
Religion as a Conversation Starter

Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in the Balkans

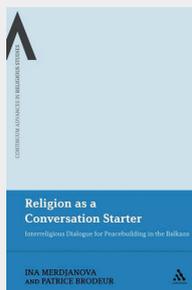
By Ina Merdjanova and Patrice Brodeur

New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009, 194 pages, \$130, ISBN 9781441194381.

Reviewed by Önder Çetin

RELIGIONS and religious actors have been the subject of several scholarly works published in the last two decades to examine the outburst and dynamics of the inter-communal conflict in the Balkans. This was primarily due to the role of religions in drawing the boundaries of ethno-national identities in Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular. Some of these works demonstrated the increasing visibility of religious actors in public realm of the post-Tito era; others have interpreted their role as a part of nationalist political strategies (see, Mojzes, 1994, 1998; Perica, 2002; Powers, 1996; Velikonja, 2003). They have also been analyzed in relation to their increasing role in post-war settings within the broader framework of peacebuilding (see, Goodwin, 2006; Little, 2007; Mojzes, 1998; Perić, 1998; Mojzes, Swidler and Justenhoven (Eds.), 2003; Steele, 1994; 1996, 1998, 2003; USIP, 2003). Related to that second body of research focusing on peacebuilding, cultivation of social capital, that is cooperation, social inclusion and trust, has generally been regarded as a crucial element for sustainable inter-communal relations.

In *Religion as a Conversation Starter*, Merdjanova and Brodeur aim to address the gap between scholarly analyses and these practical initiatives of inter-religious dialogue for peacebuilding (IDP) in the Balkans. Although the study is not the first attempt at the analysis of inter-religious relations in the Bal-



kans, it is based on a more comprehensive set of data than the preceding work of Sterland and Beauclerk (2008) on the state of faith based interventions towards conflict transformation and reconciliation in post-conflict settings of former Yugoslavia. Moreover, the study still has not lost the timeliness of

the topic, in contrast to other dimensions of post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding, (see, Björkdahl, 2012; Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Ker-Lindsay and Kostovicova (Eds.), 2013; Farrand, 2011; Juncos, 2012; Kappler, 2013; Martin-Ortega, 2013; Paffenholz 2009, 2010; Pankhurst, 2008) beside recent works focusing on particular aspects of religious peacebuilding (Çetin, 2012; Spahić-Šiljak, 2013).

Merdjanova and Brodeur provide a detailed exploration of IDP in the Balkans by placing “dialogue” at the center of peacebuilding initiatives. Adopting a broader understanding of inter-religious dialogue as “all forms of inter-religious dialogue activities that foster an ethos of tolerance, non-violence and trust” (p. 25), they aim to bridge both academic and applied interests, that is the integration of theory and praxis. The study is mainly based on the assumption that the success lies in an integrated model of top-down and grass-roots initiatives, including different segments of society.

Adopting a comparative, interdisciplinary approach, their study is based on a three-fold

structure: (a) a descriptive portrayal of the key actors and activities of IDP, (b) “achievements” and “challenges” to be learned, and (c) policy recommendations. The book does not only provide an extensive set of data on the practice of IDP at different levels in the Balkans, based on 65 semi-structured interviews and 7 survey questionnaires supplemented by relevant declarations and reports, but also outlines a multi-dimensional strategy for an effective, long term peacebuilding structures by way of a set of policy recommendations.

Upon setting the theoretical grounds of the IDP, the authors provide an overview of inter-religious trends in the Balkans from the early 1990s to the end of 2008 (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 then focuses on a country-by-country overview on organizational actors engaged in inter-religious peacebuilding, with particular focus on Inter-religious Councils representing a top-down approach. This part particularly focuses on the three controversial realms in-between the political and the religious establishments, namely social reconciliation, restitution of the latter’s expropriated properties and confessional religious education in public schools. While the Macedonian case, as a locally-driven initiative with international support, reveals the importance of prioritizing the grass-roots dimension, the Bosnian and Herzegovinian case has kept the fragility of the top-down attempt, the preparedness of religious leaders in dialogue apart from their common concerns as well as the structural arrangements in guaranteeing the maintenance of their activities, including a strong national and international political will and revised political structures.

Prioritizing the complementarity of the structural, public institutional initiatives, and the individual acts (p. 74), the authors turn to major achievements and challenges faced during

IDP initiatives in Chapter 4 and 5 respectively. Achievements include growing awareness on the need for inter-religious dialogue, participation of women and youth in various forms of inter-religious dialogue and cooperation, engagement in education, research and publishing, and significant practices in grassroots interaction and artistic initiatives. However, these initiatives have to confront considerable challenges on the ground, such as the legacy of the communist era shaping the demographical settings as well as people’s attitudes towards religion, interplay between politics and religion, lack of a lasting inter-religious dialogue, and finally shortcomings on the part of international organizations.

While these reviews and analyses offer the reader a comparison between these local organizations, it could be strengthened with a more critical analysis in terms of the views of the recipients on the ground, including non-religious segments, to clarify the impact and added-value of religious peacebuilding and develop a more systematic analysis of their strengths and weaknesses at different settings and levels. The same also applies to the analysis of the role of resources particularly connected to religious organizations used to shape the choices of the believers of respective religious communities in engaging or avoiding inter-religious dialogue and collaboration.

The policy recommendations, as one of the distinctive contributions of the book, address international organizations, governmental actors, and the issue of local-international cooperation. Underlying the need for a more-local based, contextualized and long-term strategy for IDP, the first set of recommendations invoke a more inclusive, but realistic approach vis-à-vis religious as well as non-religious segments of those particular societies. Emphasis on local ownership also

shapes Merdjanova and Brodeur's second set of recommendation addressing governmental agencies in developing an inclusive awareness in inter-religious knowledge and understanding, including those aimed at media education. The final set of recommendations is that of local-international cooperation. The authors call for joint programs, without overlooking the local as well as regional needs, covering all those relevant groups as well as realms for cooperation, such as at the inter-personal level.

While these recommendations seem to be one of the most promising parts of the book, some of them kept as abstract recommendations raise questions about their appropriateness, effectiveness, and efficiency. While Merdjanova and Brodeur's references to their field sources might be accepted as anticipated indicators of success, presenting common principles and both qualitative and quantitative

assessment tools referring to exemplary cases might better help the reader to assess the underlying theory of change. This would also equip the readers of such a comprehensive analysis, who are practitioners and stakeholders of IDP on the ground in particular, to measure their consistency and impact.

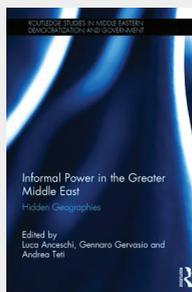
Nonetheless, by presenting a comprehensive set of data identifying key actors in peacebuilding processes, the book addresses a global audience of different disciplines and professions, including religious studies, political science, and international relations as well as the arts. In summary, *Religion as a Conversation Starter* provides a valuable contribution to the fields of peace and conflict studies as well as the literature on post-conflict transformation in the Balkans by outlining potential areas for collaboration of these actors, ranging from inter-personal to transnational dimensions, which aim peacebuilding.

Informal Power in the Greater Middle East Hidden Geographies

Edited by Luca Anceschi, Gennaro Gervasio *and* Andrea Teti
London: Routledge, 2014, 226 pages, \$145, ISBN 9780415624367.

Reviewed by Pascal Abidor

THIS VOLUME examines the relationship between the formal and informal spheres of power and is meant to serve as a corrective to overly "statist" political analyses that focus entirely on formal power institutions. Analyses that focus exclusively on formal political spheres grant them exaggerated strength and denude informal mechanisms and actors of any political relevance or power. The



Arab Spring has made it clear that the formal power of the state in the Middle East is contestable and changeable with the informal playing a significant role. The editors of this volume seek to bring attention to the informal mechanisms that are available for use in authoritarian regimes. The case studies in this collection look into "the political dynamics developing inside, in parallel to, and/or beyond