

# Spiritual Assistance During Two Refugee Crises in the Republic of Macedonia

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This paper offers an analysis of spiritual assistance offered in times of crisis. It is based on research and interviews conducted in the early months of 2009 and provides insights into the role played by both NGOs and publishing houses during two refugee crises in the Republic of Macedonia. Their motivation to intensely engage in helping the refugees was greatly due to their religious convictions and was imbued with spiritual connotation. Based on a number of interviews conducted with the engaged parties, this paper also includes the religious discourse of the imams<sup>1</sup> during these two major refugee crises that happened in the Balkans. Through various means of action, both the organizations and the imams attempted to convey a religious message that would provide psychological strength to the victims of these crises in the region, as well as to restore their faith in keeping their community alive and returning safely to their homes. Much of the religious messages and the religious discourse in general, aimed at giving both spiritual support and teaching patience, as well as giving the victims a sense of belonging to a community, and therefore triggering their awareness to preserve it. Some aspects of the 2001 conflict in Macedonia, which bring in the questions of nationalism, nationalist agenda and patriotism, are also brought into focus, especially as it can shed some further light on the different agendas of both humanitarian and spiritual assistance in times of crisis.

**Keywords:** spiritual assistance, refugee crisis, Islamic literature, piety, religion, sense of belonging

## Some anthropological perspectives on religion and their relevance to the current case study

Discussing any aspect of spiritual assistance in times of crisis opens a vast array of questions, the first one being clearly related to defining spirituality, but from the delicate lens of someone going through a crisis. Much of the literature touching upon crisis and spiritual help starts from the crisis in meaning that one undergoes. This crisis has been probably most lucidly brought to the fore by Heidegger (1962), who described the “constant lack of totality” that we experience in this lifetime as uncompleted, unfinished modes of being, which achieve full meaning upon death. Carroll (2001) advises us of the burning need of understanding spirituality if we are to offer any kind of spiritual assistance and care. She points to Murray and Zentner’s (1989) somewhat broad definition of spirituality, which places it beyond religious affiliation, and describes it as a quality that strives for inspirations, reverence, awe, meaning and purpose, even in those who do not believe in any God, but instead wish to be in harmony with the universe.

This brings us to the understanding that spirituality has often been defined in terms that reach beyond religion and move into the realm of existential meaning (Saunders, 1988; Carson,

1989; Kellehear, 2000). Yet, working with the narratives of nurses and patients with advanced-stage cancer seeking spiritual care, Carroll illuminates both the strong link drawn between spirituality and religion (Cassidy, 1988) and the lack of it. Additionally, in their study of spiritual support in coping with the September 11 national crisis, Ai et al. (2005) emphasize the fact that the concept of spiritual support mostly centers on “an internalized resource derived from the perception of an intimate relationship with a higher power” (2005: 765). They go on to note that “only recently, psychology has formally recognized the faith effect on health as ‘a genuine frontier’ for research” (Miller and Thorensen, 2003, p. 33 cited in Ai et al. 2005: 765).

Although by no means overshadowing the fact that the importance of spirituality existed before the emergence of institutionalized religion, this paper predominantly focuses on the religious modes of search for meaning in times of crisis. Building upon this dominant, but in no way sole correlation between spirituality and religion, the first question this paper considers is the problem of defining religion. Through an analysis of the activities of several publishing houses, NGOs, and individuals, it then tries to see if possible other patterns in the assistance offered come to the fore.

Melford E. Spiro (1966) makes an interesting point when arguing that the definitional controversies concerning religion do not necessarily stem from the controversies over the meaning of the term “religion” as much as they stem from the “disputes over the phenomenon or range of phenomena which are considered to constitute legitimately the empirical referent of the term” (1966: 87). Anthropologists have strongly disagreed precisely on the phenomena that could be brought into relation with whatever would be considered *religion* or *religious*. Coercive rituals, ethical codes, reference to supernatural being/s and so forth, are but a few of the phenomena on whose religious status anthropologists agree or disagree. Spiro observes that these controversies are often a result of bringing in personal attitudes of the scholars to the study of religion. He defines religion as “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman being” (1966: 96). The dominant element put forth in this statement is that of the cultural/social construction of things that would otherwise be rendered transcendent and ineffable, i.e. of faith. This argument bears importance to our case study, as it relates to a number of socially constructed modes of expressing religion, i.e. nation, and nationalism, which played a crucial role in tailoring the spiritual assistance offered to refugees from both Bosnia, and later, Kosovo.

Geertz’s interpretation of religion as a cultural system can also be illuminating for this study. Geertz reminds us that for a long period of time four men have dominated the discourses on religion. These figures are Durkheim, Weber, Freud, and Malinowski (Geertz, 1966: 2). No doubt, Durkheim’s insights into the nature of the sacred, Weber’s *Verstehenden* methodology, Freud’s parallel between the personal and collective rituals, and Malinowski’s distinction between religion and common sense are inevitable points of departure in any fruitful anthropological discussion of religion. Yet, Geertz contributes a fresh perspective with his proposition to explore, in empirical terms, how the otherwise taken for granted notion that religion tunes human actions to an envisaged cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience, comes into being.

In his essay *Religion as Cultural System* (1998) Geertz defines religion “as (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (124). The second aspect of this definition will be the important point of departure in

this article's analysis of the effect religion and piousness played on the refugees. In addition, Geertz offers an informative analysis of the role that symbols and religion have as a source of consolation and meaning in situations where people are brought to the limits of their analytic abilities and durability. His conclusions on this matter reach beyond the realm of religion in that he thinks that the chronic uneasiness in life often comes as a result of our inability to understand certain aspects of nature, of our personality, and of organizing phenomena in clusters of facts, which can be culturally formulated. Important to our study of religious/spiritual assistance in times of crisis is also Geertz's conviction that as a religious problem, the problem of suffering is not about how to avoid it, but rather, about learning how to suffer—that is, learning how to make physical pain, personal loss, and agony, bearable and sufferable. Thus, he argues that religious symbols, for those willing to accept them, can serve as a cosmic guarantee not only for comprehending the world, but likewise, of rendering it bearable, be it reluctantly or joyfully, with burden or ease (1998: 144).

Regarding the events such as war, famine, natural disaster and so forth, where there is a lack of interpretation and interpretability and can therefore be rendered a state of chaos, it is interesting to look at Geertz's observation about the three points where chaos threatens to break in upon man. These points are, "at the limits of his analytic capacities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insights" (1966: 14). Those are the challenges with which any religion must attempt to cope. Concerning the first point, Geertz bluntly states that considering people's religious beliefs as attempts to potentially explain anomalous events or experiences (death, dreams, etc.) seems like Tyloeanism or even worse. However, he does agree that there is an undeniable tendency among people to use beliefs in order to explain phenomena which, if left unexplained, can cause deep disquiet (1966: 15). Regarding the second point, Geertz offers an interesting observation that may shed further light on the particular case study analyzed in this paper. The opacity of certain events, the pain and suffering that one may be put through, raise the suspicion that there is no genuine order in the world. Yet, the effort of religion in such events, as Geertz understands it, is not to deny the undeniable, but to deny that there are inexplicable events, that life is unendurable, and that justice is mirage (1966: 25). Undeniable events (pain, suffering, etc.) are then normalized, accepted not as ambiguities, but rather as rational and logical outcomes of the moral structure of reality. At the same time, through its symbolism religion should deny that these irrationalities are characteristic of the world as a whole. Many of these arguments, pointing to religion as a logic-making mechanism in a world that has lost its meaning, find their reification in the narratives of the people engaged in providing support for the refugees in Macedonia during both refugee crises.

### **Modes of spiritual assistance during the Kosovo and Bosnian refugee crisis**

This paper predominantly covers issues related to the Kosovo refugee crisis in Macedonia<sup>2</sup>, which happened in the spring of 1999, but also draws on the religious rhetoric and assistance offered through the Bosnian refugee crises in Macedonia, which happened during 1992-1995. Another interesting area of research opens up when we consider that most of those people who helped the Bosnian refugees later also helped the Kosovo refugees. Their experience with the Bosnian refugees prepared them for yet another crisis that came later. Moreover, the refugees coming from Kosovo were similar both ethnically and linguistically (and in most cases religiously) with those who assisted them. It is worth noting that a future anthropological comparative study of this case could find rich ground for future research, considering the fact

that it was predominantly the same people who offered their assistance to different clusters of refugee populations. In the case with Bosnia, they were helping people who were ethnically and linguistically different from them (though coming from what used to be one and the same country – former Yugoslavia). In the case of the Kosovo crisis, they helped people who came from another territory, but were ethnically and linguistically the same as those offering the assistance. This creates a fruitful ground for a comparison of the effects of assistance and support given to those who share much of their ethnic, religious, and linguistic background, and the assistance given to people who differ in many respects from those who assist them.

The former crisis was marked by refugees who came exclusively from Kosovo, whereas the latter was marked by an influx of Bosnian refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as from parts of Montenegro and Serbia (Sanjdak) – regions populated with Muslims. The Bosnian crisis brought approximately 38,000 refugees to Macedonia. The Kosovo crisis brought some 360,000 refugees to Macedonia (tantamount to around 20% of the population of Macedonia)<sup>3</sup>. In the Bosnian refugee crisis that brought a huge influx of refugees to Macedonia, it was predominantly the ethnic Bosnian<sup>4</sup> Muslims who were the target of ethnic cleansing. It was predominantly the Muslims of Macedonian (Albanians being the dominant group since they constitute 25% of the population and are predominantly Muslims) who helped those refugees. Of these, at the outbreak of the crisis in April 1999, about 65,000 refugees remained stranded in a mud-covered no-man's land at Blace (the Macedonian border point with Kosovo), without adequate food and in extremely unsanitary conditions. "This place was hell. Birth and death happened simultaneously there," recalls one of my interlocutors from the NGO who helped alleviate the tragedy of those people. Around 14 refugee camps were opened in Macedonia to accommodate the refugees, although many (approximately 170,000 people) were accommodated in private houses across the country, sometimes as many as 50 refugees per house. In what follows, I analyze the types of assistance offered to the Kosovo refugees who fled from the Serbian military campaign in the country.<sup>5</sup>

In my analysis of the religious/spiritual assistance that was offered to the refugees I conducted interviews with members of the two most active NGOs during both refugee crises - *El Hilal* and *The Wheat of Goodness* (a title inspired from the Sura 2, 261 Ayat of the Qur'an), as well as with two publishing houses, *Logos A* and *Furqan* (a name given from the 25 Sura of the Qur'an- which means the criterion, or the standard; that is, distinguishing between good and bad). They published spiritual literature in the form of pamphlets and magazines tackling the complexity of themes regarding the cause of the ethnic cleansings. I bring into focus the types of spiritual assistance these organizations offered, but also the ideological agendas permeating aspects of the spiritual support, thus bringing in themes of patriotism, national awareness, and a long term national strategy. The material support (shelter, food, medications) has by no means been the central form of aid to the refugees; these organizations have also been active in providing lectures in the mosques and the refugee tents, as well as in distributing literature.

According to my interlocutors, the literature they provided did not have an ideological content, but was rather spiritual support to the *muhajirs*.<sup>6</sup> Its main aim, they claimed, was to give moral strength to the victims, offer explanation for the otherwise anomalous events in the lives of those people, preserve their sense of belonging to a community, and subsequently give them hope that their lives and their community can and will be reestablished. This clearly brings into question the likelihood of the ideological niche that such publications could launch.

Anthropologist Wendell Schwab (2011) analyzes the proliferation of Islamic literature in Kazakhstan and the Musylman Publishing Press, which became an influential Islamic press in

the country and published Islamic magazines, pamphlets and books, as something that was tailored towards becoming a “model of the conscious establishment, expansion and consolidation of a niche for the piety movement in Kazakhstan” (2001: 228). Schwab’s interlocutors claim that the zeal to re-establish the piousness of the nation stems from the rigidly atheistic structure of the state for more than 70 years. These arguments shed important light in understanding the multilayered approaches to interpreting the proliferation of religious publications. Yet, in the particular case of the religious literature provided to many of the refugees in Macedonia, in addition to tracking and possibly diagnosing the presence of a (possible) ideological niche, I am also prone to an interpretation that stems from studies which treat religion in the delicate context of traumatic experience.

Some of these studies show that religious belief may have a major influence on the psychological well-being of adults, and that the subjective experience of spiritual support may form the core of the spirituality-health connection (Mackenzie, Rajagopal, Meibohm, and Lavizzo-Mourey, 2000). Levin (2001) looks at the connection between health and a number of spiritual beliefs, which include prayer and some kind of faith in God, claiming that there is a certain definite level of optimism and hope among those professing some kind of faith as a result of their connection with some kind of higher power. Hence, the weight of the analysis of the publications of several publishing houses in Macedonia active during the two above-mentioned crises is placed on seeing faith as a source of emotional recuperation and building of self-esteem for the victims of military actions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

*Logos A* distributed some 5,000 Qur’ans to the Kosovars and another 10,000 to the Bosniaks, yet the bulk of the literature published and distributed during the crisis was written by various Muslim thinkers. Among some of the distributed works there were also pieces by the famous Muhammed Al-Ghazali, an Islamic cleric and scholar who attracted a broad following with works that sought to interpret Islam and its holy book, the Qur’an, in a modern light. A number of other books (largely by Bosnian thinkers or in the Bosnian language) were distributed to women and children. In addition, I conducted an interview with the imam Dr. Zekirija Bajrami, from the Mosque of Sultan Murat II in Skopje, who preached in the mosque every Friday throughout the Kosovo crisis, trying to, as he said, offer strength to the victims as well as a sense of communal values as an incentive for patience and hope.

### **Refugee crisis and the modes of assistance: the Islamic publishing proliferation, individual and NGO assistance**

The effects of the spiritual assistance are predominantly analyzed through the views of those who offered their help. Much of the discourse of my interlocutors opens up an impressive perspective on the role that religion also plays for the psychological strength of *those offering the help*. Namely, much of the inspiration for the support given to the refugees by these organizations stems from their religious persuasion. On a number of occasions, I was told by these people that they were inspired by the belief that it was their mission to help, and that they identified themselves with the *Ansari* (originating from *Ansar*, the people of Medina who helped the Islamic prophet Muhammad when he migrated from Mecca to Medina). The literal meaning of *Ansar* is *supporters*. They found in Islam what they believed to be their spiritual mission. What follows are my analysis of the interviews I conducted with representatives of the publishing houses, NGOs, and individuals who assisted in the recuperation of refugees.

In his detailed analysis of the emergence of the Islamic publishing trend in Kazakhstan that eventually evolved into a strategy for the creation of self-sustaining piety movement in the country, Schwab (2011) traces the early beginnings of such activity after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Similar patterns can be noticed in the Macedonian case, where both publishing houses I discuss were roughly established before and soon after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Schwab's argument that the Islamic publishing activity was a conscious and moreover, strategic move towards the establishment of a piety movement in Kazakhstan, also could apply in the case of the publishing houses I discuss. This becomes especially visible through a number of their publications, which bring forward the basic introduction into the Qur'an, the duties (*Ibadat*) of the Muslims, the key components of a prayer, the role of the Muslim woman and modest dressing, as well as the Muslim ethics (*Ahlak*).

Yet, my main point of departure in my interviews with the NGOs and publishing houses was to rather trace the logic of what, according to them, meant spiritual assistance for those in great need. Detecting if there might have been an ideological background to it, similar to the one Schwab diagnoses in the Kazakhstan case is rendered problematic inasmuch as the narratives of my interlocutors were charged with emotions, which conveyed the message that they truly aimed at offering hope rather than solidifying the Islamic practice. Yet, in the rest of the text, I trace what I believe is a nationalistic/patriotic narrative in some of the modes of assistance offered to the refugees. Additionally, a more "stereotype-challenging" literature about Islam can be tracked in the decade following 2000, which saw the backlash against multiculturalism in Europe and the negative sentiments towards much of the Muslim community<sup>7</sup>. The Islamic Youth Forum published a book in 2006 by Ajni Sinani called *Islam through the Eyes of the Others*<sup>8</sup>. The foreword written by Baskim Aliu makes reference to the appearance of certain extremist fractions, which, as it is explained further, caused a lot of harm to Muslims and Islam. It also resulted in the waste of enormous energy in persuading this world that the "message and platform of Islam transferred by Mohammed (PBUH) [...] calls for peace and understanding, creativity and positive energy, holistic human evolvement and progress, instead of calling for fanatic behavior and ignoring the true values" (2006: 5).

Logos A is a publishing house in Macedonia. It marks its beginning in 1989 under the name Mehmet Akif Ersoy, only to be officially established in 1990 under the current name, Logos A. They consider themselves as the pioneers of independent publishing in former Yugoslavia and present day Macedonia. They have so far managed to publish around 500 titles (more than two million volumes) from various fields. More than half of the titles have been translations from English, French, Bosnian, Turkish, Arabic, and Macedonian languages (into Albanian), while the rest are original works. During the Kosovo and Bosnian refugee crisis, Logos A published a great variety of Islamic literature in order to support those refugees in overcoming the calamity they experienced. In my conversations with the director of Logos A, I was told that their primary intention has not been the distribution of books with ideological content, but rather, books that would give spiritual support to the *muhajirs*. Logos A has distributed approximately 5,000 Qur'ans to the Kosovars and another 10,000 to the Bosniaks, but the bulk of the literature published and distributed during the crisis was written by various Muslim thinkers and translated into Albanian<sup>9</sup>. "Most of the books were distributed during the lectures held in the tents of the refugee camps and people were free to take as many as they wanted, or none", recalls Adnan Ismaili, the director of Logos A. "All the books that we published during both the Bosnian and Kosovo crises, were meant to provide moral support and

spiritual tranquility, as well as to provide an introduction into the basics of Islam”, recalls one of the employees of Logos A.

It is striking to note that some of my interlocutors came up with similar insights on the “spirituality of Kosovars”. In other words, much of the contemporary rhetoric about Albanians (including those from Kosovo and Macedonia) maintains that religion plays a secondary role in their lives, whereas their feelings of belonging to a particular ethnicity and nation are of utmost importance. Building upon this point, and taking into account Kosovo’s complicated history, its recently gained status as an independent state, and the general attitude towards religion in the settings of the former Socialist Yugoslav Republic, my interlocutors maintained that the Kosovars have been “de-spiritualized”. Hence, many of them found a compelling dimension that they were quite unfamiliar with before in the Islamic literature and religious teachings offered at the time of crisis. This again, nicely correlates to some of the diagnostics that Schwab offers, in what his interlocutors called “an atheist nation for 70 or 80 years” (2011: 228). Yugoslavia might not have been that radical in its agenda of erasing religion from people’s lives, but its overall policy was clearly aimed at the constitution of concepts of brotherhood and unity, far beyond any religious identification.

The publishing house Furkan ISM<sup>10</sup> was established in 1994 and throughout the decade it has been predominantly involved with the Kosovo crisis. The name is inspired by the 25<sup>th</sup> Sura of the Qur’an - which means the criterion, the standard; that is, distinguishing between good and bad. The director of Furkan ISM is Muhamed Murtezi. Mr. Murtezi is also the president of the Community of Albanian Publishers. During the crisis, they organized a number of lectures held in the refugee camps across Macedonia. Furkan ISM is best known for the publication of a magazine called *Vepra*, a journal for scientific, educational, and cultural research, which largely covered the events taking place in Kosovo in 1999. *Vepra* also published extensive articles related to the relationship between mother and children, the ways of preventing divorce, and the nurturing of the mother-child relationship in accordance to Islamic values.<sup>11</sup> Furkan ISM has also been engaged in publishing diverse materials ranging from more complex literature about Islam, to books about the treatment of children, as well as about the role of a pious, Muslim woman. They have mainly published translations of books from Arabic, English and Bosnian languages.<sup>12</sup>

During the Kosovo refugee crisis, Furkan ISM also participated in organizing lectures in the refugee camps focused on explaining to the victims that the current state of affairs was due to the ambitions of certain people, but that there is a way out, and that God will help those to whom injustice has been done. Among the titles, there are Muhammed Hamza Sa’avi *Do you know Who I am?*; Muhamed Gazali *The Faith of the Muslim*; Jusuf Kardavi *Patience*; Muhammed Gazali *A Muslim’s Character*. Their activity is still visible. The annual report of 2010 of the NGO el Hilal mentions the marking of the 7 March – *The day of the Teacher* (emphasis is made on male teachers). It is explained that this event is part of the program activities of El Hilal aiming to enrich the school libraries as well as to reward the teachers who helped and supported the spreading of the humanitarian cause. As part of this activity, El Hilal contacted several publishing houses for book donations, and Fuqan ISM donated the largest number of books. Furkan ISM also recently published a special issue of the magazine *Vepra*, marking the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Albania.<sup>13</sup> Some of the lines in the opening text of the editor and director of Furkan ISM, Muhamed Murtezi, make reference to the commitment, dedication, sacrifice, sweat, and blood, that went into it, and also laments the misfortune of the tearing apart of the nation.<sup>14</sup> Murtezi also points out that there has been an accentuated violence, terror, and destruction

against Albanians (most likely referring to, among other events, the Kosovo crisis). These activities throw light on the dedication of Furkan ISM to the Albanian national cause and their politically-infused agenda.

During my visit to the NGO *Wheat of Goodness*, (*Kalliri I Mirësisë* in Albanian, *Klasje na dobrina* in Macedonian). I interviewed the director of the organization, Mr. Muhammed Ismaili. The interview took place in Macedonian language. I rang at the door of a house located in the Albanian-populated part of the city. A bearded man wearing a Palestinian style black-and-white scarf around his neck opened the door with a big smile. I took off my shoes, and although it is a must when entering a Muslim house, the men (employees at the NGO) gathered in the room, seemed quite worried about me, because they had no slippers there and the house was very cold. They took me to the warmest room where, obviously, some 15 minutes before my announced arrival time they had turned on the electric heater. They immediately served me some black tea and asked me what they could do for me. I told them what my interests were, and explained that I wanted to write a paper about the religious support in times of crisis. The talk began. Mr. Muhammed immediately told me that although the primary focus of the NGO is humanitarian assistance, the motivation for launching the NGO was the desire to do something in the name of Allah. Their hope is that Allah will take into account all the help they provided for the people in crisis, he said. He even considered his participation in my interview as a good deed that shall not pass unnoticed from Allah. Essentially, then, the foundation of the organization lies in the Qur'an. The NGO was established on 15 April, 1991. The title was inspired by the Sura 2 - The Cow, 261 Ayat of the Qur'an).

*2:261 He that gives his wealth for the cause of Allah is like a grain of corn which brings forth seven ears, each bearing a hundred grains. Allah gives abundance to whom He will; He is munificent and all-knowing.*

The NGO began with providing humanitarian aid to the Bosnian refugees in Macedonia during 1992 – 96. According to Muhammed Ismaili, very often the buses carrying Bosnian refugees (sometimes even 200 of them in a single bus), would take them to the mosque first, to attend a lecture or pray to Allah to someday return back to their homes. This NGO also gave its unreserved support to the Kosovo refugees in 1999. Muhammed told me that 98,000 refugees are registered with their NGO as recipients of humanitarian aid. The Kosovo refugees have been arriving to Macedonia from all parts of Kosovo, including Prishtina and Poduevo. A large portion of them arrived by train, others by car or on foot. The refugees come in mostly through the Blace border crossing (Macedonian-Kosovo border), but some also used Jazhince (another Macedonian-Kosovo border) and Tabanovce (Macedonian-Serbian border), and they were being transported to the refugee camps.

The biggest refugee camp was the one located in the nearby surroundings of Skopje, called Stenkovec. This camp accommodated approximately 50,000 refugees at one point. The *Wheat of Goodness* placed a tent there that served as a gathering point for the refugees; they also held lectures and distributed books. As Muhammed recalls, “it served the function of a Mosque.” Most of the humanitarian aid (medicine, food, clothing) (approximately 70%) arrived from organizations in Turkey, especially the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, IHH. The rest of the aid arrived from various Arabic organizations.

I tried asking Muhammed if he could give me his general impression on the effects that the spiritual support had in those times of crisis. I was curious to see if he could pinpoint cases of a different discourse, of agony and confusion among the victims themselves as to why such terrible things were happening to them, and if they have maybe fallen out of the favour with

God. “Evil deeds do not come from Allah. People harm each other,” replied Muhammed. Talking about the inspiration for doing noble deeds and helping the ones in need, Muhammed clarified to me that they believed that it was their mission to help, and that they identified themselves with the *Ansari* (originating from *Ansar*, the people of Medina that helped the Islamic prophet Muhammad when he migrated from Mecca to Medina. The literal meaning of *Ansar* is *supporters*). They found in Islam what they believed to be their spiritual mission. Moreover, he said that doing good deeds for the needy ones fills them with joy and brings joy to Allah as well. The modes of material and spiritual assistance that were offered during the crises do not stop here. Moreover, the modes and motivation and/or inspiration behind some of the assistance provided especially during the Kosovo crisis, is brought into question in the light of the conflict, which happened in Macedonia. While the Bosnian refugee crisis saw a versatile population (ethnically) in offering support and shelter, during the Kosovo crisis, it was predominantly the Albanians in Macedonia who helped the Kosovars. The Kosovars are linguistically, ethnically, and in most cases, religiously extremely similar to them. They therefore believed they were helping their brothers. This political dimension of the nation unjustly torn apart, mentioned previously in the discussion of some of Furkan ISM publishing activities, hence seems to come to the surface in both the spiritual, as well as material, assistance offered during the Kosovo crisis.

Although it was generally accepted that Macedonia was a unique former Yugoslav state due to its peaceful and bloodless secession from the Yugoslav Federation, in 2001 Macedonia was struck by an ethnic conflict, which brought eight months of unrest and calamity to the region. The conflict started on 17 February 2001, when paramilitary Albanian groups (NLA-National Liberation Army) entered the border village of Tanusevci (Macedonian-Kosovo border). The conflict lasted until the Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed on 13 August 2001, finally putting an end to the insurgencies and working towards the improvement of the conditions of the Albanian population in Macedonia. In a statement for the Magazine *Civic World*, on 13 February 2002, Saso Klekovski, the Director of the NGO MCMS (Makedonski centar za multikulturna sorabotka – Macedonian center for Multicultural cooperation) offers several interesting insights about the humanitarian situation in Macedonia. Klekovski recalls that during the 2001 crisis in Macedonia NGOs were active on several fronts: providing humanitarian support, promoting multicultural cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution, as well as civic decision making. Several dilemmas were raised in the public and among the NGOs themselves as to the sufficiency of the humanitarian aid provided. It was frequently claimed that the humanitarian aid for the Kosovo crisis was more extensive than the one for the crisis in Macedonia. One reason for this is the moral and political support during the Kosovo crisis given by the international community. In the case of Macedonia, there was a lack of such support, as things were not fully clear regarding the conflict. Most of the media argued that the humanitarian aid was partial.

It is worth looking at one more argument concerning the very complex political aspect of the humanitarian aid, opened by Ibrahim Mehmeti in his article “A TV story”, published in AIM press on 15 March, 1999. Mehmeti clearly notes that the most active NGO during the Kosovo crisis was El-Hilal. Often during the crisis, the president of the organisation, Abdurauf Pruthi complained that his attempts to provide assistance from ECHO of the Office of the European Committee failed. Hence, the bulk of the assistance provided for the refugees came from individual volunteers, who were almost without exception of Albanian nationality. The most interesting point brought by Mehmeti is his observation that unlike the Albanian population in

Macedonia, who directly experienced the Kosovo crisis as a crisis that also happened to them and in their homes, the Macedonians experienced it as a “TV/news story”. There was, as Mehmeti observes, an aura of tacit agreement among Macedonians in Macedonia that the refugees were an “Albanian problem”, and that the Macedonians (both the citizens and the government) were included only in the “political part of the problem”, that is, the effects that such a refugee influx can play on the demographics of the country. This will bear further importance in claiming our case whereby the nationalistic and patriotic discourses came to the fore in much of the assistance offered to those in greatest need.

In the somewhat short, but rich list of interviewees, H.M.I (hereafter referred to as H.M., from the initials of her name) provided me with her perspective on the assistance in the refugee crisis. H.M. was a young woman in her early thirties. She has worked for the NGO Merhamet since 1999 focusing on helping women and children in the refugee camps in Macedonia. She was a representative of the women’s sector of the NGO. She spoke about her intensive work in the camp Stenkovec, where she regularly brought clothing, food, etc. to women. She focused most of her assistance on the spiritual dimension carried out through lectures and private talks/counseling with women. Thus, she held a number of lectures, mainly teaching them about patience. She taught the children various quotations from the Qur’an as well as the Arabic letters, an activity that according to her words, filled them with joy and brought them content in an otherwise desperate time. H.M. taught in the refugee camp Stenkovec for three months, three times a week, to children and women individually. H.M. drew several points in her religious discourse. She taught women about patience and pointed out the importance of *shahid* (witness or martyr in Islam) to the numerous women whose husbands were killed during the Serbian military attacks on Kosovo. In her talks to the children, she focused more on the joy that will come once the war is over, and once they return to their homes. Much of H. M.’s discourse dealt with erasing any skepticism among the people that God is not on their side. She sought to make their suffering bearable by teaching that none of the events taking place at the time were a result of Allah’s punishment or lack of Allah’s mercy. Rather, her interpretation of the events took on the line of argument whereby this would bring them freedom in the future – freedom from the Serbian occupation. The following Suras are some of those that H.M. used in her lectures during her visits in the refugee camps.

The Imrans:  
Sura 3: 142

Did you suppose that you would enter Paradise before Allah has proved the men who fought for Him and endured with fortitude? You used to wish for death before you met it, and now you have seen what it is like. Mohamed is no more than an apostle: other apostles have passed away before him. If he die or be slain, will you recant? He that recants will do no harm to Allah. But Allah will reward the thankful. No one dies unless Allah permits.

This Sura was used by H.M to bring comfort for the lost ones. The first lines bring into focus the concept of the *shahid* (martyr), referring to Muslims who give their lives defending their faith, country and family. The reward for the patience and ability to cope with the critical situation is also brought into focus. The inability of finding meaning behind the loss of the loved ones, is

also rendered bearable and meaningful, with the words that state that no one dies unless Allah permits.

The Imrans  
Sura 3: 179

Allah was not to leave the faithful in their present plight, but only to separate the evil from the good. Nor was He to reveal to you what is hidden. But he chooses those of His apostles whom He will. Therefore have faith in Allah and his apostle; for if you have faith and guard yourselves against evil, your reward shall be rich indeed.

This Sura correlates with the above-mentioned discussion on the anthropological understanding of religion. Geertz brought to the attention the fact that the opacity of certain events, the pain and suffering that one may be put through, raise the suspicion that there is no genuine order in the world. Yet, the effort of religion in such events, according to Geertz, is not to deny the undeniable, but to deny that there are inexplicable events, that life is unendurable, and that justice is mirage (1966: 25). Undeniable events (pain, suffering, etc.) are then normalized, accepted not as ambiguities, but rather as rational and logical outcomes of the moral structure of reality. This Sura likewise, was used by H.M to argue that the plight the victims were going through, were a normal process of Allah's separation between good and evil as well as plans that will not be revealed to most, except a few.

I also conducted an interview with the imam, Dr. Zekirija Bajrami, from the Mosque of Sultan Murat II in Skopje, who preached in the mosque every Friday throughout the Kosovo crisis, trying to offer strength to the victims as well as a sense of communal values as an incentive for patience and hope. Similarly to Perelman (1965: 51), who argues that in order to awaken the feeling of belonging and sharing of a community, the speaker "tries to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience", the imam informed me that he centered his lectures around four key points: to not be afraid and therefore flee the country; all things come to an end; the aggressor will be punished; and Kosovo will gain something in the end. The last two points bring the attention to the nationalist, patriotic, and ideologically infused element that I will discuss later on. While his lectures focused around particular Ayats of the Qur'an (a verse in the Qur'an), it is illuminating to find that some of the key points brought about in his lectures were dressed in nationalist layers, which makes the observation regarding the ideological connotations stronger. This becomes clear when taking into account the specific demographic picture of Macedonia, where approximately 25% of the population are Albanians and have thus identified with the Kosovo refugees as their brothers. Among the major messages the imam conveyed to these people - the message about not being scared and not fleeing the country, thus leaving it to the Serbian aggressor - stood out the most. According to the imam, even the recently gained independence of Kosovo is a reward of Allah Jale Shanuhu<sup>15</sup> for the patience of the refugees.

Bajrami is an imam at the Sultan Murat's mosque in Skopje. He has been there since 1985. His lectures also stretched over a period of three months during the biggest influx of refugees who fled from Kosovo to Macedonia in 1999. One of the key points on which his lectures focused was to convince the refugees that they should not flee the country and go to distant countries, thus threatening to leave Kosovo empty of Albanians and taken over by Serbs.

This certainly carries both religious and national overtones. He would regularly have around 4,000 - 5,000 refugees in the mosque during his lectures. All his lectures were tailored around a particular Ayat<sup>16</sup> that he would then put into relation with the situation in the region. The chronic failure of the explanatory apparatus of people to map the empirical world and to find explanation for the calamity was explained by the imam in two ways. According to him, he tried to balance out the approaches whereby, on the one hand the evil, pain and suffering come from the aggressor-that is, from among people-but at the same time, the circumstances in which the victims were placed *are also a form of God's test of their faith*. These are some of the Suras he used in his teachings.

The Imrans

Sura 3: 141

If you have suffered a defeat, so did the enemy. We alternate these vicissitudes among mankind so that Allah may know the true believers and choose martyrs from among you (He does not love the evil-doers); and that He may test the faithful and annihilate the infidels.

He did however, find the final outcome of the Kosovo crisis, that is, the return of most of the refugees back to Kosovo, to be a result of Allah's mercy, and being faithful to Allah just as the infidels, and those who have caused suffering and pain shall be punished or annihilated.

Sura 3:160

If Allah helps you, none can overcome you. If He abandons you, who then can help you? Therefore in Allah let the faithful put their trust. The call for patience is explained through the religious prism and mercy is something that should be deserved. Possible skepticisms and questioning of one's faith and the existence of God in critical moments is fought against with Suras that one must endure persecution patiently and not doubt Allah.

Sura 14: 12

And why should we not trust in Allah, when He has already guided us to our paths? We will endure your persecution patiently. In Allah let all the faithful put their trust. Zekirija addressed his listeners as his brothers, which is mainly a result of the fact that during the Kosovo crisis, the Albanians in Macedonia helped the Kosovars, who are linguistically, ethnically, and in most cases, religiously extremely similar to them. In many of his lectures (including the one I have a transcript of) he reiterates that they have opened their doors to their brothers.

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that the forms and effects that spiritual assistance can take in times of crisis are highly versatile. It goes without saying that one can clearly notice several layers in the religious help offered during the Bosnian and Kosovo refugee crisis. The ones that can be clearly

brought to the surface are the psychological, sociological, and political aspects. Hence, in retrospect the structure of the religious support appears to have been much more complicated than it might have appeared at the time, given the chaotic circumstances and conditions. Similarly to what Stone et al. (2003) argue, there is clearly an element of social support, which, as they put it, can be “conceptualized as the tangible or intangible assistance provided in times of need by family members, friends, neighbors, colleagues, selfhelp groups, and others” (2003: 330). This social support according to them, may come in the form of instrumental aid such as financial or physical assistance, similar to the one offered by the NGOs discussed in the paper, as well as emotional aid such as empathic listening, information and advice, or appraisal. In addition, there is what Stone et al. call the intangible support, which manifests itself as the nurturing of the feeling of security, which comes from being loved and cared for by others. The social support, according to them enhances the *self-concept* as well as the self-esteem, but also plays the role of a *stress buffer* balancing the effects of stress on the mental and physical health of the individual.

Pargament (1990) argues that religion is a stress-buffer in that it offers people a framework for understanding a stressful event. Similarly, Geertz’s definition of religion accentuates its importance as a meaning maker through some of the elements of his otherwise long definition of religion. Here, I point to the third and fourth element of his definition. Whereas the former states that religion helps people formulate conceptions of a general order of existence, the latter points out that it clothes these conceptions with an aura of factuality. Religious participation provides a sense of belonging as well as additional social support resources (Stone et al. 2003: 330): “Individuals who attend church frequently also report having larger social networks, more interactions with network members, and more satisfaction with the quality of those interactions” (Bradley, 1995 as cited in Stone et al., 2003).

The several modes of support in times of crisis (ranging from material, through NGOs, to mental, psychological, and at some level ideological) analyzed in this paper can lead us to several rough conclusions. Firstly, it appears that the psychological layer aimed at giving mental support and regeneration of mental strength to those whose lives were ruined and whose future was completely unpredictable, was the initial, key point of those who offered their support. The prayers in the mosque, the books distributed, and the individual talks with women who were raped or whose husbands were killed all played the role of first aid, thus satisfying the most urgent needs of those people, i.e. of giving precisely that stress-buffer religious assistance. At a more permanent level, it seems that those offering support aimed to bring back the self-confidence and self-concept to the victims, that is, to strengthen the effects of the first aid through a religious component. The aim of this layer of assistance was to teach them patience and endurance mainly by teaching particular verses of the Qur’an. Hence, if the first, psychological point was about bringing comfort and providing first aid at a very basic level, the second layer was more focused at regaining hope and opening up a perspective for the future rescue of the community. This segment however, brings in certain layers of ideological components, which were visible also in the short overview of the Macedonian conflict in 2001.

The ideological layer is brought in by the fact that the Kosovo refugees came from a set of very specific circumstance that most of those who helped were familiar with. Many of the people from the NGOs who helped the Kosovars actually have relatives in that country and have therefore been indirectly involved in the tragic events of 1999. Taking into account that the refugees came from a concrete setting that those who were helping were familiar with, in their assistance they also brought up elements that are ideological, that is, that tackle the concepts of

patriotism, national awareness, and a long term national strategy. An illustrative example of the ideological aspect of the support offered through the lectures in Mosques and books delivered to the victims, is the recent independence of Kosovo, which has been interpreted by Dr. Zekirija as Allah's reward for all the patience and endurance of the people of Kosovo during the Serbian military campaign. His discourse during the crisis and before the independence of Kosovo was always bringing these points in focus: that they should not flee to distant countries thus leaving Kosovo empty and at the mercy of Serbs, and that eventually something good for Kosovo would come out of all the calamities its people were thrown into. Hence, this ideological element was something that both the assistance-givers and assistant-receivers have shared – a hope for autonomy, that is, sovereignty of Kosovo. This fervor did not exist in the case of the Bosnian refugee crisis, where there was either a general disinterest among the Macedonian public as a crisis that is happening somewhere far away, or else, the support was offered to those religiously identical, i.e. mainly the Albanian population in Macedonia.

Although Geertz disagrees with Malinowski's insight that religion helps one to endure emotional stress by opening up escapes from such situations that offer no empirical way out but through rituals and belief, it seems that much of what has been done during the crisis on the part of those giving the assistance has been precisely aimed at that. Religion played precisely the role of the "theology of optimism", the disqualifying term that Nadel used to refer to Malinowski's understanding of the role of religion. Still, this also made the pain more sufferable, and that was one of Geertz's insights into the paradoxical role of religion. Most of the lectures and books provided also show another interesting point. Namely, instead of just teaching that the reward in this or the next life will come for all the patience and endurance that they showed during the worst moments of their lives, the point that they should be worthy of their hope and that they should deserve the mercy and the reward has also been brought up. Based upon their research among a group of Christians in the U.S., Stone et al. (2003) conclude that "support resources, including religious beliefs, participation in religious activities, such as praying and reading of Scripture and relationships with church leaders and members, clearly play an important role in helping people through difficulties in their lives" (339). They also pointed out the crucial effect religion and social assistance can play in the self-concept and enhancement of self-esteem. Similarly, the inspiration and effects offered through religious assistance in this study show elements of distribution in three different spheres of life:

1. in the individual-psychological sphere, enhancing the *self-concept*;
2. the communal sphere (bringing the sense of belonging to a community, and of experiencing care and love from others);
3. in between, that is, in the reality of social human life where people function as both individuals and as political and national units.

It is in the third segment that much of the ideological aspects infused with the motifs of nationalism come to the fore even in the forms of religious support. This study, similarly to some of the works cited, captured several segments of the religious dimension in unusual/extreme circumstances. These range from the individual-psychological level (helping one to regenerate his vitality), the distilled religious aspect (the destiny of a person faced with the perspective of eternity and God) and the social dimension, which brings in the agendas of ideology, strategy, and the concepts of nation and nationhood as well as the friction and labeling of victims and victimizers.

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<sup>1</sup> A priest in Islam.

<sup>2</sup> The territory of what is today Macedonia (FYROM) was until 1913 the last part of the Balkans ruled by the Ottoman Empire. After 1919, Macedonia entered the Kingdom of Yugoslavia under Serbian jurisdiction and without administrative autonomy. This Kingdom was defined as a Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians, without mentioning of the Macedonians. After 1945, Macedonia was constituted as the People's Republic of Macedonia within the framework of Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ). After the breakup of Yugoslavia, Macedonia was admitted to the UN on 8 April 1993 as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) until an agreement could be reached with Greece which claimed that some of the articles of the new Macedonian Constitution following the declaration of independence on 8 September 1991 made territorial claims on the Greek province of Macedonia. The issue regarding Macedonia's name has still not been resolved with Turkey being the first state to recognize the country under its own constitutional name, i.e. the Republic of Macedonia. While a lot of international institutions and countries still use FYROM as a reference for the Republic of Macedonia, a large number of countries have gradually recognised it under its constitutional name, as the Republic of Macedonia. Macedonia is a land-locked country covering 26,000 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of approximately 2 million and the capital is Skopje. The Macedonians constitute approximately 64.17% of the population (this includes the Macedonian Muslims as well – 5.86%, since the Macedonians are dominantly Christian Orthodox believers), the Albanians constitute the second largest group with 25.17% or more, the Turks constitute approximately 4 % of the population, and the rest are Roma, Serbs, Boshnjaks, Vlachs as well as other nationalities represented in minor percentage.

<sup>3</sup> More detailed insight into the precise number of refugee influx in Macedonia during both crisis can be found in the *U.S. Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey 2000 – Macedonia* retrievable from [http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,USCRI,,MKD,4562d8b62\\_3ae6a8cb44.0.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,USCRI,,MKD,4562d8b62_3ae6a8cb44.0.html)

<sup>4</sup> Officially after 1995, they adopted the old ethnic name as Boshnjaks (originally, the singular was - Bošnjak, plural – Bošnjaci). The decision made in 1993 put into force the old historic name, mentioned at first as Bošnjani. The reference to Bošnjani is already made in documents dated from the *Charter of Ban Kulin*, the first ruler of the independent Kingdom of Bosnia (August 29, 1189). With the arrival of the Turks in 1453, the name has been gradually transformed into Bosnjaci referring to all autochthonous inhabitants of Bosnia and its territory as a common ethnic name until the end of 19 century. Ilija Garašanin, in his best-known text “Nacertanije” (“Načertanije”), published in 1844, explicitly writes that in Bosnia there are Mohammedan (Muslim), Orthodox and Catholic Bosnjaks, without making any reference to Serbs or Croats. Hence, the traditional name of the autochthonous population of Bosnia is Bosnjak, and until the 19th century it was applicable for the adherents of Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic faith. The decision made in 1993 is a decision about the renewal of the original traditional, national name.

<sup>5</sup> The military atrocities committed in Bosnia have often been blurred under a vague terminology that ranges from military campaigns to Serbian attack. However, this vagueness in the diagnosing and description of those events became all the more problematic with the publication of Čekić (2012) *Genocid i Istina o Genocidu u Bosni I Hercegovini* (Genocide and the Truth about the Genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina), where details, including documents taken from the Archives of the Institute for the Research of Atrocities Committed against Humanity and International Law at the University of Sarajevo, are published. Among others, an order by the Chief of Staff of the Army of Republika Srpska, Ratko Mladić calling on the eradication of Bosnian Muslims as well as a number of other documents are brought to light.

<sup>6</sup> Muhajir or Mohajir – an Arabic word meaning emigrant. My interlocutors have spoken of the refugees as *muhajirs* and not as refugees, clarifying that while the word “refugee” has a passive connotation referring to someone being scared and thus, escaping from somewhere, while *muhajir* brings into focus the meaning of someone being **expelled** from their country. The literal translation then, of the word *muhajirs*, would be, the expelled ones.

<sup>7</sup> See more on the backlash against multiculturalism in Europe in Vertovec and Wessendorf (2010). Their analysis clearly shows that many of the narratives that emphasized the backlash against multiculturalism, pointed to the immigration policies of European countries, which resulted in the creation of a so-called “heaven for terrorists”.

<sup>8</sup> This is my translation. The original in Macedonian language is *Другите за Исламот*, which roughly comes down to meaning “Islam through the perspective of others” and it combines the sayings of great thinkers throughout history about Islam.

<sup>9</sup> These included Haki Sharofi, Hasan, Cengic, Sejjid Kutub, Taha Mudevver’s *Andalusia and the Ottoman Empire* – given to the public as a historical account of Andalusia and Andalusinas, that would or could be used as an incentive for the Kosovo refugees to stay strong throughout the crisis.

<sup>10</sup> For further information about the activities and literature published by Furkan ISM, please go to <http://www.furkan.com.mk/index.html>

<sup>11</sup> See more in <http://www.furkan.com.mk/VEPRA%2098.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> This includes authors such as: Jusuf el-Kardavi, Muhammed Hamza Sa’davi, Muhammed Gazali.

<sup>13</sup> The online version of this issue of *Vepra* can be retrieved from <http://www.furkan.com.mk/VEPRA%20100.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> This statement coincides well with the general belief among the Albanian elite that the starting point of their continuous calamity can be traced back to 1912, after the Balkan Wars. The London Conference and its final decisions brought on July 29, 1913, divided Albanian lands by giving Kosovo to Serbia, Peja and Gjakova to

Montenegro, and Janina and Epirus to Greece. Although Austro-Hungary argued that all Albanian inhabited lands should be included in the newly established Albanian state, Serbia's protector power – Russia, as well as France opposed this idea. (See more on this in Malcolm 1999: 256.)

<sup>15</sup> There are a number of phonetic versions of translating this Arabic expression جلاله جل with reference to Allah in English language. These vary from Jalla Jallallahu, Xhele Shanuhu, Jalla Jalaluh, Jale Shanuhu to Zelleh Shanuhu. While often conflated with a reference made to the prophet Muhammad (PBUH-peace be upon him), Jale Shanuhu has no reference to a deceased Allah or God, as God cannot decrease nor be late. The closest translation of the expression would be *sublime, glorious* or *transcendent*.

<sup>16</sup> Ayat refers to the smallest unit of the Qur'an, otherwise known as 'verses' or 'signs'.