

UDC 2-67:316.647.5-053.6(497.7)

Muhamed Jashari, MA<sup>1</sup>

**TË RINJTË DHE DIALOGU RELIGJIOZ NË MAQEDONI**  
**МЛАДИТЕ И РЕЛИГИСКИОТ ДИЈАЛОГ ВО МАКЕДОНИЈА**  
**YOUTH AND RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN MACEDONIA<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract**

Taking into consideration the fact that Macedonia is a country whose demographic structure is composed of a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic mosaic, coexistence between citizens becomes an essential condition for the existence of the country. Historically Macedonia has been considered *Catena Mundi* or meeting point of civilisations, and this kind of mentality exists even today in the country.

It has now been proven many times that the stable future of Macedonia is in the hands of its youth, hence dialogue and mutual respect should be of primary concern. We could say the religious dialogue between young people in Macedonia was absent during the communist system, whereas the coming of democracy and the fall of monism enabled such kind of activity.

Not only this, but the contact of young people at university rendered building relationships among young people unavoidable, therefore there different youth and student organizations came to be established.

In this paper we will talk precisely about the inter-religious relations of young people in the Republic of Macedonia, the extent and impact of these relationships, and whether youth organizations are effective in fostering coexistence among the diverse ethnic communities in Macedonia.

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<sup>1</sup> MA, in Political Science, International Relations and Diplomacy.

<sup>2</sup> Paper presented at International Conference, "Religions and Pluralism in Europe", University of Wiena & Islamic Community of Montenegro, 17th October -19th October, 2014, Podgorica, Montenegro.

**Key words:** Macedonia, youth, youth organisations, youth and religious dialogue, multiculturalism

## RELIGION IN MACEDONIAN SOCIETY

In speaking about multi-culturalism or multi-religiosity in multi-religious or multi-ethnic societies, such as the Republic of Macedonia, it is impossible not to mention the religion factor. This is because the religion is considered to be one of the key institutions of society and one of the most important social elements in the global era.

Henry Bergson says that in the past as well as today we can be faced with societies which do not cultivate art, philosophy, or science, but we cannot come across a society where there is no religion. The German scholar of social phenomena, Hans Frayer, asserts that human beings from the time of the most primitive cultures lived within social groups, and also lived within religious norms.

Even though religion has to do with the private matters of belief grounded in the subjectivity of humans, it is in constant interaction with society, and not only that, religion is an influential phenomenon in social life. It is assumed that the oldest and most loyal friend of a human in his inner and outer life is the phenomenon called religion. The human being always seeks happiness, whereas the primary place wherein he finds comfort and happiness is religion (Pajaziti, 2003: 48).

Religion puts more emphasis on individual-psychological functions that are of great importance for making a sense of the life of individuals. It goes from the public into the private sphere. At different periods its effect has been greatly reduced but has never entirely disappeared. (Matevski, 2013:47).

The American researcher, Meredith McGuire, asserts that religion constitutes one of the most powerful forces that is felt deeply and has a great impact on human society. It impacts interpersonal relationships and has a profound influence on family, on community, and on economic and political life (McGuire, 2007: 27).

With the establishment of the Communist system in the Balkan Peninsula and in Macedonia, religion was declared an enemy of society and citizens and religious people were unwanted persons for the Party which promoted paradise in this world (Gellner, 2001: 84), while members of the Communist Party enjoyed authority and numerous privileges.

With the destruction of Marxist ideology, the value of the phenomenon called religion immediately began to increase. (Pajaziti, 2012: 54). The population of this region immediately started to identify itself with religion and religiosity. Religious edifices as mosques or churches that once used to be empty, now began to fill with practicing believers. So during the transition period on the scene religiosity appeared to be the expression of Vox Dei (Divine Voice), or as a “return to sacrality”.

## MULTICULTURALISM AND MULTI-RELIGIOSITY IN MACEDONIA

Seen from a theoretical angle multiculturalism is a “recognition of differences”, or as Charles Taylor says: “Multiculturalism is a policy of recognition or antipode of non-recognition..”.

Who wants to see how ethnicity and religion is in the Balkans, you can encounter that in Macedonia. The Republic of Macedonia is a real picture, of the historical reality, cultural, or religious of the Balkans, and that is because it is a typical country with great ethnic and cultural diversity.

The cultural mosaic called Macedonia is special because of its deep diversity and its natural situation for this country. Rightly to say for Macedonia it is said to be a country with a complex society. (Aceski, 2013:88). Whoever visits Skopje should not be surprised if at the same time will hear the Adhan (call to prayer from the mosque) also the church bells ringing..

According to the census of 2002 and ethnicity in the Republic of Macedonia there are: Macedonians – 64.18%, Albanians – 25.17%, Turks – 3.85%, Roma -2.66%, Serbs – 1.78%, Bosniaks – 0.84%, Vlachs – 0.48%, and the rest – 1.04% (200). While the religious composition of the population of Macedonia is this: Macedonian Orthodox 64.7%, Muslim 33.3%, other Christian 0.37%, other and unspecified 1.63%<sup>3</sup>.

On the basis of these figures we see that Macedonia is a microcosm of the Balkans, a country with great cultural, religious, ethnic and lingual heterogeneity. The intellectual and current Prime Minister of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoglu, during his visit to Skopje a few years ago stated that "Macedonia is the epicenter, or the heart of the Balkans". (Ahmed Davutoglu, December, 2012).

Therefore, we can again affirm that Macedonia is "Catena Mundi", or the crossroads of civilizations, the corridor where East and West meet, as well as Islam and Christianity. This fact is proven by its Islamic religious monuments but also its Orthodox Christian structures. (Pajaziti,

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<sup>3</sup>(STATE STATISTICAL OFFICE, 2002)

2012: 31). As Macedonia possesses a multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious society, respecting "*the other*" becomes indispensable to the prosperity of the state and its future.

## YOUTH AND RELIGION

No doubt that the youth is the most vital layer of a belonging or a society, to invest in the youth means investing in the future of the country and society in which you live. Youth is a separate social category which is the basis of the future development of the society.

Youth is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence. That's why, as a category, youth is more fluid than other fixed age-groups. The United Nations, for statistical purposes, defines 'youth', as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States. However, in both the reports, the Secretary-General also recognized that, the term 'youth' varies in different societies around the world. (United Nations, Definition of Youth).

National Youth Strategy of The Republic of Macedonia defines Young: as a people who are able to assume responsibility for their own lives and make decisions on all issues pertaining to them, at all levels.

According to Macedonian society former historical, social, political and ethical practice, and in the absence of internationally recognized definition, the term youth as used in the Republic of Macedonia signifies a separate socio-ethical category of population aged between 15 and 24<sup>4</sup>. It is worth mentioning that among the total number of inhabitants of the Republic of Macedonia, 23% are in the 15 to 29 years' of age bracket.<sup>5</sup>

Although during the period of Communism interest in religion among youth was extraordinarily low, we can say that religion didn't completely disappear. According to research studies conducted at that time, especially those done after the 1970s, 34.8% of the youth aged 15 to 25 years believed in God. According to research conducted in the 1980s, 72% of Macedonian

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<sup>4</sup>(REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA NATIONAL YOUTH STRATEGY, 2005)

<sup>5</sup>(СТУДИЈА ЗА МЛАДИТЕ ВО РЕПУБЛИКА МАКЕДОНИЈА 2013)

youth were non-religious, whereas the lowest percentage of non-religiosity was found among Macedonian youth of Albanian heritage – 38%.

We should mention that the most non-religious youth during the times of Yugoslavia was the Montenegrin youth, with a percentage of 79%. Amongst the Muslim population the amount of percentage of the non-religious was 45%. (Pajaziti, 2003: 70)

Despite the fact that the Communists tried to present religion as a threat to society, no age group, nor any segment of the population was completely detached from religion. After the fall of the Communist system, religious consciousness was raised among the population of Macedonia, so that in a research survey conducted in 1991, 64.3% of the population of this country had a belief in God, whereas 57.6% had some religious feelings.

Research about the attitudes of the young towards education, culture, politics, and the economy, including religion, in the Republic of Macedonia was conducted in 2013, respectively in September, October, and November. The age group of those surveyed in this research was 15 to 29 years old. In this research the young belonging to the Macedonian ethnic group were 67%, the Albanian young 25%, whereas 8% of the youth were from other ethnicities living in the Republic of Macedonia.

In the question asked of youth regarding religious affiliation, 63% of them expressed themselves as belonging to Orthodox Christian belief, 34% were Muslim, whereas 0.4% were Catholic. In this research only 2% of the youth answered that they were atheists. In reference to the question about religious practice only 3.4% answered that they *regularly* practise religion, whereas 18.8% answered that they *hardly ever* practice religion. It is worth mentioning that on the basis of this research Albanian youth had the higher percentage of those practising religion in comparison with Macedonian youth. 25.5% of the Albanian youth *regularly* do practice their religion [presumably Islam], whereas the *regularity* of the Macedonians' religious practice is 14.7%.<sup>6</sup>

A large number of the youth that took part in this survey were born exactly at the time when religion once again became part of public life. We could say that religion among Macedonian youth enjoys a high popularity and a large number of youth are religious.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

## YOUTH AND NGO-s

A non-governmental organisation (NGO) is any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group, some are organized around specific issues, such as human rights, environment, health, religion etc. Civil society must at any given time manifest the will and interest of the citizens. It must be distinct from government-controlled institutions; that is the reason it is referred to as 'the third sector' of the society.

Among the places where the young of different ethnicities and confessions in Macedonia meet and face the same challenges, different NGOs play an extraordinary large role in terms of multi-culturalism, multi-ethnicity, promotion of peace or mutual respect. Through NGOs the young get to know each other, exchange ideas, do activities or projects, and undertake new initiatives.

When it comes to NGOs and their activity in the Republic of Macedonia it is worth mentioning that there are around 6000 registered NGOs, including student, sport, cultural, youth and religious organisations.<sup>7</sup> This growth of the number caused a respective growth in interest in the NGOs. A great number of NGOs were established after the conflict of 2001.

In the survey which was carried out in 2013, youth were asked to declare their trust or distrust toward a total of 16 (public and private) institutions, on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 meaning "do not trust at all", whereas 4 signified "trust a lot".

According to these results, among young people in Macedonia, the scale of trust is higher toward NGOs (2.16) than for political parties (1.95), or the parliament (2.05). Various NGOs in Macedonia in recent years have carried out activities to raise general public awareness about political culture, participation in elections, as well as human, cultural and religious consciousness.

Below we will mention several student youth organisations which, in recent years, have conducted activities and undertaken various beneficial initiatives for Macedonian society. Among them we can mention: "Islamic Youth Forum – IYF", "Mladinski Obrazovan Forum – MOF", Student youth organization "Deca". etc.

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<sup>7</sup>[http://www.mtsp.gov.mk/WBStorage/Files/analiza\\_nvo.pdf](http://www.mtsp.gov.mk/WBStorage/Files/analiza_nvo.pdf)

IYF is a youth organization that was founded in 2000, the mission of which is to promote and cultivate universal Islamic and human values in the youth, as well as protecting them from deviation. (IYF, Activity Catalog, 2013).

In the materials published by this organisation it states that, it is an “.. organization that proceeds with integration processes”. Whereas another of the policies of this youth religious organization is encouraging dialogue with others as well. It is worth mentioning that this youth organization is involved in various cities of Macedonia, and is an organization affirmed in the international arena as well.

This organisation from time to time organizes forums and conferences discussing different topics, with speakers from Macedonia and abroad. In recent years within its activities this organization has addressed several topics, among which we can mention the following: “Islam and Globalization”, “Integration of Muslims in Europe”, “Human Rights”, “Youth and Interethnic and Interreligious Tolerance in the Republic of Macedonia”.

Several years ago, IYF together with some other youth organization in Macedonia, initiated the “March of Peace”. This initiative was undertaken with the aim of fighting interethnic tensions, as well as to build bridges of cooperation among different ethnicities in the country.

One of the activists of this youth religious organization asserts, “*The Islamic Youth Forum is an organization which promotes the highest Islamic and human values among the society in which it is active. It is becoming a symbol of peace, unity, tolerance, youth integration, intellectual and spiritual development. Its aims are to create a civil society whose reflections will affect everyday living, changing the world for the better*”. (Lion, 20, Skopje).

Youth initiatives in the Republic of Macedonia are welcomed by the youth, especially by students, exactly due to the fact that they undertake initiatives that meet the needs of the society. We can realise this from their declarations:

“*They are very fruitful organisations, and recently there has been a big flux. We can see that the youth is becoming aware, dedicating some of their time to follow lectures and to join very important social projects. Youth Educational Forum – YEF has a very wide background, with thousands of projects undertaken to meet the interests of the youth.*” (Zana, 19, Skopje).




*“NGOs have a positive influence on the youth, as they implement many projects, seminars, trainings; they have presentations on which they debate, and they work on important topics which are of interest for the citizens, especially the youth.” (Sofija, 23, Skopje).*


Doubtlessly different NGOs serve as facilitators of communication among youth in Macedonia. A large number of students are active in NGOs with the purpose of raising awareness of the youth and citizens in general. This makes a special contribution to breaking down stereotypes between ethnic communities.


## Conclusion


Youth is the foundation of every society. The more that the intellectual level of the young is nurtured and developed, the more the society is enriched. The best possible investment that could be made by a government or state is the investment in young people. At the same time religion is one of the crucial institutions of a society. It is part of our daily routine and interactive activity. Equipping the young with religious values means equipping them with human or universal principles. The different youth NGOs and confessional initiatives in Macedonia are good contributors to mutual understanding and tolerance that facilitate building bridges of cooperation.


 Religion is either very important element in human life, as well as in the society.

 After years of the 90s, the population in Macedonia began largely to identify itself with religion and religiousness.

 Respect “of the other” in Macedonia is indispensable for the future of the country.

 In the youth of the Republic of Macedonia religion has a good reputation, and pretty a big part of them are religious.

 The regularity of the practical religion comes more in expression among the Albanian youth than the Macedonian.

 High reliability among the youth in Macedonia have NGO-s rather than political parties and parliaments.

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