

CHRISTIANITY AND MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIPS IN KOSOVO[∞]

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Abstract

A small country of Europe in terms of her surface area and population, Kosovo is a multi-faith country where various religions and religious groups live together. A great majority of her population was Christian at the Roman Empire (and Orthodox at the Byzantine time), and Muslim at the Ottoman time and today. Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Churches, Judaism and some other religious movements as well as Islam still live in the country. This article, after briefly summarizing the history of Christianity in Kosovo, deals with the relations between Muslims and Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical churches past and today. It also evaluates the positive and negative aspects of the Muslim-Christian relations in Kosovo, and gives some observations about the future of these relations.

Key Words: Kosovo, Muslim-Christian Relations, Interreligious Dialogue, Islam, Catholic Church, Serbian Orthodox Church

Özet

Yüzölçümü ve nüfusu bakımından Avrupa'nın küçük bir ülkesi olan Kosova, farklı dinlerin ve dinî grupların bir arada yaşadığı çok dinli bir ülkedir. Roma döneminde Hıristiyanların, Bizans döneminde Ortodoksların, Osmanlı döneminde ve günümüzde Müslümanların çoğunlukta olduğu ülkede, Ortodoks, Katolik ve Protestan Kiliseler, Yahudiler ve birtakım yeni dinî hareketler varlıklarını ve etkinliklerini devam ettirmektedir. Bu makale, Kosova'da Hıristiyanlığın tarihçesine kısaca değindikten sonra, geçmişte ve günümüzde Müslümanların Katolik, Ortodoks ve Protestanlarla ilişkilerine dair bilgiler sunmaktadır. Makalede ayrıca Müslüman-Hıristiyan ilişkileri konusunda yaşanan olumlu ve olumsuz gelişmelerin nedenleri değerlendirilmekte ve bu ilişkilerin geleceğine dair gözlem ve tespitlere yer verilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kosova, Müslüman-Hıristiyan İlişkileri, Dinlerarası Diyalog, İslâm, Katolik Kilisesi, Sırp Ortodoks Kilisesi

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Introduction

Kosovo is the oldest settlement in the Balkans, with the utmost historical, political and geopolitical importance owing to its location as a bridge between East and West.¹ With approximately 2.3 million habitants, Kosovo is one of the least populated countries in Europe; nevertheless, the population density is high relative to its small area.²

The ancient history of Kosovo dates to the 4th century B.C. when the state of Dardania³ was founded. In 44 B.C., the Romans seized Dardania and ruled the region for a long time. When the Roman Empire divided into the Eastern and Western Roman Empires in 395 A.D., the province of Dardania remained under the rule of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire and the Orthodox Church.⁴

Slavic tribes, such as the Serbs and Croats, came from the north to Kosovo in the early 7th century. Following convergence with the Bulgars and Greeks, they gained power in the region and became influential in many fields.

The region was generally under Bulgarian and Slavic dominance until the arrival of the Ottomans in 1389; in many respects, these lands broke free from the West and moved closer to the East. With the Ottoman invasion, the Kosovans converted to Islam. During Ottoman rule over five centuries, many Albanians took charge of the highest ranks in the state.

In the wake of the Balkan Wars in 1912, the Ottomans retreated from the Balkans. Slavs recaptured the region, also owing to the assistance of external powers. Slavic peoples, such as the Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, attempted to remove Ottoman traces from the Balkans in political, economic, religious and sociocultural terms. Consequently, many locals had to immigrate to

¹ Fatmir Toçi, *Kosova në Vështrim Enciklopedik*, Akademia e Shkenca e Shqiperise Qendra e Enciklopedise Sqiptare, Botimet Toena, Tirana 1999, p. 5.

² Vahdet Pruthi, "Pozita Gjeografike", *Kosova Vështrim Monografik*, Akademia e Shkencave dhe Arteve e Kosovës, Pristina 2011, p. 21.

³ The Dardanians, one of the most famous Illyrian tribes in antiquity, founded the state of Dardania. The center of the aforementioned state was modern-day Kosovo, and it included northern Macedonia and southern Serbia. Accordingly, Kosovans consider the Dardanians (Illyrians) to be their ancestors.

⁴ Skënder Anamali, "Iliria në Periudhën e Zgjerimit dhe të Rënies së Perandorisë Romake", *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar I*, Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë-Instituti i Historisë, Botimet Toena, Tirana 2002, p. 174.

Turkey, while the remaining hundreds of thousands of people underwent various oppressions and persecutions, and thousands were massacred.⁵

Slavic rule, generally under the leadership of the Serbs, between 1912 and 1999 brought many difficulties for the Kosovan people. Guerrilla warfare started by the Kosovo Liberation Army in 1998 was ended the following year by NATO intervention, whereupon Kosovo was freed from Serbian rule. Governed by United Nations until 2008, Kosovo declared its independence on 17 February 2008.⁶

Kosovo is a state of ethnic diversity; 90% of the population consists of Albanians, whereas the country is also home to Serbian, Bosnian, Turkish and Romani people. The overwhelming majority of the population (approximately 96%) is Muslim, while the remaining minorities include Catholics (some Albanians and Croats), Orthodox Christians (Serbs and Montenegrins), Protestants and more recently founded religious communities.

Christianity in Kosovo

According to the findings of historical research, traces of religious life in Kosovo date from ancient times. A few studies about the religion of the Illyrians, the ancient ancestors of Albanians, have indicated that this people had pagan beliefs. Illyrian religion initially included symbols of several objects and animals (*heliolatry*), such as the sun and serpents; over the course of time, the Dardanian Queen became the most important religious symbol in the region.⁷ A statue of the Queen is still used as a symbol of the Municipality of Pristina, the current capital of Kosovo.

There are several opinions and allegations about the arrival of Christianity in Kosovo. Christian scholars claim that Christianity began to proliferate in the Balkans from its earliest days, attempting to prove that

⁵ Lush Culaj, "Nën Sundimin e Serbisë dhe të Jugosllavisë", *Kosova Vështrim Monografik*, Akademia e Shkencave dhe Arteve e Kosovës, Pristina 2011, p. 228-229; Stefanaq Pollo - Kristaq Prifti, "Shpallja e Pavarësisë së Shqipërisë", *Historia e Popullit Shqiptarë II*, Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë - Instituti i Historisë, Botimet Toena, Tirana 2002, p. 507-508; Mark Krasniqi, "Toleranca Fetare Me Myslimanëve dhe Katolikëve në Kosovë", p. 140-142; Orhan Bislmaj, *Marrëdhëniet Ndërfetare Në Kosovë (1990-2010)*, Logos-A, Skopje 2016, p. 127-131.

⁶ Fehmi Rexhepi, "Lëvizja Çlirimtare dhe Lufta për Pavarësi", *Kosova Vështrim Monografik*, Akademia e Shkencave dhe Arteve e Kosovës, Pristina 2011, p. 250-251.

⁷ Shkuriu, *ibid*, p. 172.

Christianity entered Kosovo during the time of the Apostles.⁸ It is asserted that St. Paul, the most prominent figure in the establishment of Christian doctrine, came to the vast region of Illyria in the Balkans during his famous journeys and that he converted the locals to Christianity. Nevertheless, such allegations cannot be proved by any scientific evidence. Moreover, there were no established Christian churches in Illyria during the first three centuries of Christianity, according to the findings of some impartial studies.⁹

The earliest evidence on the existence of a church in Kosovo can be found from the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325. Among the participants in the council was a bishop called Dacus Dardania from Illyria, more precisely from Skopje.¹⁰ Therefore, the first-ever church in Dardania province was established in Skopje, and the city was the earliest ecclesiastic center in the region because, as very ancient city, Skopje was also the center of the state of Illyria. Nevertheless, we have no information about the time of its foundation, the founder or the structure of the church where the bishop was in charge.

The Romans and Byzantines ruled the region for centuries and exerted the utmost effort to proselytize to the locals. Christianity attained official legitimacy in the time of Constantine the Great via the Edict of Milan, before becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire under the rule of Theodosius the Great in 380;¹¹ accordingly, the religion rapidly proliferated in lands under Roman sovereignty. In 395, the Roman Empire fragmented

⁸ Zef Mirdita, "Gjashtë Shekujt e Parë Të Krishtenizmit Në Trevat Iliro-Shqiptare", *Krishterimi Ndër Shqiptarë (Simposium Ndërkombëtar)*, Konferenca Ipeshkvinore e Shqipërisë, Shkoder 2000, p. 37-38; Shan Zefi, *Islamizimi i Shqiptarëve Gjatë Shekujve*, Drita Yay., Prizren 2000, p. 25; Dhori Qiriazi, *Krishterimi Në Shqipëri*, LMG, Tirana 2000, p. 8; Xhufi, Pëllumb, "Shqipëria Gjatë Shekujve V-XIV", *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar I*, Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë-Instituti i Historisë, Botimet Toena, Tirana 2002, p. 200; Nikollë Loka - Gjet Kola, *Iliria Biblike Shejtorët Iliro-Shqiptarë*, Geer, Tirana 2005, p. 6; Aleksandër Meksi, "Shën Pali Dhe Fillimet e Krishterimit Në Trojet e Sotme të Shqiptarëve", *Shën Pali dhe Doktrina e Tij Sot*, Konferenca Ipeshkvinore Shqiptare, Tirana 2009, p. 7.

⁹ David Hellsten, *Historia e Krishterimit Në Shqipëri*, Vernon Publishing, Tirana 2008, p. 11-12; Nexhat Ibrahim, *Islami në Trojet Iliro-Shqiptare Gjatë Shekujve*, M.D.I., Pristina 2000, p. 197; Pajazit Nushi - Anton Berishaj, "Religjioni dhe Toleranca Fetare", *Kosova Vështrim Monografik*, Akademia e Shkencave dhe Arteve e Kosovës, Pristina 2011, p. 604.

¹⁰ Gaspër Gjini, *Ipeshkvia Shkup Prizren Nëpër Shekuj*, Drita Yay., Ferizaj 1992, p. 23; Kastriot Marku, *Kishat e Kurbinit*, Geer, Tirana 2008, p. 54.

¹¹ Ekrem Sarıkçoğlu, *Başlangıçtan Günümüze Dinler Tarihi*, Fakülte Kitabevi, 6th ed., Isparta 2008, p. 312-313.

into Eastern and Western Empires,¹² whereupon the Balkans became a region of intersection where the two states competed against one another. The Western Roman Empire was dominant in Durrës and Shkoder on west coast of the Balkans, while the Byzantine Empire established sovereignty in the southern, central and eastern Balkans.¹³ Evidently, the regions that remained under the rule of the Western Roman Empire were scenes of propaganda for Western Christianity, which would eventually become the Catholic Church; at the same time, the Eastern Church, or in other words Orthodoxy, began to proliferate in regions under Byzantine sovereignty. Consequently, almost all of the inhabitants of the region, including in Kosovo, and all of the Slavs who emigrated there until the time of the Ottoman Empire were Christians.¹⁴

Reportedly, there were churches in Ulpiana, Skopje, Ohrid and Prizren in the Kosovo region from the 5th to 10th centuries. Later, churches were established in places such as Novo Brdo, Trepça and Gracanica. The region was subjected to the Byzantine Empire. The Bulgars were more powerful in the beginning, and they were followed by the Serbs. Both peoples were adherents to Eastern Christianity, so the majority of population had to adhere to the Eastern Church. Using Slavic languages in their liturgy and religious rites, the churches of Gracanica, Pec, Deçan and Ohrid became the most important Eastern Orthodox Churches.¹⁵

Orthodox churches are generally established on a single identity by Slavs; accordingly, these institutions attempted to impose Slavic religion, identity and culture on the Kosovan people. Serb governors established dominance in a short time in the region, and the center of the church was moved to Kosovo.¹⁶ Despite public resistance, Serbian rule significantly succeeded in assimilation in terms of identity and culture.¹⁷ During the period, most Albanians forgot the Albanian language and became Serbian and Orthodox. Orthodox or Serbian names were given to many Albanian children; in

¹² Mehmet Katar, "Ortodoksluk", *Yaşayan Dünya Dinleri*, DİB, 1.b, Ankara 2007, p. 114.

¹³ Zef Mirdita, *Krishtenizmi Ndër Shqiptarë*, Drita & Misioni Katolik Shqiptar Në Zagreb, Prizren-Zagreb 1998, p. 148-149; Krasniqi, "Toleranca Fetare Me Myslimanëve dhe Katolikëve në Kosovë", p. 205.

¹⁴ Ibrahim, *Islami në Trojet Iliro-Shqiptare Gjatë Shekujve*, p. 200.

¹⁵ Nushi-Berishaj, *ibid*, p. 605; Muhamet Tërnav, *Popullsia e Kosovës Gjatë Shekujve XIV-XVI*, Instituti Albanologjik i Prishtinës, Pristina 1995, p. 21.

¹⁶ Lulëzim Lajçi, "Të Dhënat e Para Për Pejën Dhe Emërtimin e Saj", *Gjurmime Albanologjike, Seria e Shkencave Historike*, Instituti Albanologjik, KGT Yay., p. 37, Pristina 2008, p. 240

¹⁷ Noel Malcolm, *Kosova Balkanları Anlamak İçin*, Sabah Kitapları 91, Istanbul 1999, p. 57-58.

addition, the names of towns were changed to Serbian.¹⁸ Thus, Christian, or more precisely Orthodox, religious doctrine and culture became widespread and dominant in these lands until the arrival of the Ottomans.

Today, the Kosovo Serbian Orthodox Church (KOS) is one of 36 episcopates¹⁹ under the central Patriarchate in Belgrade, with its national center in Prizren. It is the second largest religious community in modern day Kosovo, following Muslims. Today, there are Serbian Orthodox churches in cities such as Pec, Gracanica, Deçan, Mitrovica and Prizren, as well as in several villages. The Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo operates as a national religious community that embraces all Serbs. Since the Ottoman era, the Serbs have grounded their national and religious identity exclusively on the church; consequently, the Orthodox Church was transformed into a national church that represents the people²⁰ and has been influential in Kosovan politics from 12th century until today.²¹ Accordingly, all decisions made by Serbian governments against the Kosovan people over the last century were supported by the church, and the assimilation of non-Serbs was encouraged. In this regard, Serbs patronized several ancient shrines in Kosovo under the leadership of the Serbian Church based on alleged Serbian ownership of these buildings. Constructing many churches, monasteries and schools in places, even those without Serb populations or any requirements, the church wanted to demonstrate to the world that Kosovan territory belonged to Serbs. Even today, these policies continue.

Upon the arrival of the Ottomans, the Roman Catholic Church attempted to look after Catholics in Kosovo; simultaneously, Slavic peoples reinforced their assimilation policies in Kosovo and attempted to destroy every non-Slavic thing. Muslims were the greatest sufferers of these policies since they were forced to make a choice between apostasy and leaving their country. Catholics were in a relatively better position at the time; thanks to collaboration with Serbs toward the end of the Ottoman era, Catholics had

¹⁸ Serbian scholar Stojan Stanojević reviewed the names in charters in Deçan and found that, in many families, the father had an Albanian name while his son's name was Serbian, or vice versa. For example, a father called Tanush (Alb.) might have a son named Boljko (Srb.); a father named Bogdan (Srb.) might name his son Progon (Alb.), and there were even two brothers with the names Gon (Alb.) and Drajko (Srb) (for further information, see Malcolm, *ibid*, p. 84-85).

¹⁹ Radomir V. Popovic, *Serbian Orthodox Church in History*, Trans. by Petar V. Serovic, Academy of Serbian Orthodox Church for Fine Arts and Conservation, Belgrade 2013, p. 80.

²⁰ Mark Krasniqi, *Toleranca në Traditën Shqiptare*, Akademia e Shkencave dhe Arteve e Kosovës, Pristina 2007, p. 115.

²¹ http://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/28021/105_religion_kosovo.pdf (24.02.2017).

gained certain advantages and were free to practice their religion. Consequently, the Catholic Church continued operating as before²² and even expanded its influence and frontiers during the post-Ottoman period.

In the late 20th century, churches built by Catholics enjoyed a boost; at the time; there were 22 churches under the Kosovan Catholic Church (Skopje-Prizren), with two in the Macedonian cities of Skopje and Bitola and the remainder in Kosovo. In addition, new buildings were constructed for religious education. The best-known Catholic churches in Kosovo are the Franciscan St. Anton Church in Gjakova and the Bayan (Zojes) Church in Letnica.²³

Currently, the Kosovan Catholic Church is influential in every aspect in Kosovo. After the Kosovo War, Catholics established numerous colleges and schools in the country with the assistance of various incoming associations and institutions. Accordingly, the church has a say not only in politics but also in education, health, and social and cultural domains.

Until the end of 20th century, religious communities other than Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Catholics were not common in Kosovo. Following the fall of communism in the 1990s, the emerging political and cultural atmosphere paved the way for several new religious movements and institutions. Therefore, Kosovo began to host Jehovah's Witness, Baptist, Adventist and Evangelist churches and other new religious movements.²⁴

Today, numerous Protestant churches and groups are active in Kosovo. They come mostly from Albania, Croatia and Macedonia, and they organize religious conversations and ceremonies in houses in various parts of Kosovo. In addition, missionary activities continue by different methods within the scope of social and cultural life, education and health, thanks to the assistance of foreign-based organizations and institutions.²⁵

Muslim-Christian Relationships in Kosovo

The proliferation of Islam in the Balkans began with the arrival of the Ottomans; nevertheless, traces of Islam were apparent in earlier periods. According to various historical sources, the earliest appearances of Islam in Kosovo can be found in the travels of merchants and Sufis prior to the Ottoman period. Indeed, the Ottoman Empire did not encounter much difficulty in entering the region and establishing authority therein, probably

²² Gjini, *ibid*, p. 203.

²³ Gjini, *ibid*, p. 210.

²⁴ Nushi-Berishaj, *ibid*, p. 607.

²⁵ David Young, *Lëvizja Protestante Midis Shqiptarëve 1908-1991*, Tenda Publ., Pristina 2011, p. 183-185.

thanks to the presence of persons who were familiar with or who had adopted Islam already.²⁶

There are two opposite arguments about how Islam arrived and proliferated in the Balkans. According to historians and researchers with negative attitudes toward the Ottoman Empire (and probably toward Islam), the Ottomans exerted oppression and power on the locals, ravaged the emerging national culture everywhere they invaded, imposed an entirely unfamiliar system of government, tyrannically oppressed any feeling of national identity, populated the region with migrants of Turkish origin, subjected Christian villagers to famine and slavery, exerted unbearable oppression on local Christian churches and compelled the people to adhere to Islam, in line with their allegations about Turks as barbarians of Eastern origin.²⁷ Nevertheless, an objective review of scientific studies, historical sources and documents reveals that such allegations are deceptive and do not reflect the truth. Indeed, such claims point to violence and oppression due to the domestic turbulence of the last century of the Ottoman Empire and assert that the entire Ottoman era and system brought nothing but chaos and persecution. However, most scientific studies today have clarified that such allegations are far from accurate and that some persons or groups have deliberately distorted the truth.²⁸

Prior to the Ottoman conquest, Kosovo was under rule of the Kingdom of Serbia for two centuries. During this period, Kosovo was subjected to Slavic and Orthodox policies, mostly by force. When the Ottomans invaded Kosovo, the people, overwhelmed by Slavic oppression, converted to Islam because it offered values such as peace, happiness and human rights. Indeed, the majority of the people in Kosovo (Albanians) converted to Islam in a

²⁶ Qemajl Morina, "E Vërteta Dhe Paragjykimet Për Islamin Në Botë dhe Ndër Shqiptarët", *Feja Kultura Dhe Tradita Islame Ndër Shqiptarët*, Kryesia e Bashkësisë Islame Të Kosovës, Pristina 1995, p. 30; Nexhat Ibrahim, *Kontaktet e Para Të Islamit Me Popujt Ballkanikë Në Periudhen Paraosmane*, Logos-A, Skopje 1997, p. 48; Bislmaj, *ibid*, p. 25.

²⁷ Shan Zefi, "Fenomeni i Laramanizmit Në Vazhdën e Islamizimit Ndërsqiptar Në Dritën e Relacioneve Kishtarë", *Krishtërimi Ndër Shqiptarë*, (Simpozium Ndërkombëtarë Tirana, 16-19 Nëntor 1999), Konferenca Ipeshkvinore e Shqipërisë, Shkoder 2000, p. 180; Petrika Thëngjilli, "Katolicizmi Në Shqipëri Përballë Shtetit Osman (Shek. XVI-XVIII)", *Krishtërimi Ndër Shqiptarë*, (Simpozium Ndërkombëtarë Tirana, 16-19 Nëntor 1999), Konferenca Ipeshkvinore e Shqipërisë, Shkoder 2000, p. 229-230.

²⁸ Ibrahim, *Islami në Trojet Iliro-Shqiptare Gjatë Shekujve*, p. 213-214.

relatively short time.²⁹ Pursuant to the doctrines of Islam and traditions of the Ottoman Empire, the members of other religions were not compelled to convert and practiced their religions at will so much so that, over five centuries of Ottoman rule, the government allowed for the building of many churches and other religious institutions, sometimes with the direct assistance of the state. The presence of churches that were constructed before the Ottoman era is proof of Ottoman tolerance and justice. The Ottoman Empire guarded non-Muslims as well and protected members of all religions against any threats.³⁰ Thanks to this Ottoman tradition of tolerance and the positive attitude of Islam toward other beliefs, Kosovo has always enjoyed mutual tolerance and respect between religions. Certainly, since the majority of the Kosovan population consists of Muslims, they bore the greatest responsibility, duty and contribution to establish such religious peace.

During the Ottoman era, 90% of Albanians converted to Islam, whereupon Muslims established a distinct identity in the Balkans. After the Ottomans, the Serbs and communists attempted to obliterate Islam from the region; nevertheless, the locals remained loyal to their religion. Interestingly, such oppression accelerated efforts toward the rejuvenation of Islam and paved the way for the birth of a vibrant Islamic movement in Macedonia and Kosovo.³¹

Today, Muslims constitute 96% of the Kosovo population, and they are under the umbrella of the Islamic Community of Kosovo, an independent institution. Mufti offices in every city, as well as the Faculty of Theology in Pristina, branches in Prizren and Gilan, and the Alauddin Madrasa in Pristina, are subject to the Islamic Community of Kosovo, based in Pristina. It is worth noting that, although Muslims are the majority in Kosovo, they have weaker and lower roles within the government, compared to other religious communities. Attempts by foreign-based representatives and institutions of other religions to have a voice in Kosovo might have influenced this outcome. In recent years, there has been growing interest in Islam; nevertheless, the activities of Muslims undergo strict official monitoring due

²⁹ Muhamet Pirraku, "Roli i Islamit Në Integrimin e Shqipërisë Etnike dhe Të Kombit Shqiptar", *Feja Kultura Dhe Tradita Islame Ndër Shqiptarët*, Kryesia e Bashkësisë Islame Të Kosovës, Pristina 1995, p. 45.

³⁰ Masar Rizvanolli, "Shkaqet e Pranimin të Popullsisë së Krishtere në Klasën e Spahinjve", *Feja Kultura Dhe Tradita Islame Ndër Shqiptarët*, Kryesia e Bashkësisë Islame Të Kosovës, Pristina 1995, p. 127; Pirraku, *ibid*, p. 47-48.

³¹ Pirraku, *ibid*, p. 42; Morina, "E Vërteta Dhe Paragjykimet Për Islamimin Në Botë dhe Ndër Shqiptarët", p. 35.

to negative incidents involving Muslims on a global scale, as well as wars and unrest in the Muslim world.

In contrast, the Christian churches in Kosovo, which suffered no difficulty or oppression in maintaining their existence throughout Ottoman rule,³² gradually increased their influence in the country as Orthodox and Catholic churches during the post-Ottoman period.

Kosovans have never discriminated against one another in religious terms. After converting to Islam, they maintained good relationships with Christians and remained in touch. The history of Kosovo is full of examples in which Muslims and Christians acted together in trade, war and social life.³³ In brief, Kosovan Muslims never minded whether their neighbors and colleagues were Christians or of other religions. In this regard, Kosovan Muslims have always got on well with Catholics. Similar to all other communities, Catholics did not face any religious restrictions under Ottoman rule and had no particular liability to the state, except for *jizya*. Catholics could benefit from all of the economic, commercial and other resources of the state, just like Muslims. Muslims and Catholics worked together, lived together and faced no problems.³⁴ After the retreat of the Ottomans, Muslims and Catholics collaborated and resisted Slavism through Serbian oppressions.³⁵ This resistance against the Serbian policy of Slavism was considered by Muslims and Catholics to be a matter of nation, so both communities left aside religious differences.³⁶

In addition to cooperation in civil life and war, Muslims and Catholics married each other as well. In such marriages, the parties were not compelled to convert; consequently, Kosovo has many families with both Muslim and Catholic relatives.³⁷

³² Local Albanian Muslims preserved ancient Orthodox churches in Kosovo during the battles and clashes in the country during the late Ottoman era and thereafter (including the World Wars). Patrons of churches are known as "Vojvod." For further information, see Krasniqi, *Toleranca në Traditën Shqiptare*, p. 97.

³³ <http://lajme.shqiperia.com/lajme/artikull/iden/261746/titulli/Marredheniet-Nderfetare-ne-shqiperi> (11.02.2017).

³⁴ Ismail Hasani, *Vetëdija Fetare dhe Kombëtare Tek Shqiptarët*, Universiteti i Prishtinës, Pristina 2001, p. 121.

³⁵ Krasniqi, "Toleranca Fetare Me Myslimanëve dhe Katolikëve në Kosovë", p. 207.

³⁶ Eduart Caka, *Dialogu Ndërfetar - një qasje teoriko-praktike dhe realiteti shqiptar*, West Print Publ., Tirana 2015, p. 153.

³⁷ Krasniqi, "Toleranca Fetare Me Myslimanëve dhe Katolikëve në Kosovë", p. 209.

Kosovan communities pay mutual visits to one another on religious holidays. Muslims celebrate Catholic feasts and pay visits to Catholic neighbors, and vice versa. In addition, they console each other at funerals. Both communities participate in rites or ceremonies organized for religious holidays. For example, Muslim university students go to church and accompany their Catholic friends on vacations.³⁸ In short, Muslims and Catholics in Kosovo have shared and continue to share joy and sorrow.

Consequently, Kosovo has been and is a place of positive relations and abundant tolerance between Muslim and Catholics; there are no conflicts, battles or problems between the two communities.

However, both communities have had troubles with the Orthodox Church. As is known, the majority of Kosovan Albanians are Muslims, while Catholics constitute a small minority (2%). In contrast, the Kosovan Orthodox community consists of Serbs. Throughout history, the Serbian Orthodox Church has been a political institution, as well as or rather than a religious body.³⁹ In other words, the Orthodox Church has been influential in Serbian politics; rulers and politicians have had to abide by the requests and orders of the Church.⁴⁰

Serbs took control of Kosovo following the retreat of the Ottomans. Just like in the Middle Ages, the Serbs intensified activities of Slavism and Orthodoxism in the 20th century. Muslim and Catholic Albanians fought together against such oppression. Therefore, it is difficult to say that the Serbs (particularly Kosovan Orthodox Serbs), who consider Kosovo the cradle of the Serbs, have got along well with other religious communities. In addition, the role of the Orthodox in wars and battles that cost thousands of civilian lives in Kosovo led to negative relationships between Orthodox Christians and other communities.⁴¹ Even today, Serbian Orthodox bishops who visit Kosovo make political statements, instead of talking about religious issues, and they speak harshly against Kosovan Muslims. Even church rituals include such discourse against Kosovo.⁴² It is clear that normalization of relations with the Orthodox Church is possible only by means of positive steps in politics. To this end, there have been efforts, through the mediation of foreign representatives and international organizations, to bring clergy

³⁸ <http://www.evropaelire.org/a/1031055.html> (05.01.2017).

³⁹ Dušan Bataković, *Serbia's Kosovo Drama - A Historical Perspective*, Cigoja Stampa, Belgrade 2012, p. 227; Popovic, *ibid*, p. 55-56.

⁴⁰ Krasniqi, "Toleranca Fetare Me Myslimanëve dhe Katolikëve në Kosovë", p. 115.

⁴¹ Qemajl Morina, "Roli i Kishes Orthodoxe Serbe Ne Lufterat e Fundit ne Ish-Jugosllavin", *Edukata Islame*, issue 75, Pristina 2004, p. 252-254.

⁴² Bislimgaj, *ibid*, p. 96-97.

together to establish interfaith dialogue and communication. In addition, there have been some recent meetings and contacts between clergy and prominent personalities from the Orthodox, Muslim and other communities to promote relations.

In summary, Catholic-Muslim relations are free of problems in Kosovo, while the negative approach of the Orthodox Church causes trouble in its relationships with Muslims and Catholics. According to some surveys, Kosovan Serbs have almost no relationships with Muslims in the country due to the Serbian political approach and the attitude of the church; according to Serbs, the war is still not over in Kosovo. A similar conclusion⁴³ can be drawn regarding the relationships of Orthodox Serbs with Catholics and other Christian communities.⁴⁴ Serbs in general and the Serbian Orthodox Church in particular still consider Kosovo to be cradle of Serbia, the Jerusalem of Serbia and an integral part of Serbia. In other words, the Orthodox Church keeps propagating Serbian nationalism and attempts to transform this attitude into government policies. Consequently, Catholics and Protestants of Albanian origin⁴⁵ in Kosovo, as well as Muslims, are uneasy with Serbian activities, and their relations with Orthodox Serbs are on the verge of total breakdown.

Following the Kosovo War in 1999, the country was visited by many missionaries under the auspices of nongovernmental organizations from around the world. Most of them came for aid, while a significant number also conducted missionary activities. Until then, there were only Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox communities in Kosovo, while several religious movements began to proliferate at that point. Protestantism is the leading faith among these newer religions.

It is difficult to come to definite conclusion about the relations of Muslims with new communities, such as Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, who arrived in Kosovo in the wake of 1999. Any such evaluation is subject to confusion since these movements never became widespread, and it is difficult to distinguish their members. For instance, Muslims mistook

⁴³ Relations between Catholics and Serbs were more intense in Kosovo prior to the war in 1998-99. The attitude of the Serbian government after the war apparently affected Serbs in Kosovo.

⁴⁴ Bislimaj, *ibid*, 138-139.

⁴⁵ Fehmi Cakolli, a Protestant pastor in Kosovo, indicated that, over the last century, the massacres, destruction and battles by Serbs were supported and encouraged by the Serbian Orthodox Church; therefore, according to Cakolli, the Serbian Church is a factor behind Serbian nationalism. See <http://kishaprotestante.net/pse-u-dogjen-kishat-serbe/> (27.12.2016).

Protestants for Catholics for a while. In addition, there have been recent mutual visits between Muslim and Protestant clergy, who have participated together in various organizations. Accordingly, as the Kosovan government recognized Protestants, other communities began to be officially invited into various organizations, and mutual relations are in the process of improvement.

Conclusion and Evaluation

As a country in a significant location in the Balkans, Kosovo is a multi-faith country with various ethnicities embracing Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

Christianity began to spread in Kosovo since its beginning; following the division of the Roman Empire, the country mostly experienced Byzantine and Orthodox domination. In the 12th and 13th centuries, Slav-based Orthodox tried to assimilate the Albanians in Kosovo through harsh policies. After the Ottoman conquest in 1389, the Kosovan people were freed from Serbian assimilation and left Orthodoxy for Islam. Nonetheless, thanks to Ottoman tolerance, Slavic peoples in Kosovo and other Balkan countries did not face forced assimilation or religious conversion and maintained their faith.

As a result of the positive approaches in Islam toward members of Abrahamic religions during the Ottoman era, interfaith relations have always been good, and the Kosovan people lived in peace for centuries despite religious differences. The Ottomans preserved the churches and allowed Christians to perform their rites and to freely practice their faith.

During the post-Ottoman period, the efforts to maintain good relations between communities continued. However, the Orthodox Church served Serbian nationalism and weakened relationships with Muslims and Catholics. Over a century, the Serbs supported terrorization, oppression, torture and destruction against other communities in Kosovo; in many cases, Orthodox clergy actually participated in such activities.

After the war, we observed more frequent dialogues and meetings between the clergy and communities of different religions; there have been efforts to eliminate prejudgments and troubles between religions. These attempts have had transformative effects on the negative approaches and policies hitherto adopted by the Orthodox Church.

Problems between religious communities in Kosovo have been and are related to ethnic and political causes and changes. Today, these problems can be resolved by ending ethnic and political dissolution and ensuring convergence if possible. The statements and attitudes of politicians and

religious officials about religious issues and relations should be as attentive as possible to improve these relations.

The inclusion of lessons on religions and religious tolerance within school curricula will clearly contribute to the amelioration of interfaith tensions.

Today, the most notable obstacle to improved interfaith relations in Kosovo is the lack of identification of legal status of religions and the lack of any laws about religion. There is an urgent need for legal regulations in this regard.

In Kosovo, Muslims, Catholics, Protestants and Jews have lived mostly in peace. There have been religious wars almost everywhere on the globe, and as a small country, Kosovo hosts members of various faiths; nevertheless, Albanians never experienced a religious war. Therefore, the Kosovan people are a good example of the tolerant cohabitation of members of three religions.

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