Article

Why Do They Not Do More? Analyzing Peacebuilding Actions of Religious Leaders during and after Violent Conflicts

Stipe Odak

Institute of Political Science Louvain-Europe, Université catholique de Louvain, 1348 Louvain la Neuve, Belgium; stipe.odak@gmail.com

Abstract: This article examines how religious leaders navigate between tensions involving theological ideals of peace and pragmatic realities during violent conflicts. The findings are based on 75 in-depth interviews with Orthodox, Catholic, and Islamic religious leaders in Bosnia-Herzegovina, conducted between the years 2015 and 2017. The paper introduces the concepts of "theological dissonance" to describe mismatches between principles and actions, and "pastoral optimization" for the strategy of maximizing influence under constraints. Factors influencing engagement in peacebuilding include doctrinal traditions, individual differences, organizational capacity of a religious community, effective control over messaging, and audience receptivity. In terms of practical suggestions, the article proposes several measures that could enhance synergy between religious and nonreligious actors working together in this field, most notably, understanding each other's scopes and limitations and clarifying what "peace" and "peacebuilding" represent to each partner.

Keywords: religious leaders; conflict; peacebuilding; war; Bosnia and Herzegovina

1. Introduction

This article examines circumstances under which religious leaders are engaged as agents of peace during violent conflict. The findings draw primarily from extensive ethnographic research with religious leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, contextualized within broader debates on the relationship between religion, conflict, and peace. As highlighted by this issue's theme, such discussions simultaneously expose both the positive and negative aspects of religious and faith-based activism. They also present religion as a multidimensional phenomenon, manifested as sacred doctrines, cultural traditions, and elements of identity, as well as a factor in personal development and group organization. In the first section of this study, various viewpoints will be delineated on the intersection between religion, conflict, and peace. Following this, the article will underline the privileged position of religious leaders in mobilizing the potential for peace through religion. Subsequently, a theoretical framework will be presented to explain why religious leaders either choose to engage or abstain from involvement by introducing concepts of "theological dissonance" and "pastoral optimization. The framework suggests that during conflicts, religious leaders feel a mismatch (dissonance) between their theological ideals and realities on the ground, including their own, action, or lack of action, during conflicts. In deciding how to act, they aim to optimize their positive impact by weighing situational constraints and threats to their life and status. In the second part of the article, all these elements are illustrated by quotes from the chosen research participants. The paper concludes by proposing effective strategies for integrating religious leaders into broader peacebuilding initiatives, an approach that can prevent overreaching expectations leading to disillusionment or fundamental misunderstandings regarding the nature and scope of peacebuilding.

1.1. Religion, Conflict, Peace

Let us commence with two distinct images. The first dates back to 4 July 2014 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, delivered a speech at Mosul's al-Nuri Mosque.

In his address, he urged all Muslims to rise against the enduring humiliation and combat "the camp of the jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of kufr" (quoted in Ingram et al. 2020, pp. 162–63). He further obliged them to migrate to the caliphate, where Muslim devotees from diverse races and countries were united in mutual defense and sacrifice. "Their blood," al-Baghdadi continued, "mixed and became one, under a single flag and goal, in one pavilion, enjoying this blessing, the blessing of faithful brotherhood" (quoted in Ingram et al. 2020, p. 163).

Fast forward nearly a decade later. Russian President Vladimir Putin declared during a Victory Day rally following the invasion of Ukraine that "there's no place in the world for executioners, punishers, and Nazis" (quoted in Dixon et al. 2022). Commending soldiers who continued their forefathers' liberation work, Putin referenced the passage from John 15:13 stating "[T]his is where the words from the Scriptures come to my mind: 'There is no greater love than if someone gives his soul for his friends'" (quoted in Elie 2022).

Those two very different speeches, nevertheless, illustrate striking similarities in the narrative blending of religious symbols, fraternal imagery, references to grievances, and defensive claims. Simultaneously, they provide insights into the inherent complexities associated with analyzing links between religion and violence. On the one hand, it appears that violent endeavors are directly inspired by religious doctrines. While the ISIS war against "unbelievers" and enemies included struggles over territory and resources, their overarching project was a theological one. Here, it seems political power is only an instrument of theological aims.

Conversely, Putin quoting the Bible during a military parade suggests a very different interpretation. The Russo–Ukrainian War involves two states sharing the same majority religion and it in no way centers around theological disputes. Religion, therefore, does not appear as the "root" of the conflict but rather as something conveniently appropriated. It serves as a justification for pre-existing decisions regarding the need for a territorial invasion. Religion, it seems, in this case, is an instrument of politics. Putin's example also shows that references to religious symbols are not prerogatives of religious elites; they are resources available to political leaders, identity entrepreneurs, and wide groups of believers in general.

These two vignettes also represent different perspectives in debates on religion and violence. One sees religious elements as subservient to political ambitions, while the other roots violence in interpretations of religious texts and the execution of theological ideals. Importantly, both interpretations can be valid depending on the specific dynamics and circumstances. Yet neither provides a universal truth applicable to all instances where religion features in violent conflicts. So, how do we then decipher these intricate connections between religion and violence?

As stated, one approach involves scrutinizing religious texts and doctrines. Critics frequently highlight that foundational texts of numerous religious traditions harbor concepts that are inherently at odds with modern liberal values. Examples include the notions of a holy war, the superiority of men over women, mandated punishment for blasphemy, or the glorification of martyrdom (Selengut 2003; Harris 2005; Schwartz 1997). Furthermore, broader norms such as absolute obedience to the divine, adherence to religious conceptualizations of the universe, and belief in ultimate rewards and punishments after death stand in contrast to the secular emphasis on open inquiry, scientific authority, and the pursuit of happiness within a person's earthly life (Hitchens 2007; Dawkins 2008). Yet, societies are always heterogenous. While conflicting norms can lead to polarization between societal groups, it does not necessarily follow that these groups will engage in conflicts. To explain how violence follows from ideological discrepancies, the following pathway is sometimes suggested: groups hold different norms, and based on these norms, they articulate mutually incompatible goals, the achievement of which is predicated on control over material and symbolic resources. From this perspective, religions—like any other ideology—offer ideational resources upon which individuals and groups construct their objectives. The existence of conflicting aims—or even compatible ones achievable

only at another group's expense—thus ultimately incites conflicts due to competition over resources. Some authors argue that religion can create a sense of artificial scarcity. To use an example from Avalos (2005), ordinary land might not be viewed as a valuable or scarce resource prompting competition. However, if the same piece of land is designated as a "sacred land", the stakes then suddenly become much higher, and the parties essentially engage in a zero-sum game with transcendent stakes at play. This approach, largely in line with the realistic conflict theory (Sherif 1966; Sherif et al. 1988; Brewer 1979; Jackson 1993), puts a strong emphasis on goals and "rational" calculations in assessing the ways to achieve them. Some other theories, most notably the Integrated threat theory (Stephan et al. 2008, 2009), prioritize the perception of threats, be they symbolic or existential, in line with the pre-existing group anxieties and prejudices.

It is crucial to acknowledge that within different theoretical frameworks, religions can appear at different phases of a process, commencing with the recognition of a threat and culminating in violence. For instance, religion can foster the belief that certain actions constitute blasphemy (*perception*), that adherents should respond with insult and outrage (*stance*), that such irreverent acts stem from a malevolent and "eternal" adversary (*attribution*), and must be therefore punished (*action*). Concurrently, promises of divine rewards may serve as motivation to overcome psychological impediments like fear or hesitation, which, according to Collins (2011), establishes the final threshold of every violent confrontation.

Grievances spurred by religion diverge from those politically motivated due to their association with divine justice and the perception of violence as an element of cosmic war. As Juergensmeyer (2000, p. 217) posits, the notions of cosmic wars are "ultimately beyond historical control, even though they are identified with this-worldly struggles. A satanic enemy cannot be transformed; it can only be destroyed". Here, a broader connection can be made between the completely negative Manichean depictions of the enemy and the theories of "scapegoating", perceived either as a general mechanism underlying conflicts (Girard 1986) or part of a larger process of victimization (Staub 2000, p. 370).

Another articulation of the path from religion to conflict goes through the formation of individual predispositions and collective identities. Certain tendencies, such as authoritarianism or dogmatism, can be reliably correlated with prejudice, negative stereotypes, and discrimination (Sibley and Duckitt 2008; Adorno et al. 1950; Laythe et al. 2001), which are, in turn, frequently theorized as antecedents to violence (Stephan et al. 2008; Faragó et al. 2019; Saguy and Reifen-Tagar 2022). Religion enters the equation because it is suggested that religious socialization and education foster these conflict-prone dispositions (Danso et al. 1997; Weller et al. 1975; Rock 2004). The focus here extends beyond religious doctrines to encompass the organization of religious life. Religious communities typically direct their activities exclusively toward members of that particular group, thereby reinforcing identification and strong preferences for coreligionists at the expense of outsiders. Additionally, hierarchies present themselves in the organization of religious life, coupled with the sanctions for "sinners" and "outcasts", promote compliance with group norms.

This perspective deviates from theories that focus on competitions stemming from incompatible goals. In line with Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004), the mere presence of contrasting identities can generate discrimination, which then may escalate into conflict. The organizational aspect of religious life then may bolster existing divisions between social groups or create new ones. Even when final conflicts do not explicitly invoke religious claims, differences solidified by religious traditions can be seen as foundations for violent mobilization (Aho 1981; Kavrakis 2023).

This process of religiously supported identity clashes can be examined at the level of a single society, where members of different faiths are in contention. However, it can also be extrapolated to higher levels of abstraction. One popular macro-level model of religious conflict is the "clash of civilizations" theory (Huntington 1996), which posits religion as the defining component of civilizations and the broadest level of cultural organization. While

Huntington forecasted that these clashes would transpire along civilization fault lines, their genesis can be ultimately traced back to divisions between groups sanctioned by religions.

Of course, the story can be told in a radically different way. Religious traditions are not solely repositories of ideas extolling their own communities; they also encompass narratives emphasizing the sanctity of every human life and the irreducible dignity of all created beings, as well as the value of the shared environment. As such, religion can inspire ideologies promoting universal human rights and transnational justice (Abu-Nimer 2000; Bouta et al. 2005; Aydin 2002). Instead of fueling conflicts, this has the potential to dismantle existing or emerging intergroup boundaries, facilitating rapprochement and the "humanization" of former enemies (Smith et al. 2022; Lindsay 2020). Similarly, religious narratives espousing peace, empathy, and benevolence can catalyze the articulation of shared goals and mobilize collective action toward positive ends. As Küng (1998) argues, religious traditions, as fonts of moral authority, could provide the bedrock on which principles of a global ethos take shape. Finally, social capital accrued through religious rites and ceremonies could be channeled into resistance against oppressive political regimes. It could also support advocacy for democratic values and protection for marginalized groups. Empirical backing for these claims can be found in the evaluation of different democratic movements globally. Of the 78 cases analyzed by Toft et al. (2011, pp. 92–96), religious actors assumed a leading role in 30 and a supporting role in 18 additional cases.

When it comes to the individual level, religiosity appears in various forms, manifested in a wide range of attitudinal and behavioral patterns. Some forms of religiosity are associated with prejudice, ethnocentrism, and right-wing authoritarianism, while others correlate with tolerance, empathy, and an enhanced inclination for reconciliation among groups (Doebler 2013; Scheepers et al. 2002; Laythe et al. 2001; Rowatt 2019). Consequently, the critical question is not whether religion universally leads to conflict or peace but which expressions of religiosity engender conflict and which encourage prosocial behavior. As Appleby (1999) astutely notes, religious traditions are ambivalent; they harbor both abundant potentials for peace as well as resources that can lend legitimacy to violence. This task is fundamentally interpretive; religious traditions must be "read" in ways that uphold peace. In this context, religious leaders hold pivotal roles; their influence over believers as experts in religious matters and community organizers renders their interpretation of religious traditions particularly consequential.

1.2. Religious Leaders as Agents of Peace

Religious communities and leaders have gained increasing attention from political actors and organizations. The United Nations resolutions following 9/11 demonstrate a growing awareness of the need to engage religious leaders not just to counter extremist narratives that can lead to violence but also to address underlying conditions conducive to radicalization. For example, The UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) and the UN General Assembly Resolution 60/288 (2006) highlight that religious leaders can have a unique impact through their authority in interpreting religious traditions and their deep integration into community life. As noted in the 2002 United Nations Report of the Secretary-General, religious groups and their leaders hold a comparative advantage in conflict prevention thanks to their rootedness within a local context and culture. By leveraging their moral influence, these leaders can underscore the common humanity of disputing factions and advocate for peaceful methods of expressing disagreements as opposed to resorting to hostility.

Religious leaders' impact goes beyond theological arguments against violence to shaping identities in ways that increase resilience to violent mobilization. These sentiments are echoed in a recent action plan aimed at preventing incitement toward violence known as the "Fez Process", published by the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and Responsibility to Protect. There, it is stated that religious leaders "in particular, have a strong potential to influence the lives and behaviour of those who follow their faith and share their beliefs. When they speak out, their messages can have a strong and wide-ranging impact" (UN

Office on Genocide Prevention and Responsibility to Protect n.d., p. 6). Their efforts include not just countering violent rhetoric but promoting interfaith dialogue, education, human rights, and social justice.

A recent scholarship within International Relations has highlighted how religion remains an underutilized resource within statecraft alongside conflict transformation and peacebuilding strategies (Johnston and Sampson 1995; Appleby 2003). Many peace initiatives falter because supporting narratives fail to resonate with wider cultural traditions or seemingly contradict ethical norms (Philpott 2012). Thus, according to Vendley and Little (1995, p. 307), "Understanding a religious community's primary language is a key to grasping that community's potential for peacemaking". In this regard too, religious leaders can become important actors by "translating" dominant (often secular) discourses on peace into language accessible to their communities, thereby rooting these concepts more deeply within their own religious traditions. Finally, in many societies where they are regarded as trustworthy figures, religious leaders may serve as representatives during negotiations or mediate between conflicting sides; moreover, they can act as "bridges", promoting mutual understanding between opposing parties (Harpviken and Røislien 2005, pp. 24–26; Johnston 2003, pp. 238–39).

Religious leaders, in summary, possess a dual advantage not necessarily enjoyed by other community leaders. Firstly, they hold the authority to interpret their religious traditions without negating violence-supporting texts but can contextualize them in a manner that emphasizes their subordination to the overarching principle of peace (Bennett 2008, pp. 193–200). Additionally, they can emphasize sacred texts and elements of their tradition that underscore the universal sanctity and transcendent value of human life beyond national or religious boundaries (Gopin 2015, pp. 360–61) while also morally and spiritually denouncing crimes and fighting impunity (Omona 2023, p. 279). Secondly, by organizing religious rituals and other aspects of communal life within their faith communities, these leaders have an opportunity to demonstrate virtues in a practical way such as through peaceful coexistence and intergroup understanding. In societies where large numbers attend religious ceremonies regularly (typically weekly), these leaders benefit from consistent contact with diverse social strata (Odak 2021, pp. 316–17).

The question then arises: Why do religious leaders, who have such large potential at hand, often fail to fully actualize it? In the sections that follow, that specific question will be addressed in detail.

2. Methodology and Choice of Case Study

The 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina stands as one of the bloodiest conflicts in Europe since World War II. Over just three and a half years, it claimed more than 100,000 lives, while more than half of the population (around 2 million people) were forced to flee their homes (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia n.d.; Zwierzchowski and Tabeau 2010). This backdrop saw numerous war crimes, crimes against humanity, and even genocide. The country's demographic makeup consists primarily of three ethnic groups—Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats—whose identities overlap to a large extent with the religious identities of being Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic, respectively. Although the war was not perceived as a religious conflict, religion did inevitably play a role as a marker and fortifier of ethnic identities and as a source of legitimation for political assertions. The role of religious leaders during and after the conflicts remains contentious.

Some scholars suggest these communities were key proponents in fueling violent rhetoric (Perica 2002, p. 166; Sells 1998), while others criticize them for their inability to contribute sufficiently toward de-escalation efforts or proactive peacebuilding activities after hostilities had ceased (Clark 2010; Sterland and Beauclerk 2008). More positive evaluations highlight documents produced by these religious communities during the war condemning atrocities and advocating for peace. They also acknowledge their practical engagement in humanitarian aid provision along with spiritual assistance and emotional support to those affected (Blažević 1998; Brajovic 2006, pp. 160–62).

Looking at a larger historical arch, the 1990s conflict represented merely the latest eruption in a line of recurring mass violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was particularly widespread during the World Wars. The Nazi-allied totalitarian regime ruling from 1941 to 1945 eventually gave way to the multiethnic Communist Yugoslavia which, despite economic improvements, constrained civil liberties, including religious freedom (for a broader context, see Ingrao and Emmert 2013; Ramet 2002). This long history of intergroup conflict—it is important to stress—exists alongside an impressive array of mutual understanding and exchange between different ethnic and religious traditions. In that sense, Bosnia and Herzegovina is akin to a "natural laboratory", where complex interactions between religion, conflict, and peace can be explored.

Between September 2015 and February 2017, 75 in-depth interviews were conducted with religious leaders from Bosnia and Herzegovina's three largest faith communities: 26 from the Islamic Community, 28 from the Roman Catholic Church, and 21 from the Serbian Orthodox Church. The research was part of a doctoral project approved by the Université catholique de Louvain and KU Leuven. The interviews were carried out in person and in each respondent's mother tongue to facilitate openness on this sensitive topic. To protect anonymity, all personal identifiers have been removed during transcription and analysis. Any names of participants used here are pseudonyms. The transcripts were imported into NVivo software ver. 11, coded, and analyzed. Both the collection of data and the subsequent analysis were guided by the principles of the Grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006). Grounded theory methodology aims to develop a theory starting from concrete empirical observations. It is, in this respect, different from other methodological approaches that test hypotheses based on pre-existing theories. As the name suggests, the Grounded theory approach *grounds* its theoretical models in collected data, gathered through repeated cycles of data collection and theory building (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The fundamental tenet of Grounded theory research can be encapsulated as "abductive reasoning". The given process is iterative in nature; it begins with a set of limited observations, which subsequently leads to the development of working hypotheses. These hypotheses are then revised based on newly acquired data (Philipsen 2018). This ongoing process continues up until a point referred to as "theoretical saturation". Theoretical saturation refers to the stage where "no new properties of the category emerge during data collection" (Charmaz 2006, pp. 100–1). Ultimately, this entire procedure culminates in the formulation of a viable theoretical model.

Theoretical Framework

The discussion will present the theoretical framework developed as a result of the aforementioned Grounded theory approach, which explains religious leaders' engagement during conflicts through two key concepts, "theological dissonance", and "pastoral optimization". The theory suggests that religious leaders, when confronted with violent conflicts, grapple with discord between their theological ideals and their (in)actions amidst the harsh realities of violence and suffering. Furthermore, this state of theological dissonance can manifest itself when two conflicting values or objectives are present but cannot be achieved concurrently or successively. This situation is then reflected in the domain of action as "pastoral optimization", where selective practices are chosen from available resources after weighing existential and symbolic risks against potential benefits. The model helps us to understand the specificities of religiously inspired peacebuilding. Unlike other peacebuilding projects, these endeavors have theological motives and incentives at their core and are thus less influenced by economic, political, or other nontheological objectives. However, religious leaders' deep community ties—the very foundation of their influence and credibility—also constrain the scope of their actions. Aiming to achieve theological goals and resolve theological dissonance, religious leaders seek ways to optimize their activities in such a way as to maintain strong bonds with the community. This, however, rarely results in a perfect optimum, and the selected course of action might be seen as subpar to faith demands. This can, in turn, create further theological dissonance, for

instance when religious leaders feel they have compromised truth for security or comfort. These dynamics will be examined further in subsequent sections.

3. Analysis

3.1. Theological Dissonance

The manifestation and intensity of theological dissonance during conflicts depend on two core factors: doctrinal traditions, primarily those regarding the legitimate use of violence, and, secondly, the individual characteristics of religious leaders. Importantly, religious traditions themselves can have different coexisting positions on the same issues. A case in point would be Christianity's strong doctrinal support for nonviolence even in self-defense as depicted in the Christian Gospels' narratives on the passion and death of Jesus, which coexists with the broader tradition of "just war" that permits the limited use of violence under particular circumstances. Both of these positions are then juxtaposed with pragmatic concerns arising from the context of existential insecurity. Let us now consider several concrete examples.

Josip, a Roman Catholic priest, initially stated that the defense of cities and populations under attack exemplifies both humanistic and religious ideals of unselfish self-sacrifice. He illustrated this with an example of soldiers who were defending Vukovar, a city in Croatia that became a symbol of innocent suffering and loss during the wars in the 1990s. However, Josip also notices a certain mismatch between the image of Jesus as presented in the Christian Gospels and the one of warriors:

> I am hesitating a little bit... It is a little bit paradoxical... Perhaps [I can put it] this way: Christ would never take a gun to defend Vukovar, I agree. He could have called angels from heaven to prevent his crucifixion, but he has let it be done. But I think... Under the predicament of contradiction, under the danger of being in disagreement with Christ's essential message, perhaps we can still imagine a pious, godly person defending the homeland. Home and family are also things of value. They are not anti-Godly values. (...) I am hesitating to say.... What would happen to us—did we betray Christ when we said, "We will defend Vukovar" or were we supposed to withdraw to Zagreb and then what? (...) I am hesitant to say if that [defense] is faithful to Christ's message of peacemaking.

Unlike Josip, who ultimately accepts the enduring tension between theological ideals and practical realities, Miloš, an Orthodox priest, strives to resolve this apparent incongruity. He interprets the deeds described in the Gospels as singular examples of Christ's salvific mission, not as models for Christians to imitate. Miloš states:

> Christ's death was aimed at unifying human nature with God's nature, to destroy death by dying, and to grant resurrection to the weak [human] body, that is the meaning of his death. For that reason, one should not equate Christ's voluntary death with armed conflicts and wars, or to put those things in opposition to each other, or use it as an ideal model for us.

For Miloš, the event of Jesus's voluntary death for the salvation of humankind presented in Scripture is exceptional. It should thus not be viewed as a model for how individuals ought to act in recurring situations of violence throughout history. The issue is that this same logic could be applied to other moral actions depicted in religious texts, raising the question as to why these other examples should not also be seen as exceptional cases rather than universal obligations. Miloš's Orthodox confrere Damjan, conversely, opines against theological justifications for any form of violence:

> [W]ith respect to the role of sacrifice in Christianity, I am personally much closer to the theory that violence should absolutely never be used. I do not think that a person who simply shows even a minimum amount of violence stops being Christian just by virtue of that act. But that person does lose that identity, especially when persisting in it [in their use of violence] and especially when justifying it theoretically. (...) [T]here were cases when people in high positions,

including theologians, claimed that the defensive war was good, and so on. That does not have any theological basis; it could only be treated as something that can be tolerated as a lesser evil. But I believe that one should never in practice resort to it [violence], and even less justify it theoretically.

These statements underscore the diversity of perspectives on the legitimacy of violence within a single religious tradition. The general tendency among respondents was to affirm the acceptability of self-defense under attack, but they diverged on whether such violence was virtuous or simply an imperfect lesser evil. These very understandings influence the degree to which religious leaders experience the dissonance between theological ideals and realities. However, even when there is a narrow allowance for the use of violence in self-defense, the dissonance surfaces upon recognizing that claims of self-defense often serve as justifications for offensive actions. Danijel (the Catholic Church) observes:

I hold the view that it is all right that a person cannot allow another person to kill him. In my view, the theory of the defensive war could be acceptable, if there were not so many wrong interpretations that sneak into it and then even an aversion towards others is explained as self-defense (. . .) Here, in our territories, everyone was defending themselves. They were defending their centuries-long hearths [houses]—some were defending centuries-long Serbian hearths [houses], some were defending their identities, some were defending the state. All were defending themselves, but [in reality] everyone was attacking everyone.

Another example of theological dissonance is the mismatch between the religious imperative of forgiveness and the practical challenges of enduring injury. As initially stated, the degree of dissonance depends foremost on a religious community's doctrinal position. For Christians, this mandate rings true given the Gospels' call to love one's enemies and the explicit petition in the core prayer which reads, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". Marijan, a Catholic priest, affirms, "I think that the theology of forgiving is really one of the bedrocks of the Christian identity and worldview. (. . .) In the theological sense, we have to forgive, if that is in any way possible. [They should forgive] in the same way, or at least in a similar way, as God forgives".

In contrast, while acknowledging the potential benefits of forgiveness, Hamza, an imam, presents it as but one possible response to insult, recognizing the divergences between Christianity and Islam on this issue. Hamza says the following in that respect:

[Islam] is not like Christianity, [which states], "If he hits you on one cheek, turn [the other]", although that is at the top [of the moral hierarchy]. But I still think that Muslims, theologically speaking, do not have the right to do the same. Also, because God is the one who passes the final judgment and he [the perpetrator] is, after all, a perpetrator. One should influence [the perpetrator] through prayer, social [sanctions]. (. . .) If everything else fails, what remains is praying for him [the offender]. A Christian would say immediately, "pray for him" or "love thy neighbor". No! Let him come to himself. (. . .) He needs to experience some social [sanctions and feel] despised at least.

We can also detect instances of theological dissonance when individuals need to prioritize between competing values. A prime example from the wars in ex-Yugoslavia was the religious leaders' desire to remain separate from rampant nationalism and a recognition that such fervor often acts as a magnet for new believers. Speaking about the situation in the Orthodox Church, Konstantin explains:

[N]o matter how strange and unacceptable that sounds at first, that the national fervor and enthusiasm brought some people to the church door and that person then truly converted and became Christian. That was along the line of thought that Serbs are Orthodox and they should be baptized, burn incense, go to church, know some prayers and whatnot. . . Thus, even that [nationalism] can be a "fishing net" for reaching people. You cannot meet an average Joe except on that level where he is currently standing.

Konstantin explains the situations in which the allure of religion for individuals was not predicated upon introspective spiritual exploration but rather on the belief that a particular religion was integral to their national identity. Such "conversions", although clearly imperfect, could nonetheless represent the first toward a more profound religious education. The concern was that strong criticism of nationalism could have stifled this nascent enthusiasm for religiosity. Pavle, another Orthodox priest, likewise noted that it was necessary to "keep those people in the Church", and thus, the Church refrained from overt criticism of the ongoing events. The challenge here is that the practical desire for maintaining neophytes within the sphere of pastoral care becomes a convenient justification for silence even when the core identity of the religious community is at stake.

A similar problem is the tension between keeping a firm stance against war crimes and the religious obligation to minister to all believers, even convicted war criminals. This is in Christian theology linked to the idea that Christ came to redeem sinners, not the saints, or as Bojan (Orthodox Church) puts it: "The Lord tells us that the healthy do not need doctors, but the sick do. That is where the role of the Church is very important, if not the most important (. . .) Those condemned for the gravest war crimes have great need of a priest". The dissonance here occurs when such a theological mandate mutates into a heroization of criminals at the expense of victims of those crimes. As Željko, a Catholic priest, critically notes:

> They humanize criminals. They humanize criminals saying, 'But he is also a human'. Of course, he is. [But] when Jesus forgives people, [when he forgave] the criminal on the cross, he did not deny his evils". In the absence of clear condemnation of crimes, former criminals enjoying pastoral care are "becoming saints in some sense—national heroes and saints, without contrition.

In conclusion, theological dissonance manifests as a disconnect between proclaimed courses of action grounded in religious doctrines (theological ideals) and actual deeds or omissions. The extent of this dissonance correlates chiefly with the specific religious teaching on a given subject. For instance, adherents of religious traditions that insist on the imperative of forgiveness tend to have a more pronounced sense of discrepancy between words and deeds than those from faiths with loss of a focus on forgiveness after wrongdoing. The same can be said for theological teachings on the need for reconciliation, the construction of memory of suffering, or interfaith dialogue. Importantly, theological dissonance is not uniformly distributed among all religious leaders. Some, notably, do not perceive any evident conflict between theological concepts and actions at stake. More often, though, they try to mitigate the severity of dissonance through interpretive tactics. In other cases, they simply accept a degree of dissonance, as with the respondent who leaves the question of defense unresolved.

3.2. Limitations of Influence

In order to exert influence over individuals and groups, it is necessary to effectively mobilize available resources and advantages. The moral authority of a religious community, however, does not guarantee a successful impact on a community. Challenges may arise if the community lacks the structural ability to share its message, faces obstructions in communication channels, or fails to persuade its intended audience. These practical limitations will be discussed in turn.

3.2.1. Organizational Limitations of Religious Communities and Internal Pressures

Vasilije, an Orthodox working in Sarajevo, reported that religious communities faced significant challenges at the start of the war due to their rudimentary organizational structures and lack of adequate human resources. In his view:

> [A]ll our religious communities were on a low level from the perspective of human resources (. . .) They did not have a structure and were on the margins for fifty years, especially the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community. They were more a pretense for a religious community than a religious community

in the real sense of the word. Those were remnants of religious communities. It [the Serbian Orthodox Church] did not have a basic structure. In the whole of Sarajevo, where 250,000 Serbs lived, there were only three priests who did not come down from Bare, the graveyard where they buried people. What mission could they have had and what had they become? Those were not priests anymore but gravediggers.

Other communities, most notably the Catholic Church, possessed somewhat greater organizational capacities but were likewise engulfed in the rapid post-Communist transition as their public role expanded dramatically. To depict the shift from inward-oriented activities to the public role of religious communities, Danijel (the Catholic Church) invokes the metaphor of a "sacristy", the space where clergy prepare for services:

In the period before the war, the Catholic Church especially, and the Orthodox Church to some degree were reduced to sacristies. They were reduced to their own space and given some form of conditional freedom of confessing faith. (. . .) But what happened after the democratic changes? The Church suddenly appeared on the public scene, on the grand, political public scene, and then politics started to be created within sacristies.

Describing the situation in the Islamic Community, Sead similarly mentioned that the community "came out from under a glass bell in which we protected ourselves from external influences" and then suddenly had to profess faith in the public sphere–a space characterized by struggles for political power and symbolic contests over interpretations of Islamic tradition, which will be discussed more in later sections.

What is important to note here is the increased presence of religious communities in the public sphere went hand in hand with stronger public pressures on religious leaders. Members of religious communities often did not look benevolently on the actions of religious leaders that could threaten group solidarity. Showing kindness toward members of the "other" side during the war was thus very difficult as it would yield dual negative consequences: rejection within their own community and suspicion from members of the out-group who might question the hidden motives behind these acts of benevolence. As Enis, an imam from Bosnia, notes:

A: Once the war started, when the army took control, in a state of emergency, it was very difficult even to think about that [helping the other side], not to mention doing it, because all that was interpreted differently.

A: How was it interpreted?

A: Well, it wasn't interpreted as if you wanted to help someone; it was interpreted as a betrayal, of helping the other side (. . .) It was very difficult to do it publicly, on all sides (. . .)

Q: One had to hide?

A: Of course, one had to hide. And although there were some positive examples, they probably . . . no, not probably, but I can say with 100% certainty that they had to be done secretly.

The same pressure to maintain internal group solidarity was reflected in the hesitancy of religious leaders to criticize war-related activities perpetrated by members of their own group. In some cases, respondents stated that they were even directly threatened at gunpoint when they dared to criticize the crimes committed by individuals within the group. Arsenije (Orthodox Church) says the following in that respect:

I spoke, and I am still speaking publicly to my people. That is why a good many of the people who declare themselves to be believers, Christians and Orthodox who attend Church, hate me—because I tell the truth about crimes that we committed. I told some of my people not to do that. I told them during the war, "Your grandfather can only be ashamed of what you are doing. (. . .) everybody is

ashamed of your actions. That is not any form of heroism". I told that. And look, I knew [the risks] of saying that—it is the same today. During the war, I was twice exposed to a situation where they wanted to [kill me]. (…) I told him: "You can kill me, but there will always be someone to warn you. Your conscience will warn you one day. You cannot kill the truth. You cannot kill God. God is the truth.

In most cases, the fear was that any actions targeting the group would elicit reputational losses. Even in postconflict periods when physical threats subside, criticism of past crimes remains rare due to anxieties over potential backlash from the community. Haris (the Islamic Community) stated that religious leaders can express regret about crimes in their prayers but not publicly, as such an act would provoke judgment among their coreligionists. Nedim, a young imam from northern Bosnia, explains further:

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, cases of criticism are rare; people generally keep that to themselves. They condemn them; obviously, nobody is glad that such things happened. A Quranic verse states that killing an innocent person is tantamount to killing the whole world. Therefore, the faith is clear in that respect. Those things are criticized in a general sense, but direct criticism of a concrete event is rare, probably because of the fear of stigmatization that might ensue.

Put concisely, during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, religious communities struggled with limited internal organizational capacity and a lack of practical knowledge on how to engage effectively in public activities under a new political system. This was largely due to their prolonged marginalization under Communist rule. The circumstances of the war further compounded these challenges by increasing the pressure on these groups to maintain unity and solidarity. Any criticism of internal actions risked damaging reputations or, in extreme cases, even death. Notably, not all religious communities were affected evenly; those that had more resources and better organization before the war were more resilient but still susceptible to pressures for group unity. For example, Drago, a Catholic priest, acknowledges the significant role of the Second Vatican Council documents within the Catholic Church. These documents endorse interreligious and interfaith dialogue, providing an official means of validation for individuals interested in such initiatives. Without these documents, individuals would be more susceptible to allegations of disloyalty or even religious heresy. The transnational organization of the Catholic Church guarantees that the doctrinal texts are authoritative across the world. This can assist religious leaders in justifying undertakings that might otherwise face contention from local communities, such as interfaith dialogue after a civil war. For those who "dare to engage in dialogue", Drago states "it is important to have those documents (…); one needs some kind of protection". Finally, individual differences led to variations within each community; some religious leaders exhibited greater tolerance for risk—even existential ones—while others held back from criticizing their own community or engaging with the out-group.

3.2.2. Limitations of the Control over Religious Symbols and Channels of Communication

During Communist rule, religious communities in ex-Yugoslavia were marginalized from public life but retained significant autonomy in organizing internal activities and transmitting ideas. As religion was a minor societal factor, political leaders had no particular interest in controlling religious discourse, as long as it remained on the peripheries. The fall of Communism drastically changed this situation. Religious institutions suddenly received a huge influx of "new-old" believers who could now express their religious convictions publicly. As visible from the discussions in the previous sections, many of the new "converts" joined religious communities not because of their spiritual concerns but because they perceived the need to reinforce their national identity through participation in religious ceremonies. For religious communities, this also meant decreased control over religious symbols. In effect, anyone could now carry religious insignia, attend ceremonies, and use religious narratives to justify convictions, regardless of their religious education and sincerity. For political entrepreneurs who initially needed legitimation of their projects from religious authorities, this was an attractive opportunity with very low participation costs.

The situation eventually fostered mutual dependence between religious and political leaders. As Markešić (2010, p. 535) observes, political leaders in ex-Yugoslav countries initially lacked popular support and recognition. Thus, they sought legitimacy by aligning themselves with religious leaders and institutions that the people held in high regard. Once the political leaders had secured their status, they only backed religious leaders who supported their agendas. In this turn of events, the religious authorities who had initially legitimized political power now themselves required political legitimation to be seen as sufficiently patriotic. This stance was also supported by the interviewees. Ljudevit (Catholic Church) says:

> Once war begins, parallel structures arise with individuals who act as if they were greater authorities than official leaders. These individuals then proclaim, 'We are the real protectors, and this [religious leader] betrayed us. His views are weird'. In this way, religious leaders are turned into ideologues and strategists.

Critics of political agendas were thus marginalized by questioning their loyalties and portraying their perspectives as outliers compared to other religious authorities. In some instances, even sacred spaces and ceremonies were not exempt from attempts at delegitimizing religious interpretations. Marjan, a Catholic priest, shared an anecdote from his early priesthood when he preached to refugees who had fled northern Bosnia and Herzegovina for Croatia. Although his sermon spoke about their hardships, he emphasized that conflict should not define their identity, as all groups and individuals perpetually strive toward fuller humanity. Marjan's aim was to instill hope while providing a spiritually grounded alternative to vengeful attitudes. However, near the ceremony's conclusion, a local politician brazenly contradicted him stating "The priest said those things in his sermon, but it is not like that (. . .) Let him speak whatever he wants; we know how it really is and how we are going to behave". Marjan described this incident as one of the most shocking experiences of his life—an act of moral and spiritual "sabotage". He continued, lamenting: "We, priests, keep playing into their hands. We open space in our churches to, to be blunt, idiots, who can easily destroy all the good and beautiful things that we do".

Religious leaders also found themselves facing vexing dilemmas where they were expected to perform duties that could be exploited politically or misconstrued as endorsing hatred in their official capacities. A case in point is Grigorije's invitation by local politicians to consecrate a cross-shaped monument erected for Croatian war victims located dangerously close to Ahmići, a site notorious for civilian war crimes perpetrated in 1993. Aware that such actions could potentially be misinterpreted either as an endorsement of political agendas or even war crimes, Grigorije (the Catholic Church) was in a quandary. Notwithstanding his predicament, he chose to perform the ceremony but reclaimed control over its interpretation by emphasizing: "Whoever has hatred inside, or a desire for revenge, should not, and must not, use the cross to legitimize it. A cross is a symbol of suffering but also of victory. But that victory is a victory over evil, primarily over evil in and of oneself". He concluded that "politics always wants a priest, a cassock, whatever; they always want him on their side to legitimatize both their good deeds and their crimes".

To summarize, during the Communist rule in ex-Yugoslavia, religious communities were marginalized but retained autonomy in organizing activities and communicating ideas. After the political system changed, there was a resurgence of religious adherence, but many joined for pragmatic and not necessarily spiritual reasons. Consequently, control over religious symbols weakened as many other actors could now participate in ceremonies and employ faith narratives. While initially political leaders required legitimation from religious leaders, they later became arbiters as to whether individual religious leaders were "national" and patriotic enough. Critics of political agendas were thus often marginalized by public questioning of their national loyalties. Religious leaders finally faced dilemmas, knowing that even seemingly peaceful messages and symbols could be politically exploited.

This is not to suggest that religious leaders were innocent bystanders during the sacralization of politics and politicization of religion. Some leaders openly embraced this synthesis between national and religious ideologies. Those who opposed such amalgama-

tion either found themselves marginalized or resorted to self-censorship out of fear they would lose influence under prevailing trends. Finally, these developments also need to be understood within a broader context of atrocities and heightened community grievances, which are discussed in the following section.

3.2.3. Limitations Related to the Persuasiveness of Peaceful Messages

The third constraint pertains to the content of the messages. Notably, religious leaders possess a distinct advantage in anchoring their peace and conflict-resolution messages within spiritual and religious sources that inspire hope and surpass the limitations of historical pragmatism. However, these types of messages often lack credibility in situations marked by prolonged stress and grievance. Zaim (the Islamic Community) provides an example from a county in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina enduring a years-long occupation:

> 'After the war, there are many generals'. [a proverb] It is easy to say, after the war, that doing it one way or another would have been better. But what were you to do in Una-Sana Canton, which was hermetically closed for a thousand days—a bird could not enter or exit the canton—when there was a struggle for bare survival and bare existence, in the time when… I saw with my own eyes— people were paying 800 Deutschmarks for a sack of flour. If a religious leader were to speak about purely spiritual things at that time, he would surely not have been understood either by his peers or by the people over whom he presided. Moreover, he would have placed himself in a very difficult position, even eliciting extreme complications (…) Therefore, a war situation should be seen as a war situation. Of course, one does not need to justify what cannot be justified.

The respondent explained that the peace message simply did not resonate with people's lived reality at that time. Furthermore, acute suffering coupled with existential threats can trigger border activation toward the out-groups while favoring a more insular communal identity, which often comes in tandem with more radical religious interpretations. Sead, also an imam, details how Bosnia and Herzegovina's previously sheltered Islamic Community suddenly had to grapple with drastically different interpretations that were absent prewar:

> [D]uring the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Muslims, unfortunately, met other and different interpretations of the faith in very bad circumstances (…) People who possessed very unstable personal religious experiences met, in an extreme situation, [foreign] individuals who, in their eyes, had perfect answers and then quickly fell under their influence. Consequently, the balance in one's own traditional faith experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina was disrupted (…) There was an encounter with the most radical teachings of Islam because the conditions were the most radical. Today, people reflect [on faith] completely differently.

Rather than competing on an even playing field, peaceful interpretations of religious traditions were at a disadvantage compared to more radical interpretations. This is because situations of extreme suffering and perceived threats tended to favor interpretations that were simpler and offered a stronger sense of identity and feelings of superiority over enemies.

Another significant problem was the absence of recognizable role models of peacemakers who could inspire communities as exemplars worthy of emulation. In contrast, warriors were instantly identifiable as symbols of idealized sacrifice, embodying the notion of sacrificing one's own life for others. Respondents were often asked why religious sermons lack references to peacemakers who bravely sacrificed their lives defending innocent people (often from different ethnic or religious groups). Those people could, after all, serve as valuable models of moral courage. The most common answer was that, unlike warriors, peacemakers do not elicit equivalent levels of admiration; they may even convey passivity or naïve compliance.

To put it concisely, in times of war, religious messages of peace face challenges. People struggling to survive could view spiritual images as abstract ideals disconnected from reality. In turn, harsh conditions are favorable to more radical interpretations of religious traditions that insist on strong group identities and superiority over enemies. During religious sermons, warriors emerge as more salient role models than peacemakers. Unlike warriors' perceived strengths and bravery, peacemakers' nonviolence may be seen as passive or naïve.

3.2.4. Limitations on the Side of Recipients

The final component of the communication channel is the recipient. The constraints here pertain to the readiness and aptitude of recipients to interpret messages as intended by the sender. For religiously inspired peace messages, this implies an ability to comprehend the religious rationales underpinning the message and the moral obligations they incur.

This issue was acutely perceived by the interviewees. Tarik, an imam, believes that the former Communist system with its strict controls cultivated general rigidity among the population. This was then coupled with inadequate education in religious values leading to insufficiently developed moral characters:

> The absolute majority of those who participated in the war were disciplined, not educated. All those military and police officers, all of them were disciplined. They were disciplined in school, and were miseducated—in a nationalist way, without faith—at home. All of this produced people who were ready to commit genocides, crimes, and so.

Consequently, states Tarik, even when peace messages came from religious institutions, they were often disregarded because "the ears that were supposed to hear that were not educated in the spirit of faith".

Velimir, an Orthodox priest, also emphasized the importance of personal moral predispositions which are further amplified during a crisis. In his view:

> People are a wonder, both in a positive and a negative sense. They can go so far as to become animals or reach the level of the greatest Samaritan and Christian. [They can] transform in a single moment into either of those (...) It depends on what was sown in them, and what was planted in [their] heart.

He stated that successful pastoral work relied heavily on listeners' receptivity: if they're unprepared to receive messages promoting kindness and peace, achieving the desired goals becomes challenging. Many respondents similarly believed that religion's role in fostering peace begins preconflict through proper education about virtues. Once a conflict occurs, this educational base might help to resist wrongdoing. Pavle (the Orthodox Church), in that sense, sees his peacebuilding role precisely in highlighting the link between love and courage: "I often say—in that horrible moment of temptation (...), when I can lose even my life, I still have to stand in defense of the other, regardless of who that person is and what that person is like. And I call upon my believers to do the same". The absence of such and similar education in virtues prior to war reduced, in the eyes of many respondents, the ability of believers to interpret properly the peaceful messages and calls for actions, even when they were sent by religious leaders.

The final limitation to peace activism and messaging during conflicts relates to the receptivity of the audience. The respondents believe that many people in their religious communities lacked the moral education and character development needed to understand properly such calls as religious imperatives. The interviewees thus emphasize the importance of preconflict education in virtues, so that when a crisis comes, people have the moral foundation to resist wrongdoing and heed calls for peace, regardless of the danger.

3.3. Pastoral Optimization Given the Limitations

A key aspect of the theoretical model discussed here is the connection between theological dissonance and pastoral optimization. One potential counterargument may be that

both elements simply constitute rational behavior, wherein prospective risks and payoffs are weighed against one another. As such, this process may not differ markedly from the strategies used by other rational actors such as politicians or humanitarian workers. However, while a full exploration of what constitutes "rational action" exceeds the scope of this paper, there are at least two distinctive aspects of this model to note. Firstly, it must be emphasized that theological dissonance represents an internal conflict brought about by discrepancy between specific theological ideals and actions. It occurs even in situations that would typically be deemed "rational" or justified in different contexts. A salient illustration of this is seen in the context of self-defense. As suggested earlier, some respondents clearly recognize that the use of force in self-defense is entirely rational; nonetheless, it still falls short of the theological ideals set forth in the Christian Gospels. In essence, their religious ideals extend beyond conventional rational calculations related to the appropriate use of force; they sometimes encompass adamant opposition to violence and even self-sacrifice for the enemy's sake. Konstantin, an Orthodox priest, encapsulates this point effectively when stating that the comparative benefit of Christian churches in peacebuilding lies precisely in their capability to transcend quotidian logic focused on survival toward notions such as love and altruistic sacrifice:

> I think that [the Christian community] can formatively influence people so that they become true peacebuilders, eccentrics, that is, people who do not behave according to the rules of this world, who are ready to work in others' favor even to their own detriment. That formation of the consciousness of people and of practical believers, directing their thoughts to the Gospel, that is, self-sacrificing love and self-giving, that is their comparative advantage. Worldly establishments can hardly ever evoke that kind of sacrifice because doing so would bring a fiasco to certain values of the state. Imagine that a state works to its own detriment! On the other hand, religious life promotes boundless sacrifice.

The secondary distinctive characteristic of this model involves the interplay between theological dissonance and pastoral optimization. The feeling of theological dissonance directly influences subsequent peacebuilding actions, thereby shaping strategies pertaining to pastoral optimization. Moreover, these two theoretical concepts are interconnected through a feedback loop. Pastoral optimization is not merely a rational execution of optimal actions within constraints; it is also a coping mechanism that helps religious leaders deal with the emotional and/or spiritual discomfort caused by theological dissonance. What does this mean concretely? The fact that theological dissonance directly influences subsequent actions becomes particularly evident in how certain incentives are considered or prioritized.

When it comes to political elites or NGOs, economic incentives are, for instance, often taken as a factor that has a major impact on their peacebuilding activities. On the other hand, my data suggest that the same logic cannot be consistently applied to theologically based peacebuilding initiatives, at least not to the same extent. Peacebuilding activities led by religious leaders appear both in "poor" communities and in those that are relatively affluent. Of course, there are religious leaders who censor or silence themselves in return for financial support from the establishment, such as funding for a construction of a church, a mosque, or a community center. However, such actions frequently provoke an internal sense of theological dissonance, which has been one of the focal points of this article. Nebojša (the Orthodox Church), for instance, regrets the lack of the freedom to express criticism due to his economic and reputational ties to his community. He states: "We know everything, but we remain silent (...) If we say something we could lose our job overnight". Theological dissonance, to put it bluntly, cannot be resolved through economic, political, or other non-theological means. It requires engagement that addresses theological and spiritual imperatives. There is, therefore, not only a strong connection between theological dissonance and pastoral optimization but also a feedback loop between the two.

Finally, there are elements that play a very significant role in religious peacebuilding that do not fall neatly into mainstream theories of rational action. As was described, some

religious leaders preached forgiveness even if that went against the priorities of political leaders; they were inspired by theological visions of reconciled humanity, even though those visions might seem irrational or naïve from a political viewpoint. This does not imply, however, that religious leaders' actions lack rationality. Their actions can be considered rational if we understand rationality as goal-driven behavior that is neither random nor merely impulsive. The question is, however, what kind of rationality we talk about and, more concretely, which values, imperatives, goals, risks, and ideals are taken into account. A distinguishing factor between religious leaders and other actors is their deep-seated theological perspective, which offers a unique set of incentives that cannot be reduced to other forms of logic or frameworks.

The paragraphs below will briefly discuss several common pastoral optimization strategies employed by religious leaders. The first one could be described as a strategy of maintaining proximity to a community as a source of legitimacy to express criticism. A poignant example emerges from the ICTY case against Blaškić, where a Franciscan friar, Tomislav Pervan, was summoned as a witness. He participated in proceedings alongside soldiers wearing national insignia, a move deemed inappropriate by the prosecution who felt he should have declined this invitation outrightly. Pervan countered this by saying: "[H]ad I not responded to the invitation, they would not have looked upon it kindly. I could not have been punished for it, of course, quite certainly, but had I not turned up and responded to the invitation, I would not, later on, have been able to speak about what is good and what is bad" (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia 1998a, p. 4608). To illustrate his engagement, the witness presented a public statement in which members of the Catholic clergy called for the cessation of the conflicts and directly condemned the crimes that had been committed by the members of their own group (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia 1998b, pp. 4385–87). Essentially opting to remain within their communities—even under less than ideal circumstances— was an optimization strategy to maintain the moral legitimacy necessary for decrying potentially serious abuses down the line.

The same approach can be observed postconflict in relation to the condemnation of war crimes and abuses by individuals within their own ethnic group. Slaven, a representative from the Catholic Church, says in that respect that religious leaders "do not feel the full freedom [to condemn crimes] because they are also a part of that people. I would say there is some kind of directed condemnation, which is moderate, not so radical. They say that something is evil, but they also find a way and modality not to make it too direct". Franjo, an influential Catholic representative, agreed that religious leaders often do not feel free to criticize crimes committed by their coreligionists. While underscoring the Gospel's imperative of truth that liberates, he recognizes that these leaders reside and serve within communities that frequently prefer national myths of infallibility over inconvenient truths. In his own words, "[P]eople live on mythology. (. . .) Mythology represents preservation; it connects to identity; [such is] the myth 'We are without fault'". Similarly, Nedim, an imam from northwestern Bosnia, believes that despite theological clarity on denouncing crimes, religious leaders still hesitate to be too specific in their criticism. Consequently, they opt for a limited form of criticism where crimes are condemned but only in general terms. Ljudevit (the Catholic Church) articulated this strategic approach well. As Ljudevit explained, openly voicing all critiques would at once undermine his legitimacy and ties with the community. Instead, he dispenses criticism selectively and carefully, in order to preserve his image as someone credible and dedicated to the wellbeing of the community. In Ljudevit's view, this measured approach ultimately has more positive long-term effects than harsh one-time criticism would achieve.

The second strategy could be described as resistance to the rhetoric of divisions during special occasions of religious rites or private counseling. Luka, a Catholic priest, explains how, during the war, even funerals, which are fundamentally opportunities to speak about eternity, can turn into nationalistic rallies. He opted instead to use these special occasions for the promotion of different narratives, those of hope and salvation, which transcend

the limited horizons of the war. Similar opportunities can occur during private meetings. Although they may lack influence over large-scale events, religious leaders can alleviate some negative effects through private counseling sessions; these environments, free from public scrutiny, also offer safe spaces for voicing criticisms without fear of accusations relating to betrayal or disloyalty.

The third strategy could be described as symbolic actions that are not deemed too provocative but which, nonetheless, send a strong message of solidarity and unity. Simple acts such as joint walks through the city or gathering in public spaces can potentially be very effective while avoiding the provocation associated with direct criticism. Tarik, an imam deeply involved in the postwar reconstruction of life in his city, noted that one of his significant accomplishments was assembling leaders from various religions at a prominent city venue to share a coffee together:

> We have sent a message that people positively interpreted, I analyzed that later. Ordinary people told me, ordinary citizens, ordinary farmers [reacted]: 'Look, when they can do this together, why cannot I do it with my neighbor? Why wouldn't I have a coffee or breakfast with my neighbor every morning in front of our houses or farms? If not every morning, then once a week or twice a month?'

This simple yet effective strategy greatly differs from ceremonial talks and does not involve the discussion of war guilt and questions of responsibility. At the same time, it sends a message that sitting together and creating a circle of trust is nonetheless possible across ethnic and religious lines. Such activities, simple to replicate, can then be easily followed by other members of a community who would feel more at ease to follow the lead from their religious representatives. In a similar way, distributing humanitarian aid without regard for the recipients' ethnic or religious backgrounds serves as a potent symbol of inclusivity and unity. Such actions can be carried out both during the conflict and afterward.

Pastoral optimization, thus, refers to the strategy of achieving the greatest social and spiritual benefits within existing constraints and risks. As we have seen, perceived threats are often symbolic of a fear of negative reactions from the community, loss of legitimacy, or even inadvertently harming the prospect of reconciliation and shared life. This manifests, for instance, in religious leaders' reluctance to directly criticize crimes committed by coreligionists, even when their faith clearly condemns such acts. However, avoidance of theological duties and self-censorship frequently produce a sense of moral failure. This illustrates the close links between theological dissonance and pastoral optimization. If leaders lacked theological incentives to promote truth and justice, they would not experience the same discomfort with silence and self-censorship. Similarly, they would lack equal motivation to fulfill theological ideals within the imposed constraints. This is not to say that religious leaders necessarily pioneer projects addressing painful history. Other actors, including NGOs, may have greater involvement in such efforts, motivated by humanist ideals or even economic incentives rather than theology. However, to comprehend why religious leaders choose to engage or hesitate to engage in peacebuilding initiatives, it is necessary to understand the specific structure of their motives and the processes shaping their actions. The data indicate that their motives are chiefly theological and communal in nature, analyzed here through the concepts of "theological dissonance" and "pastoral optimization". Naturally, other incentives may also be relevant, but their influence on the actions of religious leaders appear far less important than in comparable cases of political actors or NGOs working on peacebuilding projects. This difference is most visible in the durability of religious involvement even when religious communities do not enjoy support from the local government (e.g., as an ethnic and religious minority) or despite facing hostility (e.g., as returnees to formerly ethnically cleansed areas). Unlike numerous organizations that tie activities to specific projects, the activities of religious communities are not limited by time or project budgets. They are motivated primarily by a desire to perform their spiritual mission, even in very difficult circumstances.

On a final point, time is a significant factor that should be taken into account. Although certain actions may inherently seem positive, they could potentially be perceived as premature. As Nedim explains, the war events in Bosnia and Herzegovina remain vivid in people's memories: "From a historical perspective, those events happened not even 'yesterday' but 'this morning'. (...) The wounds are still fresh". This metaphorical freshness of past experiences contributes to people's reluctance to interact with members from diverse religious groups. Ljudevit (the Catholic Church) emphasized the need not just for the passage of time but also for a generational shift: "I think that only the new generations, free from the chains of the past, will succeed in thinking about peace. They will, of course, also be indoctrinated about the past events, but at least the feeling of pain felt by the current generations will diminish". Time, therefore, is perceived not only as chronological progression but also as emotional liberation from the trauma induced by past conflicts. Certain events may have occurred nearly three decades ago yet still feel incredibly recent as if they happened "this morning". Two additional facets of time can be characterized as the sequencing and rhythm of activities. The optimization strategy in this context would involve determining a pace for these activities that does not feel overly hurried or prematurely executed. One illustration of this tactic is the symbolic act of religious leaders gathering informally. Despite meticulous preparation (Tarik admitted that it took three years to persuade religious leaders in his city to publicly share a coffee), these actions were perceived as positive and not premature, even in a city scarred by numerous war atrocities. These symbolic gestures align with other pastoral optimization strategies; they stimulate a positive transformation without inciting strong community backlash against their religious leaders.

4. Conclusions

This article examines the complex role of religious leaders in situations of violent conflict, focusing specifically on the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In an attempt to answer a frequent question as to why religious leaders do not do more during conflicts, elements of religious ideas that can inspire peace were contrasted with practical limitations that arise in concrete circumstances.

The paper proposed a theoretical model that helps to understand the specific dynamics and limits of religiously inspired peacebuilding activities. The main argument is that religious leaders experience a disconnect termed theological dissonance between their doctrinal ideals and their (in)actions amidst the harsh realities of suffering and deprivation. This dissonance also stems from competing values and objectives that cannot be easily reconciled. To resolve this tension, leaders engage in "pastoral optimization" by selecting actions that maximize perceived theological benefits within the contextual constraints. Importantly, the structure of incentives and the perception of limits is deeply influenced by theological doctrines, as well as the religious traditions of the communities to which religious leaders belong.

Several key findings regarding theological dissonance emerge. First, religious doctrines themselves contain differing perspectives that shape leaders' normative starting points. For instance, some religious traditions strongly preach nonviolence or forgiveness, while others do not see them as their central tenets. This affects the degree of dissonance experienced when violence occurs. Similar observations can be made regarding other peacebuilding efforts such as reconciliation, memory work, or interfaith dialogue. Second, individual differences lead to divergent assessments of dissonance severity and strategies to mitigate it through interpretive tactics. Some accept dissonance as inevitable, while others employ reasoning to align theological ideals with practical exigencies.

The research also reveals multiple limitations curtailing religious leaders' influence in terms of organization and effective communication of religious messages.

Organizationally, religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the last war lacked the human resources and practical expertise to respond effectively to rapid societal changes. This was reflected in the gradual loss of exclusive control over religious

symbols. We could see that, in the view of respondents, political actors frequently appropriated religious symbols and narratives to legitimize their own ideological projects, even if they went against the grain of religious teachings. Another important limit to effective communication of de-escalatory and peaceful messages were circumstances of suffering and violence. Such messages often lacked credibility amidst acute grievances. This point was illustrated by the testimonies of religious leaders who worked in communities under prolonged siege during the war. In such dire circumstances of profound existential fear and scarcity, messages of peace and reconciliation failed to resonate with the fundamental needs of community members. Additionally, in preaching activities, peacemaker role models were often less valued than warrior archetypes. Those who died defending their own community as warriors embodied a clear and coherent image of sacrifice. The same was not the case for those who died defending innocent people of other ethnic groups. Finally, insufficient religious grounding and education hindered the comprehension of peaceful messages among the audience. Thus, respondents lamented that without this essential education, community members were not inclined to take theological imperatives seriously. Inversely, they lacked the adequate ability to resist the mobilization of religion for violent and exclusionary purposes.

Taken together, these contextual factors posed considerable limitations on effective peacebuilding activities during the war. An important element that cannot be overlooked is the fear of judgment or retaliation for criticizing one's own group. As evident from multiple testimonies, religious leaders often recognized clear theological reasons to criticize certain actions of their own group yet feared that such criticism would diminish their moral standing in the community or the impact of their future actions.

Facing both the incentives to act (supported by the theological dissonance) as well as situational limits, leaders engage in pastoral optimization, balancing their desires to achieve moral goals, all the while taking into account the aforementioned limitations and risks. These strategies included limited forms of criticism which allowed for change without severing community ties, resisting divisive rhetoric during special rites and private meetings, and undertaking unifying symbolic acts. The aspect of time significantly influences the choice or abstain from certain actions, as well as their sequencing and frequency.

Practically, the findings underline that successful engagement with religious leaders in peacebuilding activities requires grasping their specific situational logic rather than applying generalized assumptions.

Several feasible steps can facilitate collaboration between religious and non-religious actors in peacebuilding activities. First and foremost, it is necessary to acknowledge religious leaders' obligations and duties to their own communities. Those obligations primarily relate to their theological responsibilities, which are typically performed within monoreligious congregations and settings. Thus, instead of forcing or expecting participation in interreligious activities as the quintessential example of peacebuilding, it is important to recognize that meaningful peacebuilding often occurs organically within a religious community's ordinary rhythms and life cycles, e.g., during private counseling or religious rites.

Additionally, it is vital to acknowledge that religious and nonreligious peace practitioners may have fundamentally different conceptions and definitions of what peacebuilding entails in practice. For religious leaders, daily prayer, meditation, or spiritual guidance could be considered legitimate and even preferential forms of peace work centered on personal growth and reflection. Meanwhile, nonreligious actors may prioritize and expect external, tangible actions and directly measurable humanitarian results when evaluating peacebuilding initiatives.

Finally, religious communities may operate with divergent notions of temporality and timing regarding when it is appropriate and opportune to openly discuss past traumas versus when the community needs more time to confront their difficult history while avoiding excessive internal divisions or retraumatization.

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