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Psychology of Religion and Intercultural Dialogue and Tolerance

»Religion is indeed powerful medicine; it should be administered prudently, selectively, and deliberately.« (R. Scott Appleby)

Abstract: Irrespective of all negative predictions of social scientists concerning its very survival, religion continues to be a vigorous social force strongly influencing culture of modern man. Taken its motivational and cultural power, specific social location and organizational configuration, religion becomes rather indispensable for any kind of intercultural dialogue campaign. Insights of psychology of religion in that context becomes increasingly important given the increasing prominence of nested paradigm in inter group dialogue and conflict resolution whereby local actors embedded at the gross-level of cross-cultural encounter are directly involved and responsible for creating atmosphere of dialogue and peaceful coexistence. Psychologically speaking, threats to intrinsic peace and tolerance building capacities of religion come from psychologically unbearable and abnormal environmental conditions, religious orientations such as extrinsic religiosity and partly religious fundamentalism, authoritarian personality trait, overstressed ethnic identity and uncontrolled inter-group processes. On the other hand, the most significant contribution of religion to intercultural dialogue lays in benign religious orientations of intrinsic religiosity and religious orthodoxy, and in ability of religion to offer subordinate transcultural goals and more inclusive categories of self-identification that could pacify otherwise competitive intercultural relations.

Key words: religious orientations, intercultural tolerance, authoritarian personality, ethno national identity, realistic group conflict, social identity.

Povzetek: **Psihologija religije in medkulturni dialog ter strpnost**

Ne glede na vse negativne napovedi sociologov glede obstoja religije, ta ostaja živa družbena sila, ki močno vpliva na kulturo sodobnega človeka. Če upoštevamo motivacijsko inkulturno moč religije, njeno specifično družbeno umestitev in organizacijsko konfiguracijo, postane resnično neogibna za vsak medkulturni dialog. Uvidi psihologije religije so v tem kontekstu vedno pomembnejši, saj raste ugled paradigme vcepljene v dialog med skupinami in reševanje sporov, kjer so krajevni dejavniki, vključeni na globalni ravni navzkrižnega srečevanja med kulturami, neposredno vključeni in odgovorni za ustvarjanje ozračja dialoga in mirnega sožitja. V psihološki govorici, grožnje miru in sposobnostim religije za gradnjo strpnosti prihajajo iz psiholoških nevzdržnih in nenormalnih okoliščin in religioznih usmeritev, kot so zunanja religioznost in delno verski fundamentalizem, avtoritarne osebnostne poteze, prepoudarjena narodna identiteta in nekontrolirani procesi med skupinami. Po drugi strani pa najpomembnejši prispevek religije za medkulturni dialog leži v naklonjenih religioznih usmeritvah ponotranjene religioznosti in pravovernosti ter v sposobnosti religije, da ponudi podrejene nadkulturne cilje in vključene kategorije samo-identifikacije, ki lahko pomiri sicer tekmovalne medkulturne odnose.

Ključne besede: verske usmeritve, medkulturna strpnost, avtoritarna osebnost, narodna identiteta, dejanski spor med skupinami, družbena identiteta.

Introduction

Compared with the beginning of the last century, humanity today is witnessing much more dynamic intercultural interactions at both between-society contact and within-society contact levels. As result, modern man more than ever before has chance to encounter on daily basis cultures, worldviews and values that significantly or even shockingly differ from his own. For the latter, the term »culture shock« has been appropriated.

As rightly observed by social scientists and theologians, diversity is one of the most basic principles of human earthly life and interaction (Abu Sulayman, 2005), without which human life would be meaningless and, I would say, extremely boring. In addition to that, humanity simply cannot allow itself to make out of the interpersonal and inter-group variations solid basis for unavoidable and unsolvable conflicts as that ultimately would mean chaos at interpersonal level and the end of planet earth at interstate and global level given the destructiveness of modern military technology. Altogether, intercultural dialogue or, as Khatami initially put it, dialogue among civilizations (Khatami, 2000) does not have alternative and modern man must learn to enjoy fruits of the diversity in order to contribute to social, economic, and political wellbeing and justice of the world. The famous saying of the former U.S Senator George Aiken »If we were to wake up one morning and find that we were all the same race, religion, and nationality... we would find some other reason to hate each other by noon« (in Akbar and Holladay, 2004, p. 15) therefore is there only to remind us of how hard we have to work in order to benefit from cultural diversity.

Given the strength and scope of its cultural power and ability to motivate human action, religion certainly has enormous intercultural dialogue and peace-building potentials which cannot be ignored if not for anything else then at least for the possibility of being misused and abused as it is natural law that existing vacuum is sooner or later filled up. On the basis of recent findings of psychology of religion and other relevant psychological disciplines, in what follows we will try to shed some light on how modern psychology views the role of religion in the context of intercultural dialogue and tolerance. Before that, it should be noted that psychologists are sometimes careful to make clear difference between »religiosity« and »religion«

whereby the former stands for personality trait and latent construct with its cognitive, emotional, behavioral and spiritual dimensions describing quality of one's religious commitment (Ćorić, 1998; Miller and Thoresen, 2003), while the latter retains meaning of a social institution regulating activities of society's members. This difference between the two is assumed in the paper.

Importance of Religion for Intercultural Dialogue and Tolerance

Almost all founders of social sciences, including Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Sigmund Freud as one consequence of the institutional differentiation of the religious and secular spheres predicted not only privatization of religion but also its marginalization and decline in Europe and the world (Appleby, 2000). As very few people expected religion to disappear completely, also very few expected religion to be powerful public force again (Riesebrodt, 2000). However, not only that billions of people in parts of the world other then Europe newer ceased to structure their daily activities according to their religious believes, but religious sentiment in last decades has been witnessing obvious global resurgence. Partly because of that social scientists since 1960s begun to seriously revise these theories, concluding eventually that secularization did not eliminate religion, as it was expected, but rather shifted its social location (Casanova, 1994). In other words, religion is still vigorous social force strongly shaping culture and identities of today humanity.

Religion as a worldview is primarily concerned with answering three major questions of human existence, namely its origin, its purpose and its destiny. Unlike philosophical discourse which also addresses these questions using rational arguments, religion in addition to that is always distinguished by degree of conviction. That is to say, a religious standpoint on these grand issues is supported not only by rational arguments, but by emotional attachment as well (Safi, 2005), because of what religiously based convictions represent a strong source of motivation and powerful springboard for action. To some authors this emotional charge of religious experience is very reason why religion survived decades of secularization and attacks of modern philosophy and science (Skelić, 2006).

If we furthermore consider that religion has at its disposal an array of symbolic, moral and organizational resources exemplified in its creed, rituals, code of conduct and confessional community, it

clearly follows that religion constitutes »an integral culture, capable of forming personal and social identity and influencing subsequent experience and behavior in profound ways« (Appleby, 2000, p. 9). In other words, taken its current global resurgence, its cultural and motivational power, its specific social location and organizational configuration, religion becomes rather indispensable for any kind of global campaign for intercultural dialogue and tolerance.

The issue, however, gets in complexity by the fact that religion operates in various situational and psychological conditions that make inherently tolerant religious teachings vulnerable to corruption, manipulation and abuse, eventually producing so called religiously motivated intolerance and acts of violence. This ambivalent capacity of religion to »make and unmake« intolerance (in Hunsberger, 1995) - to borrow expression of famous American psychologist Gordon Allport – is a question, which has been perplexing social scientists including psychologists for more than half century. Therefore, the question here becomes not whether or not to incorporate religious strength and capacities in ongoing process of intercultural dialogue but rather how to make sure that the campaign of evangelization for global dialogue and tolerance gives the best fruits and is not endangered by to religion essentially foreign elements. Given the title of my paper, I would like here to draw primarily on the recent findings of social psychology of religion and inter-group tolerance and subsequently to delineate socio-psychological structures and forces supporting or corrupting peace-building and dialogue capacities of religion.

Importance of Psychological Perspective

According to some authors, statehood is one of constituent features and hallmarks of any civilization (Kale, 1991). This might be at least one of reasons why the very term »clash of civilizations« has in a way created impression that meeting between different values and worldviews is primarily taking place at inter-state or inter-regional level in which states following different worldviews and belief systems are seen as basic actors. Although this impression might have partially objective basis in reality, it should not ignore ongoing shrinking of intercultural spatial distance due to globalization, multicultural nature of most today world societies as well as the fact that great majority of inter-group conflicts in last 20 years having their roots in cultural differences have taken place within a single country (Wallensteen and Sollenberg, 1997). In other words, the primary

actors in intercultural encounter and subsequently dialogue are not states and spatially separated societies but rather increasingly individuals subscribing to different value and norm systems.

Following the idea of interstate encounter of civilizations and interstate conflicts, the accent in intercultural dialogue has been put in interstate diplomacy and, at the best, scholarly conferences, thus leaving individual actors very often unprepared and unskilled for encounter with different others. For that reason, a number of scholars has been calling for »nested paradigm« of inter-group dialogue whereby local actors embedded or nested at the gross-level of cross-cultural or cross-ethnic encounter will work for creating social conditions and relationships across different cultures that foster mutual understanding, dialogue and peaceful coexistence (Appleby, 2000; Lederach, 1997). It is here where psychology with its unique individual micro level approach to the phenomenon of religion can help us to construe more complete picture about role, both positive and negative one, religion and religious actors could have in inter-group dialogue at different levels of interaction, including intercultural one. More specifically, insights of psychology might be helpful in identifying factors that corrupt or promote tolerant religious attitude towards different others at psychological level and accordingly assist relevant social institutions in conceptualization of programs that would support successful and more meaningful cross-cultural and cross-religious encounter.

Role of Religion in Intercultural Dialogue: Social Psychological Perspective

Before I proceed to elaborate on the ways modern psychology has envisaged place of religion in inter-group and inter-cultural relations, I would like to note that psychologically speaking seemingly irrational and abnormal reaction might be absolutely rational and normal, given the abnormality of concrete social conditions under which these individuals and groups are operating. Under such environmental conditions, psychological states steaming from them simply might »defeat« even the mature and tolerant expression of religion and take over religious sentiment, giving it intolerant or even violent expression and form. In the case of such examples of so called religiously motivated intolerance - we firmly believe - the precedence should be given to political, sociological and economic analyses instead of psychological ones, as roots of such acts are simply in psychologically unbearable socio-political and economic circumstances. As far as

Muslims in good number of Muslim countries are concerned, Prof. Akhbar Ahmed - widely known Chair of Islamic Studies and professor of international relations at the American University in Washington, D.C. - while addressing the very same topic of clash or dialogue between civilizations, for example has pointed out that:

> »The first and most important step is to help create a climate that will allow the problems of the Muslim world to be solved... So far, the formal world bodies failed miserably... No other people in our times can be so openly abused and humiliated with such impunity as the Muslims... This has resulted in *growing sense of powerlessness and despair* that has fed into anger which, in turn, encourages violence« (Emphasis added, Akhbar, 2004. p. 8).

In greatly similar if not the same context, Alan Boesak - a prominent black African Christian leader in South Africa and president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Nobel prize winner - during apartheid regime in his country in 1984 uttered meaningfully the same words, which run as follows:

> »The civilians of South Africa - our people - don't really face a police force which is bent on keeping law and order but full scale military occupation by the government against its own people... This is a civil war situation...« in which »all of those efforts have been almost chocked to death in blood... So you see nonviolent efforts are not bringing results, the kind of results that bring people hope, and the people see that - so the very philosophy [of nonviolence] that can make such an incredible contribution to a humane and peaceful society, that *philosophy becomes an ally of the oppressor.* I worry about that *because my own commitment to nonviolence is in question here«* (Emphasis added, Interview with Allan Boesak, »Tensions are Deepening, Anger is Rising,« in Appleby, 2000, p. 35).

For that reason, some social scientists rightly have observed that in such cases focusing research on religion (Rogers et. al., 2007), and I would add also on psychology of perpetuators, might rather become excuse to avoid focusing on real issues and problems and, if not appropriately considered in the context of wider social forces, an example of how scientific research is manipulated for political purposes (Renzetti and Curran, 2000). That is why we would suggest

that psychological findings concerning role of religion in the encounter with different others would be most beneficial in multicultural circumstances where the religious actors are granted the minimum of human rights and justice.

In the attempt of psychologists to delineate the place of religion and religious actors in promoting tolerant attitude towards different others and explain ambivalent relationship between the two, two general directions could be discerned. While the first tries to identify psychologically unique religious orientations that at socio-psychological level either corrupt intrinsic tolerance of religious teachings on one hand or represent an authentic expression of religion on the other, the second aims to discover separate inter-group processes and psychological characteristics that threaten to modify dialogue and tolerance building capacities of religious conviction.

Concepts of extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity, religious fundamentalism, religious orthodoxy, and religious quest fall within the first category of religious orientations standing in specific relations to pro-dialogue and tolerant attitude towards different others. Thus, extrinsic religiosity represents strictly utilitarian and immature religious style, in which religious actors see religion as an instrument »useful for the self in granting safety, social standing, solace, endorsement for one's chosen way of life« (Allport, 1966, p. 455) whereby religion becomes partner in protecting one's own interests rather than a source of authentic moral teaching whose requirements are to be sincerely fulfilled (Ćorić, 1997) irrespective of others' belief, skin color or ethnic origin. Extrinsically oriented people thus tend to be self focused, bigot and eventually prejudiced or intolerant towards different others as they tend to endorse prejudiced ideologies that promote group's interest (Jackson and Hunsberger, 1999). On contrary, intrinsic religiosity stands for more mature religious style characterized by broad-mindedness, acceptance of faith as a supreme value in its own right, humility, compassion, love of neighbor (Ćorić, 1997; Jackson and Hunsberger, 1999; Rogers et al., 2007), and needless to say certainly more tolerant cross-cultural attitude.

For not being completely satisfied with explanatory power of extrinsic vs. intrinsic religiosity concept in regard to ambivalence of the sacred in the context of inter-group relationships (Hunsberger, 1995), psychologists following the above mentioned »religious orientation approach« have been increasingly focusing on relationship between religious fundamentalism and inter-group tolerance and antagonism, which is indeed interesting one. Religious fundamentalism is usually described as a style of religious belief characterized by a militant belief system.

Interestingly, socio-psychological studies have not shown clear positive relationship between religious fundamentalism and prejudice or intolerance (Laythe, Finkel, Bringle, and Kirkpatrick, 2002), but rather that its authoritarian element or dimension - which later on will be discussed in some detail – pollutes otherwise tolerant attitude of religious fundamentalism that then subsequently »makes« prejudice or intolerance. Similarly, it has been observed that orthodox dimension or firm practice of, in this case, Christian teachings proscribing many forms of prejudice and emphasizing human brotherhood strengthens tolerant attitude of religious fundamentalism that in turn »unmakes« prejudice (Laythe, Finkel, Bringle, and Kirkpatrick, 2002). The authors concluded their findings in the following manner:

> »The high [positive] correlations between the variables" of Christian orthodox belief or fundamentalism and authoritarianism »mean that people, who are highly orthodox or fundamentalistic, but simultaneously low on authoritarianism, are relatively rare; however, our results suggest that such individuals might well be the least prejudiced of all. These results further suggest that if the effects of authoritarianism could somehow be eliminated, orthodox Christian belief and even Christian fundamentalism would be inversely associated with racism, consistent with the explicit message of Christianity." (Laythe, Finkel, Bringle, and Kirkpatrick, 2002, p. 630).

The most important contribution of these findings is, firstly, that particular religious orientations indeed support inter-group tolerance and, secondly, religious orthodoxy or one even could say religion deprived from non-tolerant personality elements can positively contribute to inter-group dialogue and tolerance at all its levels.

Similarly, religious quest orientation, which involves questioning approach to religion, a resistance to clear-cut answers, readiness to face existential questions without reducing their complexity and self criticism, represents an open and flexible religious style (Hunsberger, 1995) that certainly offers energy to counter inter-group intolerance.

As said earlier, the second approach in social psychology of religion and tolerance aims to discover separate individual psychological characteristics and inter-group processes that threaten to modify dialogue and tolerance building capacities of religious conviction. The most noted among the first is the above mentioned authoritari-

an personality trait, which is characterized mainly by set of attitudes and orientations such authoritarian submissiveness, authoritarian aggressiveness and conventionalism (Altemeyer, 2006). Thus, people high on authoritarianism tend to readily and uncritically submit to the established authorities and norms of society, attack unprotected and weak others in their name and are highly conventional. Plenty of empirical studies confirm positive relationship between authoritarianism and intolerant attitude towards different others as well as scary ability of this personality trait to simply overshadow personal religious sentiment or even subdue its motivational power to its own purposes (Hunsberger, 1995; Čorkalo and Kamenov, 1998; Altemeyer, 2006). These findings just confirm our conclusion that authoritarianism serves as basic driving force of intolerance of religious fundamentalism. Put simply, noble values and vigorous motivational energy of religion became a victim of dysfunctional personality characteristics.

More to the area of former Yugoslavian republics and the issue of ethnicity, recent empirical studies on the relationship between religiosity and ethnic (in)tolerance in Croatia (Kunovich and Hodson, 1999), Serbia (Joksimović and Kuburić, 2004), and parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Dragun, 2006) confirm conclusions of sociologists that religious sentiment in different ways has been hijacked and manipulated by ethnical agenda. On one side, nationalization of religion made out of religion a boundary marker between different ethnic groups along which tolerance is to be practiced. Given the fact that religion and ethnicity today represent the favored markers of the new cultural identities (Appleby, 2000), one only can imagine the impearability and strength of these ethno-religious boundaries. On the other side, and at more intrapersonal level, religious convictions certainly have not been able to balance out ethnic intolerance of religious individuals produced by their feelings of nationalism and ethnocentrism. Antun Dragun (2006) - one of very few social scientists who conducted empirical studies on relationship between individual religiosity and ethnic tolerance among Bosnian Croats - has summed up his findings in the following manner:

> »It is interesting to note that once the variable of national identity or ethnocentrism is statistically controlled for (that is, its influence is statistically excluded), majority of [negative] correlations between religiosity and criterion variable [of ethnic tolerance] either disappears or decreases. This finding confirms assumption that the [positive] relationship between religiosity and

> ethnical distance could be at least partly explained away on the basis of [positive] relationship between religiosity and nationalistic attitude, that is, on the basis of [finding that] nationalistic attitude positively correlates with both religiosity and ethnic distance. On the other side, [positive] relationship between nationalistic attitude and ethnic distance could be very little explained away by the influence of religiosity on these two variables given that even after statistical control of religiosity measures all correlations of nationalistic attitude with measures of ethnic distance remain and little or non significantly decrease." (p. 175)

In other words, the process of nationalization of religion, at least in this case, has been largely limited to one way influence of nationalistic agenda on religious convictions, whereby religion obviously failed to reciprocate by lending to national identity universal religious and Christian values of love, tolerance and respect for other religious and ethnic groups. Thus, religion again has failed a victim of ethnic interests.

Finally, understanding psychology and social structure of intergroup processes could be of considerable help in delineating role of religion in creating atmosphere of intercultural dialogue and tolerance. For that purpose, realistic group conflict theory (RGCT) and social identity theory (SIT) - the two most prominent theories of inter group relations - provide useful insight into some of causes and resolutions of inter-group and inter-cultural conflicts as well as role of religion in the whole process. Unlike the above mentioned authoritarian personality theory, RGCT suggests that the causes of intergroup conflict at different levels lay at the structure of situation or more precisely at the incompatibility of goals regarding material resources (Sherif, 1966). SIT goes even further suggesting that although mutually incompatible goals are sufficient to create inter group conflicts, they do not represent necessary preconditions for producing tension between various groups as salient self-categorization or social identity is enough to generate prejudice and discrimination between respective groups (Tayfel, 1982). Accordingly, in the absence of incompatible goals even bare awareness of belonging to a separate group is just enough to create intolerant attitude towards different others.

It is interesting to note that religions indeed do participate in competition over, at least, human resources as well as promote dividing boundaries between »us« and »them«. However, world religions also

offer a series of subordinate transcultural and transconfessional goals that might unite various cultural groups in cooperation for the wellbeing of entire humanity and, as suggested by RGCT, reduce inter group conflict (Liu, 2004). Similarly as implied in SIT (Liu, 2004), religions also offer more inclusive basis for self-categorization and forming social identity that might incorporate the whole humankind, thus preventing or reducing any kind of inter group conflict. In that sense the following verse of Qur'an echoes the message of all religions:

> »O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).« (*Surat al-Hujurat,* verse 13).

Conclusion

Religion today is certainly more than alive cultural and social force, which is strongly shaping individual and societal identities of modern man. To hope that religion will simply go away in near future is rather unrealistic. If we in addition to that consider its unique motivational power for action, specific social location and organizational configuration, then it becomes clear that humanity should be fast to begin campaign of evangelization for peace and tolerance that will support mature and authentic expression of religious moral principles in relation to different others, thus countering religious extremism and manipulation of religion. The extent of success in this campaign will decide whether this powerful medicine of religion is going to be treasury of riches or Pandora 's Box for intercultural dialogue and tolerance.

Psychologically speaking, treasury of religious riches for intercultural dialogue and tolerance is in well developed religious institutions that will help their adherents to internalize respective doctrinal and moral teachings and eventually adopt tolerant social religious orientations of intrinsic religiosity, religious quest and orthodoxy. Dialogue and peace potentials of religion are also in its capability to offer various subordinate transcultural and transconfessional goals uniting different cultural groups in cooperation for the wellbeing of humanity as well as in its ability to contribute more inclusive basis for self-categorization of the humankind.

However, Pandora's Box face of religion in this context is hidden in psychologically abnormal and unbearable environmental conditions, utilitarian religious orientation of extrinsic religiosity, authoritarian personality trait that corrupts otherwise tolerant religious fundamentalism and orthodoxy, selfish influence and divisive manipulation that ethno-nationalism exercises over personal religiosity, and finally in divisive influence of various inter-group processes. It is up to social, political and religious institutions to start building the strategy to save religion from the claws of these socio-psychological anomalies, thus ensuring the best use of peace and tolerance building capacities of religion in inevitably multicultural environment of human reality.

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