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OSCE Event, Warsaw

September 12-13, 2018.

**Overcoming secular-religious divide in order to reduce discrimination and
intolerance**

Discrimination and intolerance occur all around the globe; currently in Europe, with the flow of migrants and asylum seekers, we can see the EU facing many challenges to ensure human rights protection under European Convention on Human Rights.

One of the challenges to active tolerance and non-discrimination faced by most societies today is the question of translating the language of human rights, including freedom of religion, into practice. So far, we have tried to resolve most conflicts between secular and religious understanding of human rights through legal norms and court practices, and as it turns out we did not find a model of better communication between the two and enable more constructive collaborative learning practices.

My work in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans in the last 20 years shows that discriminatory practices against ethnic and religious minorities, women, disabled persons, LGBTQ and many other groups have not yet been overcome, and in order to confront these practices we need to properly address the secular-religious divide. In the post-secular era, some authors emphasize the disastrous consequences of dualisms that divide religious and secular, individual and communal, rational and irrational. They propose a

“**relational dialogism**” (Willson, 2012) as means for going beyond the imposed dualisms in international politics, which can be also applied more broadly to social and political life in local communities in order to bring about social change.

Relational dialogism is a framework that opens up the possibility of understanding religion and politics not as two separate and completely divided spheres of life, but as two spheres that are constantly changing, shifting, and impacting each other.

In the Balkans, the gap between secular and religious understandings of human rights, freedom of speech, reconciliation and development is still enormous, and there has not been a great deal of collaborative work, nor has religion been employed as a driver of change in resolving national and global issues.

Some faith-based initiatives challenge ethnic divisions; religious dogmatism and status quo polity and they foster further development of civil society and peace-building. What is also important is that spiritual capital brought by faith-based activists moves beyond mere bonding between members of the same faith communities: it helps bridge the secular-religious divide and reduces discrimination.

In BiH’s fragmented educational landscape, with religious education in public schools that is very often focused on doctrinal learning and conveying knowledge without critical thinking, it is challenging to effect change and open the ethnically and religiously divided boxes people live in. Religious communities, parents and students choose religious education and defend it as part of their human rights and right to freedom of religion, while opponents advocate for a more inclusive religious education, such as cultural studies, ethics and history of religion (Alibašić, 2009). Both sides have their arguments, but there has not been enough willingness to resolve the tensions and misunderstandings

between them. The dichotomy between private/religious and public secular still prevails, and the only way to overcome existing divisions and exclusions is to adopt **relational dialogism** approach.

I will mention two examples from the post-conflict Bosnian realm: the Initiative “Monotheistic Three Voices” (Spahić Šiljak & Abazovi’, 2009) launched by International Multireligious and Intercultural Center -IMIC Zajedno and “Global Ethic in School” run by Transcultural Psychosocial Educational Foundation –TPO from Sarajevo. These two initiatives both demonstrate how **relational dialogism** functions in an ethnically divided educational system. By enabling a more fluid understanding of religious and secular they were able to translate ideas of peace, dialogue and development into the educational system.

The idea behind the two initiatives was to bring teachers and student together, to connect, to re-connect and to build something new – a new ethos of tolerance and mutual understanding. Over 700 social sciences and humanities teachers in BiH, including teachers of religious education, were educated on how to build an ethos with key common ethical values for all children notwithstanding their ethnic or religious backgrounds. So far, the initiative has managed to integrate some global ethic contents into the official curriculum of Sarajevo’s schools.

However, in the ongoing debate regarding religious education in Bosnia and other Balkan countries, we should stretch **relational dialogism** to deal with not only secularist dualism that defined religion as irrational, institutional and individual, but also religious biases that perceive secularism as godless, profane, materialistic, and self-centered. Both perspectives should allow their understanding of both secularism and religion to be

reconceptualized, as well as be prepared to transcend obstacles that serve dualistic polarization.

Neither secularism nor religion has recipes for every problem in a society but since they both serve people and care for their well being, they can fulfill their mission if they work together without diminishing and undermining of each other's roles. An important part of **relational dialogism** is to start with self-criticism and open windows of catharsis for one's own community, but also to come up with concrete solutions. Religiously inspired activists have criticized "religious godlessness" (Krstić, 2014b) in churches and religious communities, gender discrimination (Jadranka, 2011), violence against women (Spahić-Šiljak & Jadranka, 2009), lack of freedom of speech (Brnčić, 2014) and reconciliation initiatives (Sremac, 2012). They raised their voices against politicized religion, rigid dogmatism, and puritanism that serve to maintain the power of hierarchies while betraying the core religious principles of faith: love, care, compassion and justice.

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