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## Religious Identity as a Contributing Factor to the Integration of Middle Eastern Immigrants Into Croatian Society

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**Abstract:** The migrant crisis in Europe is one of the most challenging problems that the European Union has faced since the very start of its existence. By examining the process of the acculturation of Middle Eastern migrants in Zagreb, this paper will provide a basic insight into this cultural phenomenon. The possibilities for successful integration lie within the religious identity of Islam as being partially common both to migrants and the Muslim population in Croatia. Another positive factor for successful integration can be found in the history of the Muslim population in Croatia, whose rich tradition and integration into Croatian society can be regarded as highly instructive. The main goal of the paper is to present the experience of the encounters that individuals from the Islamic Centre in Zagreb had with immigrants from the Middle East using qualitative methodology and the deep interview method. This research should provide a better understanding of the importance of religious identity in the process of the integration of Middle East migrants into European society and guidelines for overcoming the risks of parallel societies. In addition, the authors will present an overview of the problems that occur in the education process in the context of religious identities, with an emphasis on Islam in the Croatian educational system.

**Keywords:** integration, Islam, migration crisis, identity, Croatian society

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## Introduction

Immigration issues and the arrival of a growing number of refugees and asylum seekers have become preeminent political issues for many European Union member states. The complex international political situation in the Middle East has raised not only ethical and civilizational questions but has also led to a type of stigmatization of Muslims in the media (Kovač 2009: 207). For the last twenty years in EU member states, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have been considered security threats. Problems that Western European societies encounter today require a re-evaluation of one's cultural identity not only as a European identity, but as one opposed to the growing Muslim population. An important feature of contemporary migration flows in Europe today is the adaptation of European society to these changes and the design of a new European migration policy. The elusive crisis in the very sense of the word is often misunderstood. International migrations do not happen by chance (Mesić 2002: 9). The consequence of contemporary migrations can be of a geopolitical nature, mixed with cultural and economic changes with a global perspective. Contemporary migrations are a challenge for local populations, but also for the migrants, refugees or asylum seekers. Europe in general is a challenge for Islam and Muslims because, as a religious minority, they must find a way to acculturate and integrate themselves into the secular and democratic conditions that often differ from the countries of their origin.

The challenge presented in the migrant crisis is manifested in the problem of acculturation. As a process, acculturation has four basic strategies: assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization (Teske and Nelson 1974). In order to have effective acculturation there should exist a policy of integration. Well-thought-out integration, in order to succeed, needs an organization that provides a safe space for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (Giddens 1984). Anthony Giddens defines such an organization as a potential for action. It presents the possibility of action towards a structured goal of either the individual, group or society.

The main goal of this paper is to examine the role of the Islamic Centre in Zagreb towards the integration of Middle Eastern migrants into

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Croatian society. Additionally, the paper will examine the Muslim religious identity in its correlation with the education process in the Republic of Croatia.

This paper is structured into several sections to provide a better insight into the results of the research. It starts with a short introduction to the historical context of Islam in Croatia. Its complexity and long presence is one of the arguments that suggest that historical developments have led to the contemporary integration of the Muslim community into Croatian society. The second part of the paper will introduce different theoretical concepts: the theory of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000) and the theory of religious pluralism (Berger 2014a). The Islamic Centre in Zagreb and its role in the integration process of the Middle Eastern immigrants are presented in the third part of the paper. In this part, the transcendental similarity, despite the reflexivity of modernity, is analyzed. Lastly, the potential of the integrative religious identity for the educational process of immigrants from the Middle East is described, with an emphasis on several possibilities.

### **The historical context of Islam in Croatia**

In modern societies it is not easy to discuss Islam or Muslim people objectively or coherently, mostly because their historical background is a complex one. Islamic religion is an integral part of the world's history and culture. That is why it must be acknowledged through dialogue and coexistence rather than be regarded primarily as a potential threat or as the opposition (Kovač 2009: 208).

Generally speaking, Islam and Western culture share almost fourteen centuries of entwined history. The complexity of that history comes from the fact that it has often been permeated with wars, many of which have still been insufficiently researched by historiographers. Narratives which present Muslims as heretics and conquerors of the West, as well as the ones that observe the West through the lens of the Crusades or colonialist imperialism, are mostly based on ignorance and fear. Those judgements

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do not take into consideration the many positive examples of dialogue and peaceful coexistence, for example, the period of coexistence in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century in the Mediterranean basin countries (Watt 1972).

The position of the Muslim community in Croatia is similar to other South Eastern European countries where they are practically a part of the autochthonous population. This is an important factor which significantly dissociates them from Muslim communities in Western European countries. The region of South Eastern Europe witnessed the growth of Islam after the conquests of the Ottoman Empire. At that time, the territory of Croatia witnessed constant changes while it was under Habsburg, Austrian and later Hungarian control. Parts of its territory fluctuated between the Austrian and Ottoman Empires, meaning between primarily Christian and Muslim control, thereby producing a distinctive imprint on the people. Such a unique situation makes Croatian Islam an interesting subject for discussion and for research in order to provide a better understanding of integration processes.

It must be noted that it is difficult to determine when Islam was first introduced to the Croatian population. Contacts most probably existed as early as when Arabian merchants first reached the Adriatic coast. According to written documents from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Muslim communities in Croatia existed in that period (Omerbašić 1999). Although only their presence in the coastal area can be confirmed, there were probably other small groups of Muslims who came from Hungary and other regions to the Croatian hinterland, but the reasons for their arrival have been insufficiently researched.

Intensive contacts between Islam and Croatia occurred under the Ottoman Empire, especially from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards. During those centuries, the Ottoman conquest left its mark and partly influenced the shaping of the Croatian national identity through the creation of a self-awareness of being the 'bulwark of Christianity'.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, many Muslims moved to Zagreb and Croatia in general looking for work, military service or to acquire education. This period brought a new experience for the Muslims who were, for

the first time in several centuries, living in a country whose supreme authority was not Islamic. It was also a very important period for the Croatian people, who had just started the long journey of rediscovering their national identity. For the Croats, this period provided an interesting new experience of Muslims. After centuries of fighting the Islamic conquerors, they were now getting to know and live alongside members of the Islamic community.

The fact that Muslims have been settling in Croatia since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century indicates the autochthonous identity of the Muslim community. With more than a century-long presence in Croatia and by contributing to its economic, social and cultural development, Muslims have enriched the Croatian community as well as built their own recognizable cultural identity.

Statistical data for Muslim communities in Croatia has been recorded since 1910, when only 204 members were counted. After the First World War, the number reached 3,145 members and in the 1931 population census there were 4,750 Muslims registered in Croatia (Kulenović 1997: 187). According to the population census from 1991, there were 43,469 people who declared themselves as Muslims. In relation to that statistic, Muslims were proportionally the second largest ethnic community or minority in the Republic of Croatia. That situation was confirmed by the population census from 2001 with its figure of 56,777 Muslims and by the latest population census from 2011, in which 62,977 Muslims were registered in Croatia (DZS 2011).

Describing the history of Islam in Croatia inevitably requires at least a short description of the history of the Islamic Centre in its capital city. The Muslim community in Zagreb was institutionalized in 1878 (Hasanbegović 2007). In 1916 the Croatian Parliament acknowledged Islam as an equal religion (with Catholicism and the Orthodox Church) with all the rights that are due to it from the state constitution and with all the activities that result from it (Čičak-Chand 1999: 452).

The Islamic Centre in Zagreb has been active since 1987. It is recognized as one of the largest and most active in Europe in the context of faith, culture and its social-political plan. Its leaders invest great efforts in

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interreligious dialogue and cooperation and often emphasize their contentment with the position of Muslim people in Croatian society, which should be an example for other European countries. In 1991 the Islamic community in Croatia became independent from the Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Meshihat (the highest executive body of the Community) was established for the first time in Croatia. Among its many activities, the Islamic Centre in Zagreb provided incredible help during the period 1991–1995 when they accepted over 300,000 refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, providing them with accommodation, medical treatment and other help (Mašović 1997: 138).

The example of the Croatian Muslim community proves that plurality can exist if the identity of the other is respected in the context of the general good. Although few in number, Muslims are integrated in the historical, cultural, political and social settings of modern day Croatia. They have no significant problems with their identity, language, skin colour, religious or cultural customs. Voluntarily adopting Croatian work ethics, concepts of time and calendar, clothing and other circumstances of life has reduced the distance between Muslims and others in Croatia. Maybe this Islam will one day be an example to the whole of Europe (Balić 1998: 10).

### **Religious identity and its components**

The concept of identity is one of the most important concepts for modern theory regarding social psychology and sociology itself. In its general meaning, identity can be understood as an individual sense of self, group, affiliations, structural positions, and roles (Peek 2005: 217). According to that concept, we can separate the collective components of identity from the personal identity that includes the meaning and understanding of those collective components. Identity as a concept can be discussed through phenomenology, clinical relevance or measurements. The historical context, its development and its origins also influence that concept (Akhtar and Samuel 1996). Despite the broad theoretical understanding of identity, it is certain that society provides

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a component which is internalized in the individual's understanding of self and society.

In order to determine a religious identity, different methods could be applied. Different structural components should be examined in the context of religious identity. Religious identity can be determined by the role of religion in the process of forming a collective identity. Religious identity has its own components of integration that mainly depend on the context in which this identity forms interactions. In the context of Croatian society, these components have been proposed by Krunoslav Nikodem (2004). In relation to the methodological aspect, he suggested different categories in order to determine the religious identities in Croatian society. The categories include the traditional dimension of religion (positive religion; see Hegel in Pavić 2004: 19), the moral dimension, the individual dimension and the social asceticism dimension. There is a unique understanding of those dimensions as the collective response to the transcendental via symbolism. In this paper the concept of religious identity is understood as a symbolic response to the transcendental. This response can form a collective integration, as will be presented further on in the paper.

Special attention must be paid to the coexisting duality of the transcendental forms of religious practise and the everyday life of an individual. Since religious identity forms a specific relation towards the transcendental dimension of human existence, it also provides a ritualistic form of social cohesion. Symbols of faith provide a relation towards the profane part of life. According to this idea, religious identity can form the basis of the collective action in a social context. It can be a powerful tool of social integration, or it can lead to disintegration.

### **Theoretical approaches**

In order to explain the complex correlations between education and religious identity in the Islamic Centre in Zagreb and its role in the integration of Middle Eastern migrants, an analytical methodology based on

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a comparison of different theoretical approaches is required. The answer to the main research question can be approached by referring to the theory of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000) and the theory of religious pluralism (Berger 2014a).

The theory of multiple modernities was introduced in the work of the Israeli sociologist Shmuel L. Eisenstadt. The theory of multiple modernities criticizes the traditional view of modernity as a stable system of new structural, institutional and cultural features and formations which decompose the older 'closed' institutional frameworks (Eisenstadt 2010: 1). The focus here is to search for the variations of modernity during its history. Eisenstadt tends to explain modernity in the sense of the multiplicity of cultural programs in the global context. The historical component of his theory gives him a wider perspective for his description of modernity. Historical analyses tend to focus on the actors and their capacity to modify certain aspects of modernity which can be considered as universal, but also as being generated by Western civilization (Eisenstadt 2000). The reflexivity of social behaviour is the force of modernity's modification. Together with the theory of multiple modernities, it is essential to describe the phenomenon of Islam as a religion which developed a contextually different type of relation towards modernity, especially modernity in its Western modification. Due to a wholly different historical context, Islam in Croatia is different to Islam in the Middle East. This, however, does not imply completely different forms of transcendental and ritualistic forms of practise, but rather the fact that these forms of religion hold values and norms that are complementary to their cultural context. While the Croatian Muslim community proudly shares the same transcendental substrate as other Muslims, it nevertheless retains a distinct and unique cultural flavour.

The theory of religious pluralism (Berger 2014b) has developed from two theoretical frameworks: the phenomenology of Alfred Schütz and the theory of multiple modernities of Shmuel Eisenstadt. While Schütz deals with consciousness, Eisenstadt presents a variety of perspectives on modernity. These influences prompted Berger to advance his theory of religious pluralism which originated in posing these questions: how

do we manage religion in the contemporary world, and how does religion manage in contemporary society (Berger 2013)? To answer these questions, Berger assumed the presumptions of the modern secularization theory which correlates modern reflexivity with a decrease in religious behaviour. He proposes religious pluralism as an alternative concept to the problems of secularization and religions as strong opposing factors in societies. In this concept he recognizes the necessity for religions to adapt to technological and social progress as well as the possibility for them to coexist within multi-religious societies. In correlation with those presumptions, a specific religious identity of context can be addressed. Muslims in Croatia are connected in a transcendental sense with other Muslims, but Islam in Croatia did adapt to the specific societal context. Such a religious identity has the potential to connect other forms of similar religious identities that do not have the required contextual knowledge (Berger 2014b).

### **Methodology**

The main research goal of this paper is to examine the role of the Islamic Centre in Zagreb regarding the integration of Middle Eastern migrants into Croatian society. The role of the Islamic Centre in Zagreb is described through the formation of meaning that determines the ability to integrate. To make the meaning empirically reachable, the main method in this research is phenomenology. Phenomenology is one of the methods in the qualitative methodology of social research that strives for the hermeneutical knowledge of phenomena. The main orientation of phenomenology is to understand the problems of the meaning and significance of certain phenomena (Creswell 2007). By understanding the meaning of the integration from the contextual framework of the Islamic community in Zagreb, we can understand the way in which they can contribute to the process of the integration of Middle Eastern immigrants.

The applied research method was the use of focus groups. The reason for the use of this method was that it would help in investigating

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a collective understanding of integration, specifically for the Islamic community in Zagreb, and for Croatia in general. With this method, we could investigate different approaches or proposed solutions for the current problem of the Middle Eastern migrant crisis. The sample for the focus groups was selected via a method of intentional, intense experience cases. In this context, the case that was selected for participation in the focus group was the Imams of the Islamic Centre in Zagreb. Specifically, the participants were Imams with experience of teaching Islam. All of the participants had more than five years' experience in teaching. In order to gain a better understanding of the present generation of Muslims in Zagreb, the Imams included in the survey were under 40 years of age. That means that the included Imams were educated and socialized at the time of the cohesive coexistence and integration of the Muslim community in Croatia as well as of the ongoing process of reflexive modernity. The focus group was held on June 13, 2017 in Zagreb. The participants of the focus group and their responses are marked with the following codes: G1, G2, and G3.

### **The Islamic Centre in Zagreb and the integration of Middle Eastern immigrants**

There are different opportunities for the Islamic Centre to intervene with Middle Eastern immigrants. A shared transcendental and ritual basis of Islam allows a coherence in their religious identity which can be a functional modality of integration and a potential starting point for their re-socialization in a new environment. On that subject, there has been a great contribution by the Imams, who have had an influential role for the young generations of Muslims in Croatia. According to the testimony of the participants, they decided on the role of the Imam purely because they had experienced the positive influence of their Imams in the past.

I decided on the call of Imam, the priest in Islam. I was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade of elementary school, and by that time I already knew what I wanted to be in life. My influence was my Imam who

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taught me the principles of Islam. I simply wanted to become someone like him because he was my role model. Along with my parents he was one of the most important people in my life. (Brezovec, 2017; G1)

This statement is a clear example of the influential role of the Imams in defining the faith as well as the path of an individual's life. Imams share their experience through their teachings, and they define Islam as the religion of peace and coexistence because they are well integrated into Croatian society.

By learning the possibilities of religious pluralism, immigrants can achieve a basic understanding of Croatian society as well, with the help of the Imams. Understanding in this case means an actual reflexivity towards the values and norms of everyday life in Croatia and the successful integration of Islam into the society. The Islamic Centre in Zagreb, along with other Islamic Centres in Croatia, is considered to be a valuable cultural factor in the production and reproduction of the social reality.

The Islamic Centre in Zagreb has been actively involved in managing the migrant crisis. Based on research using qualitative methodology and the deep interview method, several important aspects of the role of the Islamic Centre can be presented. Firstly, the Islamic Centre in Zagreb provides important financial aid to the immigrants. This kind of aid is primarily based on religious solidarity, especially noted as one of the pillars of the Islamic faith, the Zakāt.

We have the fourth Islamic duty, which is Zakāt. Zakāt is given by the wealthy Muslims who have annual savings of about 25,000 Kuna [Croatian currency] or 3,500 EUR. It is mandatory to give 2.5% for Zakāt. So if someone has one 1 million Kuna, he is obliged to give 25,000 Kuna. It is all collected in the so-called Bejtul-mal, or the treasury of the Islamic community. The collected funds are managed by the Islamic community. It is the resource from which they can give to the ones in need. (Brezovec, 2017; G1)

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In this manifestation, the pillars of faith present a description of collectiveness and religious solidarity. It is an example of how religious identity can provide an approach to culturally diverse individuals or people. Due to being of the same faith, the Islamic Centre in Zagreb can approach the immigrants more easily than the civil institutions, which are often viewed as overly bureaucratic with a crude normative stance.

The Islamic Centre in Zagreb is the central site for Islamic cultural, religious, educational and social interaction. It is perceived as an Islamic oasis in Zagreb. It includes a mosque, a high school, a coffee house and a restaurant. Running a complex as large as this one requires human resources which creates opportunities to employ immigrants, providing them with a regular income and a sense of independence and self-worth.

The Republic of Croatia has organized and provided accommodation at the asylum for immigrants in Zagreb. Because it is a long way from the mosque, the Islamic Centre in Zagreb has organized daily bus transports to and from the asylum and the Centre in order to provide the immigrants with easy access to the mosque for their prayers.

The duality and richness of the content provide a certain value, which can connect the religious with the profane cultural identity. The sacred part of the Centre gives them a possibility to express their religious identity, but, more importantly, the profane part gives them a chance to see the social reality of Muslims living in Croatia. The Islamic Centre not only provides a first view of the cohesion between the two cultures but also provides them with an opportunity to stay in Croatia.

We are helping the immigrants by giving them a chance to practice their religion in our Centre. By means of interaction with the local Muslim population they can observe our everyday life, our work, our practices, our customs. We organize a transport from the asylum to the Centre where they pray, socialize and learn. (Brezovec 2017; G3)

Immigrants have to adapt to the social space that is regulated by values and secular laws. Croatian law restricts and prevents any discriminating

action against any religious or ethnic group (NN 83/02, 73/13). For immigrants it is not essential to learn the form of the law, but rather to understand the purpose of the law in the specific context. The Islamic Centre in Zagreb provides a good example of how one religious minority in Croatia can function in a fully integrated manner in society. Their norms of conduct can successfully integrate immigrants into Croatian society.

This positive example of functional integration on the part of the religious identity of Muslims in Croatia contributes to the process of contextualizing the framework of the religious identity of Middle Eastern Muslims in terms of the value of religious pluralism in the theoretical context.

### **Religious identity in the process of education**

Education as a process of acquiring knowledge, skills, beliefs and habits requires skilled educators and settings that provide a formative effect. The right to education is recognized by many governments and, in Croatia, state law declares education as compulsory at the primary and secondary stages. Religious identity is often not recognized as a problem in the context of the education process due to the universality of the prescribed curriculum. Religions are included in the curriculum mostly as a subject in history or specific religious courses. The educational system in Croatia acknowledges the possibility of enrolling in religious subjects according to personal preference. Most students at the primary and secondary education levels are enrolled in the Catholic religious course, which also includes many lessons about other religions. The interdisciplinary approach that is denoted in the curriculum offers an insight into the history, development and characteristics of the major religious systems and the cultures of their practitioners.

In Croatian schools we can organize and provide a course on Islam. That way, we are given the possibility to teach children the basic contextualization of Islam in Croatia. We have a secondary school (gymnasium) in the Islamic Centre in Zagreb, with

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a curriculum approved by the Croatian Ministry of Education and Science. In the gymnasium students are taught, along with many courses that are directly connected to Islam, other courses, in order to gain the competencies they need to successfully enrol in a desired college or university. (Brezovec, 2017; G1)

The importance of religion in defining the cultural foundations and values, i.e. ethics and moral systems, of a society is well recognized in the contemporary educational process. If the focus is placed on just one religious identity, there is a chance of an identity crisis, which reduces the possibility of successful integration. In such circumstances the successful education process of the whole society becomes questionable (Dolot 2000). As Weisse has noticed, the modern world can mostly be described as de-secularized and, in order to enable religious pluralism in its ideal form, there is a need for the implementation of religious education. He continues by saying that the reduction of social tensions and conflicts requires a dialogue between people of different religious beliefs or different cultural values (Weisse 2010: 187–188). Inspired by these problems, the European Commission has launched a major project dealing with religion and education in schools. The results of that project point to the need for a focused education for teachers concerning the development of critical thinking, because a high number of young people did not possess a critical approach to the dominant media discourses on religious subjects, especially about Islam and Muslims (Jackson 2011: 105). The implementation of the basic presumptions of mutual tolerance and respect is presupposed in the educational setting. According to that model, religious communities that belong to a minority group in a society could acquire adequate education.

The basic premise that has to be fulfilled for the successful integration of Middle Eastern immigrants comes from the positive examples of Muslim communities in Europe – for example, the Islamic Centre in Zagreb. Its main contribution is in providing a safe place while also introducing the immigrants to the social reality that is dominant in Croatian

society and offering them a chance of achieving a successful integration. One of the most important tools that can be used in this process is the education process. The immigrants could attend the school that is in the Centre's complex in the future, but it is not yet possible. The potential of the Islamic Centre in Zagreb in the process of the education of immigrants is enormous and it will probably function in the future.

The positive example of the Islamic Centre in Zagreb, which is actively involved in aiding immigrants with their economic, religious and social needs, should be used as a model for other societies. In a setting discharged from cultural discrimination, the foundations have been laid for further integration in all aspects of society. The importance of education in this process is unquestionable. Hopefully, the future will provide a possibility for the immigrants to enrol in the school in the Centre, where they already have a sense of belonging.

### **Conclusion**

The main goal of this paper was to introduce the role of the Islamic Centre in Zagreb to the process of integrating Middle Eastern immigrants into Croatian society. In plural societies, an essential precondition for successful integration is the positive reception of the new society. In the case of the presented example, the Islamic Centre in Zagreb shares a religious identity with the immigrants. This is the foundation of the conditions that ensure a starting point for positive integration.

The positive attitude towards Islam in Croatia is grounded in the historical context of this region. The Muslim community is a minority in Croatia that is practically a part of the autochthonous population. Therefore, Islam in Croatia can be distinguished from Middle Eastern Islam in the sense of its relation towards secularism. In order to integrate successfully, the immigrants have to adapt their religious beliefs to the specific context of the host society. The Croatian Muslim community demonstrates that this is possible for them without losing their religious and cultural identity. In Croatia this is made possible because its laws regulate the

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rights and obligations of religious communities as well as provide a certain level of financial aid.

With the help of the Islamic Centre in Zagreb, immigrants have experienced the Croatian reality. The next step for functional integration must include their substantial involvement in the education process. With their integrative potential, enrolling the migrants in the educational system should provide them with a formative education as well as culturally enrich Croatian society.

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