

## **Religious Claims, Nationalism, and Human Suffering in Political Conflict: Perspectives from the Former Yugoslavia**

### **Overview**

From October 11-12, 2014, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Nadim Rouhana and Dino Abazović co-convoked a workshop entitled *Religious Claims, Nationalism, and Human Suffering in Political Conflict: Perspectives from the Former Yugoslavia* in Sarajevo. The workshop examined the relationship between religious claims and nationalism, and the effects of this fusion on the legitimation and dynamics of conflict with special attention to the consequent human suffering. The workshop brought together an interdisciplinary and transnational group of scholars to examine processes of religious identity formation and the emergence of religion as a salient source of social identity in various contexts, raising opportunity for comparative analysis in: post-socialist Yugoslavia, Israel-Palestine and India.

The workshop was part of a larger comparative research project sponsored by the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in collaboration with Mada al-Carmel: Arab Center for Applied Social Research in Haifa, Israel and supported by the Luce Foundation. In addition to the former Yugoslavia case, the larger project examines the fusion of religious claims and nationalism in Israel, India, and Sri Lanka.



Pictured: The group of international scholars who participated in the Sarajevo Workshop

## Sessions

The workshop was comprised of six sessions, each of which developed a different aspect of the theme. This section highlights key contributions of each participant's presentation, as well as analytical takeaways and ideas for further expansion of the workshop themes highlighted in the closing session.

### Session I

*Vjekoslav Perica (University of Rijeka)* examined upsurges of religions in times of crisis, war and human suffering, taking the Balkans as a case study. He noted the steady growth of nationalist ideologies in the public sphere, and traced the emergence of Pan-Slavism as one of the early nationalist projects in the region. Ethnic nationalism began emerging in the Yugoslav state when various ethnic groups sought homogenization, and therefore relied on religious institutions and religious identity as a means to accomplish this. Historically, the region had largely secular beginnings with multiethnic programs, followed by the emergence of an ethnically based nationalist project, then a period of communist rule as a period of relative prosperity and secularism. Yet the last twenty years has witnessed a resurgence in fusion between religion and concepts of nationhood, as national ideologies and projects post-communist, post-Yugoslav have nothing to offer in terms of social programs, except symbols, myths, and the ability of renewing conflict as the form of strongest legitimacy of what they are.

*Dino Abazović (University of Sarajevo)* presented findings based on interviews with the religious leaders of four major religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Husein ef. Kavazovic - Grand Mufti of Islamic Community, Vinko Puljić - Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church and Archbishop of Vrhbosna, Grigorije Durić - Bishop of Serbian Orthodox Church, Bishop of Zahumlje and Herzegovina, and Jakob Finci - President of the Jewish Community in BiH). He analyzed the role of religion in the process of social reconstruction in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina, symbiosis of ethnic and confessional identities and religious nationalism, a (miss-) use of religion during the war, and potential of religiously based arguments in seeking social justice. Prof. Abazovic's findings indicate that anything that is not ethnicized is not a priority of current religious leadership. There is a need for religious leadership to articulate a new narrative, and to shift its 'traditional' discourse (from war, ethnic groups, etc) to the everyday lives of their communities in seeking social justice.

### Session II

*Goldie Osuri (University of Warwick)* analyzed the extent to which the idea of secular and religious nationalism are linked in the Indian context. She argued that Hindu nationalist discourse often translates Indian secular majoritarian assumptions into violence against minoritised groups. Thus, attention must be paid to the concern for state sovereignty in both religious and secular nationalisms. Prof Osuri highlighted how anti-colonial quests for sovereignty coalesced around anti-conversion campaigns. In light of the slippage between secularism and religious norms, she argues for a "critical secularism", which involves "disclosing dominant religious norms rather than concealing them in the guise of a liberal neutral state".

*Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Mada al-Carmel – Haifa)* analyzed the fusion of religious claims and nationalism in the context of Israel-Palestine,

examining the criminality of Zionism against Palestinian children. Investigating violence against children in settler colonial contexts, she argued, reveals the particular narratives of state power inscribed on children's bodies and lives, the social body of the colonized, and the colonizer's political logic. Prof. Shalhoub-Kevorkian focused on the recent military attacks on Gaza, which killed 513 Palestinian children, as well as the kidnapping of and killing of Mohammed Abu-Khdeir in the Shuafat neighborhood of occupied East Jerusalem this summer. She first analyzed how Israeli society, specifically politicians and religious leaders, use racial and religious language to frame offenders and victims of violence, and discussed performance of state ideology in the Israeli court system, as reflected in the indictment against the perpetrators of Muhammad Abu Khdeir's murder. Next, she provided discourse analysis of Israeli media coverage of Abu Khdeir's murder, which she argues constructs Palestinian children as individuals who can be evicted from the legal and moral community, even when their families seek justice through the Israeli judicial system. By examining the way in which the Israeli media responded to Abu Khdeir's case, Prof. Shalhoub-Kevorkian analyzed how violence against Palestinian children is circulated, accepted, justified, and becomes a tool in the hands of the state to produce and sustain its religio-nationalist ideology.

### Session III

*Nikola Knežević (Center for the Study of Religion, Politics and Society Novi Sad)* raised Desmond Tutu's role in South Africa and Juan José Gerardi's role in Guatemala as examples of religious engagement in processes of truth commissions and transitional justice. He questioned whether religion might play such a role in the Western Balkans. Given the role that religion played in raising ethnic difference and catalyzing violence in the aftermath of the downfall of communism, he argued that religions must be more involved in the process of reconciliation in the Western Balkans. Religious authorities should be more attentive to dealing with the past and the issues of nationalism than they do at present, because the notion of the sacred is still being manipulated in the public discourse of the political and of religious elites. Dominant religions in the Western Balkans are, to some extent, continue to embrace strong ethno-political narrative that influence public life, leaving divisions and thick "boundary lines" intact, keeping the reconciliation process trapped in the complex intertwining of ethno-nationalism, religion and politics. Thus, involving religious entities into a regional Truth & Reconciliation commission is imperative.

### Session IV

*Nadim Rouhana (Tufts University and Mada al-Carmel – Haifa)* examined the relationship between Zionism and mass atrocities. The Zionist project's goal has historically been to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. Thus, the main threat to the Zionist project is necessarily the existence of a population in Palestine that is not Jewish. Prof. Rouhana argued that Zionism has three primary components: settler colonialism, nationalism and a strong religious component. The interplay between these three aspects of state power has resulted in mass atrocities committed against Palestinians. Because the colonial project in Palestine did not seek to establish a hierarchical relationship between colonialists and the colonized, and the economic extraction of the labor force, he argued, the exclusive nationalism, the project of establishing a Jewish state led to mass expulsion and other forms of violence. Zionism is an inherently exclusive nationalism.

The fusion between religious claims and nationalism is also integrated into colonial claims. This fusion brings forth, in the Zionist context, the potential to organize the ambivalent energies for violence that both religion and nationalism have—the potential to bring two streams of violence into complete fields of structural and physical violence, producing legitimation processes. Thus justifications for atrocities can be found in the fusion of the religious into the national project.

*Yagil Levy (The Open University of Israel)* argues that Israel has increasingly moved towards a theocratization of military policies. He examined the increasing number of orthodox Jewish Israelis joining the military apparatus since the 1980s, which has led to the existence of a critical mass of ‘religious soldiers’ within the military. Attempts to reshape military culture, he argued, have ‘linked good soldiering with religiosity’. Keeping the military camp holy might affect the potential for resolution between Palestinians and Israeli Jews, as various issues, such as settlement removal, are imbued with religious significance, i.e. restricting the government capacity to dismantle settlements. Theocratization of military has also included modification of military ethic in the revival of the concept of religious war. Such a project has several drives: The ethno-nationalist discourse of Judaism, the reaction of religious and other groups in Israel posed by reconciliation with Palestinians, and the portrayal of war as a religious war. Religious war is an instrument in making the population disposable, which can partially account for lack of Israeli empathy for Palestinian suffering. The religious face is thus used as a form of symbolic capital to claim recognition of authority and competence. To challenge secular society, by associating religious virtues with military competence, and in creating processes of classification and hierarchies.

#### Session V

*Srdjan Sremac (VU University Amsterdam)* examined the strategic and ideological assumptions, interests, and effects of present-day constructions of (homo)sexuality and religion in public arenas of the Western Balkans. He analyzed the construction of national, sexual, and religious identities in public discourse and their effects on conflicts around sexual diversity in the Western Balkans. One of the prominent and fiercely contested issues in the post-conflict societies of the Western Balkans regards the position of religion and homosexuality. Whereas several Western societies consider the acceptance of sexual diversity the litmus test of tolerance and essential to human rights, other societies see homosexuality as a threat to their national and cultural identity. Prof. Sremac argued that sexual and religious nationalisms emerge as collective identity markers in political debates and popular culture.

*Rada Drezgić (University of Belgrade)* analyzed religious discourses on sexual and reproductive rights. She examined the mechanisms and consequences of the Serbian Orthodox Church’s biopolitical policies, or intervention in the realm of sexual and reproductive rights, arguing that the effects of religious discourses on these rights and on overall gender and sexual equality have been ambiguous. The heteronormative family pattern that is reinforced by religious discourses is discriminatory against sexual minorities and instrumental for maintaining and naturalizing traditional, dichotomous conceptions of gender mostly founded on sexual division of labor. Still, thus far, the Church has had limited success in undermining women’s reproductive rights and in denying basic human rights to sexual minorities. At the same time, however, religious discourses have created an atmosphere of collective blame and guilt for those who do not procreate – because of abortions or sexual orientation.

## Session VI

*Selma Porobić (University of Sarajevo)* examined the dual role of religion, as being both a burden and a resource in the lives of war-displaced Bosnian refugees, the largest community of displaced people in Europe since the Second World War, who permanently settled in Sweden. Religious meaning-making, she argued, became a key coping strategy for those displaced by war and violence, as well as a source of psychological resilience in dealing with adversities raised by forced migration. Reliance on religious faith and mechanisms of support provided guidance and coping to refugees, and led to a replacement of an earlier world view with a new religious one that could adequately respond to the complexity of the situation, providing hope and meaning. Ironically, in the case of Bosnians, while religious identity was one major cause of conflict, individuals still chose religious identity as a mode of making meaning of the conflict and enabling survival.

The **closing session** mapped key findings of the workshop as well as recommendations for future expansion of workshop themes, including:

- The need for further comparative study on the fusion of religious and national claims
- The need to emphasize and develop the symbolic dimension of religious nationalism
- Further research on the relationship between religious claims, sovereignty and the state
- How to move beyond traditional understandings of nationalism or the nation state and move beyond this in our analysis of the circulation of a fusion of nationalism and religious claims? A transnational feminist perspective could help deepen this analysis, in tracing how discourse and power is engaged in different local contexts and how things travel transnationally.
- We have analyzed the formation of power in this fusion between religious claims and nationalism. How do we understand various forms of resistance to this fusion in the making of state power?
- A need to examine pop culture, public space, graffiti and music as aspects of circulation of religious/nationalist claims as well as resistance.
- How can we further examine the question of indigeneity—where in India, Muslims are considered to be invaders, in Palestine, Palestinians are considered as invaders, and in Sri Lanka we see a similar issue.
- A need to increase focus on gender violence and this fusion, as well as trauma.