investments even when they go without notice.

Speaking about the collective level, "Vasilije" interestingly mentioned that peace, in fact, "is a matter of habit." Vasilije, an Orthodox priest who occasionally works in the Sarajevo region, wanted to accentuate the importance of re-habitualizing people to the reality of different ethnicities living together. In his view, one of the consequences of war in the former Yugoslavia was the estrangement of people who had a lot in common. War turned the previously ordinary coexistence of different ethnicities into something extraordinary. Vasilije's point is that one needs to re-learn something that was forcefully estranged, transform closeness and coexistence from a surprise to habitualness.

It is important to mention that the three elements we analyzed (giftness, spirituality, and praxis) are only theoretically divided. The praxis of peace, from the religious perspective, follows from an alignment with peace as a transcendent and spiritual reality. Peace, therefore, carries holistic connotations. In that respect, Ahmed said that:

> Peace is a general term that encompasses peace with oneself, peace with those around you… Islam comes from that word [peace]… Being a Muslim etymologically denotes a person who carries peace. When I come to see you, or when a Muslim greets a Muslim, we give the same greeting as in Church: "Peace be with you."

"Ante," a Franciscan priest from the West Herzegovina Canton, pointed out that Christ's first words addressed to his followers were, "Peace be with you!" In his view, peace allows a touch, an exchange between two people, a contact through which an enemy, stops being an enemy.

In both of those views, peace figures as a state that enables a transformative contact between individuals, but it is also something that can be carried to other individuals. "Andrej," a young Orthodox priest working in central Bosnia, stressed that the central element of the Christian life—the Eucharist—ends with the words: "Go in peace!" The mission of peace, in his view, becomes an extension of the inner unity with God, which can be achieved even without direct acts: "God directs us, who have that possibility, to spread that mission [of peace]. Even if we remain silent, we can have that [internal] harmony that we will show to people."

Velimir, an orthodox priest from the central Drina Valley region, states that peace requires gradual growth. In his view, peace starts from a core circle of people and spreads more and more outwards. Building peace in the world without concern for one's immediate environment and sphere of influence, he implies, can easily become just a form of virtue-signaling, an idea without expression, a spirituality without praxis, a lofty excuse for doing nothing. That would be, Velimir explained, a form of an empty peace-talk without true grounding in spirituality. However, an overt emphasis on the spiritual elements of peace can also function as a certain form of escapism. While some criticism of the lack of religious engagement in peacebuilding comes from a lack of understanding what peace in religious discourse means, certain shortcomings of religious communities need to be pointed out. One of them is suspicion towards non-religious peace actors and, consequently, refusal to engage in common activities. Such a stance fails to acknowledge any form of joint goals, as Vasilije discusses:

> We reduce it [peace] somehow on some transcendent level because we define peace in overtly transcendent terms. I think that everyone who wants to build peace in a concrete way performs an evangelical deed. All that [NGO work] might look like careerism and commercialization, and many of those organizations have profited from their quest for peace; it [the work] is nonetheless an articulation of some human [and] divine attempt to achieve peace.

To put it concisely, the praxis of peace, for religious leaders, comprises all activities big and small contributing to nonconflictual coexistence. In the second part of this discussion, I will focus more concretely on specific actions through which religious leaders can support and build peace. While other classifications are possible, I will arrange them around the axis of conflicts. If we imagine a conflict as a central concern of our analysis, then peacebuilding action before its escalation will be termed preventive actions. I will then speak about reactive actions during conflicts, and about transformative actions after conflicts.

Religious Leaders: Preventive Peacebuilding Activities

It seems counterintuitive to speak about peacebuilding actions in the absence of conflict. Yet, the view that a peaceful society has no conflict is only a theoretical one, where conflicts imply the presence of large-scale atrocities. Speaking from a different perspective, every society has some internal conflicts and divisions that can be deepened and lead to an escalation of violence. In that view, peacebuilding during a time of relative peace is a continuous activity of resolving divisions and making a society resilient against political misuses of societal differences. Bearing in mind the fact that religious symbols, narratives, and rituals have frequently been used as tools of war propaganda, the preventive role of religious leaders seems both important and meaningful.

The centrality of peace and peace-supporting values in religious traditions is, as we can see from the previous interviews, a significant part of religious identity. However, their presence means little if those values are not actively taught. Not every religious education is equally effective, however. One must always question where the locus of authoritative legitimacy lies: if peace-building ideas are widely disseminated but their interpretation remains in the hands of a small number of religious leaders, those ideas could easily change if and when those leaders change their positions (e.g., as a result of external pressures or due to organizational changes). In such a scenario, we would have a positive—but centralized—peace orientation. If, on the other hand, peace-strengthening ideas were widely disseminated and various faith practitioners were encouraged to interpret them legitimately, a more resilient network of peace values would be developed. Therefore, one important (if not essential) element of religious peace-formation is the creation of a critical mass of religiously inspired thinkers and engaged believers who are perceived as legitimate interpreters of religious traditions within their communities.

The preventive activities of religious leaders would, therefore, comprise all those activities pertaining to the development of a robust moral character and sound knowledge among believers who would be capable of resisting the misuse of religion for ideological purposes, including violence. In addition, those believers would need to be encouraged to see themselves as legitimate carriers of religious knowledge and experience. In several interviews, respondents saw the absence of proper religious education in schools during the period of Communism as a relevant element that contributed to later outbursts of inter-group violence. According to Vasilije, the prevailing ethos in schools during the Communist period in former Yugoslavia was one of violence:

> *V:* My father's generation, even mine [generation], had an education that resembled the one in North Korea. You know, when you go to primary school, you assemble and disassemble guns during classes in the fourth grade. That gun must fire eventually. We were putting gas masks on, we trained and played war. And when you play, you tend to get caught up in the game. That lasted for fifty years—that militarism in education… I generally do not like militarism, perhaps I am a little bit too subjective, but that was the reason in my view. When you have all that military potential, a nation militaristically trained, it is to be expected that politicians will use that… In the end, there was much more war there than hatred.
>
> *Interviewer:* What does that mean exactly? The phrase "there was much more war than hatred" sounds interesting to me? Can you explain it?
>
> *V:* **…** As a matter of fact, once when a war starts, it does not need hatred to fuel it. It can start [even] without hatred, but once it starts, those who do not hate become silent.

In addition to an all-pervasive war ethos, the absence of any robust knowledge about religion itself made it possible for a new form of religious radicalism, previously entirely absent from the region, to gain prominence. "Sead," a chief imam from a city in central Bosnia, explains how the lack of religious education and lack of engagement with public issues facilitated the spread of radical religious ideologies:

> We came out from under a glass bell in which we protected ourselves from external influences…. We were able for the first time to talk about faith openly…. Secondly, during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Muslims, unfortunately, met other and different interpretations of the faith in very bad circumstances… People who possessed very unstable personal religious experiences met, in an extreme situation, [foreign] individuals who, in their eyes, had perfect answers and then quickly fell under their influence. Consequently, the balance in one's own traditional faith experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina was disrupted… There was an encounter with the most radical teachings of Islam because the conditions were the most radical. Today, people reflect [on faith] completely differently.

Sead here remarks that the instability of personal religious experience facilitated the spread of radical ideologies. This was because radical answers seemed straightforward and credible in extreme circumstances of war. There was also no safety net of self-confident interpretations and

experiences that would counteract the radical ones. Furthermore, if receivers of religious messages do not have sufficient religious grounding and appreciation for religious traditions, those messages would hardly enter their everyday consideration.

Social research on the role of religious leaders during conflicts usually analyzes the messages they send or statements they sign. While this remains important as a reactive measure, it is naïve to lose sight of a broader communication channel which consists not only of the sender and the message itself but also of the context of the message and the audience. Different forms of coding and decoding happen during communication. Even if the content of the message itself is a peaceful one, one needs to acknowledge that the transmission of information also includes listeners' perceptions of the speaker as well as their evaluation of the importance of the message. For example, a hypothetical message— "We should stop war because it contradicts our religious convictions"—is sent by religious leaders of two opposing sides. While it appears unequivocally to be a call to end violence, we must explore many other elements to understand its impact on intended audiences. If that message were to be sent by two religious leaders who otherwise preached sectarianism, it would be seen as a superficial statement without any real substance. If made under the auspices of an international community, it might be perceived as a ceremonial statement made to please foreign funders or to manufacture a positive self-image before external observers. Finally, if the audience does not grasp the religious urgency of the message or its theological grounds, the message might be understood merely as wishful thinking without any concrete obligations.

Velimir thus presented his view on the importance of education in the following words: "People are a wonder, both in a positive and a negative sense. (…) It depends on what was sown in them, and what was planted in [their] heart." In his view, preaching peace in conflict-prone situations can be effective only if the message resonates with its receivers. For that reason, he emphasized the necessity of proper faith education that would make people capable of recognizing the genuine elements of faith. "Tarik," imam, central-eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, remarked, similarly, that religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina were sending numerous peace messages during the war, but "the ears that were supposed to hear that were not educated in the spirit of faith." "Ilija," an Orthodox priest from the north of Bosnia and Herzegovina, thinks that education can "sow a good seed" among pupils, but he also underlined that educators should have a significant amount of creative freedom in their work. It is to say that educators should not be constantly micromanaged by members of the hierarchical church. Therefore, the additional preventive role of religious leaders lies in

contributing to the construction of an open and critical educational framework that would enable young people to think critically and creatively about their faith.

Aside from their role as teachers, religious leaders can also contribute to the betterment of the quality of education in general, and the development of specific civic values, including respect; appreciation of diversity; and tolerance of political and moral differences. One concrete activity would include deconstruction of stereotypes and misconceptions about out-group members. As "Edin," an Orthodox priest in East Herzegovina noted in his interview, it is much more effective to educate tolerant people than simply teach tolerance.

Religious Leaders: Reactive Peacebuilding Activities

As implied by the name, reactive activities consist of reactions against ongoing abuses. Those abuses vary from the use of religious symbols for violent purposes over war crimes and humanitarian crises, to exacerbations of psychological and social grievances.

Political context should also be considered. As the experience of the territories of former Yugoslavia shows, the fall of Communism signified a major milestone in religious self-understanding and the place of religion in societies. While religion was previously relegated to limited spaces in which religious authorities preserved authority over interpretation of religion, things changed at the beginning of the war. In the early 1990s, religion gained a relatively prominent position in Yugoslavian societies. The revival of religion coincided with the rise of national identities and, consequently, those two were frequently conflated with one another. In such an environment, it was difficult for religious leaders to retain autonomy over religious symbols. As Croatian sociologist of religion Ivan Markešić (2010) points out, religious leaders in the former Yugoslavia were first legitimizing national projects of political leaders (who initially lacked popular legitimacy); later, nationalistic leaders secured their power and started to select and back only those religious leaders who supported their political projects (p. 535). How was such a thing possible? "Ljudevit," a Catholic priest from the West Herzegovina Canton, explains:

> Religious leaders are, therefore, very significant and important, although not too crucial because once a war starts, parallel structures arise with individuals who set themselves up as, so to speak, greater popes than the Pope. These then say: "We are the real protectors, and this [religious] leader betrayed us. His views are weird." And in that way, religious leaders are turned into ideologues and strategists [by politicians].

Under such a situation, previously private spheres of religion became a common property. Politicians, ideologues, and propagandists were able to display religious symbols, pose together with religious leaders, appear during public ceremonies, and thusly strengthen their public appeal. Religious communities, on the other hand, gained public prominence but sacrificed their autonomy (Odak, 2021, pp. 319-321).

Another contextual aspect that must be considered is the proximity of conflicts that prioritize the struggle for survival. As "Zaim," an imam in northwestern Bosnia explains, during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was very difficult to preach anything peaceful in situations where people were paying exorbitant costs for a bag of flour. According to Zaim, such discourse of peace and reconciliation might even have had adverse effects since it could have been perceived as detached from reality.

Aside from these contextual factors, limited involvement of religious leaders might be partially due to fears of loss—not only of their lives and lives of their families, but also of their authority within the community. "Drago," a Catholic priest from Mostar, said in that respect: "Unfortunately, religious leaders did not rise sufficiently above [the situation], because it was easier to stay in one's own group than look for a new way, because that new way would mean betrayal…" While it is understandable that some people can remain silent under such a pressure, withdrawal because of fear was by no means a general rule. There are some examples of morally courageous individuals who played a visible reactive role even under duress. "Arsenije," an Orthodox priest living in the central part of the Drina Valley region, openly criticized crimes committed by members of his community during the war. This is how he explained the situation:

> I spoke, and I am still speaking publicly to my people…. During the war, I was twice exposed to a situation where they wanted to [kill me]. A man admitted that [to me]; he is still alive. His hand shook, he said. I told him: "You can kill me, but there will always be someone to warn you. Your conscience will warn you one day. You cannot kill the truth. You cannot kill God. God is the truth."

Another example is Father Golijan, an Orthodox priest who was ostracized for saving the lives of two imams, his colleagues from Vlasenica. In a later interview, he explained the reactions of his community:

> When I returned, I experienced daily harassment. People turned their heads from me on the street, they condemned me publicly, spat at me, called me betrayer. … But I do

> not regret because being human and preserving face is more important than keeping life. (Radisavljević, 2015)

Golijan paid a heavy price for his reactions to the abuse of religious leaders of another faith. Such brave actions have the potential to become pillars of interreligious dialogue and platforms for the reconstruction of mutual trust because they clearly demonstrate the impossibility of putting all members of the out-group in the same category. Therefore, their peacebuilding potential becomes fully realized only after the conflict. Another example of crossing-the-lines of intercommunal division can be seen in the non-selective distribution of humanitarian aid during the war. "Jakov," a Franciscan from north-western Bosnia, said to me that his community provided humanitarian aid to all people in the city, without regard for ethnic belonging, even during the worst inter-communal conflicts.

An additional type of reactive peacebuilding action is resistance toward divisive narratives by providing limited frameworks for hope. It is unrealistic to expect that warring sides would ever stop propagandistic activities during a conflict. However, religious leaders can play a role in creating specific spaces in which people would have a chance to experience a different order of things, a limited but nevertheless important experience of hope and different moral imagination. "Luka," a Franciscan from northern Bosnia, gave such an example during funerals. Instead of repeating nationalistic rhetoric, he used to speak about Christianity and peace, highlighting that those things are transcendent to human limitations. After a funeral, someone thanked him for giving people spiritual comfort instead of repeating belligerent rhetoric. Those spaces of hope have only a limited potential to change the general dynamics of a conflict. Nevertheless, they resemble a general position of religious communities and religious space which, although limited and unable to drastically change the social order, still provide an opportunity of a different insight, of alternative thinking.

Religious Leaders: Transformative Peacebuilding Actions

Every large-scale conflict leaves a legacy of divisions and traumas that create obstacles between communities, which need to be reconfigured/transformed in the interest of peaceful coexistence. Conflicts—especially protracted ones—deeply influence the way people think about themselves and others, the way they remember, and the way they interact with previous enemies. Common hurdles along such a path can be attributed to the concept of closed identities, or identities that are inward oriented and leave no space for either external criticism or self-criticism, limiting communication with out-groups.

On face value, it seems that a national or an ethnic identity in itself is a problem. The deceptive solution would be eliminating such pre-modern identities in favor of a civic identity that supersedes them. These attempts, however, can be very counterproductive. In the context of the former Yugoslavia, it was precisely the experience of the forced imposition of a supra-national identity and inability of certain groups to express their own identities that led to some forms of identity overcompensation. What used to be hidden or suppressed suddenly became a badge of honor in its extreme form. In such a situation, the prevailing perception is that identity itself is precarious and could be threatened by another group. In conversation with religious leaders from Bosnia and Herzegovina, I discovered an often-forgotten element that may be an important aspect of peacebuilding: stabilization of identity. Ahmed compared identity-creation to a game of marbles. For him, identity is like a colorful marble—when others have it, you also want to have one to participate in a game. The moral of the story was the following: identities are necessary elements for intergroup communication, which is always some form of a game in which each group has its own marble. Marbles, without the interaction of other marbles, mean nothing. Additionally, where there is a fear that a marble can be destroyed or stolen, participation is difficult, if not impossible.

One element that can keep an identity closed is a fixation on collective trauma that has become central to that group identity. As Alexander (2004) points out, cultural trauma, unlike individual trauma, is a framework that enables a community to grapple with the excessive nature of tragedies and to develop a circle of solidarity (p. 1). At the same time, cultural trauma has an exclusionary potential toward out-group members. A local term in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *zlopamćenje*, describes a form of remembering which is exclusively focused on the resentful reemergence of evils. Such memory is transmitted only for purposes of distinction and vilification. For "Željko," a Franciscan priest from Sarajevo, zlopamćenje is not only an instance of selective remembrance but also an act of self-redemption where others' wrongful acts are not judged against the practice of one's own act but by one's "shiny" principles:

> When the other is observed, his acts are judged by one's shiny principles. It is not that practices are measured against practices. Within a political religion and zlopamćenje, that is fundamental. Only the evil of the Other is remembered, one's own evil is negated.

In zlopamćenje, the Other plays the role of a permanent opposition that remains entirely outside the circle of solidarity. A solution for responsible remembering, therefore, cannot be the

elimination of any identity or societal difference. Such acts themselves have often been the very source of inner-group violence. Bosnian-Herzegovinian theologian Ivan Šarćević (2014) thus advocates the creation of communities of compassion, where differences are not negated, but where the Other and Different are not seen as an existential and moral threat (pp. 60-61).

A community of compassion should be understood in an ecumenical sense, where community does not imply unity, but companionship. In such a model, the suffering of the Other can be acknowledged and recognized even when the Other is still perceived as the very source of one's own suffering. A community of compassion suggests that there will always be some differences between groups who create the community. It implies the absence of one unifying narrative for all. The Other remains Other, and the suffering of the Other is not my suffering. While recognition of this difference excludes identification, it does not prevent communication. In a community of compassion, one is interested and invested in the story of the Other but remains aware that they might not be able to understand it entirely.

Building grounds for common life does not mean insistence on hasty policies of letting bygones be bygones. Coming to terms with losses and legacies of violence requires time; pushing for instant solutions, conversely, resembles attempts to cure cancer with an aspirin. (Cf. Bosch's criticism of "cheap reconciliation" in South African context in: Livingston, 2013, pp. 330-331).

What is nevertheless possible to establish is the situation that I would term Degree Zero of Reconciliation. This situation is negatively defined as a rejection of the idea of perennial enemies and is positively defined as an acceptance of some form of future common life. Degree Zero of Reconciliation, therefore, does not offer any fast solutions, it simply attempts to develop a framework for future reconciliation. In such a framework, people can start at a degree zero, which is still not even a degree one, but is nevertheless something more than a complete rejection of any prospects of coexistence.

When it comes to the role of religious leaders, their involvement in reconciliation does not need to be understood in a ceremonial way, as mediatized gatherings of high-profile religious representatives. "Damjan," an Orthodox priest from western Herzegovina, who is personally involved in interreligious dialogue, warned that overtly ceremonial and externally imposed activities can distract from a genuine development of trust and collaboration between participants. Speaking about one of his most important achievements in peacebuilding, "Tarik," an imam in central-eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, mentioned lunch and a coffee at a visible local venue, attended by representatives

of three local religious communities. Although simple, this act can be extremely subversive to the solidification of closed group identities. Tarik remarked that the power of that action lays in its simplicity and imitability—while the local population can hardly emulate the creation of official statements and ceremonies, they can all invite their neighbor for a coffee or a meal. By sharing a meal together, religious leaders thus bring peacebuilding from the level of officiality to everyday life.

Finally, the transformative role of religious leaders' peacebuilding activities also includes the work of building hope and moral support among communities that are, after wars, often vulnerable. This is especially the case with returnees in places where they are a minority. Ivan, Orhan, and Tarik were examples of leaders who returned to support their communities in places where they lacked political support and social networks. In those cases, reconstruction of religious institutions goes hand-in-hand with the reconstruction of life. Since organizational units of religious communities are relatively permanent, the rebuilding of those units sends a signal of long-term dedication, support, and advocacy for a community in question. Soon after finishing his education, "Orhan" arrived to a city affected by mass crimes during the war. He is still serving as imam there. Rebuilding life there was, in his view deeply challenging but nevertheless morally satisfying. As he said metaphorically, he feels himself being "integrated into every brick" of the city.

Conclusion

In this article, I wanted to emphasize a pluralistic understanding of peace and, consequently, peacebuilding based on face-to-face interviews with religious leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina. While the necessity of peace is commonplace, taking the understanding of peace for granted can easily lead to confusion and misrepresentations. Outlining three major axes of religious understandings of peace—its giftness, spirituality, and praxis—this article sought to achieve two main goals. First, it was shown that those three elements are essentially tied. They also follow the larger logic of religious reasoning that insists on both visible and invisible dimensions of peace. Secondly, I wanted to point out some possible misunderstandings that can result from reductive views on religious notions of peace, especially when it comes to evaluations and measurements of peacebuilding efforts. While there is a significant overlap between religious and socio-political conceptions of peace in the field of praxis, there is a large domain of spirituality and metaphysics which remains outside the latter view. Consequently, in many cases, criticism of religious leaders' ineffectiveness can arise from a lack of understanding as to their primary mission. It is, therefore, necessary to communicate not only similarities and overlaps between different notions of

peace(building), but also—and perhaps even more—domain-specific understandings that cannot be directly translated into a language of other disciplines. One could hope that such engagement would yield more honest engagement of different stakeholders in peacebuilding, as well as more reasonable expectations on all sides. Returning to the initial thoughts presented in this article, it is perhaps also necessary to become more sensitive to long-term, everyday actions that are just like the sound of the sun—inaudible, but always present behind the screen of the visible light. Two final verses of Bradley's (1986) poems are inspirational. They read: "And you, too, must make a sound that is somewhat like it / Though that, of course, you have no way of hearing at all."

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