



# Religious elites and societal organisation in south-eastern Europe

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Berlin

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**T**he relationship between traditional religion and processes of modernity is a central issue in contemporary public discussions as well as in debates within the field of social sciences. The latter shall ask about short-term incidents, like topics such as Islamist terrorist attacks, anti-Islamic populism, and new developments in the Arabic world, which prevail in the daily news, give an empirical basis, and integrate them into long-term concepts. Overall, there is a strong relevance of a scientific analysis of religion in pluralist society today.

The research project *'Religious Elites and Societal Organisation in South-Eastern Europe'* includes two central issues. The first one is to detect types of attitudes regarding the societal order within the religious elite of south-eastern Europe without a normative background. Thus, this part of the project also has no thesis and seeks to find out the perspective of the religious sphere in an explorative way. Several major branches of Christianity and Islam are traditionally rooted in this region, so the second part asks for the integrative as well as the conflict-afflicted potentials of religion in multi-religious societies. Do these attitudes have rather integrating or separating consequences for society? And, how important is religion in building identity today? Are reasons for so-called 'religious conflict' located exclusively within the religious sphere or rather caused by external factors as political power arrangements? The selection of cases is based on the specific differences in the structure of the religious field and comprises Albania, Macedonia, and Slovenia.

## **Why south-eastern Europe?**

In order to represent the traditional religions and religious communities with a large amount of followers in Europe adequately, central types of attitudes of religious dignitaries towards the triangle religion – politics – population in multi-religious societies of south-eastern Europe are in focus. Here, Christianity with its major branches (Roman-Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant), Islam (mostly Sunni but also Shiite), and other religious communities have been represented for centuries. The historical background of religion in the states of the region can be regarded as quite similar: Major religions were state religions during the great empires (Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian), whereas smaller communities were not forbidden but treated 2nd class before 1914. After the short period between the two world wars, religious communities were suppressed strongly in the first phase of socialism after 1945. During that time, a significant group of people arose among the populations of Eastern Europe bearing indifferent attitudes towards religion. The second phase of socialism, beginning in the middle of the 1970s, saw a more moderate administration of socialist rulers and religious communities able to practice the rituals of their faiths in hidden circumstances again. Since the collapse of socialism in 1989 and the beginning of transformation of the societies in Eastern Europe, religion experienced a recovery and was able to enhance its influence over wider parts of society and politics. Strongly connected to the mentioned revival of religion is the emergence of new states in south-eastern Europe twenty-five years ago: In the process



of their foundation, traditional religious communities – willingly and unwillingly – were called as sources of legitimization of the new states by certain but decisive political actors and hence could be located close to the sphere of politics.

Therefore, the selection of cases comprised the religious spheres of Albania, Macedonia, and Slovenia. The mentioned similarities among the historical path-dependencies of the states and societies of south-eastern Europe can be also observed here: affiliation to multi-ethnic empires until 100 years ago, a short term of self-discovery between the two world wars, and the experience of fierce socialism after 1944/45 which persecuted traditional religion. The toughest measures to suppress religion were applied by the political elite of socialist Albania, where all rituals and practices of traditional religion were forbidden since the proclamation of the first atheist state of the world in 1967. In socialist Yugoslavia – the federal state that incorporated Slovenia and Macedonia until 1991 – religious groups were strongly repressed since 1944/45, until a slow liberalisation appeared in the 1970s/1980s. Nevertheless, observation and partly

prosecution went on in all states of the region until 1990. The collapse of socialism at the end of the 1980s brought about new freedom for traditional and new religious communities – a development which surprised a large majority of these groups and brought them to search for their role in state and society. (Genov 2010: 187) The picture of initial confusion about the role of religion in society was completed by a largely secular understanding of the state on the side of the population, as well as a religious elite who was surprised by transformation and could develop visionary conceptions only in few exceptional cases. In some states they were entitled (by politics) to hold strong positions in the process of nation and identity-building (see Russian Federation, Serbia, and Macedonia, where politics fostered a so-called re-traditionalisation in that spheres), while in other countries, such as the Czech Republic or Slovenia secular tendencies threaten their potential to influence society, politics, and the economy. In general, today, a high degree of religious pluralism can be observed in the states of south-eastern Europe, which provides new challenges for traditional and new religious communities.



All three societies under scrutiny are multi-religious with one dominating traditional religious community: In Slovenia, the Catholic Church is the main player among several others, while in Macedonia the Orthodox Church prevails and in Albania the Sunni Islam. All major communities are present as majority and minority in the three cases, so the analysis also respects the position within the religious field.

### **Why religion today?**

Today, we as Europeans experience a strong revival of religion in the public and political sphere, as daily news indicates (terrorist attacks in the name of a religion, ‘Anti-Islam’ movements that become violent, and the reaction of democratic politics). Additionally, the above-mentioned remarks show that religion was brought back to the political arena by political actors in south-eastern Europe recently. Hence, religious dignitaries are able to influence the (positive and negative) political decision-making of parts of the population. Over the 20th century, they lost their function as economic and political power-elite but can be regarded today as value-elite.

**“And, how important is religion in building identity today? Are reasons for so-called ‘religious conflict’ located exclusively within the religious sphere or rather caused by external factors as political power arrangements?”**

Key players in the sphere of religion are religious dignitaries – they are the central source of interpretation of traditional religion for today. They represent their religious community to the external environment and interpret the content of religion internally for the members of their spiritual community. Thus, they are accepted as normative multipliers within their group and additionally influence wider parts of society by public statements and symbolic behavior (provoke reaction). The existence of attitudes towards the societal order also originates from considered world religions themselves: a major characteristic of them is the claim to handle reality in its entirety (‘Ganzheit’) – hence, they follow a holistic program.

Consequently, it is the intention of the project to take the perspective of religion and detect central types of attitudes of religious dignitaries towards the triangle of religion, politics, and population in multi-religious societies of south-eastern Europe.

### How to catch attitudes adequately and consider subjectivity

In order to determine these attitudes adequately, an innovative qualitative method<sup>1</sup> is applied which refers explicitly to the internal frame of reference of the respondents, called Q-method. It is designed for explorative approaches; e.g. a data collection in areas of society which were rarely subject of scientific analysis before. The method takes into account the subjectivity of the researcher and of the respondents: Therefore, no questions for the interview are pre-formulated, which would ask just for the acceptance of models of the researcher among the religious elite. In a first step, a scientific content analysis of speeches and public statements of religious dignitaries in Albania, Macedonia, and Slovenia was conducted. Extracting 36 central statements regarding the topic, the researcher in a second step presents these to the religious dignitaries in focus, who are the origin, and asks for a grading and a comment with regards to them.<sup>2</sup>

After quantitative processing, types of attitudes are generated which prevail among the religious dignitaries. The interview is conducted anonymously and answers are offered in several languages. Q-method needs a relatively small number of respondents (20-40) in



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order to explore types of attitudes within a group in focus. Although the field work is not completed, results of a first analysis show two central types of attitudes: rather modern and progressive views prevail in a first group of respondents, while conservative attitudes can be located just in a minority of cases, whereas the overall potential for religious conflict is rather small.

I DO NOT agree					I DO agree			
-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4



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The advantages of the method in comparison to others are described widely in literature – a conclusion was coined in a sentence in 1935 by William Stephenson, in the *Journal of Personality*: ‘correlating persons instead of tests’, since the attitudes of the respondents are in focus and the researcher does not ask about his perceptions.

### Goals

After a quantitative and qualitative analysis of all three societies and a comparison of attitudes, the results shall answer the following questions: “Which discourses dominate within religious communities in south-eastern Europe towards the society, the state, and other religions?” and “How far do these perceptions correlate with current societal arrangements?”. Identifying discourses in the framework of the project does not mean to focus on short-term issues or scandals – rather, long-term conceptions of society are of interest.

Therefore, the specific goals of the project are manifold and can be classified within four groups: theoretical as well as empirical objectives following current debates in the social sciences, links for further research, and the generation of applicable recommendations for policy makers (and responsible persons in the religious sphere).

The overall goal is the detection of attitudes towards the above-mentioned triangle of religion – state – society from the perspective of religion and more precisely of religious dignitaries. From the point of view of the scientific discipline of sociology of religion, there are very few empirical studies asking for the attitudes of religious elites towards the societal order in the multi-religious sphere of south-eastern Europe. Beyond external ascriptions, which discourses can be revealed by the application of the q-method? Where are convergences and divergences among different religions, states, or communities? Do these attitudes foster cultural and political integration or exclusion in the societies under scrutiny?

Results from the empirical study are able to bring about conclusions also for the development of existing

theoretical models in branches of science as ‘religion and politics’ or ‘religion and conflict’ that are of importance to a wider public audience. The first contribution in the area of religion and politics is the capture of the actual spectrum of attitudes of religious elites and a comparison with classification about the relationship of religion and politics. In the area of religion and conflict there is a need to ask whether religion is an important element of basic distinctions between social groups and analyse the differences and convergences in intra and interreligious comparison. Additionally, patterns for analysing sources of societal conflict can be specified. The third point of the goal is the strong connection to further research. On the empirical side, a basis is produced for the quantification of the results. To what extent are the attitudes and discourses represented among religious people or the whole population? Additionally, the types of attitudes found in south-eastern Europe can be surveyed in other societies of the continent in order to see their distribution.

The underlying importance of the project is the intention to foster consensus-oriented understanding and communication between religion and politics.

### Extrapolation

A worthwhile expansion of the project on other countries would be able to generate profound and comparable data on the self-positioning of religion in Europe – rarely done before but still a necessary step to be realised in order to understand a key player of society and classify its impact on today’s developments.

1 Contrary to its rare application in Social Sciences, there’s extensive scientific literature on Q-method available. See also the International Society for the Scientific Study of Subjectivity (ISSSS).

2 Representatives of the Slovene Bishops Conference, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovenia, the Islam Community in Slovenia (ISRS), the Muslim community in Slovenia (MSRS), the Serbian Orthodox Church in Slovenia, several other Christian churches, and the Buddhist Congregation Dharmaling.



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