

Youths of Albanian Origin between the National Identity and Religiousness



Social Science

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Abstract

After the cycle of NEZI conferences, based on the articles in the media regarding the religiousness in general, and for youths of Albanian origin in particular, as well as on the public debates in countries of Western Europe regarding migration, the impact of different religions in the construction of their identity, and after consultations with other conference participants who were interested in this project, we started thinking of writing an article about national identity and religiousness of the youths of Albanian origin. Apart from revealing the scientific truth about religious and national (ethnic) identity, the paper aims at presenting the activities of the NEZI group to the public, pointing out the outcomes of the cycle of conferences held in 2014 and 2015.

Secularism and Contemporary Societies

In recent years, the role of religion has drastically changed in modern societies of Western Europe. Indeed, with the strengthening of secularism in these societies, religion has lost its dominant power against the economic and political development. As a consequence of this essential change, individuals and institutions have become less dependent on religion (Morlet, 2007); however, this also results in an increased level of secularism in the public sphere as well as the individual one. In this respect, religion today is perceived mainly as an external power with little influence in society (Crul et al., 2007). However, with the increase of mobility and *mondialism* in the beginning of the 21st century, even though universal values tend to spread more and more, regional and religious specifications continue to play a crucial role especially in traditional societies in the reproduction of their own norms and values.

The Swiss Federal Council has also dealt with the issue of religious practices in Switzerland (CF, 2013). In a published report, a general explanation, especially in relation to the threats from possible Islamic radicalism in Switzerland has been given. This report, in our opinion, lacks precise explanations related to the specifications of religious practices by the youths of Albanian origin, as well as the factors that influence the strengthening or withering of such practices. The recommendations on the best ways of nurturing the interethnic, intercultural and interreligious peace among the foreign youngsters living and working in Switzerland are also missing. On the other hand, as regards the phenomenon of practicing religion in Prishtina and Tetovo, or even in broader Albanian areas, we have not been able to find adequate scientific literature.

Parallel to the published report by the Swiss Council, studies in the domain of Albanian migration in general (Burri-Sharani et al., 2010) present religion as something marginal and with very little effect. It is said that Albanians have always given more weight to the national aspect as opposed to religion. In centuries, they have been organized based upon ethnic grounds and never let the religious aspect dominate in the political or public sphere (Malcolm, 2011). It is, however, quite paradoxical that the Albanian youths living and working in Western Europe tend to develop and express a stronger “religious conscience” as well as practicing religious rituals in sanctuaries. If this is proven in the paper, then the issue of relatedness between this phenomenon and the perception of national affiliation emerges. In cases of identifying Albanian youngsters, the question is if they are going to be classified first as Albanians or as Muslims. If all of these elements prove to be relevant, what will the explanation of this phenomenon be? Exactly, our paper will try to provide a scientific-sociological explanation of this possible change in relation to religiousness and to analyze the factors that influence the amplification or enervation of the religious and/or national identity.

The Project Flow

Based on the plan, each of the project coordinators (in Geneva, Prishtina and Tetovo)² was responsible for organizing the activities, abiding by the preset agenda and executing the specific part of their job. In the three locations, the contacts with youngsters and their interviewing were carried out by students, supervised by the coordinators themselves. This kind of division of duties and responsibilities enabled the coordinators to deal more with the analytical approach, as well as reflections and project finalization. In order to understand and explain the multi-dimensional process and to territorially contextualize every city separately, the survey consisted of half-directive interviews, which made it possible to talk to young people and take into account their life experiences. The questionnaire was composed of 15 questions, all of which were almost identically presented to 10 young people in the three cities mentioned above.

Both colleagues of ours in Prishtina and Tetovo reported that the received initial instructions were successfully transmitted to the interviewers, in order for them to maintain the necessary distance with the interviewees. The role of interviewers was quite delicate, in the context of *insider and outsider*³, which required from them to maintain the necessary distance with the interviewees and neutralize subjective effects (De Sardan, 2008: 197). In addition, the interviewers lacked experience in research and interviewing and as a consequence, interviews sometimes lacked spontaneity. They lasted for about 45 minutes and were carried out in different locations, based on the precursory agreements between the interviewers and the interviewees.

² Based on the fact that there was an atheist ruling power in Albania for more than five decades and that Tirana does not have a similar religious history to Prishtina, we decided not to include this city in our study.

³By being *insiders*, the interviewers had enough knowledge about the developments and family functioning in locations where interviews took place; whereas, the *outsiders* only had to look for specific information, which would enable the most objective sociological analysis (Brubaker, 2002).

The aim of emphasizing the interviews was the creation of a sufficiently substantial construction, which would enable objective analysis and finding of scientific explanations about everything that was pointed out by the youngsters in the three cities. After the transcription of the interviews, the aim was to cut and select parts of interviews based on previously defined codes, with the help of a special computer program known as *Atlas*. However, the transcripts in Prishtina and Tetovo had changed their shape, especially in terms of ordering the sub-questions, compared to the initial recommendation, and this prevented us from using *Atlas* as such. According to this, we have to say that the analysis of the content was done in a classical and logical way (Bardin, 2007: 47); i.e. reading and rereading of texts to find the most representative and meaningful citations, which would also sufficiently explain the eventual tendencies of the interviewees. In this way, we managed to build typologies and give meaning to the sociological explanations for all meaningful topics in relation to the explanation of the feeling of national or religious affiliation of the interviewees.

It is worth mentioning that all interviewees were 18-year-olds in their final year of secondary education. In order to understand their explanations better, they were identified in a specific way for every city. The citations taken from those interviewed in Geneva – GE⁴ have been numbered from 1 to 10; those in Prishtina – PR, from 11 to 20, and those from Tetovo – TE, from 21 to 30. In order to be able to distinguish the gender of the person cited, we have used ‘M’ and ‘F’. These pieces of information can be found under every piece of citation used throughout the text, in order to illustrate tendencies or analyze content. However, based on these interviews we could not detect big differences between the male and female discourse in all the three cities in question.

Youth’s multidimensional identity

In order to understand the construction and development of identity in youngsters, we should take into consideration certain crucial parameters, such as: ethnicity, traditions, parents’ social status, and the desired social status by the youngsters themselves. According to Crul et al., (2007: 286), identities are closely related to respective cultural and social practices and in order to adopt a certain identity, these practices have to have at least three main dimensions:

- The symbolic dimension
- The interaction dimension
- The discursive dimension

The first dimension refers to symbols such as the flag, hymn, as well as other ceremonial rituals. The second dimension has to do with the perception of one’s self against the presence of other(s) – all of this in a constant and reciprocal interaction.

⁴ E.g. in Tetovo, TE23V: 4 (page 4) or in Prishtina, PR17 : 2 (page 2)

The third dimension refers to the criterion of defining tags and affiliation, which cannot be individual specifications, but rather reproduced under certain social circumstances, which quite often do not match with the reality, and expressed and distributed based on a specific social discourse and context.

In general, a youngster can be faced with quite ambivalent life experiences, i.e. undergo fluctuations between the traditional/imaginary world of their parents on one hand, and the modern world of the youth on the other. In principle, this phenomenon is quite present in families with a more traditional/conservative background, which have moved from rural to urban areas due to socio-economic reasons. Laëtitia Aïssaoui and Myriam Sousa point out the difference between the social context and daily confrontations of the youth living in completely different conditions compared to their parents:

“In the family cell, the youngster is developed under cultural circumstances related to the values of the country of origin of his/her family and parents, sometimes in interaction with communities of people with similar family culture and history [...]. Outside their family, they are exposed to a completely new culture, language and history. As a consequence, these youngsters have a broader identification possibility and they have to navigate through systems of different values and norms simultaneously”. (Aïssaoui e Sousa, 2008: 19).

This means that youngsters in general, in their teens, navigate between various different realities, which sometimes can transmit contradictory messages. This makes those youngsters to deal with different values and norms in their everyday life, including stressed contradictions among them. This is especially evident in migrated families, where youngsters develop under quite different life dynamics and extremes between their own experiences and those of their parents (Haxhijaj, 2015). On one hand, during their communication with their close family members they are exposed to values closely related to their parents’ country of origin, and on the other hand, outside their family circles, they live very different lives similar to those of their peers in their area of residence. What is the reality of youngsters without these migration backgrounds and experiences, in Tetovo and Prishtina, and is it different from the reality of those youngsters with Albanian origin living and working in Geneva? How similar is their feeling of identity, especially their religious affiliation? These are some questions which we will attempt to answer below.

Religion or Ethnic Affiliation

As mentioned earlier, in modern societies the role and position of religion has changed drastically in the last century. In fact, religion has given more space to the economy and politics. This is why the individual has achieved greater independence from religious institutions in general (Morlet, 2007: 2). This means that with the increase of the tendency for secularism, the influence of religion has withered considerably. Therefore, we can state that in modern societies, religion is more and more considered as an external force (Crul et al., 2007: 341).

Even though religiousness and its influence are constantly weakening, it still continues to occupy a solid position amongst the youngsters with migration background, sometimes reaching at extreme levels (Collet & Santelli, 2012: 97).

In addition, to most of those living in Kosovo, religion is something more than just a marginal value, because religion has historically had a second position, just after the national identity (Burri-Sharani et al., 2010: 79). Even though religion affects the construction of collective and regional identity, it has never been a decisive factor in the determination of the identity of people of Albanian background. There are two ways that can explain this phenomenon: the first is based on the writings of historians, where they say that during the Ottoman invasion, Albanians converted (from Catholicism or Orthodoxy) into Islam for practical reasons.⁵ The second moment has to do with the argument that Albanians (in Albania) lived several decades under the communist rule, which forbade practicing religion; for those living outside the Albanian state, i.e. in former Yugoslavia, the practicing of religion had been limited only to individuals, i.e. in private.

These are the two reasons due to which Albanians (wherever they are) did not develop a special dose of fanaticism in practicing religion. A report published on a request by the Swiss Government, confirms that the practicing of religion by Albanians is reduced to the private sphere, and which is based on respecting the environment where they live and perform (CF, 2013: 24):

“It (the Muslim community) is organized mainly in the function of ethnic affiliation and the spoken language of its members. The Muslim Diaspora in Switzerland is different from other Muslim communities in other Western European countries; it mainly originates from the Balkans and Turkey and very little from other Arabic countries. These communities have no relations among themselves but as such, they have sufficient knowledge on the judicial order in Switzerland and respect it quite well.” (CF, 2013: 3).

If we rely on the idea that Muslims living in Switzerland adopt the same form of practicing religion as they do in their places of origin, the young generations would follow the same tendency. However, sometimes, these same youngsters, by being victims of different forms or perceptions of discrimination, can also express strong national feelings as well as religious ones (Colombo et al., 2009: 55). This makes us analyze and prove if the religious practice of these persons would be the different from that of their peers living in Pristhina and Tetovo.

As mentioned above, there are prejudices attributed to Albanian immigrants. But, what is their real religious practice and what is their opinion about radical religious organizations in the

⁵Initially, in order to avoid high taxes, Albanians began changing their names or surnames (taking Muslim ones). Later, they began to get more and more familiar with the Muslim religion.

world? This question will be answered below and we will also explain the main tendencies that derive from the interviews carried out as part of our study.

For most Albanians, religion is something marginal and spirituality is limited only to one's private life (Vathi, 2011). This statement is also confirmed in the report published by the Swiss Federal Council, which states that Albanians are not part of radical Islamic movements in this country:

“Muslim communities from Turkey and former Yugoslavia living in Switzerland are very closely related to their places of origin, with which they keep regular communication. This has had a positive impact in their religious practices too, which remain the same as those in their places of origin. This means that these communities do not get revolted with the state laws and order in Switzerland nor they pose a threat to it by any means” (CF, 2013: 67).

As regards the form or frequency of practicing religion, it was initially transferred to them from their families through a so called *religious socialization* (Crul et al., 2007). So, in this domain, we are talking about a heritage and a close inter-family relation, and this practice can later evolve. This influence can later be combined with the influence of the community (non-formal circles) or the society as a whole. This means that even if the role of parents is essential in the socialization of their children, there is a series of factors which can directly affect in all spheres of socialization. Some of these factors are as follows: state institutions, media, schools, various different organizations and associations, etc. (Campiche, 2004). The interview outcomes revealed that most of the interviewees stated that their parents or other family members had not influenced their religious affiliation and/or orientation. An exception was a girl from Prishtina who speaks about her brother's religiousness:

“My parents aren't that religious, but my brother is a bit more into it – he prays and practices it more us. He is twenty years old and is influenced by his uncles, because they are religious. The rest of us fast during the holy month of Ramadan, but we don't practice other rituals that much.” (PR15F: 1).

As regards religious holidays and celebrations, there are no big differences among the three cities. In general, the young think that they celebrate two holidays only. None of them mentioned other religious holidays, though. As an illustration, we can mention the statements by two girls from Geneva, who said the following:

“We have celebrated these holidays since we were kids, i.e. *Eid ul Fitr* and *Eid ul Ad'ha*. We have no knowledge about any other holidays.” (GE8F: 1).

However, a girl from Tetovo brings more details with regard to the celebration of these holidays, from the early Morning Prayer which her father observes to the visits of family members and relatives to their home. However, before speaking about these religious holidays, she also explains our national holidays quite thoroughly. Below there is just an extract from her interview where she explains the procedure of celebrating Eid:

“We don’t make great ceremonies; we just buy something to eat, mainly sweets and we get visits from family and relatives. My dad wakes up very early and goes to the mosque for the Eid Morning Prayer. When he comes home at about 9.00 a.m., we have our breakfast and then other family members and relatives come to visit us.” (TE29F: 2).

Based on what the surveyed youngsters claimed, the influence of their peers has also been important in making them establish or maintain connections with religion and its practicing (Muxel, 1988). The statement given by a youngster proves this tendency:

“I can say that I’ve got three types of friends with regard to the practicing of religious rituals. The first group is as me, i.e. they practice faith by their free will; the second group consists of those that are forced to obey religion by their families (parents); and the third group is composed of those that do not practice religion at all and have no ideas about it.” (PR11M: 6).

However, we should stop religious practices. Some of the interviewees think that it is important that these practices be carried out in mosques, whereas others think that they can be observed at home, too. For the first ones, it is said that they are more closely related to institutional and homogenous religiousness (Campiche, 2004), whereas those that associate it with private practicing locations pay more attention to individual demarches and implicate their personal relation with God. At the same time, they are not interested in religious institutions as such:

“No, we can also believe and observe our rituals outside sanctuaries; my parents also say that we are not extremely attached to religion. I can see my father who reads the Holy Quran at home, and he doesn’t have to go to the mosque to do that; he also prays at home, apart from the Friday Prayer which has to be observed in congregation (GE4F: 6).

As regards discussions and conversations at home and the possible influence by the parents, we cannot draw any specific conclusions from the interviews, different from what usually happens in normal modern families. The discussion topics mainly gravitate towards everyday things, such as school, current political issues, daily tasks, etc. A youngster from Tetovo said the following:

“In our house, we talk a lot about politics. We are obsessed with topics of discriminating character, typical to Albanians living in Macedonia. We are very much devoted to our national cause, including my grandfather who has written two books about the history of Tetovo Highlands.” (TE21M: 1).

With the enforcement of *mondialism*, even though universal values gain weight from day to day, national specifications are still strong. Sometimes these enable the youngsters to maintain their close and special connections with their families, relatives and the community. This identification of theirs provides even greater attachment to their traditional norms and values. This has a direct impact in the intensification of their desires to get married to a person who has the same ethnic background. In this respect, it seems that the youth living in Geneva are more open to marriages due to the fact of their socialization in multiethnic societies under different circumstances:

“It doesn’t matter, I don’t think that nationality and/or religion can influence someone’s attitude towards marriage. What is important is the fact whether I like her or not and whether s/he is a good person or not, especially if s/he is a perfect match for me or not.” (GE3M: 3).

Youngsters from Prishtina are more prone to ethnically-based marriages. The following citation reveals the current tendency in Prishtina, i.e. getting married to a partner of the same ethnic background regardless of the religious one, though:

“To me, nationality is more important than religion. That is, I don’t mind which religion my future husband follows. He has to be an Albanian though, but can have a different religion. I wouldn’t accept a partner with a different ethnic background, even if s/e was a Muslim.” (PR17F: 2).

Youngsters from Tetovo have similar attitudes to those in Prishtina. However, they just offer an explanation to their stance. According to them, here could not be extra-ethnic marriages, i.e. they have to happen exclusively among Albanians:

“In my opinion, both nation and religion are determined at birth. At a later age, one can change their religion, but they can’t do that with their nationality (ethnicity). As a consequence, religion is a free choice, whereas nation is not – it is eternal and predetermined as such.” (TE27M: 2).

None of the interviewees claimed to have been a member of any radical Islamic group. On the contrary, they have a completely negative opinion about the existence of any such groups and radicalism in general, as well as wars in the name of faith. It is worth mentioning that this is quite relevant, regardless in which of the cities under consideration these youngsters live. Indeed, all of them declared that they were in favor of modern values of European societies.

As regards religious wars, the interviewees seem to be all united around the opposition against wars, especially against those motivated by religion, because it (religion) just disguises their true reasons. In this respect, the young claim to be firmly against wars of any kind. They say that they would only go to war if their families were endangered and threatened by any means, i.e. to protect themselves and their beloved ones, if they did not have any other choice, of course. A youngster from Prishtina said the following:

“I would go to war only if I had to defend my family, and I would do it with no hesitation. Otherwise, as regards wars that are currently going on, I think they are all wrong, because none has said to go to war to defend themselves, but to kill and murder others. And then, after the war ends, those who fought claim wealth and other benefits in the name of the war or freedom.” (PR15M: 4).

A youngster from Tetovo was even more pragmatic. He is surprised with the justification of wars because, as he says, after every war people have to sit down and negotiate peace.

According to him, in order to avoid war, discussions of any kind should happen:

“It is not always necessary to start wars, because even if wars happen, people will still have to sit together and negotiate peaceful agreements.” (TE25M: 3).

Another youngster in Geneva speaks about a *brain wash process* of those that make up their minds for taking part in wars like these. She is convinced that these wars hide their true pretext. In essence, according to her, every single war is caused because of financial interests.

“Wars that tend to be religious have in fact other aims, such as economic profit, and some people are just brainwashed to do things like that, and that is why I would never be part of such dirty games.” (GE7F: 3).

This general tendency and mindset about the causes and nature of wars can also be illustrated through the words of a young boy from Prishtina and a girl from Tetovo:

“I think that Albanians take part in these wars because of financial problems and poverty.” (PR12M: 4).

“I’m against wars that use religion as pretext, because all religions should promote peace and prosperity.” (TE28F: 4).

Conclusion

In order to understand well the issue of identity determination, we should emphasize that religious affiliation as well as the general identity background, are not linear processes and can never be defined once and for all:

“[...] affiliation and identity have not been engraved on marble nor have they been eternally guaranteed; they can be negotiable and changeable [...] Among all the identities that float, some have been chosen freely, some others are attributed by people that surround us.” (Bauman, 2010: 20-23).

It is more than evident that the process of individualization generates social change and it also mitigates the role of institutions in the daily life of the young. In addition, with the increase of mobility and communication, values evolve following different dynamics. It is exactly this dynamics that makes the young ignore the traditional approach and aim towards secularism,⁶ i.e. maintain individual distance and queue towards atheism.

The interviews with the youngsters in Geneva, Tetovo and Prishtina confirm the same as in the current modern societies, that the role of religion has undergone a considerable decline. This means that the young pay more attention to their national background and affiliation rather than religion. Based on the interviewees, we can see that most of the young, regardless of the city they come from, want to marry an Albanian partner, though their religious background does not matter the most. This implies that the young behave in conformity with values, norms and culture inherited by their parents (Vasconceloz, 2013).

As mentioned above, this small-scale research was carried out in three cities only, i.e. urban areas, and we think that if it had been done in other locations too, the results would have

⁶ In general, this phenomenon can emerge with both the reduction of institutional religiousness and the increase of individualized spirituality.

changed a lot. Also, the fact that interviews and transcripts were realized by different people, the analysis of those materials was not at the proper level, moreover because of the fact that we could not take into consideration the emotions and gestures revealed during the interviews.

In conclusion, in modern societies of pluralist reality and identity, there are also variants or tendencies which could gather together groups with different individual peculiarities. These tendencies, depending on the topic in discussion, can also include bigger groups of individuals, and sometimes the whole majority, as was the case with the interviewed youngsters who listed national affiliation in the first place and who gave less weight to their religious background.

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