Interreligious Communication in Sandzak

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a case study of interreligious communication between Muslims and Orthodox Christians in the border municipalities between Serbia and Montenegro (Sandzak). A mixed, quantitative and qualitative approach was taken to study interreligious relations, among ordinary people and religious leaders. Through a combination of online questionnaires and face-to-face structured interviews, the study covers both groups’ perspectives on interfaith interactions, views and opinions. The findings showed support for the hypothesis that the lack of knowledge about other religious affiliation results in prejudices and potential conflicts.

Keywords: The Balkans, conflicts, prejudices, Sandzak, dialogue between groups for change

To my Mother
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1. INTRODUCTION

This project work is aiming at researching prejudices in interreligious communication in Sandzak. Sandzak is a (historical) region, which was divided between Serbia and Montenegro, after the Balkan wars (1912-1913). The specific mark of Sandzak is its religious and cultural diversity. The majority of population is comprised of Sunni Muslims and Orthodox Christians. Serbia and Montenegro are predominantly Orthodox Christian countries. According to 2011 Census\(^1\) of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia regarding the Serbian part of Sandzak, Muslims represent 65.6% of population, while Christians represent 32.6%. In Montenegrin part of Sandzak, the situation is somewhat different: Christians represent 53.6% of population, while Muslims represent 43.5%\(^2\).

Since the break-up of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and during the 1990s, “tensions have ebbed and flowed, though never fully dissipating” (Kenneth, 2008). Serbia and Montenegro remained to be a legal successor of SFRY, under the name Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, until 2003. In 2003, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was renamed to Serbia and Montenegro. Montenegro became independent after a May 2006 referendum. In this way, Sandzak was divided again between Serbia and Montenegro.

Sandzak witnessed several secession attempts. Ajzenhamer (2012:21) notes that the first attempt of Sandzak’s secession was born immediately after the 1912-1913 Balkan wars, while the second one arose with the beginning of Yugoslavia’s collapse. In 1991, an illegal referendum on political autonomy of Sandzak was held. In 2010, Chief Mufti of the Islamic Community in Serbia Muamer Zukorlic said that Sandzak’s autonomy will be “an inevitable social process” and “for the sake of Serbia and Montenegro’s stability it should be held in time.”\(^3\) Various sources report that Sandzak can be an area of

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1. 2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia
2. Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Montenegro 2011
potential instability in relation to Kosovo’s independence (Morrison 2012) and “a conflict area that could be manipulated to foment secession in Serbia and Montenegro” (Savich, 2005).

Motivation for the investigation and research purpose

My interest in Sandzak and its religious diversity arose during my specialization programme in Religious Groups in Serbia and Political Science of Religion. Political Science of Religion is the youngest discipline in the political sciences. The first study programme of this discipline was founded in 1993 in Belgrade by PhD Miroljub Jevtic, the University Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade. My specialization took place during the spring term 2012, at the Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade.

The research purpose is to analyze interreligious communication between Sunni Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities in the Sandzak area, as a way to foster social change. The research was conducted at two levels, among religious leaders and ordinary citizens, using structured interviews and online questionnaires. By conducting a research at those two levels, and analyzing the quality of interreligious dialogue, my final aim was to find out if the improved communication would lead to social change. The structure of the research will be discussed within the methodology analysis chapter.

This paper will explore whether positive valorization exists or not. Observing valorization is a part of our prejudices’ research. What is meant by “valorization” in this case is assigning certain value to the “Other” in a social sense of meaning. In order to understand interreligious communication, we also need to dive into specific reasons that are causing potential negative valorization. Exploring the particular reasons for positive or negative valorization will be developed within questionnaire’s analysis.

Why study interreligious communication in connection with social change?

The term “interreligious communication” is often recognized as “interreligious dialogue”, “interfaith dialogue”, “dialogue of religions” etc. Satoshi (2008:135) points out that in spite of interreligious communication becoming “an increasingly urgent and significant field of study”, very few scholars and educators “have attempted to conduct such challenging scholarly tasks”. What is interreligious communication? First of all, we must define the adjective “interreligious”; quoting Sterkens (2001: 63), Valkenberg (2006:113) says that “the prefix ‘inter-’ adds to this the wish that these religious systems
do not only live together as isolated entities, but influence one another as an opportunity for mutual enrichment.” Religion’s influence on conflicts in developing societies has always been strong. The premise is that the lack of knowledge about “the Other”, results in prejudices and conflicts. We do not know much about our neighbor, but we have an opinion and attitude towards him/her. We are not sure if we want to meet or get to know him/her, but we are somewhat confident in our views on him/her. We do not really care if our opinions are based on prejudices or not. My neighbour is different and, most probably, wrong, because he/she is different from me. Therefore, there is potential social value in studying prejudices as obstacles for dialogue. The most common definition of a prejudice is that it stands for “an adverse judgement or opinion formed beforehand or without knowledge or examination of the facts” ¹. This research will share some answers about the nature of interreligious prejudices between Christians and Muslims in Sandzak. By getting to know how familiar these two groups are with the beliefs of the other, and which prejudices prevent them from communicating with the “Other”, we could build a solid basis for problem-solving.

“The centuries long coexistence and multiple interactions of persons from four major religious traditions in the Balkans - Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Islam and Judaism - have shaped and defined in important ways the perceptions of and attitudes to religious others”- note Merdjanova and Brodeur (2009:40).

Please note that this research is not attempting to find the solution for interreligious communications issues. Rather than that, this research would aim at finding out and recognizing the specific barriers and analyzing them. Secondly, the research results are expected to share some ideas on how to develop the interfaith communication flow.

This chapter contains theoretical framework and historical background and context. The literature framework contains definitions and theories related to interreligious communication. Those theoretical studies serve as a basis for our further research. On the other hand, without understanding the historical circumstances, it is impossible to approach the complex matter of interreligious communication in Sandzak.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, some of the relevant and available publications in the field of interreligious communication, will be presented. This paper is partially aiming at summarizing the findings delivered in previous researches.

In spite of the immense number of authors and organizations that recognize the importance of interreligious communication, particularly between Abrahamic\textsuperscript{5} religions, this field remains unexplored. Some initiatives regarding interfaith dialogue for social change have been taken at a global level. One of the most recent initiatives happened in the end of April 2013; that was The 10th Doha Conference on Interfaith Dialogue, which opened with a call to “revive the culture of dialogue to fight the deepening divide on sectarian and religious lines in several countries”\textsuperscript{6}.

The sources of literature related to interreligious communication are far from being numerous.

Chatterjee (1967: 392) sees interreligious communication as “communication between an individual of one faith and an individual of another faith, a personal and direct communication, something which takes place in a social and historical context but which takes place at the same time in spite of that context.” For our case, social and historical contexts are extremely relevant, as it will be shown in the historical background chapter of this paper. One of the most recent writings analyzing this matter, “The Handbook of Intergroup Communication”, published in 2012, confirms that nothing really changed in the meantime: “Although much research has focused on communication between various types of groups, little research has focused exclusively on interreligious communication per se”. The interest for interreligious communication does not only exist in academia; Hertog (2010:23) reports that “many other institutes and centers have developed an interest in religious peacebuilding”, naming a few of them, such as The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding and its “Program on Religion and Conflict Resolution”; other organizations include World Conference on Religion and Peace, World Congress of Faiths, United Religions Initiative, International Faith Centre etc). Interreligious communication is a necessary premise for religious

\textsuperscript{5} Christianity, Islam, Judaism; This project work is focused on two Abrahamic religions, Islam and Christianity, and more specifically - on Orthodox Christianity and Sunni Islam, since the majority of Sandzak population falls under those two religious denominations.

peace-building. In 2007, the United Nations (UN) held sessions on interfaith dialogue, and the Assembly President suggested: “Promoting a true dialogue among civilizations and religions is perhaps the most important political instrument that we can use to reach out across borders and build bridges of peace and hope.” And this is exactly how our research problem fits the communication for development frame.

We should not approach the analysis without deep understanding of the relations in the area of research. To make the interreligious communication possible, some criteria need to be fulfilled; Chatterjee (1967) notes that it must take place through the medium of language and there must be certain level of openness. Furthermore, she makes a distinction between “understanding” and “sharing” at the “behavioral” level of communication. She acknowledges the importance of subtleties of communication, but gives primacy to verbal language. Gallois, C., & Giles, H. (2012: 278) approve this approach by stating that “Verbal communication, and its various dimensions, is critical to interfaith relations.” They are particularly stressing the implications of the chosen language of communication. Quoting Kenneth Cragg, Chatterjee (p. 393) brings us to the key point of interreligious communication, which is to understand: “My task, as belonging to a tradition and having a faith other than yours, is to understand what your tradition and faith mean to you.” And this is universal. In every point in time, to achieve interfaith dialogue, mutual respect is necessary. It is so in our case as well. This matter will be explored in the interviews’ analysis section. By analyzing the collected data, we will see at which level “understanding” or “sharing” are among our research participants. This research of interreligious communication in Sandzak is seeking to understand what matters to both sides and what is preventing one side from understanding the other (and vice versa).

One of the most important marks of interreligious communication is that it should be proactively promoted; quoting Takeda (1997), Satoshi (2008) notes that “interreligious communication studies should go beyond the current stage of comparing unique characteristics of different religions to the stage of systematically studying and promoting interreligious dialogue and communication”. It seems like Takeda’s remark

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8 Cragg, Kenneth: The Call of the Minaret
from 1997 remains very current in 2013. In order to understand how to promote interfaith dialogue, several goals need to be accomplished: doing comparison, finding differentiators, identifying key ideas in both perspectives.

The approach of Slavoj Zizek (2009:51) is just the opposite: “Even if I live side by side with others, in my normal state, I ignore them. I am allowed not to get too close to others. I move in a social space where I interact with others obeying certain external “mechanical” rules, without sharing their inner world. Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that sometimes a dose of alienation is indispensable for peaceful coexistence. Sometimes alienation is not a problem but a solution.” Of course, Slavoj Zizek is not referring to interreligious relations solely. The chapter “Violence of Language”, from which this quotation was taken, is analyzing the dark side of globalized communication channels. According to Zizek’s theory, the situation of alienation which is present in the area of research is not problematic; rather than that it is a solution itself. But is this really applicable? We can argue whether the alienation can be a long-term solution at all. As previously mentioned, our premise is based on the idea that the lack of knowledge/familiarity with the “Other” certainly exists; however I do not see lack of familiarity with the “Other” as a solution, but the root of interreligious misunderstandings. By no means can our (perhaps idealistic) approach negate Zizek’s theory; his findings are valuable for our research, especially because several interviewees expressed the same attitude in their answers, as we will see in the analysis chapter of this paper.

What should we be aware of, when conducting a research on interreligious communication? Satoshi (2008:142) notes that “those who attempt to conduct interreligious communication studies always need to remind themselves that socio-cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, worldviews, communication styles, and behavior patterns are basically formed, at both conscious and unconscious levels, by religio-ethical precepts and norms.” Furthermore, he predicts that “interreligious communication studies will be a challenging field for contemporary intercultural communication scholars and educators who have somehow conventionally neglected to deal with interreligious conflicts and battles from communication perspectives”.

The importance of interreligious dialogue was particularly promoted as the aftermath of September 11, 2011. Merdjanova and Brodeur (2009:14) recognize this global endeavor as a “worldwide interreligious movement”, which “actively promotes a closer link
between older forms of dialogue for the sake of theological understanding and spiritual fellowship, and newer forms of dialogue for cooperation on a variety of issues both broad (peace or the pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals, for example) and narrow (local poverty alleviation or inter-parish visits, for example)”. Nicholson (2011:22) sees “unpredicted newness” in the “contemporary theological situation”; quoting Knitter - he notes that religious pluralism has become “a newly experienced reality” for many. We cannot say that religious pluralism is an “unpredicted newness” not “newly experienced reality” in Sandzak territory. As we will see in the historical overview chapter, religious pluralism has been present in this area for centuries. Some steps towards improving interreligious relations were taken following the conflictive break-up of the former Yugoslavia, for example international participatory programs. While referring to international participatory programs in ex-Yugoslavia in the late 1990s, Brown (2006:99) notes that those programs were designed to be “confidence building” in several senses, among the others “by fostering collaboration between different ethnic or religious groups, these programs can begin to address problems of inter-communal miscommunication and intolerance, which played such a prominent role in Yugoslavia's tragic recent history”.

Probably the most important question would be - how to improve interreligious communication?

1.1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

It is self-evident that understanding interreligious communication in the Balkans (and therefore in Sandzak) is not possible without being familiar with the historical, political and social circumstances. Due to the complexity of those circumstances, this project work will shortly elaborate the main spots only.

Bideleux and Jeffries (2007:514) note that “the earliest expressly Serbian stronghold and Orthodox ecclesiastical centre was in Raska” and “Raska was later to become another9 predominantly Muslim enclave in the Balkan Peninsula, known as the Sandzak of Novi Pazar (this being the name acquired under Ottoman rule-now known simply as Sandzak for short).” Historically, the Sandzak was a part of the medieval Serbian Empire. Some of Serbia’s oldest monasteries (Sopocani, St. Peter and Paul, and

9 Referring to Kosovo
Djurdevi Stupovi) are in this area. However, following the Battle of Kosovo (1389) and the collapse of the Serbian Empire, the area fell under the control of the Ottoman Turks.

Until 1912, Sandzak was a part of the Ottoman Empire. The first country to officially declare war on Turkey was Montenegro, on October 8, 1912. In 1914, both Serbia and Montenegro gained some territory and population: Montenegro got half of the Sandzak of Novi Pazar, while Serbia won most of Macedonia, Kosovo and the other half of Novi Pazar. Schuman (2004:24) notes that “reactions were disparate. Serbs and Montenegrins were thrilled, and they began to envision some kind of South Slav unity based spiritually, if not politically.” This idea did not come into existence before 1918, when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was established. Sandzak was included into it.

Ottoman era is very important for understanding the present ethnic and religious structure in the Balkans (and Sandzak, as well). “Sandzak Muslims are poorly integrated into the Serbian and Montenegrin society. Many of them went to live and work in Turkey, which is still considered a “homeland” or the Promised Land, and tensions between Muslims and Christians make up the basic determinants of reality in this part of the Balkans”, notes Ajzenhamer (2011:18).

We must be aware that the name “Sandzak” is rarely accepted by Serbian population. The majority of Serbs refers to Sandzak simply as “Raska”. Ajzenhamer (2012:20) notes that “the Serbian part of Sandzak or the area of “Old Raska” is administratively divided into two districts, the District of Raska and the Zlatibor district”. Furthermore, he observes that the largest Bosniak/Muslim community in the Balkans, after Bosnia, lives exactly in Sandzak/Raska. Most Montenegrins refer to their part of the Sandzak region as “Northern Montenegro”.

As mentioned in the introduction, secessionist tendencies arose during the break-up of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Ajzenhamer (2012:21) states that “secessionist activities of Muslims in Sandzak started with the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia and were greatly assisted by the Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina10 and other Islamic countries.” In 1991, illegal referendum on political autonomy was held. There were several demands for autonomy, coming from various political and

10 Bosnia and Herzegovina was a part of Former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia
religious leaders in Sanzak. For example, in 1993 SDA\textsuperscript{11} president Sulejman Ugljanin requested autonomy for the Sandzak region, and so did religious leader of Islamic Community in Serbia, Muamer Zukorlic in 2010. Muslims in Sandzak have a strong sense of affiliation with Muslims in Bosnia. This strong sense of affiliation is manifested at many levels, for example at a religious, regional and ethnic level. Muslims from Sandzak and Muslims from Bosnia share the same religious\textsuperscript{12} and ethnic background, as well as the complex common history\textsuperscript{13}. According to Sandzak Bosniak political parties, some 60,000 - 80,000 Bosniaks emigrated from Sandzak during the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo and NATO bombing. Conclusion is, that Sandzak was affected by the circumstances in the surrounding areas (like Bosnia and Kosovo), but was not involved in wars. In spite of this, we cannot say that conflicts were (and are) non-existent. Ajzenhamer (2012:22) summarizes: “Religious tension between Serbs and Bosniaks is also key source of instability. (…) The burden of the recent Balkan wars and a long history of wars between Muslims and Christians in this region further exacerbate mistrust between two communities”. Therefore, the interreligious and interethnic relations in Sandzak are complex and influenced by past conflicts. In such a context, an interreligious dialogue is necessary, for the future conflicts to be avoided. What is seen as an encouraging aspect is a higher level of participation of Sandzak’s Bosniaks in the political lives of Serbia and Montenegro, after the democratic changes in 2000.

The linguistic factor is quite interesting as well. “The Muslims (with the exception of those in Kosovo and Macedonia) spoke Serbo-Croatian but had a separate cultural identity from the others in the region”, write Klemencic and Zagar (2004:10). Some of the interviewees were asked about the language they speak - the responses were different. Some said they speak Serbian, some said Bosnian and some Montenegrin. The majority of those declaring to speak Bosnian, identify themselves as Bosniaks. According to Klemencic and Zagar (2004:235): “The Muslim Slavs of Sanzak had traditionally defined themselves as Bosniaks and had considered Bosnia and Herzegovina their kin-republic.” Such identification is to the highest extent present within members of Islamic Community in Serbia, followed by Islamic Community in

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{11} Party of Democratic Action of Sandzak, which represents the Bosniak ethnic minority in Sandzak. SDA is a branch of Party of Democratic Action in Bosnia and Herzegovina \footnote{12} Islamic Community in Serbia recognises the supreme authority of the Riaset of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina \footnote{13} Sandzak was a part of the Province of Bosnia during the centuries of Ottoman rule, until 1878}

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Montenegro and Islamic Community of Serbia. Let’s take the last Census of Population in Montenegro (2011) as an example; in the tiny town of Rozaje in Montenegrin part of Sandzak, 17.27% of people said they speak Montenegrin, 4.47% said Serbian, 70.20% said Bosnian (bosanski) and 2.22% said they speak Bosniak (bošnjački). According to the same census, 1.75% declared as Montenegrins, 3.58% as Serbs, 83.91% as Bosniaks, 4.55% as Muslims, 0.05% as Bosnians, 0.06% as Bosniaks-Muslims and only 0.01% as Montenegrins-Muslims. When it comes to religious affiliation, 4.59% citizens of Rozaje said they are Orthodox Christians, 93.01% said it is Islam, 1.94% said they are Muslims. Drawing the conclusions from this statistical data, we can observe that the majority of citizens who follow Islam/are Muslims, declare themselves as Bosniaks while the significantly smaller number of them identifies as Muslims at both religious and national/ethnic level. The term ‘Bosniak’ embraces the national identity of the majority of Muslim population in Sandzak.

3. METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted by using mixed methods design. The mix of quantitative and qualitative approach was taken, to study interreligious attitudes and ideas among ordinary people and religious leaders in Sandzak.

The methodology included online surveys and face-to-face, structured interviews. The primary research method was questionnaire survey; the secondary method was qualitative interviews. Since the research was started with an existing premise - that the lack of knowledge results in interreligious prejudices and conflicts, deductive method was applied.

The major reason behind the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods lies in an attempt to increase the level of objectivity and approach the research question from different angles. Michael Pickering (ed. 2008:101) notes that combining qualitative and quantitative methods is very important, because it is not only about “providing checks and balances to the excesses of each”; other than that, combining methods is offering creative possibilities, in which “insights and findings from one strand inform directly the design and development of others”.

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The coding outline for the survey includes several classifications; Seidman (2006:125) defines coding, or classifying, as “the process of noting what is interesting, labeling it, and putting it into appropriate files”. The following steps were applied:

1. **Classifying interviewees** – interviewees/participants were divided into two groups - Orthodox Christians and Sunni Muslims. The coding of answers has been done separately. The plan is to merge the answers in order to complete the comparison.

2. **Classifying responses** - After classifying similar answers, themes were identified. This is followed by answer summarizing and moving towards conclusions.

3. **Additional data collection** - such as information about age, education level, gender of interviewee/participant, etc.

After the research had been conducted, the data are sorted by questions.

**a) Primary method: Questionnaire survey**

The quantitative (and primary) component of this research was a structured questionnaire. The reason behind choosing online survey as a primary methodology was to collect more data in less time. In addition to this, our assumption was that anonymous surveys would make participants more comfortable and open. Seidman notes that (2006:122): “the researcher must also be alert to whether he or she has made the participant vulnerable by the narrative itself.” Within this matter, Seidman is discussing the dignity of participant/interviewee. If a participant would become vulnerable if his or her identity would be known, identifying facets will not be revealed.” Our choice was to protect respondents’ privacy in such a sensitive matter like researching religious attitudes.

Kothari (2004: 100) is discussing advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires as a method; in our case, the main reason behind choosing this method as a primary is in the ability to reach those who are not easily approachable, as well as the attempt to keep freedom from the bias of the interviewer. Objectivity and freedom of expression are crucial values for our research. However, we must note disadvantages as well: low rate of return of the duly filled in questionnaires, the control over questionnaire may be lost once it is sent, inbuilt inflexibility because of the difficulty of amending the approach once questionnaires have been dispatched, possibility of ambiguous replies or omission
of replies altogether to certain questions, not knowing whether willing respondents are truly representative. Being aware of the disadvantages noted by Kothari, this research managed to avoid some of them. For example, the control over questionnaires sent out was kept by conducting the questionnaires via www.surveymonkey.com. SurveyMonkey is the world's most popular online survey tool, which allows tracking surveys and answers. Such possibilities of SurveyMonkey kept me aware of the questionnaires which were filled in. The risk of participants who are not coming from the selected area was avoided by SurveyMonkey’s ability to track IP addresses. However, the questionnaires remained anonymous.

A set of six questions was developed to support the research. All questions were open, thus giving enough space for expressing opinions and reflections upon the topic. We must bear in mind that Sandzak was under communist rule for several decades; after the breakdown of communism and former Yugoslavia, religious feelings raised from the ashes and “flourished” again. So called “new believers” appeared; paradoxically, many embraced religion in after-war decades, but did not know much about it. The paradox lies in turning to something that was ignored, almost banned for decades, and embracing it with great passion. Those new circumstances arose in the Balkans after the communist regime collapse in 1989, and practicing religion became more transparent.

Some of the questions in survey were testing religious knowledge. Those questions were designed to investigate whether the lack of knowledge creates misunderstandings. On the top of six open-ended questions, three general questions were added: about the gender, municipality and age of participants. The aims were to observe if the years of communism left a significant mark on the religious feelings, if religious convictions vary in relation to municipality, which municipality would be the most active in participating, which gender is more willing to participate etc.

The list of questions included in a questionnaire was the following:

1. What is your gender?
2. From which municipality do you come from? (multiple choice)
3. How old are you? (age was divided into several groups; from 20 to 30, from 30 to 40 etc.)
4. What do you like about your religion? (This open question aimed at seeing the values which are praised, how they see their own religion, which aspects of it they praise mostly)
5. For Christians: **What do you think about Islam?** For Muslims: **What do you think about Christianity?** (This was one of the core questions, which was aiming at exploring the differences in perspective, opinions, and introducing the challenges in interreligious communication)

6. **Could you name a few things that Islam and Christianity have in common?** (This question was an attempt: a) to test their interreligious knowledge b) to see what participants would put on the first place, which common spot they value mostly, and if those common spots can be a bridge in overcoming the challenges in interfaith communication)

7. **What do you see as the main difference between Christianity and Islam?** (The purpose of this question was to see where the chances of compromising are the lowest)

8. **Have you read the Bible/Qur’an? Why (not)?** (This question mostly served to see if they have interest in neighbor’s religion and to which extent; and to which extent the participants are interested in their own religion after all)

9. **Do you think you know more about Islam than Muslims know about Christianity?**/ **Do you think you know more about Christianity than Christians know about Islam?** (This question had, to some extent, the same purpose as the previous one)

**The coding outline** for the survey includes several classifications. After the excerpts are organized into categories, the themes should be organized; themes are seen as “connections between the various categories” (Seidman, 2006:125). In addition to presenting profiles of individuals, the researcher, as part of his or her analysis of the material, can then present and comment upon excerpts from the interviews thematically organized. The suggested scheme was applied in our case. Seidman (2006) defines coding, or classifying, as “the process of noting what is interesting, labeling it, and putting it into appropriate files”. As we will see in the extract from the analysis chapter, the answers were classified based on similarity criteria. Coding is being done separately, and, in the end, the comparison between the answers of two groups will be done.

b) **Secondary Method: Qualitative (Structured) Interviews**

The initial idea was to interview people whose profession is religion-related - imams, priests, religious teachers and scholars etc. Before conducting the interviews, I asked
participants if they mind being recorded, and if they do, if they prefer my writing down/typing their answers. The aim was to make them feel as comfortable as possible during the interview process. One of the participants said he would prefer my writing down the answers, as that would make him more comfortable than being recorded. Therefore, four out of five interviews were recorded. A relatively informal style, as Mason (2002) notes - “with the appearance of a conversation or discussion rather than a formal question and answer format”, was maintained. The interviews were conducted in interviewees’ mother tongues, Serbian, Montenegrin and Bosnian.

The Interview Questions:

1. Is interreligious communication possible?
2. What is it that has negative effects on interreligious communication?
3. What is it that has positive effects on interreligious communication?
4. How do you see the future of interreligious communication?
5. What can be done to improve interreligious communication?

The interview questions were built upon the questionnaire survey, but the questions are more general in form and more focused on interreligious communication and its improvement, while the set of survey questions looks more into personal opinions, attitudes and knowledge. I managed to conduct interviews with three imams and two priests. The interviews were conducted during my field work in December 2012 and April 2013. Initially, the plan was to conduct 10 interviews in total, but the timeframe and difficulties in reaching potential interviewees did not allow me to. Therefore, the total number of conducted interviews is 5.

Before conducting questionnaires and interviews, the expectation was that insights derived from questionnaire survey would provide guidance for structured questioning (one-on-one interviews). It turned out that the filled-in questionnaires were identifying the problems and key differences, while the interviews were looking into identifying issues, but suggesting improvements and solutions as well.

I expected a low rate of questionnaires’ return; therefore, my decision was to work hard on in its distribution in order to achieve the samples which I wanted to have: 50 Christians and 50 Muslims. Surprisingly enough, the sample coming from the Muslim

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14 It is still being debated if Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin are three different languages or just the dialects of one language; I lived for 12 years in total in Serbia and Montenegro and I am able to speak those languages.
side was bigger than expected: the total of 78 filled-in questionnaires arrived. It was somewhat different on the Orthodox Christian side - I managed to collect 36 filled-in questionnaires. The same happened with the interviews. While the field, one-on-one interviews with imams from both borders of Sandzak came in swiftly, organizing the interviews with Orthodox Christian priests was more time-consuming. Considering the difference, I came to a few potential reasons behind the level of responsiveness:

a) **“Centralization”** criteria

When it comes to Islamic Community of Serbia, Islamic Community in Montenegro and Islamic Community in Serbia\(^ {15}\), all organizations have websites and are active in the online world\(^ {16}\). The structure of Christian Orthodox Church in the area is somewhat different. The Serbian Orthodox Church is autocephalous\(^ {17}\) and organized into metropolises and eparchies\(^ {18}\). Sandzak-Raska falls under several dioceses (Diocese of Mileseva, Diocese of Raska-Prizren and Kosovo-Metohija and Diocese of Budimlja and Niksic). Diocese of Budimlja and Niksic is covering the majority of municipalities in Montenegro, the diocese does not have an official website. The same goes for the Diocese of Mileseva. Therefore, I chose a referral sampling to conduct the interviews with Orthodox Christian priests. Similar system of references was used to collect some of the questionnaires (for example, some of the questionnaires were distributed during my field work in Sandzak; in such cases, I would ask a participant to refer me to someone else who might be willing to fill it in. What was indeed helpful to make this process easier were the connections with people I made during the 12 years I spent studying and working in the Balkans area).

b) **Social media** support

Social media’s support was of immense help in spreading the questionnaires. Other than a web link, so called Facebook Collector was built. Facebook Collector is a tool (an application) which is compatible with Facebook and allows collecting SurveyMonkey questionnaires through this social platform.

\(^{15}\) All three are present in the Sandzak area
\(^{16}\) Screenshots of a few examples are included in appendix.
\(^{17}\) Independent of external and especially patriarchal authority
\(^{18}\) Types of dioceses
Several organizations from the area were contacted, including the Facebook page of the biggest web journal in Sandzak, www.sandzak.info, and asked to share the application link. The administrator of the Facebook page shared the link to the questionnaire. Once the questionnaires had been promoted via the social media, it was easier to increase the interest rate. Yet again, the level of responsiveness was higher when it comes to Muslim population.

c) Majority vs. Minority

In spite of being a minority in several municipalities of Sandzak, Orthodox Christians are a majority in both countries involved in this research. Perhaps this is a reason behind a lower level of responsiveness - being a majority, one does not really need to think about the “Other”. The same “I do not care too much” attitude could be noticed among Muslims in the municipalities where they represent majority. This conclusion is based on some of the answers collected through questionnaires (an example taken from a Muslim sample: “They are just wrong and I do not care, it is their problem”).

A total number of municipalities participating in the structured questionnaire was 11. The only municipality which is missing is Nova Varos. Nova Varos is a town in Zlatibor district, with 16,638 inhabitants in the municipality area. The absence of participants from Nova Varos lies simply in the fact that none from this municipality filled in the online questionnaire, nor I managed to be referred to someone from that municipality. The municipalities which participated in online questionnaire survey are: Andrijevica, Berane, Bijelo Polje, Novi Pazar, Plav, Pljevlja, Priboj, Prijepolje, Rozaje, Sjenica and Tutin.

Below is the map of the municipalities and their position within Sandzak region:

---

19 Some sources regard Montenegrin municipality of Andrijevica as a part of Sandzak, and some do not. I decided to involve it in this research. However, there were only two participants from Andrijevica.
The majority of respondents are coming from Novi Pazar, as expected, since Novi Pazar is the biggest municipality in the Sandžak area. In the terms of participants’ number, Novi Pazar is followed by Bijelo Polje. Novi Pazar is predominantly Muslim municipality, while Muslim and Orthodox Christian population in Bijelo Polje is almost even - according to 2011 census in Montenegro, 53.55% are Orthodox Christians and 45.18 are Muslims. This chart is showing the number of participants in the research per municipality:
Table 1: Percentage of participants in the research by municipality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrijevica</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berane</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bijelo Polje</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nova Varoš</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novi Pazar</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plav</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pljevlja</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priboj</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prijepolje</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rožaje</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sjenica</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutin</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we sort the respondents by gender criteria, the results are following:

Table 2: Percentage of participants in the research by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>39.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we sort the respondents by age, we get the following results:

Table 3: Percentage of participants in the research by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The questionnaires were conducted anonymously and online, as it was initially planned. It was more than obvious that anonymity was quite important for the questionnaires segment of this research, as participants were expected to reveal their personal beliefs, opinions and attitudes towards neighbors. We cannot claim that the results would have been this open and direct if the questionnaire had not been anonymous. Since a few respondents did not share their location or gender, we do not have the exact data, but the percentages are very close to being accurate (four respondents did not share their location and three participants did not reveal their gender). As previously noted, the questionnaires were conducted via [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com), and two questionnaires were created: one in Latin and one in Cyrillic script. Initially, there was only one questionnaire, in Latin script, which was quickly complemented with a Cyrillic questionnaire. The introduction and the questions were identical; however, the Latin (Muslim/Bosniak) version contained the territorial mark “Sandzak”, while in the Cyrillic one (for Orthodox Christians, Serbs and Montenegrins), the territory was marked as Raska region. The reason for creating a Cyrillic version was my attempt to get closer to the Orthodox Christian community and to be respectful towards their wish to refer to the region as Raska. This is applicable for the Orthodox Christian participants from Serbian part of Sandzak. A detailed explanation of reasons behind two names for the region can be retrieved from the chapter looking into Historical Background and Context.

A total number of questionnaires which were analyzed within this research was 86. Initially, I managed to collect 78 filled-in questionnaires from the Muslim population. Orthodox Christian sample was quite low compared to that. In the end, I managed to collect 36 questionnaires from Orthodox Christians. To make the samples somewhat even, 50 out of 78 filled-in questionnaires were randomly chosen from the Muslim

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 60</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20 Both questionnaires are available as annexes
sample. I decided to present the answers in graphic charts, in percentages. By doing this, the size of the sample will not affect the results.

The answers were sorted into groups and placed into charts, in percentages. Note that, since the questions are open-ended, some of the respondents named more than one similarity. The answers presented in the charts below are the most frequent ones.

Here, I would like to refer to the method and methodology of this case study, its results and potentials. On the one hand, social media tools assisted this research to a very high extent. On the other hand, it is way more difficult to have control over the questionnaires when they are conducted online. For example, I could not know if someone was pretending to belong to other religious affiliation- we can never be sure about that. My attempt of avoiding this was targeting the specific online communities, such as Facebook page of www.sandzak.info portal, Facebook page of Orthodox Christian Faculty etc. The possibility to track IP addresses (and therefore locations of participants) helped in having accurate data and making sure that participants really are from Sandzak’s municipalities.

4. ANALYSIS

The first part of the analysis is looking into the responses collected through online questionnaire.

PERCEPTION OF ONE’S OWN RELIGION

a. What do you like about your religion? (Muslim answers)

It is interesting to see that some answers have almost the same presence in the terms of percentage. The most common answer (32.2%) among the Muslim population was that they like everything about Islam. The second most common answer was that “their religion gives them answers to all questions about everyday life” (16.7%). This answer is more concrete and particularly valuable for this observation. Several conclusions can be driven; for Muslims, religion appears to be more than a spiritual sphere; it is a way of living, a guide, a road sign, an adviser. And it is not an answer to some questions, it is an answer to all questions. The third most common answer, present among 18% of the participants was “purity”. Here, we are again moving towards the spiritual sphere and the value which is very important in Abrahamic religions. These three were
significantly more common than other answers, as shown on the chart. The fourth most common answer, given by 11.67% participants was “truth”. This answer belongs to the same category as the third most common answer (divinity-related answers); however, it is specific, as it might imply that other religions are not true. Several respondents were giving examples to prove that their religion is the true one (for example, naming the scientific discoveries that are present in the Qur’an from the time of its revelation). Perhaps this is a need to convince ‘the Other’ that I am right; or simply a way to show how good ‘my own religion is’. The next two categories present among the answers are “peacefulness and tolerance” and “humanity and compassion”. From the level of divinity, we are moving towards universal human values and qualities. Pointing out the importance of humanity, tolerance and peacefulness in Islam might be an act of showing: “This is my religion, and not what you think it might be or what the media tells you it is”. The answer which was present among 6.8% of participants was: monotheism. This is a very important point, which relates to the key belief in Islam: the oneness of God (known as the Shahada). Trinity in Christianity and worshipping Jesus as the incarnation of God the Son is seen as blasphemous. I will refer to the matter of dogma in the interview’s chapter. This matter will be further developed within questions dealing with key similarities and key differences.

Figure 1: What do you like about your religion? - Muslims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everything</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purity</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice for all aspects of life</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral principles</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacefulness and tolerance</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monotheism</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b. What do you like about your religion? (Orthodox Christian answers)

It is challenging to observe the difference in answers retrieved from Orthodox Christian participants, compared to the Muslim ones. The most common answer among them
If tradition and customs can be seen as a form of culture, and among Muslims there was 3.33% percent of participants who put culture in the first place, we can see the first differentiation. Orthodox Christianity values preserving tradition and customs; many of participants were stressing the importance of preserving customs and religion during the Ottoman rule (quoting: “I love the fact that we preserved tradition during difficult times under Turkish rule” or “I admire customs and traditions in our religion, and I admire Byzantine heritage and culture”). Let’s observe this answer from another level; as Nicholas A. Berdyaev (1952) notes: “The Orthodox Church is primarily the Church of tradition (…)”, in other words “The Orthodox Church was never subject to a single externally authoritarian organization and it unshakenly was held together by the strength of internal tradition and not by any external authority.” Berdyaev is referring to Orthodox Christianity in general. Therefore, we must be aware tradition’s multilayeredness and its denotations. Some saw ‘tradition’ as customs, some as old churches, some as the ‘way to preserve identity’ etc. A conclusion based upon this statement is that the members of Christian Orthodox Church are highly rating tradition and it is not surprising to see it as the most common answer. The second most common answer was: “Ten commandments and ethical values”. Ten Commandments play a fundamental role in all Abrahamic religions, as those are present in all three monotheistic religions. The high level of this answer’s presence can serve as a common point in overcoming interfaith challenges. To elaborate, if there is a common ground (like Ten Commandments), and this common ground is good and acceptable for all of us, can we see it as dialogue initiator? The impression which could easily come into mind, after reading all questionnaires, was that Ten Commandments are perceived as “typically Christian” instructions, which is incorrect- since Islam also testifies Ten Commandments. Additional prejudices and misconceptions will be analyzed in further research. Ethical values are strongly rooted in Christian faith, and “ethics” were a common answer, along with “Ten commandments”. Perhaps a parallel can be driven between “ethical values” (a Christian answer) and the values noted among Muslim population (as listed above: humanity, compassion, justice etc). Perhaps the answer is the same, but just formulated in a different way.

The third most common answer was “everything”, with the total of 15.8% of participants, which is significantly lower figure than among the Muslims. However,
Orthodox Christian answers contained a wide spectrum of various views, which are, in this case, put under “other”. It is thought-provoking to see that there was large number of unique answers. Perhaps this can be seen as a space for interpretations which exists in Christianity. “Christian Love”/”Love for Christ” was identified as the fourth most common answer among the participants, with 10.5%. It is superfluous to point out the importance of Jesus Christ in Orthodox Christianity. While the teachings of Jesus are embraced in Islam, his nature remains an area where compromise does not exist. The last answer which is set within the chart below is “freedom”. “Freedom” in this context had various meanings; some participants see Orthodox Christianity as liberating itself, while some are defining freedom as opposing to what they think Islam stands for. “As a Christian woman, I highly value my freedom… I would not be able to live like their women…” is just a random sample to illustrate this view. The prejudices will be discussed within the further questions.

*Figure 2: What do you like about your religion? – Orthodox Christians*

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22 The unique answers will be elaborated in the final version of this project work
23 According to Islam, Jesus (Isa) is one of the Messengers of God
24 Whether it is human or divine
PERCEPTION OF OTHER RELIGION


*Figure 3: What do you think about Christianity/Islam? – Muslims and Orthodox Christians*

The chart above represents merged results. The respondents who expressed positive attitude are almost equal in both groups (46.5% among Muslims and 48.6% among Christians). Can we see this as an encouraging or discouraging result? Is 46 or 48% of participants who respect the religious beliefs of their neighbor, enough or not? Can those 46% or 48% initiate the dialogue, or were some of them just polite and cautious in answering? If we dive deeper into concrete answers, we can see that the majority respondents who are listed under “positive attitude” actually expressing respectfulness. The majority was not elaborating the answers; those who did, in most cases were basing their positive experience on interactions with their neighbours; for example: “I respect my Christian neighbours, true believers are always good people” or “Islam has similar values like Christianity, it promotes peace and understanding.” However, more unique answers could have been tracked when into responses which are expressing critical attitude. Some sort of criticism is present among 36.6% of Muslims and 18.9% of Christians. Here are some examples of what is seen when we look into the concrete critical answers:

“Christians changed the Holy Bible and the word of God.”

“Christians are ignorant… They don’t even know who *their* God is.”

Or:
“Islam is a warped version of Christianity.”

“They are extremists.”

“The rules in Islam are too strict and the religion is too demanding.”

It would have been interesting to see if those views could have been challenged if the individuals were engaged in face-to-face dialogue. The possibility to elaborate on those answers could have given a whole new dimension on those answers.

**PERCEPTION OF SIMILARITIES BETWEEN RELIGIONS**

Could you name a few things that Islam and Christianity have in common?

*Figure 4: Could you name a few things that Islam and Christianity have in common?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarity</th>
<th>Muslims (%)</th>
<th>Christians (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No similarities</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All people are similar</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot of similarities</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The same origin of faith</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus - Isa</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prophets</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayers, fasting, symbols</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 commandments</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love, peace, tolerance</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monotheism</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to note similarities between Islam and Christianity, 32% of Muslims noted “monotheism” as the biggest similarity. This is particularly interesting because it is opposing the plenty of answers related to criticism of Christianity: that Christianity is not “real monotheism” because of trinity. Almost 28% of Christians saw “monotheism” as the biggest similarity as well. In addition, 17% of Christians pointed out “the same
origin of faith”. To quote “Theory and Application of a Common Word” (2010:6):”

Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) all focus on the same God, hence would profit from listening more closely to one another talking about God.” In reference to this quote, we must note a very common mistake: Christians have God, Muslims have Allah and it is not “the same” God. Allah is simply an Arabic word for God. Here is a citation of one of the questionnaire responses, which is nicely summarizing this matter: “There is one God, but the ways to Him are different”. These similarities are a good basis for building our dialogue.

As we will see in the interviews’ analysis part, the majority of respondents were stressing monotheism as a major common spot around which all believers should gather. “Peace, love and tolerance/good deeds” were identified as the second biggest similarity between two denominations. Identifying universal human values as a similarity gives us hope; hope that we all praise something that is not tied to a specific denomination, but to something that has universally good meaning and connotations.

Ten commandments represent a similarity chosen by 13.8% of Christians and 5.7% of Muslims. From Caner Dagli’s point of view (2010), Muslim and Christian saints and sages share not only the supreme commandments to love God and love their neighbor, but also the realization of these commandments. This merges theory and praxis in the deepest sense of those terms.

A significant difference is shown in “prayers, fasting and symbols”; while more than 20% of Christians mention those three categories as the biggest similarities, there are only 2% of Muslims who note such similarities. It would be interesting to see what stands behind it, and the same goes for “the same origin of faith”, noted by 17% of Christians.
PERCEPTION OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RELIGIONS

Muslims: What do you see as a main difference between Christianity and Islam?

Figure 5: What do you see as a main difference between Christianity and Islam?

When asked about the biggest difference between Islam and Christianity, 33.9% of Muslims said it is “Holy Trinity”. This matter relates to the, previously discussed, perception of monotheism in Islam and seeing Trinity as polytheism. This answer was followed by “Jesus”, present among 17.9% of participants, which is not surprising, since the nature of Jesus is one of the main differences between two religions. Some of our interviewees referred to this matter, as we will see in the further text. Jesus as a matter of differentiation between two religions is present among 9.5% of Christians. What is interesting is that many Christian respondents did not know that Jesus is a prominent figure - a prophet in Islam (for example, “The biggest difference is that Islam does not recognize Jesus.”), but similar misconception was noted among Muslims as well (for example: “They have Jesus, we have Muhammad.”) The majority of Christian respondents (28.6%) chose “customs” as the most common differentiator between two religions. Under “customs” they were putting various examples, such as ‘funerals’, ‘weddings’, ‘celebrations of religious holidays’ etc. What is indeed interesting is that Muslims chose something purely theological to be the biggest differentiator, while
Orthodox Christians chose something cultural, like customs. Some of the examples include: “the way they dress”, “the way wedding ceremonies are arranged”, “funerals” etc. We can conclude that the perception of Muslims is based more on the ‘practical’, observing level, than on theory and theological dimension. Christians believe that the relations between women and men are better among Christian population and 9.5% of the participants sees that as a major differentiator. Therefore, social and gender factors are seen as differentiators as well. Equally present answer was “Jihad”, but with its negative connotation (for example terrorism). This shows us that the participants were not really familiar with the original meaning of this term.

Figure 6: What do you see as a main difference between Christianity and Islam?

– Orthodox Christians
FAMILIARITY WITH HOLY BOOKS - THE BIBLE AND QUR’AN

Have you read the Bible/Qur’an? Why (not)?

Figure 7: Have you read the Bible/Qur’an? Why (not)? – Orthodox Christians and Muslims

When looking into the chart that represents both groups, we see that more than 30% of participants have read their Holy Books (43.3% of Christians and 62.1% of Muslims). It is significant that 30% of Christians have not read the Bible, out of which 3.3% are planning to.

For our interreligious communication aspect analysis, it is important to observe how familiar they are with the ‘Other’ affiliation. The results are showing that 24.1% of Muslim respondents have read the Bible whereas only 13.3% of Christians have read the Qur’an. When it comes to their own Holy Books, 62.1% of Muslims read the Qur’an, while 43.3% of Christians read the Bible. In this context, we can conclude that Muslims pay more attention to religious scripts. In total, 24.1% of Muslims and 13.3% of Christians read both the Qur’an and the Bible, as we can see in the chart below. Those figures are significantly low, if placed in the connotation of familiarity with the ‘Other’.
Figure 8: Have you read the Bible/Qur’an? Why (not)? – Orthodox Christians and Muslims who have read both

![Chart showing the percentage of Muslims and Orthodox Christians who have read both Holy books.](chart)

The chart above represents the Christians and the Muslims who read both Holy books. As we can see, 24.1% of Muslims claim that they fully read both books, while 13.3% of Orthodox Christians states the same. The second chart represents Muslims and Christians who partly read both books (6.9% of Muslims and none of Christians). Once again, these results show us the knowledge about other religious affiliation is still limited.

KNOWING EACH OTHER

**Do you think you know more about Islam than Muslims know about Christianity?**
**Do you think you know more about Christianity than Christians know about Islam?**

Figure 9: Do you think you know more about Islam than Muslims know about Christianity? – Orthodox Christians / Do you think you know more about Christianity than Christians know about Islam? - Muslims

![Chart showing the percentage of Muslims and Christians who think they know more about each other's religion.](chart)
In the chart above, we see that 59% of Muslims said they think they know more about Christianity than Christians know about Islam. On the other hand, only 16% of Christians claimed the same. In total, 64% of Christians said they do not think they know more about Islam than Muslims know about Christianity. Perhaps this attitude lies in the fact that Orthodox Christians are a majority (on the countries’ levels) and both denominations are more exposed to gaining knowledge about Orthodox Christianity. Another reason could be that the interest of getting knowledge about a minority religious group\textsuperscript{25} might not be that high. The third reason can be that Qur’an identifies Psalms and Gospels as divine revelations, so Muslims’ familiarity with Christianity might be higher due to this fact. This complements our previous question, which showed that more Muslims from Sandzak read the Bible, than Christians read the Qur’an. However, the purpose of this question was really to identify who knows more; that would be hardly possible. The true purpose was to see who is more willing to show initiative towards interfaith dialogue.

\textsuperscript{25} Again, minority group at a country level
INTERVIEWS

INTRODUCTION

The interviews were conducted during the field work in December 2012 and April 2013 in Serbia and Montenegro. The interviewees received the questions in advance and were told that they could skip any question if they would prefer not to answer. All of the participants requested the questions before conducting the interviews. In all cases, none of the questions were skipped. The conversations had natural flows. The questions, as planned, were formulated in interviewees’ mother tongues\(^{26}\). Interviewees were asked if they would prefer to be recorded or to have me write down/type their answers. Therefore, some answers were recorded and some were written down. The interviews took between half an hour and fifty minutes.

Seidman (2006:113) suggests avoiding any in-depth analysis of the interview data until all the interviews have been completed; the objective of this approach is “to avoid imposing meaning from one participant’s interviews on the next”. Since this thesis is aiming at comparative analysis, in-depth analysis was impossible before collecting the interview materials. Therefore, all the interviews were completed and, afterwards, the transcripts were studied.

1. MUSLIMS

Three interviews were conducted with Imams - while two of them were from Islamic Community in Montenegro, one was from Islamic Community of Serbia. In order to conduct interviews with the competent representatives, I contacted three Islamic Communities - Islamic Community of Serbia, Islamic Community in Serbia and Islamic Community in Montenegro. No response was received from Islamic Community in Serbia. Islamic Community of Serbia referred me to D.T, Effendi\(^{27}\), Imam of Belgrade, Pancevo and Novi Sad, who is originally from Tutin, Sandzak. D.T. studied Islamic theology in Turkey and he is currently based in Belgrade, where he’s leading prayers in

\(^{26}\) This was discussed within methodology chapter

\(^{27}\) An educated or respected man in the Near East.
Bajrakli Mosque\textsuperscript{28} and giving lessons on Islamic theology. I met D.T. in Belgrade in December 2012.

The first representative from Islamic Community of Montenegro was E.B, who is a leader of Religious and Educational Service of Meshihat\textsuperscript{29} of Islamic Community in Montenegro. E.B. is the Chief Imam of The Islamic Community Board Bijelo Polje and a teacher at Madrasa\textsuperscript{30} “Mehmed Fatih”, which is the first Islamic school in Montenegro. The second representative was A.S, a secretary and a teacher of Madrasa. Both participants obtained University degrees abroad. Initially, I e-mailed Islamic Community in Montenegro (www.monteislam.com) and received response from E.B, who offered to arrange the interviews. I met E.B. and A.S. in Podgorica, Montenegro, in the beginning of April 2013.

The following chapter aims at integrating their answers and sharing their ideas to overcome the challenges of interreligious conflicts and improving interreligious communication.

1. Is interreligious communication possible?

All interviewees said YES. Two interviewees elaborated upon their answers; one interviewee said that “the religions which are, for centuries, present in the area are revealed religions\textsuperscript{31}, and that the essence of God’s word is the same in present in all Holy books. Qur’an is promoting dialogue and communication (quoting Quran, Surah Ali Imran, verse 64: \textit{O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you...})”, the other interviewee said that “interreligious dialogue is not only an alternative; I believe that is an order, it is an imperative.” Afterwards, he referred to the same call on the “common word”.

2. What has negative effects on interreligious communication?

A common ground which was identified in all answers was PREJUDICES. Below are the detailed answers:

The first respondent said: “Negative effects… are just people who do not know one side, and only look at their own side and talk about their side. People, therefore, must

\begin{itemize}
  \item The only mosque left in Belgrade
  \item The Meshihat is the executive body of the Islamic Community
  \item In this case, Islamic secondary school
  \item Reference to Islam, Christianity and Judaism
\end{itemize}
first get to understand someone, and in order to understand someone or to talk about
him, they have to get to know each other first. Because when people know… when
people realize that they have the same aim… when you have a mutual relationship,
when they establish communication, it does not matter who they were or what they are.
Then, therefore, there is no difference. First, people need to know themselves in order to
meet another man and they go together in that direction. That's the only way… The
only reason is that people do not know each other, do not communicate and have,
therefore, some bias, bad thoughts.”- Here, we see some proposals for the improvement
of interfaith communication. This answer is strongly related to our premise, that the
prejudices form a basis for misunderstanding; furthermore, prejudices are preventing
peace-building, as they caused conflicts in the past. “Prejudice is one of the biggest
reasons that made all the problems in our region, the problems that have occurred and
will happen. These are individuals, and our opinion must not be based on individuals
who do that. These individuals include Muslims, Orthodox Christians and members of
all other religions. Religion is not based on individuals but on the whole mankind. This
is the only way to go all along: to learn about each other, to socialize.” Please note the
contrast which was made: “religion” is “a whole mankind”, while “individuals” are
those who are causing troubles. According to our interviewee, individuals caused the
problems in the region, which gives some level of optimism; however, he thinks that the
problems will continue to happen. The question which is arising is: if the prevention of
future conflicts is socialization, how to socialize? And how to create interest to learn
about the “Other”?

The second respondent said: “Prejudices of the past. The rejection of the fact that
Muhammad is a prophet of God-it is unfair. We cannot communicate on a sound basis if
the one from whom faith of Islam is drawn is not recognized as God's prophet.
Religious followers have always been convicted that all the sufferings come with the
blessing of religious dignitaries, although some wars that were not religious in essence,
but wars to achieve earthly possessions, were frequently attributed to the faith, and thus
created prejudices and hostility.” The second respondent, therefore, sees an issue in
prejudices as well. In addition, he sees the problem in lack of respect. This answer also
relates to one of the survey’s questions- What do you think about Christianity/Islam?
Less than 50% of respondents from both sides said that they respect the other religious
affiliation. Do we build good relationships on focusing on the things we have in common only? How do we maintain mutual respect in debates on differences?

The third respondent said\textsuperscript{32}: “Insisting on the things we disagree on; if we talk about something that is unimportant (…) it is not good to emphasize- “that’s your Polytheism”, “this is terrorism,” so we shall always have confrontations that will not take us anywhere. The essence remains in the margins, and that is: God is one, we are members of the faith in one God. (…) Thus, the emphasis on diversity, insisting on some uncompromising attitudes towards something that is the essence of a religion, its doctrines; and we do not have any intention of changing it in Christianity nor Christianity will changed it within us; the essence is not to go into it but to try to ensure, increase cooperation on what we have in common.” Perhaps here we can see the answer to one of our previous questions: we should focus on similarities, at least in the initial stage of our dialogue. Within initial stage of dialogue, dogmas should not be discussed. As the communication level is developing, we can move onwards. But, the solid ground for dialogue should be similarities, and first of all, knowing that there are similarities. The point is- we do not need to change, but we should be flexible and open for discussion.

“I strongly believe that when someone does a good deed, we will not deny that it is a good deed if a Christian does it, therefore, it is not good even though it is good in itself - is not good just because a Christian does it. It is good no matter who does it. Also, when it comes to aid, Tariq Ramadan says: \textit{We, as Muslims, in terms of the poor, the sick, vulnerable, and disadvantaged, can be of any religion, it is important for us what the situation is, and not what their beliefs are.”} We should stop blaming each other and stop looking for the “thorn in the eye” of other. Instead of that, we should accept diversity. Furthermore, we should overcome the borders and raise mutual respect over the limits of our own religious affiliation.

\textsuperscript{32} Due to the length of this answer, the answer is partially presented here. The whole answer is available in appendix
To summarize - Qur’an is promoting dialogue. In this sense, Muslims are obliged to communicate with others.

*Res non verba* - we need to act, not to talk just for the sake of talking, but at the same time-not doing anything. Some forms of actions include educating people, participating in humanitarian actions, finding the common spots, socializing. We need institutions to help us. We need to understand that we have common goals. We must find a way to build mutual respect. Without mutual respect, we cannot move on. We should not insist on differences, but try to find the things we have in common. We should not blame religion for the conflicts in the past. The conflicts were not caused by religion, those were caused by individuals.

3. **What has positive effects on interreligious communication?**

The first respondent said: “To begin with, the most important thing is to get people closer together, to communicate, to learn. First of all, people do not even know about their faith enough, and not to mention someone else's. When you know your faith, when you see the same thing, that the parallel revelations across the whole of mankind through Muhammad, as Prophet Mohammed is not a messenger only to Muslims. There is a verse that says (quoted in Arabic, followed up by the translation) “We have sent you as a mercy to all the worlds.” Muhammad is, therefore, a mercy for all worlds, and God is as a magnet, and a driving force for all. He put Muhammad on whom he wants. Many people are asking: "How has God's grace poured on the Orthodox people?" Because it is God who gave them grace, not man. Muhammad is, therefore, a mercy for all worlds. He gave it to Muslims as well as to the Orthodox. It's just that people need to know and comprehend.” As we can see, this answer is very religion-oriented. The respondent wanted to re-assure us that Muhammed is given to all of us, as a mercy and a guidance. There is a certain sense of vulnerability among Muslims when it comes to Muhammed; Christianity does not accept Mohammed as a prophet, and this sort of ‘rejection’ coming from a Christian side, pushed several Muslim respondents into ‘defending’ Muhammed. The lack of religious knowledge was emphasized by several respondents from different religious affiliations, as we will see below.

The second respondent summarized: “Expanding knowledge about religion, the absence of the Ministry of Religion and of religious education in schools, more educational

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33 He is referring to Sahih al-Bukhâri, a hadith where Prophet Muhammad said: “Every other Prophet was sent only to his people, whereas I have been sent to all mankind.”
programmes in the media, with special emphasis on the positive aspects and on the area of common ground regarding life issues and everyday problems solving. Practical proof of communication; expression of charity toward the followers of all religions; concrete proof e.g. humanitarian actions.” Within this answer, we see several ideas which could lead to improvement. Moreover, we see a concrete call for action, for common participation in actions which support humanity and good deeds. We see a call for a joint problem-solving. We see a focus on everyday life and everyday problems, which we all have in common. This answer is in line with the other interviewee’s view on need to increase the level of good common deeds. The absence of religious education is recognized as a missing piece.

The third respondent34 said: “If a religion emphasizes a struggle against some social deviance, then I think that the members of other religions should be the most pressing first hand assistance, without prejudice to the fact that it was launched by this or that Church, this or by any Islamic community; it is essential that religion should be service to the society, and not that a society exists for the sake of a religion. (…)”. This quote is particularly important, because it is placing humanity above the religious diversities. This is a direct call for unity through common humanitarian actions and good deeds. Partitions are taking us away from the true essence of the stable society, and that is- to build it together, to co-operate and contribute to it, to strive together to improve it.

He continues: “We still consider that we have the right to say some negative things and to be cooperative with people of all faiths, and to accept, which is very important, an initiative that will lead to a good course. I think that especially the issue of the concrete, practical dialogue should be raised here, because dialogues which, usually starting on a Congress, with shaking hands, hugging, etc. are a mere formality with nothing behind it. It is a nice thing. Specifically, on Municipality Day in Bijelo Polje, when I, as the supreme religious leader there, show up in my "uniform", the Orthodox priest appears, we hug, shake hands, and this is all, we do not see each other for a year. A mere formality. Then, the city authorities say: "We have complied with both religions,” because we are fairly equally represented, and what then? In my opinion, the best dialogue is the dialogue through activities, a dialogue through specific projects, such as the fight against drugs project, the project on strengthening awareness about certain vices, sins and so on. We need to enter schools to say - why not try it, because we will

34 Due to the length of this answer, the whole answer can be retrieved from appendices
all be less afraid of that, it will not be a unilateral attempt to change things, but rather
‘Come on, here are all religions’. I think this works with people, tentatively speaking”
(…)  
In this answer we can, again, see a call for action. As previously mentioned, when the
common goals are identified, it is easier to move forward and take joint actions for
improvement and development. We cannot afford to place interreligious communication
on the level of pure formality. We will go back to this matter when discussing Orthodox
Christian views on it.

4. **How do you see the future of interreligious communication?**

The first respondent said: “In the first place people need to communicate, to socialize, to
study, then there is a step of cooperation, a kind of mutual cooperation. To be a
perfectly honest man. You cannot cooperate with someone who is dishonest. If a man is
not honest, you cannot rely on him, as we say-to give him the key into his hands.”

My Question: „Is it going to be like that or...?“ (referring to how realistic this might be)

“There has always been, from the first man, Adam[^35^], misunderstanding and there will be
until doomsday. Not all people are the same and believe in the same thing or go the
same way. And it is on us to try to be fair and just, to serve God, to serve the Lord first,
and then to serve the people. We have to be merciful towards all people so that God
descended mercy on us.” So, honesty is recognized as a crucial value in interfaith
dialogue. Misunderstandings will always be present, but we have to maintain the human
values to be able to improve our relations. We have to get to know the other person and
we must learn. By increasing our knowledge, we are making a crucial step towards
development of interfaith relations.

The second respondent said: “A man is the enemy of what he does not know. When we
do not know each other, it is natural to have aversion, fear, and a kind of prejudice.”

This interviewee confirms the theory of the first interviewee- the lack of knowledge
creates fear and hostility. The key weapon in such circumstances is learning.

To conclude- we cannot neglect the fact that prejudices do exist. A man fears what he
does not know. But, how do we overcome this fear of unknown?

**What can be done to improve interreligious communication?**

[^35^]: Adem in Islam
The first respondent said: “People could get organized. To socialize, to meet people. (...) God says: "What is not pleasing to you, do not do to others." We need to learn, to gather, to study. And God said (quoted in Arabic) ... (...) People should not see only one side, they must socialize, communicate, and when they see that both sides move towards a same goal, and if the one who goes left is cursing the one who goes right, then there is no communication.” To summarize- we must identify the common goal and move together towards that goal. The key words are: socializing, learning, gathering. By increasing our knowledge and respecting the other side, we could reach the common goal.

The second respondent said: “Establishing Interreligious Council in Montenegro, introducing religious education, history of religion in schools where the students will become familiar with postulates of the revealed religions.” Here are some practical suggestions to concretize our research problem. The lack of such institutions and education possibilities was recognized within Orthodox Christian community as well.

The third respondent said: “Today it is hard to change a mature, middle-aged man’s conviction that Muslims from this region are not Turks, not some immigrants, some barbarians, and alike. On the other hand, not all Europeans are crusaders, intended to conquer ... From the Islamic side, I have always loved to say in my speeches - we Muslims always blame someone else for something - the West is in a conspiracy against us, we are oppressed, we are killed. Why are we always looking for the culprit somewhere in there? Is there a possibility for these young people to see that they had a nice childhood, to learn religious truths in their teenage years? Mere meeting with these young people.” This part of the answer is particularly interesting because it is focusing on concrete prejudices which are present in the Balkans area- that the Muslims who live in the Balkans area are Turks. Within this answer, we can observe both prejudices and a potential solution for it. We will refer to this concrete prejudice within Orthodox Christian interviews. The respondent sees the biggest possibility in delivering a change by meeting and educating young people. We should be more critical towards ourselves, and not too critical towards our neighbour, like we are at the moment.

**How do you see the future of interreligious communication?**

This answer will be represented as a summary of all participants, relying on their quotations and reflections upon interreligious communication. One of the respondents said that, since we do speak the same language, Serbian language, and understand each
other, we do not need an interpreter, we do not need anybody. He continued saying that we should approach our ‘brothers’ and see how we can listen to them, help them, as we are made to help each other. Nobody can, of course, have a clear vision of the future development of interreligious communication and none of the respondents could predict how it will develop in the future. However, by educating ourselves, socializing, helping others, we can make the initial step towards its brighter future- those are the suggestions that were collected within the interviews. Another respondent said that, now and in the future, we should look from the perspective of people, not from the perspective of God (this or that is wrong/you will be punished). ‘We have to overcome arrogance’- he says.

In the future, concludes the third participant, we have to work on reconciling and harmonizing views on certain issues, by bringing together religious institutions.

ORTHO.DOX CHRISTIAN INTERVIEWS

As we could see above, the interview situations and arrangements with the Islamic Communities were quite simple- the communities were contacted, and the interviews were conducted face-to-face. In the case of Orthodox Christian community, it was more complex to arrange interviews. It was already mentioned above that the Orthodox Christian Community is not centralized in a way Islamic Communities are. Orthodox Christians who live in Sandzak area fall under several dioceses- in other words, different parts of Sandzak fall under administration of different dioceses. Initially, I was contacting various institutions, organizations and portals in order to get a feedback regarding willingness to participate. Very limited resources regarding Raska are available online, however they exist. An example is Raska’s web portal [http://www.raskaoblast.com/](http://www.raskaoblast.com/), which contains information about monasteries, cultural events and news from the region. However, it seems like the website has not been updated since 2010, and I received no response regarding participation in research. Eparchy of Raska and Prizren and Kosovo and Metohija is in exile ([http://www.eparhija-prizren.org/](http://www.eparhija-prizren.org/)), because “it is usurped by illegal Bishop” and “by illegal Muslim authorities in Pristina” furthermore, the statement from their official website says that: “at the request coming from the usurped center of Orthodox Diocese in Gracanica, with the approval and blessing of Serbian Patriarch, the Bishop is denied access to his congregation and his Diocese by physical force.” The second eparchy,
known under the name “Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Raska-Prizren and Kosovo-Metohija” is announcing their activities at: http://www.eparhija-prizren.com/

Since not much could be done online, I started questioning individuals - if they know someone, how can I reach those people, where they are etc. The situation got even more complicated, since the Great Lent was just in time when I was planning to arrange the interviews. During the Great Lent, many monks isolate themselves from everyday life and spend time in prayer and silence. Eventually, I was referred to a young priest N.P. from Podgorica. The meeting was arranged in Podgorica, during my field work in April 2013. However, coming from Podgorica, the capital of Montenegro, and not Sandzak area, N.P. did not fit the sample. He was, yet, willing to help. During the discussion which we had, I came to know that the younger generations of Orthodox Christian priests put a lot of efforts to modernize and approach the people are looking into the benefits of online world. On the other hand, I was informed that the priests in Sandzak area live in very difficult conditions and that is the reason behind my difficulties in reaching them. N.P. mentioned Radio Svetigora (http://www.svetigora.com/) as a main channel of communication. He offered to conduct interviews on my behalf with the priests, when he gets in touch with them, to record the interviews and send it to me. Ten days later, I received two recorded interviews, which were also sent to Radio Svetigora, probably to be used as the materials for one of the future broadcastings. One of the participants was D.P, protopresbyter from Bijelo Polje, while the other was M.S. a priest (paroh) from Rozaje. Below are the responses and its analysis:

**Is interreligious communication possible?**

When asked if interreligious communication is possible, both respondents said **YES**. Both of them elaborated on their answers.

The first respondent said: “For everyone ... especially for a Christian and a man who adheres to two commandments only - love God and love thy neighbour - of course it is possible. The reasons for that may even be positive in the sense that a man is given inspiration to show what he is God-given through the diversity, inherited from his ancestors for generations, and of course kept in the wings, the bosom of his church and his nation. If this all is combined, as pure and holy it may well be seen.” Reference to Mark 12:31, clearly shows that loving our neighbour is one of the biggest duties we

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36 a clerical rank, a title of honor given to non-monastic priests
have as Christians. Therefore, dialogue is not an option, it is an obligation for those who believe. Here we can draw a parallel with Islamic view, since Qur’an promotes dialogue between Abrahamic religions.

The respondent continues: “Bijelo Polje is a good example of inter-religious cooperation now, of course there were ... Yet this is the Balkans, there were wars that have left traces and unfortunately, there are still extremes. For me the most important thing is that the people who lead the nation are wise and sensible; that they do not build up tensions and do not emphasize differences rather than similarities; in this case you certainly can communicate and live in diverse religious communities, including here in Bijelo Polje.” As we previously noted, Bijelo Polje is a municipality where Orthodox Christians and Muslims are almost even. Just like imam, this respondent is confirming that the situation in Bijelo Polje is good in this sense. To summarize, the similarities are stressed; and since the reflections of the past conflicts are still fresh, we have to be cautious and avoid discussing differences in our initial steps of interfaith communication.

**The second respondent said:** “Of course it is possible and desirable, certainly, especially in, so to say, multiethnic environments, where several religious groups or ethnic groups are involved. It is desirable because it can contribute to a better understanding of people of different ethnic origin, nationality, or religious affiliation.”

Here, the need for interfaith dialogue is recognized. The key word here is “understanding”; We can refer again to Chatterjee (1967: 393) and her summary: “My task is to understand what it means to you.” So, we are different, and our traditions and faiths are different, but it should not prevent me from understanding you. However, there is a big step between “understanding” and “sharing”. Understanding what something means to the ‘other’ is the initial step, while sharing Initially, we should focus on ‘understanding’ the ‘Other’.

The respondent continues: “Moreover, it is desirable because, as you know, I have direct experience as a priest in Rozaje where multiple religions or multi-ethnic population is somehow polarized to the extent that unfortunately there are very few Orthodox, maybe some 2% perhaps not even that many. Others are Muslims, and for this reason one cannot feel any communication in a tangible way. But it is desirable,

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37 Your religion
38 Rozaje is a municipality in Montenegrin part of Sandzak
both here in Rozaje, and everywhere else and it should be at a higher level than it is.”

This quote is very important because the interviewee is recognizing that the interreligious communication flow is not on the level on which it should be. The uneven level of two groups’ presence makes it even more difficult to establish an interfaith dialogue.

**What has a negative impact on interreligious communication?**

The first respondent said: “Well, in my opinion, perhaps in my experience, it is primarily prejudice that negatively affects communication and, of course, some stereotypes, I am talking specifically about Islam and Christianity, that is Orthodoxy, that people have with each other - we Orthodox about Muslims and vice versa, they have about us. So, it is, above all, the impact of past time, as you all know, Islam is a religion that came to our region with the Turks, so it is regarded in some way - I mean by the Orthodox, of course - as an imperialist religion. For that reason they may be afraid in a way and lacking a closer communication.” The interviewee is giving us concrete examples of stereotypes and prejudices. One of the imams with whom the interview was conducted said that it is important for them to let others know that they are not Turks, that they did not come from “somewhere”… The centuries of Ottoman rule left a significant mark and everything that is related to “Islam” and “Muslims” is automatically associated with the Turks. It is clear that the interreligious relation in the area need to be re-defined. When the terms are re-defined, the relations will be easier to re-shape. How do we do that? The respondent is suggesting some of the options: ”It is important to emphasize that this negative effect could be suppressed by us, clergy. Primarily I think that could be organized at a higher level. Of course, I refer to the bishops, the Mufti… So if the communication was established at a higher level, then it would certainly include lower hierarchical levels, and then they would give example to the common people who, by following their religious leaders, would establish a little better communication and relationships.” So, the lower hierarchical levels of “priesthood” can play a key role in ‘changing people’s minds’. Communication can have a structure of an inverted pyramid: while the most important discussions are lead on its peak, the communication pyramid cannot exist without a solid basis, and that basis are people who communicate with each other, and, in this solution example, communicate with their priests, imams and religious scholars, in order to learn about the “Other”. 
The second respondent said: “Well, in the first place it is certainly a misinterpretation of one’s own values and thus emphasizing the value of their faith and their nation. If we start from the beginning, that man was created in the image of God; that means that we are all image of God. It cannot be that, I do not know, Orthodox or Muslim, is more or less human. Every human is simply image of God.” The equality is pointed out; as one of our questionnaire respondents said: “God is one- the ways to him are different… And there is no right or wrong way.”

The respondent continues: “Now of course, if you put yourself forward, and this emphasis relies on looking down upon other people's religion, it creates a negative context, and then we cannot call ourselves children of God, and we cannot fulfill what 'love thy neighbor as yourself'. Emphasizing differences has certainly a negative impact.” Therefore, one of the requirements to fulfill one of two greatest commandments in Christianity, we have to respect the other side. But: ”Of course, we should not forget, this is the Balkans, that until recently there were wars, and anyone who is still looking for the culprit for what happened, who is looking back rather than forward, and returns permanently in the past to blame others without seeing the blame in himself, he is someone who will always have a negative impact on inter-religious cooperation and communication and on cohabitation in different national communities in Bijelo Polje.” The interviewee is aware of the conflicts’ reflections in the post-conflict era. We must overcome accusations. This is, however, a difficult task to accomplish.

To summarize, the conflicts from the past are still, unfortunately, reflecting on our reality. We have to overcome accusations and, moreover, we have to re-shape our visions of the ‘Other’ and place our perceptions in the context of present time. Yet again, prejudices and stereotypes are recognized as the biggest obstacle in interfaith communication.

What is it that has a positive impact on inter-religious communication?

The first respondent said: “In the first place, is the man - believer, a man who loves God, loves his neighbour and a man who learns to love the man. If a man is trying to find that human, fine, divine feature in every man, he will be able to love every human being and what is said in the Gospel, the saying "condemn the sin, do not condemn the man”. To summarize- in order to improve the interfaith communication, we have to improve ourselves in the first place. We should not be judgemental- we should try to
find good features in the ‘Other’ and that will be the first step towards improvement of our communication flow.

The respondent continues: “In my opinion, the closer the man to God is, the closer he is to his neighbour, the more virtuous and a better person he is; and an individual can contribute to the community the most if he tries to be a good man. If he is a good man, if he observes the commandments of God, then he is a good neighbor and a good companion, and regardless of the environment in which he is, because of its religious or national diversity, he will be a beacon and example to others how to live and how to be a man, and he will simply gather people instead of turning them away from him.” This is an answer which is aiming at raising awareness of universal human values, but how do we do something concrete to improve the interfaith communication?

The second respondent said: “Yes, I really do my best, as they say, by fulfilling the Gospel commandment and Christ’s commandment as much as we can, to have peace with all men. As a priest, I try to give an example of behavior or attitude towards people in general, not only towards the Orthodox, but rather towards the Muslims who are my neighbors here, in some communication with them in general through completion of some administrative work in the town of Rozaje etc. So, I can say from experience that the prevailing impression is positive as I always try to find something positive even in the negative things (…)\(^{39}\). When I was traveling among people and listening, I heard that some people have a positive opinion of me as a representative of our church here in Rozaje in an environment where the majority is Muslim community, and I was really trying to do so.” So, the second respondent is trying to improve the relations and communication flow by being an example of good behavior and attitude. His aim is to influence people with his own deeds. However, we see that development communication is not on a high level, but rather restricted to communicating in relation to administrative duties etc. The respondent also referred to “another form of communication” between them- on the major holidays, they congratulate to each other. Communication, according to this quote, exists on a formal level. It is interesting to compare this with the quote taken from one of imam’s interview- where he says that the communication is based on pure formalities on specific occasions. It is about “taking pictures and shaking hands”. Can we move the communication from formal level to the level where it could bring social change?

\(^{39}\) Due to the length of this answer, the whole answer is available in appendix
What can be done to improve interreligious communication?

The first participant noted the awareness of both groups not being familiar with the beliefs of the other, and a consequence of that ignorance being distorted images: “It takes time to establish a healthier and long-term interreligious communication and cooperation.” he says. “You cannot do it right away, like- now we want to sit down and talk and resolve it. Only time can heal some wounds” he adds. Just like imams, the respondent sees the lack of religious education in Montenegro as a big disadvantage. Once again, the need to educate people is strongly encouraged by this participant as well.

The second participant had a concrete experience where ninth grade students visited him, as a part of their ‘History of Religion’ class. This means that younger generations have the possibility to be involved and to learn about different religions, in spite of religious education being formally absent- non existent in Montenegro. He says: “I think it's very important for children here to become familiar with Orthodoxy in a direct way, and not only to listen to something, perhaps not so good, from their fathers or grandfathers, some negative things, and think that we are here as some stories say that we, as Orthodox or Serbs, doesn’t matter, we are a disruptive factor here in the Balkans or something. So, we should approach these young people who are now coming up, these young generations so that they do not get the wrong picture of it. Our children have contact with their (Muslim) children, they socialize… (…).” Interactions are inevitable and we have to work hard on creating the right image of ourselves to achieve the positive impacts in the eyes of others.

How do you see the future of interreligious communication?

The participants agree on the possibility of raising interreligious communication to a higher level. One of the participants said that it has to be without denying someone else, but through mutual respect. Without questioning the dogma or religious studies, by respecting another person's identity and his religious convictions and beliefs, we can accomplish better understanding in the future. A reference to some interreligious council in Bihac-Bosnia40 was made; they organize seminars, lectures on religion and the relationships between religious communities. Another participant said that we need

40 The participant was unsure about the exact location of it
“some patience and some dedication”: it takes a lot of sacrifice and effort to “develop the best of those national and religious feelings in a man”, because “only such man is able to pass it on to his offspring, his neighbours who are not of the same religious beliefs and ethnicity.” The way is long, but is certainly worth it.

CONCLUSION

Some of the data represented in this research could be further developed. My initial plan was to explore relations between variables such as age and gender and religious feelings. In other words, I wanted to investigate if female or male participants are more willing to discuss this topic, if female or male participants are more conservative in their perception of religion, if age has influence on it or not (for example, during communism religion was almost forbidden- so perhaps people who were growing up during communism era have less knowledge about religion or less interest in it etc.). However, due to the very tight timeframe, I did not manage to analyze those factors. Perhaps this can be explored in one of the future works related to this emerging topic.

It is almost impossible to restrict this research to interreligious level only. To fully understand the data which was collected, we must understand historic, interethnic and intercultural relations as well. Interreligious communication in Sandzak belongs to much broader context of relations.

If a broader look at the aspects is taken, various prejudices are identified; some can be placed in the historical or the context of the past, some are rooted in the past and based on present misunderstandings. By analyzing the most common prejudices, this paper aimed at identifying the key obstacles in interreligious communication and its path towards social change. Knowledge is identified as a main tool in overcoming challenges of interfaith dialogue. Other strategies involve: socialization, building mutual respect, participating in common activities, learning, promoting the dialogue.

As previously mentioned, one of the most important questions which is arising is: if the prevention of the future conflicts lies in socialization, how do we socialize? How do we create interest to learn about the “Other”? When this question is placed into communication for development context, we can conclude that only participatory communication approach is effective. Without involving both groups for change and
without actively working with them through different means (for example teaching and promoting interfaith dialogue), changes for overcoming prejudices would be really slim.

By ignoring the importance of religion, and therefore, interreligious communication, in present, post-conflict societies, we are not able to make any real progress in developing communication flow between groups for change. As one of the interviewees said, there is no religion which is promoting conflicts, but in our area of research, conflicts are often thought to be religion-related. Our initial premise, that prejudices and lack of knowledge result in interreligious conflicts and misunderstanding, and observed through the case study of Sanzak, was confirmed by all our interviewees. What is valuable are the solutions for overcoming those challenges and ways of dealing with them, suggested by our research participants:

- Establishing institutions which will focus on improving religious knowledge and encouraging interreligious communication— the need for such institutions was identified by all interviewees, as a way to support the needs for interfaith relations regulation and a supportive body in various religious matters.
- Promoting common activities, which will involve both religious groups. By promoting such activities, the groups for change interact and learn about each other.
- Supporting the learning and educating processes, as one of the most important strategies in overcoming the traps of prejudices and stereotypes
- Attempting to raise the level of mutual respect, as it is one of the prerequisite of interreligious communication. If there is no respect for the other side involved in dialogue, the communication flow cannot be improved.
- Encouraging common humanitarian actions and using every occasion to remind the groups for change about the common goals they have. Some of such actions have already been taken, but they are not numerous and therefore there is a need to promote them more actively.
- Involving religious leaders and scholars in promoting interreligious dialogue—the majority of interviewees are willing to participate in interfaith dialogue’s promotion and are happy to use their knowledge to support this idea.
- Avoiding discussion and questioning dogmas, as that might lead to new misunderstandings and even conflicts. This rule is particularly applicable in the initial stages of dialogue.
By applying the suggestions listed above, interreligious communication can be reinforced. The expectation is that the interest in interfaith dialogue will grow. When this paper was almost finalized, I was informed by one of the interviewees that, shortly after our meeting, he participated in an international interfaith conference, which took place in Montenegro. “Maybe the things will really move forward” - he wrote.

We learned that developing interreligious communication is not an easy task to accomplish, and that the process might take several years in post-conflict societies. However, the initiatives for change do exist and are expected to grow in the future.
REFERENCES


Katrien Hertog. The complex reality of religious peacebuilding : conceptual contributions and critical analysis


5. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ethnic Map of Sandzak
Appendix 2: Questionnaire survey in Latin script

Accessible as a web link: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/SF6N3B6 and through “New Facebook Collector”, developed by SurveyMonkey:
http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TFGYWBM

**Interreligijska komunikacija**

Poštovani/poštovana,

Hvala Vam što učestvujete u istraživanju. Ovo istraživanje je deo magistarskog rada na temu interreligijske komunikacije na Univerzitetu u Malmeu. Cilj istraživanja je da se identifikuju ključne razlike u percepciji religije, u ovom konkretnom slučaju na teritoriji Sandžaka. Vaše učešće u ovoj studiji je volontersko. Možete da preskočite bilo koje pitanje na koje ne želite da date odgovor. Anketa je anonimna i pitanja su otvorenog tipa. Hvala Vam još jednom na saradnji i vremenu koje ste uložili u ovo istraživanje. Srdačan pozdrav,

Nika Šturm

1. Pol

☐ muški
☐ ženski

2. Kojoj opštini pripadate?

☐ Novi Pazar
☐ Sjenica
☐ Tutin
☐ Prijepolje
3. Koliko imate godina?

- 20-30
- 30-40
- 40-50
- 50-60
- preko 60

4. Šta Vam se dopada u vezi sa Vašom religijom?

5. Za muslimane: Šta mislite o hrišćanstvu? Za hrišćane: Šta mislite o islamu?

6. Da li možete da navedete nekoliko sličnosti između islama i hrišćanstva?
7. Šta vidite kao najveću razliku između islama i hrišćanstva?

8. Da li ste pročitali Bibliju/ Kur'an? Zašto?

9. Da li mislite da znate više o hrišćanstvu nego što hrišćani znaju o islamu?/ Da li mislite da znate više o islamu nego što muslimani znaju o hrišćanstvu?
Appendix 3: Questionnaire survey in Cyrillic script
Accessible as a web link at: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TW7KGKS

Међурелигијско комуницирање

Поштовани/поштоване,

Хвала Вам што учествујете у истраживању. Ово истраживање је део магистарског рада на тему интеррелигијске комуникације на Универзитету у Малмеу. Циљ истраживања је да се идентификују кључне разлике у перцепцији религије, у овом конкретном случају- на територији Рашке (Санџака).

Ваше учешће у овој студији је волонтерско. Можете да прескочите било које питање на које не желите да дате одговор. Анкета је анонимна и питања су отвореног типа.

Хвала Вам још једном на сарадњи и времену које сте уложили у ово истраживање.

Срдачан поздрав,

Ника Штурм

1. Пол

☐ мушки
☐ женски

2. Којој општини припадате?

☐ Нови Пазар
☐ Сјеница
☐ Тутин
☐ Пријепоље
☐ Нова Варош
☐ Прибој
☐ Пљевља
☐ Бијело Поље
3. Колико имате година?

- 20-30
- 30-40
- 40-50
- 50-60
- преко 60

4. Шта Вам се допаđа у вези са Вашом религијом?


5. За хришћане: Шта мислите о исламу? За муслимане: Шта мислите о хришћанству?


6. Да ли можете да наведете неколико сличности између ислама и хришћанства?
7. Шта видите као највећу разлику између ислама и хришћанства?

8. Да ли сте прочитали Библију/ Кур'ан? Зашто?

9. Да ли мислите да знате више о исламу него што муслимани знају о хришћанству? - Да ли мислите да знате више о хришћанству него што хришћани знају о исламу?
Appendix 4: Web pages of various religious institutions which participated in the research

1. Islamic Community in Montenegro (www.monteislam.com)

2. A Facebook page of Orthodox Theology Faculty in Belgrade

3. Mesihat of the Islamic Community of Sanzak (www.mesihatsandzaka.rs)
Appendix 5: Transcript of the interview with a Muslim imam

Question 2, Muslim imam:

“Insisting on the things we disagree on; if we talk about something that is unimportant, commonplace, something that came into Christianity as a tradition from earlier traditions or something that has entered into Islam from the tradition of pre-Islamic Arabs and so on; and then this is always a barrier, and I always enjoy the words of a contemporary Islamic thinker Tariq Ramadan who says that every religion has its own culture, but the culture is not a religion. Consequently, every religion produces a culture, this culture is its by-product, but the fact that it is produced by a religion – does not mean that it is a religion. In the tradition of pre-Islamic Arabs, for example, women were dressed in black, and every emphasis that this is an Islamic rule is outdated. It is a culture, it is folklore, but there are many points in common with what Islam really means; the Orthodox in this region have introduced the Old Slavic customs, pagan customs into Christianity; it is not good to emphasize that - "that's your Polytheism" , “this is terrorism," so we shall always have confrontations that will not take us anywhere. The essence remains in the margins, and that is: God is one, we are members of the faith in one God, and now - I do not remember exact numbers, but one study has shown how many believers in monotheistic religions there are in the world, and how many atheists; that the majority attacks only the theological ones, apologetic fires are just fired among members of monotheistic religions, and atheists are standing aside. Nobody is trying to call atheists in faith, no one is trying to show them the right way, what is the essence of belief in God, but the internal conflict is emphasized. Thus, the emphasis on diversity, insisting on some uncompromising attitudes towards something that is the essence of a religion, its doctrines; and we do not have any intention of changing it in Christianity nor Christianity will changed it within us; the essence is not to go into it but to try to ensure, increase cooperation on what we have in common. I strongly believe that when someone does a good deed, we will not deny that it is a good deed if a Christian does it, therefore, it is not good even though it is good in itself - is not good just because a Christian does it. It is good no matter who does it. Also, when it comes to aid, Tariq Ramadan says: "We, as Muslims, in terms of the poor, the sick, vulnerable, and disadvantaged can be of any religion, it is important for us what the situation is, and not what their beliefs are.”
Is interreligious communication possible?

Of course, it is possible and desirable, especially in multiethnic environments, where several religious or ethnic groups are involved. It is desirable because it can contribute to a better understanding of people of different ethnic origin, ethnicity, religion or religious affiliation. Moreover, it is desirable because, as you know, I have direct experience as a priest in Rožaje where multiple religions or multi-ethnic population is somehow polarized to the extent that unfortunately there are very few Orthodox, maybe some 2%, perhaps not even so many. Others are Muslims, and for this reason one cannot feel any communication in a tangible way. However, it is desirable, both here in Rožaje, and everywhere else and it should be at a higher level than it is.

What has a negative impact on inter-religious communication?

Well, in my opinion, perhaps in my experience it is primarily prejudice that negatively affects communication and some stereotypes. I am talking specifically about Islam and Christianity - that is Orthodoxy. People have prejudices about each other - we Orthodox about Muslims and vice versa, they have about us. So, it is, above all, the impact of past times, as you all know, Islam is a religion that came to our region with the Turks, so it is regarded in some way - I mean by the Orthodox - as an imperialist religion. For that reason, they may be afraid in a way and lacking a closer communication. However, it is important to emphasize that we, clergymen, could suppress this negative effect. I think that it could be organized at a higher level. Of course, I refer to the bishops, the Mufti and, if we are to include the Roman Catholic Church, bishops. So if the communication were established at a higher level, then it would certainly include lower hierarchical levels and then they would give example to the common people who, by following their religious leaders, would establish a little better communication and relationships.

What is it that has a positive impact on inter-religious communication? Can you tell from your experience? What is it that you do on the development or improvement of relations with the people with whom you live, people you meet, who are your next-door neighbours, with whom children go to school, and you also move around the town and finish all your tasks. What is your impression, what is it that has the positive impact on inter-religious communication?

Yes, I really do my best to fulfill the Gospel commandment and Christ's commandment as much as I can, to have peace with all men. As a priest, I try to give an example of behavior or attitude towards people in general, not only towards the Orthodox, but also towards Muslims who are my neighbours here, in some communication with them in general through completion of some administrative work in the town of Rožaje, etc. In my experience the prevailing impression is positive as I always try to find something positive even in the negative things. I must say that I was not really thrilled when I came here, to tell you the truth, I had the impression that I came, perhaps I’m exaggerating in appendix.

Appendix 6: Transcripts of the interviews with Orthodox priests
Translation of Interview 1

Is interreligious communication possible?

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What is it that has a positive impact on inter-religious communication? Can you tell from your experience? What is it that you do on the development or improvement of relations with the people with whom you live, people you meet, who are your next-door neighbours, with whom children go to school, and you also move around the town and finish all your tasks. What is your impression, what is it that has the positive impact on inter-religious communication?

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that statement, but somehow it seemed as if I came to an Arab country, say, Iran or something like that. Of course, it was not the first time that I saw mosques, but the first thing I heard, as Muslims call it, the sound of adhan from the mosque, the imam's voice calling for their prayers. It was so loud and somehow it was very difficult at first to get used to it, especially for my wife. As time went on, there were various temptations and problems, and you might have read in the newspapers that there were some incidents - shooting, throwing stones at priest's house, the church and so on, and there were always provocations when I was walking through the city wearing the cassock. It still happens, but much less than before. As for the relationship with the people, i.e. Muslims, with neighbours, I do have a positive opinion because I have built a very good relationship with neighbours. They are really kind, always ready to give a hand for anything I need. My children are friends with children from the neighbourhood and in this sense there are no problems. However, at school, my child is in the second grade of elementary school, there are some minor arguments. They are little children, but still their education is ... I do not know where it came from, some things may offend. To ask my child some questions about our faith or our customs - in some ways it is a little disdainful. I was a little surprised myself that young children can do this. Yet they are still small, so it is not something important or worth mentioning, something that could destroy relationships among us here.

When I was traveling among people, I heard that some people have a positive opinion of me as a representative of our church here in Rožaje in an environment where the majority is Muslim community. Also, there is another form of communication between us, especially the Islamic priests, imams, and with me as a representative of the Orthodox Church. On their major holidays, Bayram and Ramadan, I congratulate them on behalf of the official church board and so they do the same, and so we have made some communication at that level.

However, something more was missing; we had a few visits. Unfortunately, I do not have the room here; I do not have an office where I can organize receptions or something like that. It would really be good if we had such a thing and when we might have communication at that level. I can say that we could have some lectures in terms of bringing together people who live here.

Unfortunately, I have the impression that our people are more and more leaving this area, they are somehow dying out. As you probably know, this is a problem not only here in Montenegro but also in Serbia, and in general, somehow our village is dying, just as unfortunately, we have so many unmarried young men, and only old people are staying. Young people are turning away somewhere, especially to Serbia, seeking a better job opportunity and so on. Only deserted villages remain, with no prospect for a youth employment, etc. I can say that our trained staff is somehow neglected. Of course, I would not be honest if I said that we did not have people employed in state institutions.
What is your perception of the future of interreligious communication? Can it be improved and in what direction, in your opinion, since you have contacts in most of the cases with people of other ethnicity and of different religion?

Of course, it could, as I said a moment ago, that it would be desirable to put some effort in drawing attention to the unnecessary stereotyping and in order to eliminate bias among us, to get people to know more about each other. I forgot to say earlier, I had the experience of recent years. On several occasions, teachers in primary schools from two urban schools in Rozaje brought the ninth grade students. They visited our church here where I answered their questions as a part of their regular classes; I think it was History of Religion. They learned about all religions and came to learn a little more, as far as possible, about Orthodox Christianity. I answered their questions, and I talked to them about our church in general, about Christianity, Orthodoxy, etc.

I think it is very important for children here to become familiar with Orthodoxy in a direct way, and not only to listen to something, perhaps not so good, from their fathers or grandfathers, some negative things, and as some stories say, think that we, Orthodox or Serbs, are a disruptive factor here in the Balkans. For this reason we should approach young people who are now coming up, these young generations so that they do not get a distorted picture of us. Our children have contact with their children, they socialize, they (Muslims) are, as I have said, the vast majority, and they probably hear some things, they are informed about their religion. My vision of the future is ... I have read that somewhere in Bosnia, I do not know in which town, which is best place to lead an interreligious dialogue... as you know, these events unfortunately were reflected on interpersonal relationships here, as the same ethnic communities live here and in Bosnia. As I have said, I have read that an interreligious council was established in some Bosnian town, I think it might be Bihać, I am not sure, they established communication at a lower level of representatives, assistants, and they organize seminars, lectures on religion and on relationships between religious groups and communities.

In my opinion, it would be a model and a vision for future cooperation and relations in order to help to establish closer communication and the relationship between people belonging to different religions and ethnicities. That is my view that would help without denying someone else, but respecting each other, without questioning the dogma or religious studies, to establish communication at the level of relations, by respecting another person's identity and his religious convictions and beliefs.
Translation of Interview 2

Is interreligious communication possible?

It is possible for everyone - especially for a Christian and a man who adheres to two commandments only - love God and love thy neighbor. Of course, it is possible. The reasons may even be positive in the sense that a man is inspired to show what he is God-given through the diversity, inherited from his ancestors for generations, and kept under the auspices of his church and his nation. If all of these are combined, pure and holy it may well be seen. Bijelo Polje is a good example of inter-religious cooperation now, of course, there were ... Yet this is the Balkans, where wars have left traces and unfortunately, there are still extremes. The most important thing for me is that the people who lead the nation are wise and sensible; that they do not build up tensions and do not emphasize differences rather than similarities; in this case, you certainly can communicate and live in different religious communities, including this one in Bijelo Polje.

What is it that has a negative impact on inter-religious communication?

Well, in the first place it is certainly a misinterpretation of one’s own values and thus emphasizing the value of their faith and their nation. If we start from the beginning, that a man was created in the image of God, this means that we are all images of God. It cannot be that an Orthodox or Muslim is more human or less human. Every human is simply image of God. But, if you put yourself forward, and this emphasis relies on looking down upon other people's religion... it creates a negative context, and then we cannot call ourselves children of God, and we cannot fulfill 'love thy neighbor as yourself'; emphasizing differences has certainly a negative impact. Of course, we should not forget, this is the Balkans where, until recently, there were wars. Anyone who is still looking for the culprit for what happened, who is looking back rather than forward, and returns permanently to the past to blame others without seeing the blame in himself, he is someone who will always have a negative impact on interreligious cooperation and communication and on cohabitation of different ethnic communities in Bijelo Polje.

What is it that has a positive impact on inter-religious communication?

In the first place, the man-believer, a man who loves God, loves his neighbours and a man who learns to love the man. If a man is trying to find that humane, divine feature in every man, he will be able to love every human being. As it is said in the Gospel, "hate the sin, not the sinner," meaning that when a man sins, we point out his sin. In my opinion, the closer the man to God is, the closer he is to his neighbour, the more virtuous and a better person he is. The best way for an individual to contribute to the community is to try to be a good man. If he is a good man, if he follows the commandments of God, then he is a good neighbour and a good companion, regardless of his environment. Within religious and ethnic diversity, he will be a beacon and model to others how to live and how to be a man, and he will simply gather people instead of turning them off.
You see, Father, that people often commit various crimes under the guise of religion and invite people not to establish interreligious communication. What is your opinion about it?

Well, you see, there are two very important aspects. The first is to say that he is not an honest man, he is not humane, and therefore not a true believer; you cannot be called a Christian if you hate your neighbour. We should not forget that Christ stands before us for the sake of man and his salvation, spreading his arms on the cross and shedding innocent blood, since he had no sin. If a man establishes false standards and takes them as a priority, it cannot be good for anyone. In this sense, the focus should be on a proper development of a man, to the foundations, the religion of the Gospel, the Word of God. In this case, he will not be able to get a hand on the man. Do not forget that the Old Testament commandment is “Thou shalt not kill”.

The man is the image of God. It is a sin to call a man 'poor', because the man is not poor, but is a godlike being, he has his dignity, and you should see him as this, respect him. I think that even in theories, such as communism, Nazism, emphasizing one’s own nation and religion at the expense of others’… Even worse – in communism - emphasizing one’s own ideology at the expense of the value of every human being … regarding a monkey as our ancestor… all these are used to reduce the value of man, to make it easier for him to kill. If a man is a godlike being, it is not easy to yell at him, not to mention to kill him. I just think that these ideas and regarding a man and his dignity as similar to a monkey were actually invented only to discredit a man and his value and make it easier to kill a man. Anyone who puts human life in the first place, he will be able to cope with challenges. In the end, it is said: “by their fruits you will know them”; the way one nation relates to other nations will show whether it is a spiritually mature and responsible nation.

You said that one of the disadvantages is the Balkan region we live in, which was affected by the war in previous years and that it is constantly searching for the culprit, which has a negative impact on the interreligious communication. How do you actually see the interreligious communication in the time ahead?

Well, you know, why I have said that... Our people have never had enough time to devote themselves to the building of the country and nation in time of peace, because we were constantly in a position to make a decision; you have always had to choose something, any choice was ‘to be or not to be’, as if it were the last one. A man who is constantly under pressure, of course, it carries a dose of intolerance, a dose of nervousness, he gets angry quickly, quarrels, sometimes has feeling as if someone is deliberately and constantly stirring up tensions, but very little is needed… I have even had a conversation with some people, foreigners, who asked me what I really thought, what was necessary for this nation to live in harmony; as they say 'slow down events', slow down. Simply, the events were happening one after the other so quickly before our very eyes and we are so weary and always caught in dilemma. People are either too hard or too lenient, and they often do not know what is good for them and what will do good to the people in an international, interreligious sense. In fact, you need some patience...
and some dedication. Everyone, they say, even a farmer who plants a fruit tree, needs to provide ideal conditions in order to get fruit. It requires a lot of sacrifice, a lot of effort. So for a man, like for one nation, for one religion to bear fruit, it is necessary to focus only on that, to develop the best of those national and religious feelings in a man, because only such a man is able to pass it on to his offspring, to his neighbours, and even to the neighbours who are not of the same religious beliefs or ethnicity.

**Is there in Bijelo Polje, where you have been a priest for many years, is there among you, including your church and among other religious communities in Bijelo Polje, an interreligious communication, and what is it based on?**

Well, of course there is. We meet each other... Unfortunately, I still do not think there is enough of it. What is not good and may be present even among religious representatives, especially among ethnicities, I do not know, is the fact is that the Orthodox know almost nothing about Islam and also Islam, the Muslims know almost nothing or very little about the Orthodox faith. Consequently, due to ignorance, people stick to what they were told, interpret incorrectly and unfortunately create a distorted image. It takes time to establish a healthier and long-term interreligious communication and cooperation. You cannot do it right away, like - now we want to sit down, talk, and resolve it. Only time can heal some wounds, some issues may only arise with time, a moment in history. Both Muslims and Orthodox people are regaining faith. The faith should bring people closer, but one faith should not be emphasized to the disadvantage of the other.

**Is interreligious communication solely responsibility of the church on, whether it is Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Islamic community? To what extent, in your opinion, is it the responsibility of social institutions and the communities in which people live, work, grow up, and develop through the school system, through education, through work, through all the other institutions in which people live?**

I don’t know. You know, we live in a country that has declared itself a civil state. However, I think that a civil state is just an idea. If the politicians, leaders, representatives, everyone else, including education, and everything else do not support it, it is the worst mistake, as I see it. There are no citizens; there is a man in civil society. A man cannot be submitted to the community, but the man with all his characteristics should be connected to and involved in the community, a community should not simply be imposed. No imposition of any community, even if it is under the auspices of equality... but if a man is not involved, not introduced to it... It has not been done here in our country, not here in Bijelo Polje, in our community. Unfortunately, it takes time. I think it is too soon, this decision to declare a civil state with no basis in terms of knowledge. Say, you are only one out of ten people who do not know exactly who they are, what they are and so on. And now, they impose another new community. When you enter a community, you must first know who brings what in the community and what you will get, what you will have to give up and what we have in common. I don’t think a lot of effort has been made here.
In a way, do it in a way that we will put more emphasis on Christianity rather than Islam or more on Islam than on Christianity, by literally looking for some kind of equality in the statistics; it only creates an absurdity which, time will tell, I'm afraid has done no good, but it will cause more and more problems. What is also not good, and I want to point it out, is that Montenegro is the only country in the Balkans left without religious education in schools. I think that it unfortunately still largely hinders everything we talked about international, interreligious tolerance; in order to become tolerant, one should first become acquainted with it. How can we achieve that, if we do not know the basic truths about our own faith first and then about other’s, about (our) nation. All this should be done - familiarize people and especially young people with these things, and then allow people to choose from those things and ask for something that is most convenient for one’s life, most appropriate for one’s development and life in the community.