

ISLAM IN MACEDONIA: THE ORIGINS, EVOLUTION AND ROLE OF THE ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY FROM THE OTTOMAN PERIOD TO THE PRESENT

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Abstract: In Macedonia, faiths and religions, along with their followers, are typically represented by specific state agencies. Thus Islam has always been represented by a state organ since the days of the Ottomans in the region until the dissolution of the Communist rule of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Since then, the institution that has played a mediating role between the government of Macedonia and the followers of the religion of Islam in the country has been recognised to be the Islamic Religious Community. This paper will analyse the role of this institutions as a synergy between the government of Macedonia and the believers of Islam as well as its relations with various other Muslim institutions. After a brief illustration of the history of Muslim religious representative institutions in Macedonia, the focus of the discussion will be on the core issues of the Islamic Religious Community as the highest Muslim religious institution in the country. As a case study, it will deal with the institution's active role in protecting the rights of Muslims at all levels.

Keywords: Islamic Religious Community; Macedonia; Legal Status; the Ottoman Balkans.

Introduction

State institutions and governmental agencies representing people of different religious beliefs, as well as regulating norms between the believers and the state, have and will continue to function in the future as a significant social phenomenon. Such arrangements are found in societies where Muslims are either a majority or a minority, in both the Western and the Eastern regions. For example, in Muslim majority countries, or Islamic countries as they are sometimes referred to, we may find governmental ministries particularly dealing and regulating the issues concerning the faith and practices of its Muslim subjects, like Saudi Arabia¹, the Gulf States², Brunei³, Pakistan⁴, Indonesia⁵, Afghanistan⁶ and others. There are also certain types of institutions in charge of the above mentioned role which function under the office the Prime Minister as a state agency, such as the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) in Turkey⁷ and Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia) in Malaysia⁸.

Such institutions are also found in non-Muslim countries. For instance, in the People's Republic of China, since none of the religions and faiths is officially recognised, both the General Office of State Council⁹ and the Ministry of Ethnic Affairs¹⁰ interchangeably oversee issues related to Muslim minorities. In Thailand, the Central Islamic Council of Thailand (CICOT)¹¹ and Chularatchamontri (Shaykh al-Islam), who is appointed by the King upon advice of the Prime Minister, has the authority to administer all Islamic affairs in the nation and to provide advice on Islamic affairs to government agencies in Thailand. Other examples include the Ministry of Minority Affairs in India¹² and the Ministry of Buddhasasana and Religious Affairs in Sri Lanka¹³. As we will elaborate in this paper, the fate in the Balkan (or rather Southeast European countries) is very much similar to those of non-Muslim majority countries rather than Muslim majority ones.

A Brief Historical Survey of the Institution

We will first present a historical background of Muslim central institutions during the Ottoman era in the present Balkan states (which includes Macedonia), followed by the post-Ottoman 20th century period and finally give a clear picture of the present day legal framework and functionality of the Islamic community in Macedonia.

The Ottoman lands were divided into governorates or provinces known as the *eyâlet*. In Europe, the territories were under the *eyâlet* of Rumelia with the *Beylerbey* as its chief; the *eyâlet* in turn was further divided into several *sancaks*. The head of a *sancak* was the *Sancakbey* who was a provincial military-administrative figure, and the head of a district was *Qādî*¹⁴, a judicial-administrative figure. Both were appointed by the Ottoman central government, known as the *Porte*. Both the *Sancakbey* and the *Qādî* had several officials under their authority, some of whom dealt with legal matters as court officials appointed by the *Qādî*; others dealt with administrative matters as officials outside of court appointed by the *Sancakbey*. Although the office of *Sancakbey* was higher than that of *Qādî* in terms of rank, the latter was considered the most important office in the region¹⁵.

The *qādîs* held authority over many aspects defined and determined by the sacred teachings and traditions of Islam. The idea of the office of *qādî* was for Muslims inseparable from the *sharī'ah*, in the sense of being its arms and legs, speaking metaphorically. Every *qādî* had full authority, both religious and imperial, to enforce the law within his district¹⁶.

Although the authority of *qādî*'s office was bureaucratic, in the Ottoman administrative system the *qādîs* had greater freedom to act within the scope

of their office than other bureaucrats and military appointees whose positions were defined entirely by the writ of the Sultan (Mehmet İpşirli, 1994, pp. 264-265).¹⁷ The *Qādīs* were not elected but appointed by the *Porte* on the basis of his specialised education, technical training, and on-the-job experience. Their salaries were commensurate with their ranks in a hierarchical scale.¹⁸ Each *Qādī* was an integral part of the system and he could serve successively in different cities/districts, like Bursa, Sofia, and then in Skopje, without having to take a refresher course in the local traditions.¹⁹

The local folk had the right to complain to the sultan about their *qādīs'* activities and behavior; this right was enjoyed by the *re'âyâ* (the governed) against any agent of the sultan. General inspections were carried out from time to time to address wrongdoing attributed to the *qādīs*. In their capacity the *qādīs* recorded a large number of real estate sales, sales of goods that involved different payments, the incurring of loan debts, agreements among members of guilds, and so forth. One of the most important duties of the *qādīs* was to supervise the municipal affairs of the city or town where they were appointed. In other words, they played the role of what is known today as municipal mayors.²⁰

Among the *qādīs'* major roles was on the state and issues related to non-Muslims. In the Balkans, non-Muslims were predominantly those from the Orthodox-Christian sect. The policy of the Ottomans, and particularly the office of the *Qādī* toward their Christian and Jewish subjects was part of a larger pattern of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims that emerged over centuries of Muslim rule. They considered non-Muslim subjects to be autonomous but dependent peoples whose internal social, religious, and communal life was to be regulated by their own religious organisations, but whose leaders were appointed by, and responsible to, the Ottoman state. It is remarkable to note that non-Muslims often preferred to seek a *qādī's* decision or certification even though they were not under the jurisdiction of *qādīs* because the use of Muslim courts provided greater assurances, or the means to escape the more rigid stipulations of their own religious laws in such matters as marriage, divorce, and division of inheritance, which were supposed to be under the exclusive jurisdiction of their own Christian or Jewish authorities.²¹

The above brief evaluation shows us that the Ottoman *qādīs* were in charge of various affairs between the ruler and the subjects. They regulated issues related to the application of religious matters and faith practices. However, the extent to which the Ottoman office of the *qādī* was influential and beneficial during the post-Ottoman era in the Balkans—and Macedonia in particular—is a matter of dispute. Nevertheless, part of its legacy can be found today. As will be seen later, the office of the Islamic Religious Community in all the Balkan countries is recognised as autonomous but responsible to the state. We shall describe in short

the situation during this period until the collapse of the communist regime at the beginning of the 1990s.

From 1918 to 1992, the function and activities of the Islamic Religious Communities in the Balkans were divided into two periods/phases:²² a) Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which was renamed in 1929 as the Kingdom of Yugoslav and between the period of 1918-1941 covered today's regions of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Macedonia; and b) the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1992). We shall describe the emergence and development of the Islamic Communities during the former followed by the latter eras.

In the formative period of the Yugoslav Kingdom, the relationship between the state and any kind of religious communities in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was based on the principle of recognised or adopted religious confession. However, during the affirmative years of the Yugoslav Kingdom the problem of autonomy and the position of the Islamic community became a matter of question. Once the Law was enacted in 1930, the new overall official title of Islamic Religious Community was given and Muslim religious officials were at the disposal of the state. The law stipulated the following: a) *Reisul-ulema*, whose seat was previously in Sarajevo, was to be based in Belgrade; b) the members of two *Ulema Medzlis*' (councils) to be in Sarajevo and Skopje; and c) reduced number of *Muftis* to nine to be appointed by royal decree, based in Banja Luka, Tuzla, Sarajevo, Mostar, Pljevlja, Novi Pazar, Prizren, Bitola, and Skopje, respectively. This meant that Muslim religious affairs as a whole passed to the hands of religious officials and bodies appointed by the state. As a result, unlike the case of the Ottomans towards the non-Muslim institutions, the Ministry of Justice of the Yugoslav Kingdom began to place people loyal to the regime in leadership positions within the Islamic Religious Community.

The *Ulema* councils were the main bodies through which all Islamic religious affairs, including religious education and cultural life were administered and supervised. The Skopje *Ulema* council was responsible for the areas covered by the Mufti's offices of Pljevlja, Novi Pazar, Prizren, Bitola, and Skopje.²⁴

Nevertheless, it is significant to point out that parallel to the two stated *Ulema* councils (*Medzlis*), there were also two designated *Vakuf-Mearif* councils, in Sarajevo and Skopje, with their own boards of governors and managers, appointed directly by the Ministry of Justice. Under these two councils were the regional *Vakuf-Mearif* commissions, the members of which were appointed by the relevant *Vakuf-Mearif* council, and, finally, as the sole electoral body, the *dzemat medzlis* (local congregational council), which elected the congregational committee and was responsible for the affairs of the congregation.²⁵ In the case of Macedonia, most of the reputable local *'ulama* did not get involved or endorse

the system as it contradicted the former Ottoman tradition. Consequently, they either migrated to the Eastern Muslim countries or remain within their confined living areas.²⁶

Six years later, the 1936 Constitution of the Yugoslav Kingdom abolished the *muftis*' offices and the duality within the Islamic Religious Community, with its two *Ulema Medzlis*, *Vakuf-Mearif* councils and the related offices. Instead, the Constitution stipulated that under the office of *Reisul-Ulema* a single *Ulema Medzlis* be formed together with a single *Vakuf* directorate for the whole country. Contrary to their earlier status, the Constitution reinforced the role of laymen's influence in the administration and affairs of the Islamic Religious Community. Consequently, members of an electoral body were formed in 1937 in order to elect the *Reisul-Ulema* pursuant to the Constitution. However, these developments did not last long as World War II erupted and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was under attack in 1941.²⁷

After World War II, under the newly established Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), Muslims in the region found themselves in a new legal, ideological and political framework whose basic intention and goal was to build communism. Still, the Islamic Religious Community succeeded in consolidating itself and among other achievements ensured its survival by resuming activities in 1947. All forms of organised and collective legitimate characters of Muslims were manifested by the Islamic Religious Community, as one of the main objectives of communist rule was to keep Muslim communities separated from the affairs of state and politics. The concrete result of this policy was the abolition of religious studies in the primary and secondary schools, and the abolition of Shari'ah courts of any form. In addition, the abolition of private property and the nationalisation of all lands in order to develop the economy, agriculture and urbanisation, resulted in the Islamic Religious Community becoming almost without movable and immovable properties (*waqfs*), which were their *raison d'être* and source of revenue for centuries. In order to survive, the Islamic Religious Community had to seek new sources of funding and financial support. SFRY founding membership of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) afforded Muslims and the Islamic Religious Community of Yugoslavia with an opportunity to connect with the rest of the Islamic world.

From its inception under the SFRY until 1992, the Islamic Religious Community, which covered the whole region including Kosovo and Macedonia, was mainly based in Sarajevo with its sub-state offices in the so-called Yugoslavia until the collapse of the Socialist regime. The organisational structure of the Islamic Religious Community of SFRY, which was established in 1947 at the Great *Vakuf* Assembly (Sabor) in Sarajevo when a new constitution was adopted, consisted

of four councils: 1) the Islamic Community (IC) of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia with its seat in Sarajevo; 2) the Islamic Community of Serbia in Priština; 3) the Islamic Community of Macedonia in Skopje; and 4) the Islamic Community of Montenegro in its capital, then Titograd (now Podgorica). A number of delegates from each council were elected to the Supreme Council of the Islamic Religious Community of SFRY in Sarajevo which in turn elected the *Reisul-Ulema*.²⁸ Curiously enough, all the office holders of the *Reisul-Ulema* were from Bosnia except 1989's Jakub Selimoski, a Macedonian.

Lower organisational structures were regional *mufti* districts with the *Mufti* as head, comprising several councils with the chief *imam*. The head *imam* was responsible for religious life in his area and the activities of a number of *imams* attached to a mosque (*mesdžid*). Each *imam* was in charge of leading prayers, teaching children and organising religious festivals among other things. During the 1970s, each Islamic Religious Community began to have its own publishing house with a number of publications, colleges, a faculty and an administrative-legal office. This arrangement continued until the complete dissolution of SFRY towards the end of 1992.²⁹ This suffices to explain the emergence and development of Islamic Religious Communities in the post-Ottoman Balkans mainly on the Yugoslav territories during the period of 1918-1992. Now we shall proceed with the case of Macedonia, especially with the focus on the post 1992 era until the present.

The Office of Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia

Since Macedonia was part of the former SFR of Yugoslavia, after the end of the communist regime and the declaration of its independence, the newly independent Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia quickly began to rearrange its institutional structure; however, it almost followed the similar functioning tools of the former regime's norms and forms with little changes. This was due to the constitutional and legislative framework of the communist Yugoslav states, which had a strong effect on all their post-communist counterparts. All the constitutions, along with the constitution of the former Yugoslavia, guaranteed freedom of religion, and equal status of individuals and religious communities before the law. Also, all constitutions, except the Bosnian one, have stated that religion is separate from the state. Free observance of religion is guaranteed at the legislative level as well. But pursuant to the laws on religious communities, they are not eligible for financial support from the state. All the states during this period applied the laws from communist times.

Macedonia, with a population of 2.1 million, has two major religious groups; Orthodox Christianity and Islam. There is a general correlation between ethnicity

and religion. The majority of Orthodox believers are ethnic Macedonian, and the majority of Muslim believers are ethnic Albanian. According to the U.S. Department of State, approximately 65 percent of the population is Macedonian Orthodox, 32 percent is Muslim, 1 percent is Roman Catholic, and 2 percent follow other religious beliefs (largely various Protestant denominations). There is also a small Jewish community, mostly residing in Skopje.³⁰

In Macedonia, the Islamic Religious Community is mentioned in the constitution, along with the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, Evangelical Methodist Church, and the Jewish Community, as being separate from the state and equal before the law. These religious groups along with others are free to establish faith schools and charitable organisations.³¹ In terms of legislative provisions, the Law on Religious Communities from 1977 was in force until 1997, when it was replaced by the Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups.³² This was further amended with the 2007 Law, “Legal Status of Church, Religious Communities and Religious Groups.” Unlike before, the latest law was formed with an additional focus on the Christian church and covered three groups: a) Church; b) Religious Communities; and c) Religious Groups. It is clear that the Church has more specific legal provisions than the other two. The religion of Islam was classified under the second group, i.e. Religious Communities.³³ In comparison with the privileges and benefits of each religion or religious community in the 2007 Law, it is more likely that the amendment was done for the benefit of Christianity and Ohrid, Archbishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in particular, because in all the stipulations any amendment related to the other religious communities is clearly minimal.

Article 8 of the 1997 Law regulated registration of the last two groups of the above mentioned, (i.e. the Religious Communities and Religious Groups within the State of Macedonia) when it provided that “for one confession of faith only one registered religious community or group may exist.” This continued even after the amendment was done in 2007, with the exception of the “Church.”³⁴ This provision prevented groups of the same confession from registering under a different name, as can be seen with the newly formed “Muslim Community” led by the former *Reisul-Ulema* of Yugoslavia, Jakub Selimoski. The organisation could not be registered because the Islamic Religious Community, the organisation which survived from the time of the former Yugoslavia, was already a recognised institution representing all the Muslims of Macedonia. Thus, if the Muslim Community were to be registered, there would have been two parallel Muslim Organisations in Macedonia, which is not allowed by the aforementioned law. Moreover, whereas the 1977 Law of Yugoslavia required a religious community to be registered with the Ministry of the Interior, under the 1997 Law of the

Independent Macedonia, it is the Authority in Charge of Religious Affairs which executes registration.

In addition, since the 1997 Law only allows one religious denomination for every faith, adherents of the Orthodox faith, Vlachs, were therefore not permitted to establish their own Vlach religious organisation. Other restrictions on “Religious Groups” were due to the distinction between “traditional” denominations which were registered as “Religious Communities” (the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Religious Community and the Roman Catholic Church) and enjoyed various privileges, and others which had to be registered as “Religious Groups”. The Serbian minority for example was unable to exercise its religion freely under the Serbian Orthodox Church, with the Serb Orthodox clergy being prevented from entering the country or holding services for the ethnic Serb population. Another official “Religious Group” recognised by the Republic of Macedonia was the group consisting of the Muslim Bektashi Order, placed under the Bektashi Union of Macedonia. Since it was not associated with the Islamic Religious Community, the Bektashi Union of Macedonia became part of the Muslim World Union of Bektashi based in Tirana, Albania.³⁵ In other words, any religious institution, organisation, or movement that is registered under the “Religious Groups” was automatically under and responsible to one of the major and recognised “Religious Communities.” The adoption of the 1997 Law has made resolution of this issue even more unlikely. Vlachs, Turks and Macedonian Muslims also experienced discrimination by not being allowed to practice religious rituals in their mother tongue.

The laws on education previously forbade any religious activity or instruction in schools, and in primary, secondary or higher educational institutions.³⁶ However, the new amendments of the 2007 Law allowed students to have religious instruction in schools to some extent.³⁷ Nevertheless, provision of spiritual support in care homes, prisons and in the army, regulation of charitable activities or organisations of religious communities, provision of state funds, and any intentions to denationalise religious properties were not mentioned in this law. These are among the crucial issues in the eyes of the public, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Christmas, the second day of Easter, the first day of Ramadan Bayram, the first day of Kurban Bayram, and the first day of Yom Kippur are public holidays and non-working days according to article 4 of the Law on Holidays of the Republic of Macedonia.³⁸ Macedonia is among the three countries of the former Yugoslav republics to celebrate Ramadan and Kurban Bayram as public holidays. However, there are no provisions or socio-religious contracts between the State of Macedonia and the Islamic Religious Community on various other faith matters, such as permission to perform Friday prayer and to shorten working hours during the fasting month of Ramadan since lunch hour is

skipped. These are among the issues of paramount importance for the followers of the faith. Now our focus will be on the role, functions, contributions and challenges of the Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia.

A) The Islamic Religious Community: Office and Scope

As a continuation of the tradition of the Ottoman and Yugoslav periods in the Balkans, the Islamic Religious Community (literally translated as the Islamic Religious Union but commonly known as the former) became an independent and the only institution recognised by the Macedonian government that serves and represents Muslims of the country by Law. After the dissolution of SFRY, the constitution of the Islamic Religious Community in the new independent and sovereign country of Macedonia was drafted for the first time in 1994 and recognised by the state. With this, the Community entered a new phase of history as a religious institution. Its constitution states that the Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia, due to its historical background, is the sole legal inheritor of all religious institutions and is the representative organisation of all Muslims in the territories of Macedonia. It is a competent institution that is responsible for the religious development and welfare of Muslims and regulates the latter by taking care of them and by designating the affairs and obligations related to the followers of Islam. It also protects and cultivates all aspects of moral and social values, economic, cultural, educational, and other significant matters concerning Muslims. In addition, it represents Macedonian Muslims in the country and abroad. It is obligated to follow the Holy Qur'an, the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be on him), the constitution of the Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia, and to practice the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence.³⁹

The organisational structure of the Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia consists of four units: a) the Council of the Islamic Religious Community; b) *Reisul-Ulema*, the Head; c) *Rijaset* of the Islamic Religious Community; and d) *Muftis* of 13 districts. The institutional areas which operate directly under and/or are regulated by the Islamic Religious Community are mainly: a) *Waqf* Directorate; b) Religious schools (*Medrese*); c) Facult(ies) of Islamic Studies; d) Islamic research centers, institutes, libraries, information and publishing centres, museums, archives relating to Muslim history, *hans* (Ottoman accommodation complexes) and *hammams* (Ottoman public bathes); and e) Muslim humanitarian organisations.

In achieving its aims and objectives, the Islamic Religious Community focuses mainly (but by no means exclusively) on the following areas:⁴⁰

- Educating and cultivating Islamic values;
- Establishment and maintenance of mosques, Islamic centres, *tekkes* and *maktabs*;

- Establishment and running of educational institutions;
- Establishment and running of socio-cultural institutions;
- Establishment and maintenance of libraries, archives, museums, and other specified institutions;
- Establishment and maintenance of graves and graveyards;
- Establishment and running of welfare and charitable institutions;
- Establishment of *waqfs* (endowment) and protection of their rights;
- Promoting peace and the declaration of war against evil and terrorism;
- Publishing beneficial works;
- Cooperation with all institutions, associations, and various organisations that promote Islamic values;
- Cooperation with all religious centres, non-governmental and governmental organisations in Macedonia, as well as supporting all the activities concerning the advancement of Muslims in the country in religious, cultural, scientific, health, and socio-economic fields.

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the problem of restitution of religious properties expropriated by the former Yugoslav government, which was not fully resolved until the present. Many religious communities had extensive grounds or other properties expropriated by the communist regime, and they have not regained full ownership of many of these properties. Ownership of many mosques has been restored to the appropriate religious community, but that was not the case for most of the other properties. Restitution or compensation claims are complicated by the fact that the seized properties have changed hands many times or have undergone development. The Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia has been tirelessly advocating the matter and has claimed it was not able to regain rightful use of several mosques that the government had agreed to return. The Islamic Religious Community has also claimed that in some cases the government of Macedonia delayed the process of restitution by selling or starting new construction on disputed property and by questioning the historical legal claim of the Islamic Religious Community to religious properties (like the mosque of Burmalı and Davut Pasha *Hammam* in Skopje). It faced greater difficulty in obtaining ownership of previously owned property if the property was located in a desirable location for investors or business owners, often in urban areas. In addition, some Sufi Islamic groups of Macedonia experienced extensive difficulties, such as the Bektashi centre of Tetovo, which sued the Government for failing to reverse the former Yugoslavia's nationalisation of the Sufi lodge known as the Arabati Baba *Tekke*. The same Bektashi group also filed a suit against the Islamic Religious Community, which seized part of the mentioned complex in 2002. The Islamic Religious Community's argument was

that the property belonged to them, since the Bektashi order is a “mystical sect” of Islam. The dispute and legal issues still continue.⁴¹

As was common in many other cities and towns of both the East and West, Macedonian cities had clock-towers named *saat-kule*, which were attractive monumental structures. Most of the clock-towers in Macedonia were built during the Ottoman era. The clock-tower of Bitola was mentioned even during the 17th century in some written documents. The clock-tower of Skopje, attached to the mosque of Sultan Murad, was mentioned by Evliya Çelebi and many others during the 17th century.⁴² The clock-towers of the cities of Gostivar and Tetovo are also either attached or next to mosques. However, in the case of Bitola, the Christian symbol of the cross was crowned to the clock-tower in the late 1990s, thereby provoking a clash between the Islamic Religious Community and the government of Macedonia which has yet to be resolved. Similar examples and many other crucial issues are still ongoing, causing an uneasy and unhealthy environment between the Muslims and the government of Macedonia, where the Islamic Religious Community has a paramount role to play.

B) The Role of Institutions within the Islamic Religious Community in Promoting Values and Culture

Islamic institutions and their activities under the office of the Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia play a major role, as they represent an important segment in promoting and disseminating the ethical values and proper code of conduct among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims. In this context, there are three significant areas where the Islamic Religious Community has paid a great deal of attention in achieving the above intentions, and they are as follows:

1. Isa Beg Medrese (High school), including its branches as well as the Faculty of Islamic Studies (FSHI) are two key institutions for Islamic studies in Macedonia, where the subjects taught promote elements of civic education, universal values, ethics and culture. In this context, it is important to refer to the core subjects which shape the aims and objectives of both institutions: *Da'wah* (Preaching Islam), Islamic civilisation, and *Akhlaq* (Islamic moral education). Through these courses students are able to learn the following: a) cultural similarities and differences, and the functions of religion in society; b) Islamic civilisation and its distinctive characteristics; c) relations of Islamic culture and civilisation with other civilisations; d) being a model of tolerance and cooperation in the society where one lives; and e) coexistence in multicultural societies and the positive attitude of Islam towards peace and tolerance.⁴³

2. The Islamic Religious Community also conducts activities promoting Islamic and democratic values (such as tolerance and co-existence) through the 600 plus mosques and the media under its supervision. It publishes a socio-cultural magazine “Hena e Re” in three languages (Macedonian, Albanian and Turkish) and participates actively in religious programs on various radio and TV stations.⁴⁴
3. Taking an active part as a participant in international conferences, with particular interest in inter-religious and inter-civilisation dialogue, has always been on the main agenda of the Islamic Religious Community. Starting from 2007, the World Conference for Inter-religious and Inter-civilisation Dialogue has been held every three years under the organisation of the Ministry of Culture and in cooperation with the Commission for relations with religious communities and religious groups, with religious communities in the Republic of Macedonia, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The most eminent participants in these conferences include presidents of states and governments, ministers of foreign affairs, ministers of culture, directors/chairmen of commissions for relations with religious communities, religious leaders, representatives of religious communities and organisations, representatives of international organisations such as UNESCO, Alliance of Civilizations, the Council of Europe, Organization of the Islamic Cooperation, Arab League, World Council of Churches, International Conference for Religions of Peace, International Organization of Francophones, eminent experts and university lecturers who deal with matters from the perspectives of religion and culture.

The first International Conference for Inter-religious and Inter-civilisation Dialogue, with the theme “The Contribution of Religion towards Peace, Common Respect and Coexistence”, was successfully organised in 2007 in the city of Ohrid. The second such conference was held in 2010 in Ohrid as well, with the theme “Religion and Culture – Unbreakable Connection between People.”

Both conferences had numerous participants, including invited eminent religious leaders, intellectuals and politicians who deal with inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. In both conferences there were participants from more than 50 countries and they were followed by a hundred accredited journalists and reporters from both Macedonia and overseas. In these conferences, many common declarations were adopted and the international committee for organising the next world conference was formed. The above mentioned two conferences made great contributions towards strengthening inter-religious dialogue and tolerance and affirming democratic values that play a vital role in respect between differences.⁴⁵

However, the third conference held in 2013 was boycotted by the Islamic Religious Community, an act that caused a series of reactions. This action from the authorities was justified by the discriminatory politics of the Macedonian government towards the institution of the Islamic Religious Community. The following reasons were mentioned in the explanation for the boycott: 1) ‘Delay of Carshi Mosque rebuilding in Prilep, burned by Macedonian nationalists during the 2001 conflict; 2) Delay of Lazhec Mosque rebuilding; 3) Crosses crowned and painted on the Clock-Tower in Bitola and Prilep respectively; 4) Call for the restitution of the Islamic Religious Community’s nationalised land; 5) Granting a designated land for building the new office for the Islamic Religious Community in Skopje; 6) Exclusion of Islamic elements in the city centre of Skopje from the ‘Skopje 2014 Project.’⁴⁶

Conclusion and Recommendations

Islamic institutional tradition, particularly with reference to the Peninsula, began with the office of *Qāḍī* during the Ottoman rule and continued with the office of *Rijaset* or rather *Reisul-Ulema* during both the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Communist Yugoslavia. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the establishment of newly emerged states out of it, the office representing Muslim communities was rearranged and reemerged as the Islamic Religious Community in the major three states of Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Since the independence of Macedonia from Yugoslavia and the first drafted constitution of the Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia in 1994, the Muslims of Macedonia have to some extent begun to regain their religious rights and freedom. The Islamic Religious Community played a catalysing role in keeping the affairs of religion and the state at their best. The Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia succeeded not only in surviving but also in gaining very strong respect among the Muslim folks and the governmental and international arenas. The only question here is whether the Islamic Religious Community has contributed enough and whether the government of Macedonia has been fair towards its Muslim population in terms of their religious rights and other related matters: the answer would be that there is ‘a long way to go.’

It is suggested that:

- Both the Islamic Religious Community and the Government of Macedonia has to learn a lot from the history of Ottoman rule in the Balkans and its management of all faiths.
- Outstanding issues pertaining to relations between Muslims and Non-Muslims on the one hand, and Muslims and the government of Macedonia

on the other, need to be resolved through cooperation between the Islamic religious Community and other sectors of society.

- The Islamic Religious Community should play a greater role in promoting the rights of Muslims particularly those affecting their freedom of religion and education.

Notes

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1. <http://www.moia.gov.sa/eng/Menu/Pages/About.aspx>
 2. Kuwait: <http://cms.islam.gov.kw/Pages/en/Default.aspx>; United Arab Emirates: <http://www.awqaf.gov.ae/?lang=en>; Qatar: <http://www.islam.gov.qa/>; Bahrain: <http://www.moj.gov.bh/en/>; Oman: <http://www.mara.gov.om/>
 3. <http://www.pmo.gov.bn/Theme/Home.aspx> & <http://www.mufti.gov.bn/>
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 6. <http://www.mohia.gov.af/en>
 7. <http://www.diyonet.gov.tr/en/home>
 8. <http://www.islam.gov.my/en>
 9. <http://english.gov.cn/>
 10. <http://www.seac.gov.cn/>
 11. <http://www.cicot.or.th/>
 12. <http://www.elections.in/government/ministry-of-minority-affairs.html>
 13. <http://mbra.gov.lk/cgi-sys/suspendedpage.cgi>
 14. In Turkish it is called *Kadi*. This institution was not an Ottoman innovation. It was a tradition dating from the first days of Islam, an institution that all previous Muslim dynasties had honoured, even grudgingly at times. Therefore, we prefer to maintain the original term *Qāḍī*.
 15. Mesut Idriz, *The Balkan City of Ottoman Manastir (Bitola): A Model Paradigm for Applied Shari'ah with Reference to Ottoman Judicial Records* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 2010), pp. 70-73.
 16. Mesut Idriz, *The Balkan City*, pp. 72-74; Stanford J. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) pp. 135-136.
 17. On many instances the *qāḍīs* held the title or office of “*qāḍī-ship*” (“*kadılık*”)

- but without being appointed as actual *qāḍī* to any province, district or city. For instance, the *qāḍīs* Ali Efendi, Halil Efendi and Şāh Mehmed Efendi were not actual *qāḍīs* of Manastir appointed by the *Porte* in the year 1043/1633-1634, as the actual one who held that office during this time was Derviş Ali Efendi. Since there is no available data about them, perhaps the others had retired from the actual office or were waiting to be appointed as *qāḍī* to other places. See *Turskīte Dokumenti za Istorijata na Makedonskiot Narod-Serija Prva*, vol.: 2, p. 88, where the document is a translated version of the court record (*qāḍī sijil*) #3-50b-1.
18. For hierarchic scale of imperial *qāḍīs* see: Mehmet İpşirli, “Klasik Donem Osmanli Devlet Teskilati”, in *Osmanli Devleti ve Medeniyeti Tarihi*, vol.: 1, p. 266.
 19. Mesut Idriz, *The Balkan City*, pp. 76-77.
 20. For detailed information on the subject of *şerīyye sicils* see Mesut Idriz (2010), *The Balkan City of Ottoman Manastir (Bitola): A Model Paradigm for Applied Shari’ah with Reference to Ottoman Judicial Records*, (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications)
 21. Halil Inalcık, “Ottoman Archival Materials on *Millet*s” in B. Braude and B. Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in Ottoman Empire*, vol. 1 (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982) p. 437.
 22. It used to be called either “Islamic Community” or “Islamic Religious Community” referring to the institutional office and its organs in all the regions during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and later periods of the Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Directly or indirectly it denotes the same institutional meaning. Therefore, we are going to use the “Islamic Religious Community”, unless it is deemed necessary to mention “Islamic Community.”
 23. Mustafa Imamovic, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Evolution of its Political and Legal Institutions* (translated into English by Saba Risaluddin) (Sarajevo: Magistrat Sarajevo, 2006), pp. 207-8; Lejla Ramic-Mesihovic, “Religious Organization of the Montenegrin Muslims after the Berlin Congress” in Mesut Idriz and Osman Bakar (eds.) *Islam in Southeast Europe: Past Reflections and Future Prospects* (Bandar Sri Begawan: UBD Press, 2014), pp. 150-151.
 24. Lejla Ramic-Mesihovic, “Religious Organization”, pp. 150-151.
 25. Mustafa Imamovic, *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, pp. 289-90.
 26. Private discussion with Adem Idriz, a 73 years old *imam* in Skopje, who narrates from his predecessor. (Private Talk on the 10th February, 2015).
 27. Mustafa Imamovic, *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, pp. 330-341.
 28. Hazim Fazlic, “Islam in the Successor States of Former Yugoslavia-Religious Changes in the Post-Communist Balkans from 1989-2009”, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2011, pp. 52-53.
 29. *Ibid.*, pp.53-55.
 30. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2007/90187.htm> (Accessed on 15.02.2015).
 31. Article 19 of the Constitution of the FYR Macedonia (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 52/1991, 1/1992, 31/1998 and 91/2001).
 32. *Закон на Република Македонија*, Сл. Весник на Р.Македонија бр. 35/97 од 23.07.1997 година [*Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia*, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia No. 35/97 amended in 23.07.1997].

33. Александар Спасеновски, ВЛИЈАНИЕТО НА ВЕРСКИТЕ ЗАЕДНИЦИ ВРЗ ИНСТИТУЦИИТЕ И ПОЛИТИКАТА ВО РЕПУБЛИКА МАКЕДОНИЈА, *Policy Brief Macedonia*, February 2015, pp. 10-12.
34. *Ibid.*, II. ВЕРСКИ ЗАЕДНИЦИ И РЕЛИГИОЗНИ ГРУПИ Член 8 “Верската заедница според овој закон е доброволно организирана, непрофитна заедница на верници од иста вероисповест. За една вероисповест може да постои само една верска заедница.”
35. *Makedonya Muslumanlari*, ИИИ İnsani ve Sosyal Arastirmalar Merkezi, Kasim 2014, pp. 7-9.
36. Article 13 of the Law on Primary Education (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 44/1995); Article 7 of the Law on Secondary Education (Official Gazette of Republic of Macedonia, No. 44/1995); Article 13 of the Law on Higher Education (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 64/2000).
37. ‘On April 16, 2007, Parliament adopted amendments to the law on education to allow for religious education in public schools starting in the 6th year of primary school, when students are approximately 12 years old. Religious instruction is not mandatory. Parents and the student must give consent and specify which religious instruction they wish to receive. The law does not limit the type or number of religious beliefs that can be taught. Courses were to range from religious practice to history of religion and ethics. The new amendments were scheduled to be implemented starting in the 2008-09 academic year.’ Macedonia, International Religious Freedom Report 2007 (Washington: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2007) <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90187.htm> [Accessed on 11 February 2015]. For further discussions on the matter and its content, see Muhamed Ali, “Civic Education and Religion in Macedonia”, in *Islam and Citizenship Education*, ed. by Ednan Aslan and Marcia Hermansen, VS, January 2015, pp. 177-182.
38. Law on holidays of the Republic of Macedonia (Official Gazette of Republic of Macedonia, No. 21/1998).
39. For details, see the book published by the Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia namely *Bashkesia Fetare Islame e Republikes se Maqedonise*, Skopje, Rijaseti i BFI, 2012, p. 4.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
41. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2007/90187.htm> (Accessed on 15.02.2015).
42. Mesut Idriz, *The Balkan City*, pp. 63-65.
43. Muhamed Ali, “Civil Education and Religion in Macedonia” in Ednan Aslan and Marcia Hermansen (eds.), *Islam and Citizenship Education* (np: Springer, 2015), p. 179.
44. *Ibid.*, 179-181.
45. <http://www.kultura.gov.mk/index.php/odnosi-so-javnost/soopstenija/933-treta-svetska-konferencija-za-megjureligiski-i-megjucivilizaciskidijalog> (Accessed on 15.02.2015)
46. Muhamed Ali, pp.180-181.

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