

The Media and Religious Tolerance

By Xhavit Shala

Alarmed by the growing presence of intolerance and xenophobia in Europe,¹ the heads of states and governments of Council of Europe organized² a high level meeting in the fall of 1993³. During the meetings they expressed their concern that the climate of intolerance presented a threat against the democratic society and its fundamental values. According to these statesmen, the principle of tolerance guarantees the preservation of an open society and respect for multiculturalism in Europe.

Just a few months prior to this summit, in the summer of 1993, Samuel Huntington, an American professor and one of the most distinguished thinkers in security policies, while considering this new development and the post communist conflicts, predicted that the new century would witness an inevitable clash between civilizations and religions.⁴

When Huntington speaks of the inevitability of a clash between civilizations, he however, ignores the complex interaction that exists between the main civilizations in the world.⁵ The three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam share together elements and worldviews that provide no foundation for a conflict.⁶ Despite of one's opinion on Huntington's claims, international developments in recent years demonstrate that religious conflicts, while remaining in their essence completely political in nature, have become a serious threat not only for the security of individual counties or regions but for the world as a whole also. It is very important that we look at how civilizations can better interact with one another. We must consider any apperant clash between civilizations a result of this lack of cooperation between them.

Throughout history, we see that the rivalry between religions and the nature of their relation with the state has played a decisive role in the development and progress of human society. It was only when the clash between religions was surpassed, as in the

¹ These articles may be quoted in any form up to and inclusive of five hundred (500) words without express written permission of the author, providing the text does not amount to a complete article. When used in keeping with such condition, the notice of copyright must appear on the title or copyright page or opening screen of the work.

^{2 2} The remarks were first delivered during the roudntable "Media Reporting on religous issues ", held in March 6, 2006 in Tiranë, organized by USAID's World Learning and the Department of Jouirnalism of the Unvierstiy of Tirnaa. Hte studiy was subsequentlyu published in «Tirana Observer», on March 8, 2006, and daily «Standard»,. 20.03.2006.

³ The summit of the heads of stattes and govenemrtn of Council of Europe coutnires ws held in Vieana from October 8-9, 1993. During the meeting there was expressed concern about the rise of racism, xehnophobia, and antisemitism, the growth of a climate of intolerance, and increase in the acts of violance..

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, "Përplasja e civilizimeve?", 1993.

⁵ Franc-Lothar Altman – "Dialogue, instead of a clash between civilisations" – Gernam Institute for International Politics and Security in Berlin.

⁶ Prof. Arbër Xhaferri- «Religion, Politics and the Albanians» - presented at hte International Conference «Religions and civilisations in the new millenium – the Albanian case, » Tirana, November 13-14, 2003.

western world the church was separated from the state, and only when the secular age and the ideas of tolerance had set in, that societies embarked on the path of development and progress. But what does the term religious tolerance really mean?

Religious tolerance implies a prohibition of discrimination and repression against people whose faith is different from yours. The term, while defined in various ways, also implies the right of a person to change his faith. In the political aspect, religious tolerance stands for public policies that guarantee the freedom and equality of religions in their relations with the state. The concept of religious tolerance is closely intertwined with principles that regulate relations between the religion and the state, such as the principles of laïcité and secularism.

The concept of national security is defined as a set of policies to protect the national interests, the independence, territorial integrity, the constitutional order and international relations of the Republic of Albania. The state assures the protection of these interests through instruments such as an active diplomatic service and defensive capabilities, and focus on economic growth, rule of law and strengthening of democratic institutions.⁷

The opinion that people of a certain religion have about another religion helps us identify the existence of three worldviews: I. religious exclusivism; II. Religious inclusivism; III. Religious pluralism. People that subscribe to the view of religious exclusivism see their faith as the only true one. According to them all other religions are false and are an expression of a satanic act. Oftentimes, intolerance and violence are accompanying features of the behaviour of these groups. These groups find their inspiration in a twisted interpretation of passages from scripture, which can be found with abundance in any religion. Examples of such an attitude were demonstrated in action during the Middle-Ages in Europe with the burning on the stake of people who rejected the Churches' teaching. Another example is the concept of grouping people in two categories, the Muslims and their territory which is called «Dar al - Islam» (the place of Islam), and non-Muslims, whose territory is called «Dar al – Harb» (the place of war).

Such a spirit of exclusivism exists even within the same religion. Often, if allowed free rein, followers of such exclusivist movements can incite religious hatred and violence against members of other religions undermining thus the security of a country. Religious exclusivism is often the main cause behind civil wars, crimes against humanity and genocide. In such cases these teachings represent a serious threat for the security not only of the states affected by it but for regional and global security also.⁸ This has happened in the Middle-Ages as demonstrated by the crusades and continues to our days, with the most recent examples being Bosnia and Afghanistan.

This concept of religious exclusivism becomes even more dangerous when it is transformed into state policy. Such theocratic states were common in the Middle Ages but they have surfaced again in more recent times in the Middle East. The transformation

⁷ National Security Document of the Republic of Albania; Law No.572, January 7, 2000.

⁸ - Xhavit Shala- «Albanians at the Crossroads», page 56, Tirana, May 2004. A publication of the Albanian Center for National Security Studies.

of religious exclusivism into state policy is followed by other developments in domestic politics. Such countries, because of their policy of not accepting as legitimate any other faith, practice systematic violations of human rights and freedoms. They often become a place of shelter that attracts same minded militants from other countries.

The coming to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan presents a typical case of religious exclusivism (of the Sunni branch) becoming state policy. Upon coming into power in 1996, the Taliban established the rule of shariah and curtailed human rights and the rights of women in particular. The Taliban rule became an issue of great concern for Central Asian Republics. These countries feared that religious extremism would spread into their territory from Afghanistan and would destabilize their fragile systems of government. The Taliban religious exclusivism became a matter of concern for global security also. Most of the figures that were later to become heads of terrorist networks came out of the "Afghan schools". Figures such as Osama bin Laden, Ajman Zavahiri, the one responsible for organizing the 9/11 attacks in New York, Al Zarkavi in Iraq and others, at one time or another spent time in Afghanistan. In March of 1998, Bin Lade completed the unification of terrorist groups under his command and created the Front for the Liberation of the Holy Places⁹, which was later to be known as Al Qaeda.

Groups that embrace the philosophy of Religious Inclusivism also regard their religion as the only true one but unlike the exclusivists they do not regard all other religions as false but they see them as incomplete and partly developed.

Europe was able to escape religious fanaticism and enter the path of development only when the viewpoint of accepting the legitimacy of other religions and religious pluralism became a dominant pattern of thought. According to the representatives of this group, all religions are legitimate, valid and true when seen from within their particular culture. According to them, all religious traditions are deserving of respect. Religious exclusivism and religious pluralism are two worldviews that are completely opposed in the way they see other religions.

But how has the concept of religious tolerance evolved through history? It was the philosopher John Locke, Pier Bajle and Voltaire that remodeled the relation of religion with politics and laid the foundations of religious tolerance. In 1689, John Locke in his work, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," proclaimed and sought to achieve a new type of relation between religion and politics. According to Locke, every citizen should be allowed the right of free religious belief and free discussion on subjects of theology and philosophy. Obedience to the state can not be achieved by use of force. Salvation and moral truth can be arrived at only through persuasion and personal choice. Religious matters are thus personal and should be viewed as relating to the private sphere, provided that they do not present a cause of undue interference on the rights of others.¹⁰ In 1713, Pier Bajle published, "A Treaty on Universal Tolerance", and in 1763, Voltaire published

⁹ Exerpts from the answers provided to Egyptian Authorities by Ahmet Ibrahim Al Nagar, who was arrested in the premises of El Hagri Insititue in Elbasan on June 25, 1998 and was subsequently extradited to Egypt ; daily «Albania», December 2, 2001, page 5

¹⁰ Benoit Mercier, Andre Duhamel – "Democracy, the foundations and its history ", page 74, Tirana, 2003.

“the Treaty on Toleration”. Both authors elaborated further the ideas introduced first by Locke.

While toleration as an idea was born in Europe, in the U.S. it became part of the Constitution. Upon the initiative of Thomas Jefferson, the idea of tolerance and the principle of separation of the church and state were sanctioned in the Constitution of 1786. The theses submitted before the Assembly in Virginia by Jefferson put forth the right to freedom of religion. The approval of the bill by the Assembly in 1786 sanctioned once and for good the separation of state from religion.¹¹

Albania, unlike the rest of Europe was able to enter its path of western developments only after the proclamation of independence in 1912. Independence found Albania with two religions that formed four communities with a well established independence and a legacy of admirable religious tolerance. For the first time in 1923, the Albanian statesmen approved the law “On Religious Communities,” which regulated the relations between the state and religion according to the western model. The sanctioning of principles, such as the laicité of the state, the freedom of faith and the right to change it, the equal treatment of religious communities and the detailed regulations of their financial resources would have a positive impact on the consolidation of religious tolerance among Albanians and the security of the new Albanian state. The Albanian patriots from that time on continued to work to establish the principle that the religious communities in spite of their size in numbers were to be treated and represented in an equal manner. It was this principle that has served as the pillar of inter-religious dialogue and tolerance in our country ever since.

The Albanian state, while initially very weak, considered religious matters very important to its security. In 1923, Visarion Xhuvani, who was later to become the Archbishop of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church says: “We all know that religious issues have always been a bit complicated here. We all know how much they cost the state. God forbid that they be used as tools [against the state] in the future.”¹² Given these circumstances, the Albanian patriots asked, as expressed in the words of Mehdi Frashëri, that “the Government needs to be a bit more inside [the affairs] of religions ...”¹³

The blow given by the communist regime to religious organization in 1967 is unprecedented in the world. The religious communities and their institutions are an inseparable part of a nation’s culture and their dissolution greatly harmed our national culture also. The role of religion and religious education was replaced by the communist Marxist education. Faith in God was to be replaced with faith in the Party. Marxism itself was transformed into a form of religion and opiate for the people.

Albanians, throughout their long history of struggles have never experienced any domestic religious conflicts. The establishment of the Albanian national identity on the foundation of a common language, tradition and culture and not religion, the presence of

¹¹ Ibid, page 75.

¹² AQSH, Index no. 246, D- 68, Fl. 471, year 1923.

¹³ Ibid, page 637.

an Islamic faith with a folk tendency that was further ameliorated by the Bektashi presence, a resistance to all radical and intolerant Islamic currents such as the wahabites, a forced estrangement from religion of the youth during communism, and a tradition of political forces that have historically never aimed to appeal to religiously affiliated electorates,¹⁴ are some of the factors that have contributed to keeping the religious communities in Albania safe from fanaticism, extremism and religious fundamentalism.

But while religious fanaticism, extremism and fundamentalism find no traditional base in Albania, after the 1990's the danger of "importing" such currents from abroad has increased. Such a penetration has occurred mainly through the activity of non-governmental organizations of a religious nature. The introduction of children and teenagers to twisted religious teaching, which often times is exclusive of any other faith, and is provided by organizations of a dubious origin and funding creates room for the youth's manipulation and presents a threat to religious tolerance in our country. The legalization and introduction of religious education classes into our public education system, while ensuring full compliance with the secular nature of our state and school system, would provide an important investment towards protecting religious tolerance in our country.

The crisis and the political, economic and social instability that our country has experienced during these transition years (events related to 1991, 1992, 1997, September 1998), accompanied by serious violations of public and constitutional order and a lack of state support for religious communities are all elements that have contributed to the entry in Albania of certain sects and religious movements whose activity is prohibited by law in many countries.

"Traditionally tolerant in religious affairs, the society is nonetheless subject to a range of external influences...., as forms of Islam and Christianity, new to the country, seek to take root," the 2004 International Religious Freedom Report says.¹⁵ Aware of the importance to national security that religious communities had, all Albanian government from 1923 to 1967, in spite of the form of political regime, made sure to regulate by law the operation of religious communities. It is very regrettable that for so many years now the Albanian lawmakers have failed to pass a law on religious communities. The Albanian state should move away from the position of passive neutrality¹⁶ (employed during the last 15 years) and assume a more active policy on the matter. Our edifice of religious harmony is as great as it is fragile. "It takes only one serious rift, it takes only the radicalization of only one of our religions, for the edifice to come down," our great writer, Ismail Kadare,¹⁷ has said.

¹⁴ Prof. Dr. Artan Fuga - «The attitude of today's Albanians toward religion», Remarks delivered at the International Conference «Religions and Civilisations in the new Millenium – The case of Albania», held in Tirana in November 14-15, 2003.

¹⁵ International Religious Freedom Report, year 2005. A publication of the United States Government.

¹⁶ Xhavit Shala - «National Security and the Challagnes of integration», page. 107. Tiranë, May 2003. A publication of hte Albanian Center for National Security Studies.

¹⁷ Ismail Kadare – Remarks delivered at the International Conference «Religions and Civilisations in the new Millenium – The case of Albania», held in Tirana in November 14-15, 2003.

A situation where there is no legal framework regulating the operation of religious communities, and where foreign interferences in the form of funding are present may leave room to various reactions and organization that are religiously motivated. This may lead to a growth of fundamentalism in our religious communities that may have negative consequences for our national security. It is the duty of our religious communities, the intellectuals and civil society at large to work to preserve and promote the spirit of inter-religious dialogue and tolerance passed on to us from generations.

We have said earlier that religious intolerance presents a threat not only to the security of one country, but of the whole region and beyond as well. Religious intolerance presents a serious threat to the whole concept of free media and speech. The state of the media and free speech in countries' ruled by religious exclusivist serves as a fitting illustration. Ways and methods must be found to promote and further develop the spirit of religious tolerance. The media can provide an important contribution in this effort.

The media is often characterized as the fourth estate because of the great influence and effect that it can have on large segments of society. The media provides a one-way communication route which, if abused, can lead to the manipulation of those who are subjected to it. Such media, if left unchecked, has the power to instill certain hypnosis on the listener who can neither reject nor debate what they hear. "The disinformation of public opinion is an important instrument in domestic destabilization. Incorrect information can create situations of uncertainty, fear and unnecessary tension which can often lead to public reactions and wrong decision making," the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Albania says.¹⁸

The media must play its role in promoting this climate of religious tolerance but in order for it to properly play this role it would require first of all that those engaged in it be properly trained. And the place where the foundations of professional journalism are laid is the school of journalism and the media training institutes. It is important that the journalism students are provided with comprehensive information and are made aware of the great potential that media have in promoting a culture of tolerance in a society.

But training must not end at the school. It must be made part of a continued strategy. Professionals of all levels must also be provided with information on professional standards and the dangers of intolerance.¹⁹ Those in leadership position in the media must work to draft and abide by codes of ethics which should highlight the responsibility to promote a culture of tolerance. The public broadcasting services have a particularly crucial role in promoting a culture of tolerance and creating an atmosphere where intolerance is challenged. The indisputable importance of media freedom and independence calls for incentives and non mandatory legal instruments to be employed in promoting a culture of tolerance.

¹⁸ Law no. 8572, 27.1.2000 "On the National Security Document of the Republic of Albania ».

¹⁹ Recommendation No. R (97) 21, Council of Ministers of the Member states on the media and the promotion of a culture of tolerance, approved by the CE Council of Ministers, October 30, 1997.

There are many cases where deliberate efforts have been made to use the media for subversive and destabilizing activity and to spread racism, xenophobia and intolerance. There is room, however, to impose legally binding standards against the language of hatred²⁰ while preserving the right to freedom of expression and media independence. Moreover, the freedom of speech has often been understood to include irresponsible appearances in the form of media publications which undermine religious tolerance and encourage a spirit of hatred. The most recent crises of the caricatures illustrate this very well. “We can not accept art that inspires hatred, violence or that represents prejudices against particular races or ethnic groups. This goes against our idea for tolerance and equality,” the U.S. Ambassador to Albania, Marcie Ries said in an interview for an Albanian daily in February 22, 2006.²¹ The behavior of the Albanian media during this crisis demonstrated not only a high level of responsibility but also the deep roots of understanding between religions in Albania.

In closing, wherever a free media promotes a spirit of religious tolerance it contributes positively to our national security. If the opposite is the case, then the media undermines its own freedom and present a threat to security.

Tirana, March 8, 2006

²⁰ Ka dhe një rekomandim të Këshillit të Europës që dënon gjuhën e urrejtjes (Rekomandimin Nr. R (97) 20).

²¹ Intervistë e botuar në gazetën “Shekulli”, dt. 22 shkurt 2006.