

## INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN CROATIA

Tomislav KOVAČ

Catholic Faculty of Theology, University of Zagreb  
Vlaška 38, p.p. 432, HR – 10 001 Zagreb  
kovactomislav@hotmail.com

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the situation and various factors related to inter-religious dialogue in Croatia. The article is divided into four parts. Firstly, the author briefly elaborates the historical and geopolitical context of Croatia. That is followed by a presentation of data on national minorities and religious communities in Croatia and a reflection on their legal and social status. The third part outlines various bodies involved in interreligious dialogue at the state, religious and academic levels, as well as at the level of independent associations and organizations. The final part delivers a brief overview of significant initiatives in the field of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, which are often linked in Croatia. The author concludes that interreligious dialogue in Croatia has great potential, and that further efforts are still needed in the development of ecumenical and interreligious awareness and cooperation, due to the theological and moral imperatives of religion itself and the goal of building peaceful and harmonious coexistence in a post-conflict context that characterizes Croatia and this part of Europe.

*Key words:* Croatia, national minorities, religious communities, interreligious dialogue, ecumenical dialogue, institutions and associations, coexistence.

### Introduction

Croatia has a rather specific geographical position; it is located at the cross-roads of Western, Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. Although it is a nationally and confessionally homogeneous country whose population majorly consists of Croatian nationals affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, Croatia is also imbued with cultural and religious diversity by virtue of its nation-

al minorities. Therefore, Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Judaism, and Islam are also present there, as well as some other religious practices and beliefs. This cultural and religious plurality enriches Croatian society, making it special in various ways. However, this plurality also presupposes certain obligations and challenges: on the one hand, it calls on the »majority« to protect and nurture a good relationship with »minorities«, while encouraging »minorities« to become a recognizable and constructive factor in society. It can generally be said that interethnic, intercultural and interreligious relations in Croatia are at a good, sometimes excellent level, despite the consequences of the recent war that are still felt. Moreover, many national minorities and religious communities are very satisfied with their legal and social status, often highlighting it as exemplary. Generally, religious communities are an important factor in Croatian society and their contribution to coexistence is invaluable. Dialogue and cooperation between them are therefore extremely significant for the entire social community.

The article is authored by a Croatian Roman Catholic theologian who is personally engaged in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in his country at the academic, Church-institutional and personal levels. The article is intended to provide readers, particularly foreign readers, with a general insight into the state, the main participants and the structures of interreligious and partly ecumenical dialogue in Croatia. For this purpose, we shall first briefly highlight the most important historical periods and the geopolitical context of Croatia. Then we shall offer numerical data on ethnic and religious communities in Croatia, and comment on the way their legal and social status is regulated. We shall also refer to the most relevant bodies involved in the field of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in Croatia, both at the state, academic and religious level, as well as at the level of associations and non-governmental organizations. Finally, we shall highlight some interesting ecumenical and interreligious initiatives as best practices of dialogue and cooperation. In the conclusion, we shall share our thoughts on further challenges of interreligious dialogue in Croatia and the wider region.

## **1. A brief historical and geopolitical overview of Croatia**

Croatia is a medium-sized country (56,594 km<sup>2</sup>), located at the crossroads of Europe. Geographically speaking, it is the southernmost country in Central Europe: it stretches from the vast Pannonian Basin across the Dinaric Alps to the shores of the Adriatic Sea. This distinct geographical position has enabled

Croatia to maintain political, economic and religious contact with Western and Central Europe (Catholicism and to a lesser extent Protestantism), Eastern and Southeast Europe (Orthodoxy and Islam, and partly Judaism), as well as with the Mediterranean. Today, Croatia is surrounded by five countries: Slovenia (in the west), Hungary (in the north), Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (in the east), Montenegro (in the southeast), to which we can add Italy (on the west coast of the Adriatic Sea). The four largest cities in Croatia, in terms of population, are Zagreb (capital), Split, Rijeka and Osijek.

Croats as a nation belong to the Slavic ethnic group; they settled in this area in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Prior to that, this region was inhabited by Illyrians, Celts and Romans. From the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Croats were gradually baptised. At the beginning, Croats had their own principality, after which they established an independent kingdom lead by the first king Tomislav (crowned in 925). In the Middle Ages, Croatia entered into a personal union with the Kingdom of Hungary (1102–1527). Prompted by the Ottoman conquests (from the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century), which stripped Croatia of half of its' territory and halved its population, the Croatian Parliament elected Ferdinand of Habsburg as Croatian king in 1527, placing Croatia in the Habsburg field of interest. At the same time, the coastal province of Dalmatia was conquered and annexed to the Venetian Republic (1409–1797), while in the Napoleonic era it belonged to the French authorities (*les Provinces illyriennes*, 1809–1813). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Croats created the Triune Kingdom of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia as an independent kingdom within the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (1868–1918).

At the end of the First World War, Croats entered the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1 December 1918), which was later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (3 October 1929). This Kingdom, which also included the territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro, functioned as a constitutional parliamentary monarchy until 1929, when King Alexander I introduced a personal dictatorship, with power centralized in Belgrade, under the authority of the Serbian dynasty. During the Second World War Nazi Germany formed the Independent State of Croatia (10 April 1941 – 8 May 1945) though part of the Croats sided with the partisan movement led by the Communist Party. After the war, Croatia became part of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (29 November 1945), later renamed the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Constitution dated 7 April 1963). This »New« or »Second Yugoslavia« included six republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro, led by the long-standing dic-

tatorial and totalitarian regime of Marshal Josip Broz Tito, and centralized in Belgrade. In addition to severely repressing any aspiration for the national independence of individual Yugoslav nations, the regime discriminated against believers in the name of atheist communist ideology, often persecuting religious communities and their leaders.<sup>1</sup>

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall (9–10 November 1989), which marked the beginning of the fall of communism, the first multi-party elections were held in Croatia (April-May 1990), leading to the defeat of the Communist Party. In a referendum held on 19 May 1991 more than 94% of Croatian citizens supported the Croatian-Slovenian proposal to transform the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia into a confederation of sovereign states. After the communist authorities in Belgrade had refused to democratize the Yugoslav federation, Croatia and Slovenia decided to declare their independence on 25 June 1991. The Yugoslav People's Army, led mainly by Serbian and Yugoslav Unitarian officers then launched military aggression first against Slovenia, then against Croatia and ultimately against Bosnia and Herzegovina, under the pretext of preserving the constitutional order. The same Yugoslav army openly supported the Serb insurgency in the former Yugoslav republics and supported paramilitary Chetnik squadrons that committed horrific crimes against the civilian non-Serb population. Despite the international recognition of the Republic of Croatia on 10 January 1992, the military aggression against Croatia continued almost until the end of 1995. This liberation war, which the Croatian army won despite its numerical and armed inferiority, is proudly referred to by Croats as the »Homeland War« (*Croatian War of Independence*). This imposed war has left a great number of human victims and many Croatian cities (Vukovar, Osijek, Zadar, Šibenik, Dubrovnik, etc.) were destroyed or significantly damaged, as one third of Croatian territory

<sup>1</sup> In Croatia, the most famous case in this regard is the staged trial of the Archbishop of Zagreb Alojzije Stepinac, who was sentenced to sixteen years in prison by the post-war communist authorities in 1946 for his alleged collaboration with the Ustasha regime of the Independent State of Croatia. It was later proven that Archbishop Stepinac repeatedly opposed the regime and saved the lives of many Jews and Roma people in dire circumstances. He died under house arrest on 10 February 1960. Pope Pius XII appointed Stepinac a cardinal (1953), while Pope John Paul II beatified him (1998). Cf. Esther GITMAN, *When Courage Prevailed: The Rescue and Survival of Jews in the Independent State of Croatia 1941–1945*, Saint-Paul (MN), 2011; Esther GITMAN, *Alojzije Stepinac – Pillar of Human Rights*, Zagreb, 2019; Robin HARRIS, *Stepinac – His Life and Times*, Zagreb, 2016. See also: Margareta MATIJEVIĆ, Religious communities in Croatia from 1945 to 1991. Social causality of the dissent between communist authorities and religious communities' leadership, in: *Review of Croatian History*, 2 (2006) 1, 117–140.

was occupied.<sup>2</sup> A significant number of sacral buildings, particularly Roman Catholic churches and monasteries, were also destroyed.<sup>3</sup> The democratic transition continued in the post-war period and following lengthy accession negotiations Croatia became the 28<sup>th</sup> member of the European Union on 1 July 2013.<sup>4</sup>

This brief historical overview indicates that Croatia's geopolitical context is rather complex and sensitive. It is equally marked by long-standing political, economic, and cultural ties with Central and Western European countries, as well as often strained relations with its eastern neighbours. On the other hand, although all the republics that have emerged from Yugoslavia today define themselves as secular states, religious identity is very relevant in them, determining in many ways their national identity and mutual relations. Moreover, relations between religion, nation, society, and politics in all post-communist states of the former Yugoslavia have remained very complex and deserve critical deliberation.<sup>5</sup> Ecumenical and interreligious dialogue could be of great benefit for reconciliation and harmonious coexistence.

Finally, although Croatia is often classified as a part of the »Balkans« or one of the »Balkan countries«, it is also important to point out that the vast majority of Croats do not approve of such an association. More specifically, the »Balkans« is not just a geographical term that includes the countries of the so-

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<sup>2</sup> The Croatian War of Independence officially lasted from 31 March 1991 (the first armed conflict caused by Serb insurgents) until 12 November 1995. It is generally estimated that more than 21,000 people were killed or missing: around 15,000 on the Croatian side (8,600 soldiers, 6,300 civilians, 37,000 wounded, another 1,200 missing), and around 7,200 on the Serb-Yugoslav side (4,500 soldiers, 2,600 civilians, 900 missing). Croatian citizens of Albanian, Bosniak, Czech, Roma and Serbian nationalities also participated in Croatia's defence. Throughout the War of Independence, Croatia accepted and cared for over 500,000 displaced people and refugees, including many from Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless of their nationality or religious affiliation. Cf. Branka MAGAŠ – Ivo ŽANIĆ, *The War in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina*, London, 2001; Ante NAZOR, *The Croatian War of Independence: Serbia's War of Conquest Against Croatia and the Defeat of Serbian Imperialism 1991–1995*, [s.l.], 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ilija ŽIVKOVIĆ (ed.), *The Wounded Church in Croatia. The Destruction of the Sacral Heritage of Croatia (1991–1995)*, Zagreb, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> For a more complete overview of Croatian history, see: Ivo BANAC, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*, Ithaca (NY), 1984; Branka MAGAŠ, *Croatia Through History. The Making of a European State*, London 2007; Borna FUERST-BJELIŠ – Nikola GLAMUZINA, *The Historical Geography of Croatia. Territorial Change and Cultural Landscapes*, Cham, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Dinka MARINOVIĆ JEROLIMOV – Siniša ZRINŠČAK, Religion Within and Beyond Borders: The Case of Croatia, in: *Social Compass*, 53 (2006) 2, 279–290; Bojan ALEKSOV, Questioning Western Approaches to Religion in the Former Yugoslavia, in: *Balkanologie*, 15 (2020) 1. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4000/balkanologie.2526> (accessed 27 October 2021).

called »Balkan Peninsula« (stretching from the Black Sea to the Adriatic Sea), but more of a cultural and even ideological term.<sup>6</sup> Its meaning is burdened by the memories of the Ottoman conquests, Byzantium and Eastern Christianity, as well as the unitarian Yugoslav ideology that sought to reduce all the Yugoslav nations to just one. As we have seen throughout its history, the Croatian people have been mainly oriented towards Western and Central Europe: religiously towards Rome, politically, economically, and culturally primarily towards Budapest, Venice, and Vienna. Likewise, despite turbulent historical periods, Croats have managed to preserve their national, cultural, and religious identity, in large part because of the work of the Catholic Church. It is important to keep all these facts in mind when considering interreligious dialogue in Croatia and the wider region, especially when this dialogue is observed from a foreigner's perspective.

## 2. Today's ethnic and religious image of Croatia

### 2.1. National minorities

As a consequence of war, economic or political circumstances in this part of Europe, Croatia was permanently inhabited by individuals or groups belonging to other nationalities or religions. Thus, after gaining independence, Croatia has preserved the practice inherited from the period of the Habsburg Monarchy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which is the recognition of national minorities and their rights. Today, Croatia officially has twenty-two national minorities living within its borders.

According to the 2011 Census, which is still a valid reference document, the Republic of Croatia had a population of 4,284,889. The vast majority of the population is of Croatian nationality, or to be more exact, 3,874,321 persons (90.42% of the total population). As per the same Census, in 2011 Croatia had 328,738 inhabitants belonging to national minorities (7.66% of the total population). These national minorities are listed here in descending order: 186,633 Serbs (4.36%), 31,479 Bosniaks (0.73%), 17,807 Italians (0.42%), 17,513 Albanians (0.41%), 16,975 Roma (0.40%), 14,048 Hungarians (0.33%), 10,517 Slovenes (0.25%), 9,641 Czechs (0.22%), 4,753 Slovaks (0.11%), 4,517 Montenegrins (0.11%), 4,138 Macedonians (0.10%), 2,965 Germans (0.07%), 1,936 Russians (0.05%), 1,878 Ukrainians (0.04%), 1,279 Russians (0.03%), 672 Poles (0.02%), 509 Jews (0.01%),

<sup>6</sup> For more on the ambiguous concept of the »Balkans«, see: Maria TODOROVA, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York, 2009.



435 Romanians (0.01%), 367 Turks (0.01%), 350 Bulgarians (0.01%), 297 Austrians (0, 01%), 29 Vlachs (0.01%); other persons or groups 73,778 (1.92%).<sup>7</sup>

National minorities are recognized by the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (22 December 1990). In the context of protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, the Constitution guarantees »Equal rights for the members of all national minorities«, protection of their rights, the possibility to elect their own representatives to the Croatian Parliament, »freedom to express their national affiliation, to use their language and script, and to exercise cultural autonomy« (cf. Article 15).<sup>8</sup> The Government of the Republic of Croatia takes care of national minorities through the Office for Human Rights and the Rights of National Minorities. Members of national minorities exercise most of their ethnic rights through the regular institutions of the Republic of Croatia, just like the Croatian majority. They are also provided with protection from assimilation and ghettoization, as well as the possibilities to develop their cultural and national identity, in order to integrate them into Croatian society.<sup>9</sup>

Although there is always potential for improvement, members of national minorities are generally very satisfied with their legal and social status in Croatia, often publicly highlighting it. Given that the Serbian national minority is the largest in Croatia, but also due to the fact that Croatian-Serbian relations are still burdened by the recent war, the position of the Serbian national minority in Croatia is very important, as is the position of the Croatian national minority in Serbia. The Government of the Republic of Croatia has invested extensive efforts in this field, although the situation around the country is not always simple, mainly in war-torn places. During the official visit of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, to Zagreb (12–13 February 2018) the then President of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, resolutely supported all efforts that contribute to the coexistence of Croats and Serbs, stating that »no

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<sup>7</sup> The final results of the latest Census conducted in 2021, have not yet been officially released. According to the preliminary results, due to the demographic decline and economic emigration, Croatia today has a population of 3,888,529, which is 396,360 inhabitants (or 9.25% of the population) less than in 2011. The number of inhabitants belonging to national minorities is not yet known, nor is the religious configuration of the population according to the latest Census. Cf. Državni zavod za statistiku (Croatian Bureau of Statistics): <https://www.dzs.hr> (accessed 14 January 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (as of 15 January 2014), in: *Narodne novine*, nos. 56/90, 135/97, 113/00, 28/01, 76/10 and 5/14.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Official website of the Government of the Republic of Croatia for national minorities: <https://pravamanjija.gov.hr>. See also the internet portal dedicated to national minorities in Croatia: <https://nacionalnemanjine.hr> (accessed 6 November 2021).

one in Croatia should be a second-class citizen« and that »Croatia is the common homeland« of all its citizens.<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2. *Religious communities*

Unlike many countries in Europe and the world, Croatian Censuses, in addition to ethnicity, also account for religious affiliations. Hence, with reference to the 2011 Census, there are 3,697,143 declared Roman Catholics in Croatia (86.28% of the total population); 190,143 Orthodox (4.44%); 14,653 Protestants (0.34%); 12,961 other Christians (0.30%); 62,977 Muslims (1.47%); 536 Jews (0.01%); 2,550 followers of Eastern religions (0.06%); 2,555 members of other religions, movements and worldviews (0.06%); 32,518 agnostics and sceptics (0.76%); 163,375 non-religious persons and atheists (3.81%); 93,018 persons who did not declare anything (2.17%), and 12,460 persons with unknown religious affiliations (0.29%).<sup>11</sup>

The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia »guarantees freedom of conscience and religion and the freedom to demonstrate religious or other convictions« (Article 40). Furthermore: »All religious communities shall be equal before the law and separate from the state. Religious communities shall be free, in compliance with law, to publicly conduct religious services, open schools, colleges or other institutions, and welfare and charitable organisations and to manage them, and they shall enjoy the protection and assistance of the state in their activities« (Article 41). The Government of the Republic of Croatia has established a Commission and a special Office for Relations with Religious Communities.<sup>12</sup> The main role of this Office is to ensure the rights and freedoms of religious communities and facilitate their relations with state authorities, pursuant to the Act on the Legal Status of Religious Communities.<sup>13</sup>

A total of fifty-two religious communities are registered in the Register of Religious Communities in the Republic of Croatia, which is stipulated by the said Act, and which is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice and Administration of the Republic of Croatia.<sup>14</sup> They do not include the Roman

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Večernji list*, 13 February 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Population by religion by cities / municipalities, 2011 Census: [https://www.dzs.hr/hrv/censuses/census2011/results/htm/H01\\_01\\_10/h01\\_01\\_10\\_RH.html](https://www.dzs.hr/hrv/censuses/census2011/results/htm/H01_01_10/h01_01_10_RH.html) (accessed 11 November 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Šime JERČIĆ, *Djelovanje Ureda Komisije za odnose s vjerskim zajednicama Vlade Republike Hrvatske*, in: *Nova prisutnost*, 16 (2018) 1, 168–173.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Act on the Legal Status of Religious Communities (7 July 2002): *Narodne novine*, nos. 83/2002, 73/2013.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Šime JERČIĆ, *Djelovanje Ureda Komisije za odnose s vjerskim zajednicama Vlade Republike Hrvatske*, 169–170. See also: Ankica MARINOVIĆ BOBINAC – Dinka



Catholic Church, which has a special legal status arising from the large number of its members, as well as the historical and social significance it has had for the Croatian people. The Republic of Croatia concluded four international agreements with the Holy See (1996 and 1998), which regulate the relations between the Croatian state and the Catholic Church: Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia about the religious assistance to Catholic faithful, members of the armed forces and the police of the Republic of Croatia; Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia regarding their collaboration in the fields of education and culture; Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on legal matters; Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on economic issues.<sup>15</sup> These Treaties include, inter alia: the financing of Church officials and the maintenance of church buildings (as partial compensation for the material goods taken from the Church and nationalized during communism); introduction of confessional religious education as an elective subject in primary and secondary schools (students who do not enrol in confessional religious education can opt for the subject Ethics as an alternative); state funding of church schools, etc.

Pursuant to the Act on the Legal Status of Religious Communities (Article 9, paragraph 1), the Government of the Republic of Croatia has also concluded eight Agreements regulating relations with nineteen other religious communities. The religious communities that concluded Agreements are: Serbian Orthodox Church in Croatia; Islamic Community in Croatia; Evangelical Church in the Republic of Croatia; Reformed Christian Calvinist Church in Croatia; Evangelical Pentecostal Church in the Republic of Croatia; Church of God in the Republic of Croatia; Alliance of Evangelical Pentecostal Churches in the Republic of Croatia; Christian Adventist Church in the Republic of Croatia; Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement; Association of Baptist Churches in the Republic of Croatia; Church of Christ; Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Croatia; Old Catholic Church of Croatia; Macedonian Orthodox Church in Croatia; Coordinating Committee of the Jewish Communities in the Republic of Croatia; Beth Israel Jewish Religious Community; Alliance of Word of Life Churches; Full Gospel Church; Protestant Reformed Christian Church in the Republic of Croatia. These Agreements legally regulate additional rights and obligations of religious communities, in addition to the rights they already

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MARINOVIĆ JEROLIMOV, *Vjerske zajednice u Hrvatskoj. Kratka povijest, vjerovanje, obredi, hijerarhija, organizacija, članstvo, tradicija, običaji i blagdani*, Zagreb, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Ugovori između Svete Stolice i Republike Hrvatske, Povijest nastanka i komentar Nikola Eterović, Predgovor Josip Bozanić*, Zagreb, 2001.

enjoy under the above-mentioned Act. Among these rights, special mention should be made of: conclusion of a religious marriage with the effects of civil marriage, implementation of religious education and teaching in schools and preschool institutions, payment of earmarked funds from the state budget of the Republic of Croatia, etc.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly to the national minorities, most religious communities are very satisfied with their legal and social status in Croatia. The Agreements they have concluded with the state were based on the Agreements between the Republic of Croatia and the Holy See. The Islamic Community, which consists mainly of Bosniaks, Albanians and Macedonians, is particularly content with its position in Croatia. The President of the Islamic Community in Croatia, Mufti Aziz ef Hasanović, often points out the Croatian model of legal resolution of the »Islamic issue« as exemplary, both for the European Union institutions and other countries in the world, also with respect to the legal and social status of religious and ethnic minorities in the Muslim world. In that sense, with regard to the integration and sense of acceptance of Muslims in Croatian society, Mufti Hasanović is pleased to assert that in Croatia it is not about »co-existence«, but simply about *living together*.<sup>17</sup> It should not be forgotten that the relations between Croatia and Islam have been exception for a long time. More specifically, following the recognition of Islam in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Croatian Parliament passed an act on 27 April 1916 recognizing it as one of the official religions of the Kingdom of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia, along with Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Evangelicalism and Judaism.<sup>18</sup>

A ceremony was held in the Croatian Parliament on 27 April 2016, on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this legal and institutionalized recognition of Islam in the Republic of Croatia. At the ceremony, the then Speaker of the Croatian Parliament, Academician Željko Reiner, highlighted the richness of religious diversity in Croatia and praised the positive contribution of Muslims to the Croatian society as a whole: »For centuries, Croatia has been home to the world's three largest monotheistic religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Interreligious respect and the right of every person to freely practice their religion, as well as the obligation not to interfere with the same right of members of other religions have always been a prerequisite for living in

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Šime JERČIĆ, *Djelovanje Ureda Komisije za odnose s vjerskim zajednicama Vlade Republike Hrvatske*, 170.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Aziz HASANOVIĆ, *Integracija i zajednički život muslimana u Hrvatskoj – poželjan primjer europskoj zbilji*, in: *Nova prisutnost*, 16 (2018) 1, 180–184.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ševko OMERBAŠIĆ, *Islam i muslimani u Hrvatskoj*, Zagreb, 2010, 382–385.

peace and stability in this part of the world. All the more so as the interests of the great political powers were constantly at odds in the area of Southeast Europe, with every use of religion for ideological purposes being the cause of conflicts and even wars. The Islamic community has made a great contribution to the enrichment of Croatia. For centuries, Muslims in Croatia have been participating in economic, scientific, political, cultural and sports life, making it better and more advanced. The right to diversity and the acceptance of diversity is one of the basic postulates of democracy. By opposing any evil that would disrupt good relations between Muslims and other citizens of Croatia, you demonstrate by your own example that a life without prejudices is possible and above all worth living, and also preserve the peace and stability of the whole of Croatia.«<sup>19</sup>

The long presence of Jewish people in Croatia should also be referenced, as the earliest records of it date back to the early Middle Ages. Jews have made a discreet but significant contribution to the development of Croatian society, especially in the domains of economy, culture, and science. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were very well integrated into Croatian society, with many of them assimilated, particularly through mixed marriages. At the beginning of the Second World War Croatia had 41 synagogues and about 25,000 Jews. Only 3,000 of them survived the Holocaust. Today, Jews in Croatia generally gather within two communities: in the Coordinating Committee of the Jewish Communities in Croatia and the Jewish Community Bet Israel. Additionally, the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic Jewish Community has also become active in recent years. Interreligious dialogue in Croatia is inconceivable without the participation of Jews, in regard to whom Croatian society has a special responsibility.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Bodies involved in interreligious dialogue

#### 3.1. Official institutions

Among the official bodies involved in interreligious dialogue in Croatia, we can distinguish state, religious and academic institutions.<sup>21</sup> At the

<sup>19</sup> Cf. <https://www.sabor.hr/hr/press/priopcenja/u-saboru-obiljezana-100-obljetnica-priznanja-islama> (accessed 15 November 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Jasminka DOMAŠ, Doprinos židovske zajednice hrvatskoj kulturi i društvu, in: *Nova prisutnost*, 16 (2018) 1, 174–179.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Mato ZOVKIĆ, Mogućnost ekumenizma i religijskog dijaloga u Hrvatskoj te Bosni i Hercegovini, in: *Bogoslovska smotra*, 70 (2000) 3–4, 635–655.

state level, we have already introduced the Commission and the Office of the Committee for Relations with Religious Communities, which serve as a precious »bridge« between religious communities and state authorities in terms of exercising the rights legally granted to religious communities and their good cooperation with society. The Ministry of Science and Education as well as the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia are occasionally involved in the cooperation with religious communities.

At the level of religions, the Roman Catholic Church certainly has the greatest number of structures for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. One of them is the Council for Ecumenism and Dialogue, which is part of the Croatian Bishops' Conference. In 2021, this Council was elevated to a higher level and renamed the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenism, with an advisory Committee for Relations with Jews and Muslims. In addition, all archdioceses (Zagreb, Rijeka, Split-Makarska, Đakovo-Osijek, Zadar) and most dioceses in Croatia (Požega, Sisak, Dubrovnik, etc.) have their Commissions for Ecumenism and Dialogue or commissioners for these issues. Other religious communities have their own bodies or individuals in charge of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

At the academic level, after Croatia gained its independence, four ecclesiastical faculties have gradually become members of state universities: Catholic Faculty of Theology, University of Zagreb, the oldest one (founded in 1669); Catholic Faculty of Theology, University of Split; Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek; Faculty of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Zagreb, within which operates the Faculty of Theology of the Society of Jesus, affiliated to the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome; and two affiliated theological-religious colleges in Rijeka and Zadar. About 150 researchers and professors are employed at these institutions and more than fifteen journals devoted to theological and religious sciences are regularly published in Croatia. There are compulsory and elective courses in the field of ecumenical theology and interreligious dialogue at all these institutions, and some professors are personally engaged in this dialogue on an academic and practical level. The Catholic University of Croatia in Zagreb (founded in 2006), through its various study programmes, also provides a valuable contribution to social and religious studies, as well as to intercultural and interreligious dialogue. There are also three Protestant colleges in Croatia: University Centre for Protestant Theology Matthias Flacius Illyricus, University of Zagreb; Evan-

gical Theological Seminary in Osijek; Adventist Theological College in Maruševac.<sup>22</sup>

With respect to religious research in state (civic) academic institutions, the Faculties of Humanities and Social sciences or Faculties of Law of different Universities in Croatia (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, Zadar, Osijek), including the Faculty of Croatian Studies, University of Zagreb, and some other faculties, recognize intercultural or religious issues to various extents. In general, their most common research domains are the place and role of religion in secular society, religious freedom and civic tolerance, multiculturalism and interculturality, etc. It can be said that interdisciplinary collaboration between theologians or religious communities and humanities and social sciences is generally good and prospective. Lecturers of the mentioned or related institutions often cooperate within the framework of scientific symposia or projects related to interreligious or intercultural dialogue.<sup>23</sup> One such interdisciplinary four-year (2020–2024) research project is currently being implemented at the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Zagreb, on the topic of *The Contribution of Religious Education to Coexistence in a Multicultural Society (Doprinos religijskog obrazovanja suživotu u multikulturalnome društvu)*. The aim of this project, funded by the Croatian Science Foundation, is to explore the contribution of religious education in schools in Croatia, including the intercultural and interreligious competencies of teachers and a comparative curriculum analysis of religious education in other European countries (Austria, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Malta, Belgium, Poland, Finland), in the perspective of developing coexistence in a multicultural society like Croatia in its own way.<sup>24</sup>

Audio-visual media have also greatly contributed to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in Croatia. For instance, HRT1 (the First Channel of Croatian Television) broadcasts the weekly show *Zajedno u Duhu* (Together in the Spirit) and the monthly show *Ekumenizam i religije* (Ecumenism and Religions) both dedicated to reporting on the lives of religious communities in Croatia and interreligious topics, as well as the weekly show *Prizma* (Prism) dedicated to topics related to national minorities. The Croatian National Radio (HR1)

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Tomislav KOVAČ, Religious Research in Croatia: <https://religobraz.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/kovac-t.-resilience-izlaganje-sarajevo-17.02.21.pdf> (accessed 20 November 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Ružica RAZUM – Marija JURIŠIĆ (ed.), *Interculturality and Religious Education in European Documents and Curricula*, Zagreb, 2020. More information about the project is available from the website: <https://religobraz.wordpress.com/eng>

also broadcasts two weekly shows dedicated to societal dialogue in the broadest sense: *Susret u dijalogu* (Meeting in Dialogue) and *Religijski forum* (Religious Forum). There are similar shows on other regional TV and radio stations.<sup>25</sup>

### 3.2. Associations and organizations

There are numerous religious communities, lay associations or non-governmental organizations throughout Croatia, whose activities, directly or indirectly, are related to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Here we will mention the most significant ones.

*Hrvatska sekcija Svjetske konferencije religija za mir* (The Croatian Chapter of Religions for Peace) was founded during the War of Independence, bringing together religious leaders, officials and believers of various religious traditions to work together in order to assuage war tensions and establish peace in Croatia and the region. The Chapter also published its magazine, *Mirotoivorni izazov* (The Challenge of Peace), dedicated to promoting a culture of peace and non-violence, with a total of nineteen published issues from 1992 to 1999.<sup>26</sup> Although, unfortunately, the Croatian Chapter of Religions for Peace has almost completely shut down in the last fifteen years, there are indications that it will be reinstated soon. *Kršćanski mirovni krug* (Christian Peace Circle), an ecumenical association that sought to contribute to dissemination of objective information pertaining to the war in Croatia and encourage Christians in the wider region to advocate for peace and reconciliation, also thrived during the war.

Among the more relevant associations and organizations that are currently active, we can make reference of the *Franjevački institut za kulturu mira* (Franciscan Institute for the Culture of Peace), based in Split.<sup>27</sup> This Institute is particularly engaged in the promotion of social justice and the general culture of dialogue and peace in society. It organizes symposia, publishes books and proceedings on relevant topics, and is occasionally also involved in interreligious dialogue. In Zagreb we find the *Centar »Hrvatski areopag« za međureligijski dijalog* (Centre »Croatian areopag« for Interreligious Dialogue) as part of the Croatian Conventual Franciscan Province of St. Jerome. In addition to occasionally organizing inter-religious gatherings, this Centre has increasingly fo-

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Jerko VALKOVIĆ (ed.), *Vjerska tematika u hrvatskom medijskom prostoru. Zbornika radova znanstvenog simpozija i projekta na Hrvatskom katoličkom sveučilištu u Zagrebu*, Zagreb, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Liljana MATKOVIĆ-VLAŠIĆ, *Blago mirotvorcima. Glas vapijućeg u pustinji*, Zagreb, 2018, 45–55; Željko MARDEŠIĆ, *Svjedočanstva o mirotvorstvu*, Zagreb, 2002, 13–15.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. <http://www.franjevacki-institut.hr>



cused on research and preventive informing on the dangers of sects and occult practices.<sup>28</sup> The work of two closely related peacebuilding associations is rather significant as well – *Vjernici za mir* (Believers for Peace)<sup>29</sup> and *RAND: Regionalna adresa za nenasilno djelovanje* (Regional Address for Nonviolent Action),<sup>30</sup> also based in Zagreb. These two associations cooperate with members of other Christian churches and other religious communities at the regional level, particularly by organizing seminars and workshops dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution. The work of the *Ekumenska inicijativa žena* (Ecumenical Women's Initiative), from Omiš, is also very commendable. The main purpose of this association is to work with women who were abused in the recent wars in this area or who still suffer various forms of discrimination, social injustice and violence.<sup>31</sup> Given the increasing influx of refugees and migrants, mostly from Muslim countries, that Croatia has been facing in the recent years, the commendable work of the *Isusovačka služba za izbjeglice* (Jesuit Refugee Service – JRS), based in Zagreb, on the acceptance and integration of refugees into Croatian society also deserves to be noted.<sup>32</sup>

*Centar za kulturu dijaloga* (Centre for the Culture of Dialogue) was recently established at the Zagreb Islamic Centre. This Centre is particularly focused on educating young people for the values of intercultural, interreligious and social dialogue, at the regional level. It organizes seminars and workshops, and the *Naši novi susjedi* (Our New Neighbours) project, dedicated to the integration of refugees and migrants, is especially noteworthy.<sup>33</sup> Ecumenical, interreligious and dialogical initiatives are occasionally undertaken by the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, too.<sup>34</sup> In terms of promotion of religious rights, Zagreb-based *Udruga za vjersku slobodu u Republici Hrvatskoj* (Association for Religious Freedom in the Republic of Croatia) also holds an important role. The association consists of representatives of various religious

<sup>28</sup> Cf. <https://www.areopag.hr>

<sup>29</sup> Cf. <https://www.vjerniczamir.org>

<sup>30</sup> Cf. <https://www.rand.hr>; Ana RAFFAI – Snježana KOVAČEVIĆ, *Pomagalo na putu nenasilja. Zbirka osorta i primjera radionica za edukaciju članova Crkava i vjerskih zajednica za nenasilno djelovanje*, Osijek, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. <https://eiz.hr>

<sup>32</sup> Cf. <https://hrv.jrs.net>

<sup>33</sup> Cf. <https://ccd.hr>

<sup>34</sup> Cf. [www.evtos.hr](http://www.evtos.hr). We refer to interesting research conducted by two lecturers at that Seminary, as part of the project by the Agape Association in Osijek, on the following topic: »Škola za međuvjerski dijalog i aktivno građanstvo: mlade vjernice i vjernici ususret Europskoj uniji« (School for Interreligious Dialogue and Active Citizenship: Young Believers Towards the European Union): Antal BALOG – Julijana MLADENOVSKA-TEŠIJA, *Mladi i vjera ususret Europskoj Uniji. Zbornik radova*, Osijek, 2013.

communities in Croatia, and its goal is to defend, preserve, spread and improve the religious freedoms of individuals and religious communities, as well as to promote the right to freedom of conscience and religious affiliation. The association also publishes its own magazine, *Vjerska sloboda* (Religious Freedom), twice a year. Furthermore, as part of its annual Ceremonial Assembly, which is usually held around the International Religious Freedom Day (16 January), the Association recognizes and awards those who have contributed to the promotion of the values of dialogue, tolerance, and coexistence in Croatian society.<sup>35</sup>

At the civic level, we can mention the activities of the *Centar za promicanje tolerancije i očuvanje sjećanja na Holokaust* (Centre for the Promotion of Tolerance and the Preservation of Holocaust Remembrance)<sup>36</sup> and the *Centar za mirovne studije* (Centre for Peace Studies)<sup>37</sup> in Zagreb, and the *Centar za mir, nenasilje i ljudska prava* (Centre for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights) in Osijek.<sup>38</sup> With regard to the promotion of dialogue, tolerance and peacebuilding, religious and civic associations could indeed work well together and contribute to social dialogue and coexistence revolving around common values. The recently established *Centar za studije sukoba i mira* (Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies) at the University of Rijeka could also function that way. With its activities, this Centre seeks to bring together theologians and religious experts at the regional level to jointly contribute to reconciliation processes in post-conflict environments and to constructive dialogue between religious communities and the secular society. The work of this Centre is currently supported by the Church of Norway, as part of the *Interreligious dialogue across borders of Balkans* project.

Given the important role of the Internet and social networks today, we can make reference of two blogs of exquisite quality that promote a self-critical but constructive view of religion and its role in contemporary secular society. The first blog, *Fratellanza umana* (Human Fraternity) is inspired by Pope Francis' dialogical initiatives, especially in the spirit of the Abu Dhabi Document on *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living*.<sup>39</sup> The second blog, *Polis*, is edited by members of the Franciscan Province of Bosna Srebrena. Although primarily related to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the richness of its topics and dialogical content is rather stimulating for the faithful and population in the

<sup>35</sup> Cf. [www.vjerska-sloboda.hr](http://www.vjerska-sloboda.hr)

<sup>36</sup> Cf. <https://centartolerancije.hr>

<sup>37</sup> Cf. <https://www.cms.hr>

<sup>38</sup> Cf. <https://www.centar-za-mir.hr>.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. <https://fratellanzaumana.wordpress.hr>

wider region, primarily in the matters of building a culture of dialogue, reconciliation and coexistence in post-war societies where interethnic and inter-religious relations are still strained.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Significant ecumenical and interreligious initiatives

Given the ethnic and religious composition of Croatia, it is understood that ecumenical dialogue takes precedence over interreligious dialogue among the predominantly Christian population, due to the very nature of the Christian faith (cf. John 13:34-35; 17:21; et al.). The history of ecumenical relations in the wider area is generally compelling and deserves to be studied.<sup>41</sup> After the recent war in Croatia, the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church have been especially relevant for the reconciliation and harmonious coexistence of the Croatian and Serbian people. The Roman Catholic Church sees dialogue among Christians as a prerequisite for dialogue with members of other religions and with the contemporary world.

With reference to the most significant ecumenical initiatives, we should highlight that the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Unity Octave) has been celebrated every year since 1984 in several Croatian cities, with the participation of representatives of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Baptist Churches. In 1997, the Ecumenical Coordinating Committee of Churches in Croatia (*Ekumenski koordinacijski odbor crkava u Hrvatskoj* – EKOCUH) was also established as an interconfessional working party within which the Roman Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, Evangelical, Reformed, Baptist and Evangelical Churches cooperate. We should note that prior to the beginning of the Unity Octave 2019, a meeting of all five bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church and five representatives of the Croatian Bishops' Conference, headed by its president Želimir Puljić, was held in Požega. The notables reached a rather significant and momentous joint Statement focused on the respect for the innocent victims of the Second World War and the 1991–1995 war and on joint efforts to build trust, mutual understanding, and a better society for every human be-

<sup>40</sup> Cf. <https://polis.ba>

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Antun ŠKVORČEVIĆ, Katolička crkva u Hrvatskoj i ekumenizam, in: *Bogoslovska smotra*, 65 (1995) 3–4, 513–540; Jure ZEČEVIĆ, Ekumenska i dijaloška otvorenost Katoličke Crkve u Hrvata, in: Frano PRCELA (ed.), *Dijalog. Na putu do istine i vjere*, Zagreb – Mainz, 1996, 289–308; Daniel PATAFTA, Ekumenska gibanja u Hrvatskoj neposredno nakon Drugoga vatikanskog koncila, in: *Bogoslovska smotra*, 84 (2014) 4, 851–879.

ing.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the Ecumenical Music and Prayer Meeting on the occasion of the global ecumenical initiative *Time for Creation* has been held in Zagreb since 2020.

However, an excellent example of ecumenical and interreligious cooperation was achieved even before that, as part of the regular Meetings of high representatives of the religious communities in Croatia. Thus, a total of nine multilateral meetings were organized from 2001 to 2013, in which representatives of the Jewish and Islamic religious communities also participated, in addition to the high representatives of Christian churches in Croatia, each meeting had a host, addressed a current and a concluding joint statement. The meetings were held in the following order on the following topics: *Legal Situation of Religious Communities in Croatia* (5 February 2001, hosted by the Roman Catholic Church in Zagreb); *Forms of Mutual Cooperation of Religious Communities in Croatia* (20 June 2001, hosted by the Islamic Community in Zagreb); *Against the Introduction of Religious Elements into Atrocities that are being Committed* (13 November 2001, hosted by the Coordinating Committee of the Jewish Communities in Zagreb); *Facilitating One Non-Working Day for Workers; Against Sending Troops to Iraq and Calling for Croatia not to get Involved in Conflicts; Common Position on the Introduction of Yoga into the Education System in Croatia* (17 July 2003, hosted by the Union of Baptist Churches in Zagreb); *Rejecting All Forms of Violence in the Name of Religion; Agreements between Religious Communities and the Croatian government; Protection of Every Form of Human Life and Boosting Birth Rates* (3 March 2004, hosted by the Roman Catholic Church in Zagreb); *To Witness to Our Closeness and Communion in the Human and Religious Dimension and to Promote a Culture of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation* (16 June 2010, hosted by the Roman Catholic Church in Sisak); *Joint Statement on the Family* (28 February 2011, hosted by the Islamic Community in Zagreb); *Shared Religious Values in the Service of Social Justice* (7 May 2013, hosted by the Jewish Community Bet Israel); *Preventive and Curative Aspects of Preserving Marriage and the Family in Croatia – Religious Communities' Experiences* (12 November 2013, hosted by the Roman Catholic Church in Zagreb). Unfortunately, due to unknown reasons, these meetings have not been held for a longer period of time, but we hope they see a new dawn soon.

The most famous interreligious initiative in Croatia is the celebration of the Day of the Spirit of Assisi, in memory of the interreligious prayer for peace

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Promicati zajedništvo iznad svake nacionalne i političke isključivosti, in: *Glas Koncila*, 27 January 2019, no. 4, 2.

held in Assisi on 27 October 1986, at the instigation of Pope John Paul II. Inter-religious prayer meetings »in the Spirit of Assisi« have been held regularly in various Croatian cities since the mid-1990s. In Zagreb, this prayer is organized by the Franciscan Secular Order and the Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue of the Zagreb Archdiocese. Given that Croatia is a predominantly Christian country, as we have pointed out, most of the participants in this interreligious prayer are actually representatives of various Christian churches, with the representatives of the two main Jewish communities and the Islamic community.<sup>43</sup> As a related event, we can point out the Interreligious Concert held each year from 1992 to 2012 on the International Human Rights Day, 10 December, in Zagreb, as an initial project of the Croatian Chapter of the World Conference of Religions for Peace. That tradition continued in 2016, when the University of Zagreb began organizing the same annual Interreligious Concert.

From a historical point of view, the ecumenical and interreligious event that took place on 2 May 2019, on the occasion of the Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom HaShoah), is considered far-reaching. That was the first time that four high-ranking religious representatives visited Jasenovac, the largest concentration camp during the Independent State of Croatia and a symbol of the suffering brought by the Second World War.<sup>44</sup> The Yugoslav communist authorities heavily manipulated the number of deaths in Jasenovac during the Second World War in order to discredit the Croatian people as much as possible by linking them to fascism, and to cover up numerous partisan crimes committed during and after the war. Immediately after the war, the number of deaths had been estimated to be around 700,000, while later independent research offered more realistic estimations ranging from 80,000 to 100,000 victims, mainly of Serbian, Roma and Jewish nationality, but also including Croatian nationals resisting the Ustasha regime. To this day Jasenovac remains a controversial subject, chiefly among Serbian politicians in the region, who have, in fact, tried to move the attention away from the crimes committed by their compatriots both in the Second World War and the recent wars in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>45</sup> It is precisely for these reasons that the prayer visit of

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Josip BLAŽEVIĆ, Prvih 25 godina duha Asiza, in: Josip BLAŽEVIĆ (ed.), *Zbornik radova Tjedna međureligijskog dijaloga povodom 25 godina duha Asiza, Zagreb, 21.–27. listopada 2011.*, Zagreb, 31–35.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Molitva u Jasenovcu: Vjerski predstavnici za žrtve Holokausta, in: *Glas Koncila*, 12 May 2019, no. 19, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Vladimir GEIGER, Pitanje broja žrtava logora Jasenovac u hrvatskoj i srpskoj historiografiji, publicistici i javnosti nakon raspada SFR Jugoslavije – činjenice, kontroverze i manipulacije, in: *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, 52 (2020) 2, 517–587.

Croatian religious leaders to Jasenovac represents a significant step forward in ecumenical and interreligious relations in this part of the world. The four religious representatives that participated in that visit were as follows: the Chief Rabbi of the Bet Israel Jewish Community in Croatia Kotel Da-Dadon, Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana Porfirije Perić (who was elected the new Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church on 18 February 2021), Bishop of Požega Antun Škvorčević, and Mufti Aziz Hasanović, President of Meshihat of Islamic Community in the Republic of Croatia. The same interreligious prayer was repeated on 26 March 2021, with a slightly different participant composition and in the presence of the Apostolic Nuncio to the Republic of Croatia, Archbishop Giorgio Lingua, a genuine supporter of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.<sup>46</sup>

At the academic level, ecumenical and interreligious cooperation in Croatia is great. Members of various religious communities and denominations often participate in scientific or professional gatherings dedicated to religious or related topics. One concrete positive example can be seen at the Faculty of Philosophy and Religious Studies of the University of Zagreb, run by Jesuits, where courses on Judaism and Islam are taught by members of the respective religious communities. At the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Zagreb, students who opt for the elective course *Islam and Christianity* visit the Islamic Centre in Zagreb every year, where they attend Islamic prayer and have a dialogical meeting with the Imam. The Catholic University of Croatia in Zagreb also cooperates well with the Israeli Embassy in the Republic of Croatia, mainly on projects that deal with interreligious matters.<sup>47</sup>

Among the more recent gatherings, we should address the interdisciplinary scientific-professional conference *Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue: Positive Experience of Croatia in the European Context*, which was held on 21 November 2017 in Zagreb. The conference brought together sixteen presenters from Croatia and abroad who discussed the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue in a globalized world, the sociological and legal chal-

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Na međureligijskoj molitvi »kakav god da je bio zločin, nadilazi ga oprost«, in: *Glas Koncila*, Easter 2021, no. 14, 1, 8.

<sup>47</sup> One example of this cooperation was a solemn international scientific conference dedicated to Christian-Jewish relations, held at the University on 11 November 2019. Papers from this conference were published in the bilingual proceedings: Zoran TURZA – Suzana OBROVAC LIPAR (ur./ed.), *Odgovorni prema našem vremenu – Taking responsibility of our time. 25. obljetnica uspostave diplomatskih odnosa između Svete Stolice i Države Izrael (1994.–2019.) – The 25th Anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel (1994–2019)*, Zagreb, 2020.



lenges of multiculturalism as well as concrete interreligious and intercultural coexistence, dialogue, and cooperation in Croatian society. The importance of these topics and the relevance of the conference itself was confirmed by its renowned organizers: the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia and the Croatian Commission for UNESCO, in cooperation with the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Zagreb, the Catholic University of Croatia, the University of Zagreb and the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, under the auspices of the Croatian Government.<sup>48</sup> A large international conference *Human Fraternity for Enhancement of Security and Peace (Ljudsko bratstvo – temelj mira i sigurnosti u svijetu)* was held 4–5 February 2020 in Zagreb, marking the first anniversary of the Abu Dhabi Document on *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*. The event was organized by the Meshihat of the Islamic Community in Croatia and the Muslim World League (Rabita), in cooperation with Croatian Bishops' Conference and under the auspices of the President of the Republic of Croatia Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. The Conference was attended by over thirty presenters from Europe and the Muslim world, and its final result was the adoption of a joint Declaration on a shared commitment to human fraternity, unity and respect for religious, ethnic and cultural diversity and freedom.<sup>49</sup>

Here we have touched upon only a few ecumenical and primarily interreligious initiatives, which we consider representative of the specific Croatian social and religious context. There are numerous other examples of interreligious meetings and cooperation in Croatia, and it might prove useful to initiate keeping systematic records of them in the foreseeable future, so that similar activities could be evaluated and developed.

## Final reflection

Given the specific historical heritage and geopolitical and cultural context, it is gratifying to state that ecumenical and interreligious relations in Croatia are on a fairly good level and have great potential for quality development. The legal position and social status of national minorities and religious commu-

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Tomislav KOVAČ, Međukulturalni i međureligijski dijalog: pozitivno iskustvo Hrvatske u europskom kontekstu. Interdisciplinarni znanstveno-stručni skup s međunarodnim sudjelovanjem. Zagreb, 21. studenoga 2017., in: *Bogoslovska smotra*, 88 (2018) 1, 223–233.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Zagrebačka deklaracija o ljudskom bratstvu za jačanje mira i sigurnosti u svijetu, Zagreb, 4.–5. veljače 2020., in: *Minber – Glasilo Islamske zajednice u Hrvatskoj*, 8 (2020) 20–22, 20–21.

nities, compared to neighbouring countries and even many European Union countries, is at an enviable level. Although ecumenical dialogue is a priority among Christians, in the case of Croatia, this dialogue often builds on interreligious dialogue, particularly in the context of interreligious gatherings and meetings in which representatives of various Christian Churches regularly participate. Relations between the majority religious community, the Roman Catholic Church, and other religious communities are generally good, although relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church are still burdened by the traumas of the recent war and hints of nationalism on both sides. However, certain steps in the right direction that have taken place in recent years, such as the joint meeting of Roman Catholic bishops and bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Požega (2019) or the joint interfaith prayers in Jasenovac (2019 and 2021), are surely encouraging and hopeful.

It should be acknowledged, nonetheless, that ecumenical and interreligious relations, especially at official levels, remain mostly formal in nature, which is reduced to courteous mutual congratulations on holidays, occasional meetings, possibly a joint statement, humanitarian action or cultural event. Likewise, religious ministers and the faithful have yet to fully develop an awareness of the importance of dialogue, both at the general human or social level, and the ethical and religious level. There is even less awareness of the theological foundation of dialogue which, at least for Christians, stems from the dialogical nature of God's revelation and God's constant action throughout the history of mankind and in the heart of every human being.<sup>50</sup> That is why it is imperative that dialogue, from the institutional level, descends as much as possible to the grassroots level, i.e., the level of people and specific environments. The role of religious leaders and ministers is rather important here, as the example of their personal openness and commitment can serve as a strong incentive for the faithful in their communities to follow their lead. This is especially important in any (post) conflict society, such as those in Croatia and the surrounding countries.

Any initiative that favours getting to know one another, developing trust and cooperation among the faithful belonging to different religious communities is rather welcome. It is exceptionally important to educate young people for a culture of encounter and dialogue, so that they would dispel prejudices and develop respect for diversity. Religious education programmes, at schools

<sup>50</sup> Cf. PAUL VI, *Ecclesiam suam. Encyclical on the Church* (6 August 1964), no. 70–80. Available at: <https://www.vatican.va> (accessed 4 December 2021).

and in religious communities, can contribute significantly by devoting more space to ecumenical and interreligious content as well as by organizing occasional meetings with representatives or young people of other religious affiliations. The faculties of theological and religious sciences, which are quite numerous in Croatia and neighbouring countries, are especially encouraged to develop ecumenical and interreligious awareness among students and the wider social community. In this regard, the academic, professional and other dialogue initiatives that already exist at the local, national and wider regional levels are to be commended. It is true that, as far as Croatia is concerned, the burden of history is still heavy, and that many religious leaders, officials and the faithful, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church, shy away from any regional cooperation due to negative memories of destructive Yugoslav unitarism. On the other hand, given the multi-ethnic and multireligious reality, as well as the close relationship between religion and nation that is typical of all states of the former Yugoslavia, ecumenical and interreligious cooperation at the regional level is a necessary contribution to reconciliation and healing of collective conscience, so that a better and more peaceful life would be possible, at least for the younger and future generations.

In a world characterized by increasing ethnic and ideological tensions, the faithful are considered to be most called upon to serve as instruments of peace. They are especially encouraged to bear witness to spiritual and moral values based on transcendent principles, that go beyond the categories of nations and even religions, values that can free people and societies from exclusivity, hatred and violence. Teaching people to live together, in peace and with mutual respect, is the noblest task of any religious tradition. Despite the objective difficulties, Croatia has good foundations for such coexistence. And it is precisely on these foundations that further ecumenical and interreligious efforts can build a common home, in which there will be a place for everyone and where everyone will feel welcome, safe, but also responsible for one another.

**Sažetak**

**MEĐURELIGIJSKI DIJALOG U HRVATSKOJ**

Tomislav KOVAČ

Katolički bogoslovni fakultet, Sveučilište u Zagrebu  
Vlaška 38, p.p. 432, HR – 10 001 Zagreb  
kovactomislav@hotmail.com

*Namjera ovog članka je predstaviti stanje i različite čimbenike međureligijskog dijaloga u Hrvatskoj. Članak je podijeljen na četiri dijela. Autor najprije, u kratkim crtama, opisuje povijesni i geopolitički kontekst Hrvatske. Zatim iznosi podatke o nacionalnim manjinama i vjerskim zajednicama u Hrvatskoj te se osvrće na njihov pravni i društveni status. U trećem dijelu, spominju se različite instance koje su involvirane u međureligijski dijalog na državnoj, vjerskoj i akademskoj razini, tako i na razini samostalnih udruga i organizacija. Na kraju se pruža letimični pregled značajnijih inicijativa na području ekumenskog i međureligijskog dijaloga, koji su u Hrvatskoj često povezani. Autor zaključuje da međureligijski dijalog u Hrvatskoj ima puno potencijala, ali da, također, treba nastaviti razvijati ekumensku i međureligijsku svijest i suradnju kako zbog teoloških i moralnih imperativa same vjere, tako i zbog izgradnje mirnoga i skladnoga suživota u postkonfliktnom kontekstu u kojem se još uvijek nalazi Hrvatska u ovom dijelu Europe.*

*Ključne riječi: Hrvatska, nacionalne manjine, vjerske zajednice, međureligijski dijalog, ekumenski dijalog, institucije i udruge, suživot.*