**Religion and Politics as a Dangerous Mix:
Effects of Religiosity on Intergroup Forgiveness and Reconciliation in a Post-Conflict**

Setting

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Abstract: Based on two studies with Bosniak and Croatian students in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this paper analyzes the effects of religiosity on intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation. Both Christianity and Islam advance forgiveness and reconciliation as one of the major moral imperatives. Previous studies also indicate that religiosity can increase readiness to grant forgiveness on the inter-personal level and facilitate rapprochement. When it comes to inter-group level, prescripts of religious piety often conflict with norms of group solidarity and care. Another set of research suggests that religion obstructs conflict transformation due to the dogmatic reasoning it promotes, including reframing of immanent disputes in transcendental (and thus non-negotiable) terms. This study initially tested whether adding religious symbols to conflict narratives impacts prosocial attitudes of respondents and came with negative results. In other words, adding religious codes to already known narratives about conflicts did not have a significant impact on participants' attitudes. In a subsequent SEM analysis, it was found that religiosity in both groups is strongly correlated with group-centricity, which negatively mediates its relationship with both forgiveness and reconciliation. We conclude that collectivistic forms of religiosity that privilege ingroup solidarity might have negative effects on intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation in post-conflict settings.

Key words: intergroup forgiveness, reconciliation, religion, post-conflict contexts, social identity

Introduction

Effective regulations of intergroup relations in the aftermath of conflict is one of the most challenging issues in the field of social psychology. Intergroup reconciliation is correlated to complex sets of emotional states, attitudes, and processes. Between groups marked by past conflicts, forgiveness is often viewed as an imperative, not only by politicians and opinion-makers, but also by scholars and religious leaders (BLINDED, 2008; Hewstone et al., 2004; Tutu, 2000). Ability and willingness to overcome a range of negative and destructive emotions, such as anger or hatred, and transform those into constructive emotional and behavioral orientation is an important psychological indicator of social cohesion and reconciliation (BLINDED, 2016). In that sense, both theoretical and empirical literature, as well as reports by international organizations and peace practitioners, have provided strong support for positive implications of intergroup forgiveness (Auerbach, 2004; Bartoli, 2001; Bettencourt, 2015; Borris & Diehl, 1998; Michael E. McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 1999; Peace Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation, 2020).

Less researched are the antecedents of this important psychological process—particularly at the intergroup level. Current research indicates that intergroup contact promotes forgiveness by facilitating cognitive and emotional alterations among former victim group members (BLINDED, 2008). Individuals who report having good quality interactions with members from past or present antagonistic groups experience changes in their views and feelings; for example, they may have a reduction in perception of homogeneity and an increase in empathy (Exline & Baumeister, 1999; Hamber, 2007; Stathi, Husnu, & Pendleton, 2017). Another important psychological change pertinent for unblocking forgiveness suppressors are victimhood beliefs.

Individuals who exhibit strong victimhood beliefs are less likely to engage in forgiveness-related processes (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis, 2008; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008; Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013).

One of the most complex nexuses in the field of (intergroup) forgiveness is the relationship between religiosity, forgiveness, and consequently, reconciliation. Multiple connotations and different possibilities of operationalization make research on these concepts particularly challenging. Religiosity, non-exhaustively, can be understood as an acceptance of a set of doctrines, a coping strategy, a practical implementation of religious norms in life, a comprehensive worldview, a personality factor, or a sub-system of personal ethos (Glock, 1962; Huber, 2003; Hyman & Handal, 2006; Piedmont, 1999; Willander, 2014). Those possibilities can be combined and each of them can have multiple dimensions (Clayton & Gladden, 1974; Cornwall et al., 1986; Jong et al., 1976; Mueller, 1980). Forgiveness, on the other hand, can be understood as a decision to forswear prosecution or retaliation (similar to pardon), as a positive change in emotions and/or attitudes (either unilaterally or multilaterally), or – more broadly – as a reiterative process of coming to terms with past injuries (BLINDED, 2020, pp. 5–63). Finally, understandings of reconciliation vary from mere cessation of hostilities to spiritual unity between former enemies (V. Rosoux, 2009; Strupinskienė, 2017). These phenomena can be further analyzed on the interpersonal and intergroup levels. Importantly, positive relationships on the interpersonal level do not guarantee the same effects on the intergroup level, and in some cases the directionality is the opposite. Empirical insights from interpersonal studies suggest that religiosity is positively associated with interpersonal and self-forgiveness (Ayten, 2012; Escher, 2013; e.g. Worthington, Sharp, Lerner, & Sharp, 2006), but whether this relationship pertains to intergroup and post-conflict contexts remains contested. The aim of this study is to test this

question in a post-conflict context of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) with participants from two different national and religious groups. In view of global surveys that suggest the rising relevance of religion around the world (cf. Pew Research Centre, 2012), as well as its pertinence to intergroup conflicts, it is important to further understand how religiosity interacts with processes of forgiveness and reconciliation. Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a country with a long tradition of interreligious collaboration that passed through a period of deadly inter-group conflicts in the 1990s, serves as an important case-study for this research. Generally speaking, links between religious and national identity are strong, yet one cannot easily predict whether religiosity stimulates more open attitudes towards other groups or, instead, encourages group-centrism. Two major religions in BiH (Christianity and Islam) offer substantive doctrinal justifications for forgiveness and reconciliation. Those elements can be reinforced by positive historical experiences of non-violence and understanding in the country's history. On the other hand, contested interpretations of the nature of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina are strongly predicated upon group-belonging, much less ideological positions. In such conflicts, as Kasapović (2015, pp. 49–50) observes, political loyalty is based on strong identity divisions that each side seeks to preserve and reinforce. Religion in BiH can thus be more effective as a 'group-marker' than as a motor of pro-social change. Considering these different possibilities, it is thus important to test whether those positive potentials prevail after an experience of war or whether religion is linked to a different set of attitudes.

Religiosity and Interpersonal Forgiveness

A number of studies have reported a positive correlation between religiosity and different dimensions of forgiveness, manifested as an increased readiness to find *motivations* for forgiveness (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004), *grant* forgiveness (DiBlasio & Benda, 1991; Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989; Sheldon, 2014), *communicate* forgiveness (Sheldon & Honeycutt, 2011), and show *higher appreciation* for forgiveness as a valued and moral ideal. (Poloma & Gallup, 1992; Rokeach, 1973; Shoemaker & Bolt, 1977). Certain studies also find links between religiosity and trait forgiveness, otherwise known as forgiveness for a dispositional level of personality (Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006; M. E. McCullough & Worthington, 1999). This is especially the case when forgiveness is measured in the context of hypothetical scenarios. The effects of religiosity on forgiveness of specific offenses seem to be weaker but still positive (Davis, Worthington, Hook, & Hill, 2013; M. E. McCullough & Worthington, 1999). From the moral perspective of religious teachings, a positive link between religiosity and forgiveness is expected. As Pargament and Rye (1998) suggest, religions, especially theistic ones, present forgiveness as a divine-like characteristic. These religions provide role models for forgiving persons, allowing victims to reframe their relationship with offenders, and offering them resources to deal with insecurities surrounding the forgiving process. Put differently, religion provides individuals with motivations to forgive and presents them with a set of stress-coping strategies.

Other studies, however, find a weak or insignificant correlation between religiosity and forgiving (Subkoviak et al., 1995; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). A meta-analysis of situational and dispositional correlates of forgiveness conducted by Fehr et al. (2010) shows that religiosity

indeed has a positive correlation with forgiveness, but the amount of accounted variance in victim forgiveness was only 3.6%, thus demonstrating a small effect size. One way to address an apparent mismatch between religious imperatives and real behavior is to differentiate between general support for forgiveness, (i.e., seeing forgiving as a desirable ideal) and actual willingness to grant forgiveness. While religious people can readily express their commitment to forgiveness in accordance with religious norms, it does not guarantee that they will act accordingly in concrete circumstances (Brown, Barnes, & Campbell, 2007; Riek & Mania, 2012).

Several other studies make more nuanced links between forgiveness and religiosity. From the perspective of ‘relational spirituality’ (Davis et al., 2010; Davis, Hook, & Worthington, 2008), readiness to forgive is largely dependent on the nature of the offense and the perceived relationships with the Sacred. Worthington and Sandage (2016, p. 110) phrase it succinctly, stating that readiness to forgive particularly depends on “the people and transgression, their relationships with each other, and the relationship of each with the sacred.” In other words, the likelihood of a victim forgiving depends not only on the nature of the injury, but also on the nature of the victim’s relationship to the Sacred, the victims’ perception of the offender’s relationship to the Sacred, and the mutual relationship between the victims and the offender. Studies that explore more specifically the nature of the relationship to God indicate that disappointment with God or feelings of anxiety with God negatively relate to forgiveness (Hall, Fujikawa, Halcrow, Hill, & Delaney, 2009; Strelan, Acton, & Patrick, 2009). In addition, a specific image of the object of devotion, such as seeing God as loving versus controlling, is shown to influence people’s tendency to forgive (Webb, Chickering, Colburn, Heisler, & Call, 2005). Tsang et al. (2005) suggests that religion should be seen as a set of multiple systems of meaning that can be used to rationalize not only forgiving, but also unforgiving behavior.

Accordingly, religious individuals “who are highly motivated not to forgive might use religion to rationalize their unforgiving actions, just as religious individuals who are motivated to forgive can find ample justification for forgiveness” (Tsang et al., 2005, p. 796).

Religiosity and Intergroup Forgiveness

The relationship between religiosity and intergroup forgiveness has been examined to a lesser extent. Those studies that explore this concept find a rather negative relationship. For example, religiosity among Holocaust survivors was positively correlated with all forms of aversion and avoidance of Germans (Cherfas, Rozin, Cohen, Davidson, & McCauley, 2006). The authors thus suggest that “salience of identification with a victimized group contributes to the assignment of collective guilt” (Cherfas et al., 2006, p. 77), which is congruent with the findings of Wohl and Branscombe (2004).

Looking back at the history of humankind and conflicts, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the role of religion in creating, producing, and justifying conflicts is enormously significant. However, what needs to be differentiated is religion as an abstract system of supernatural beliefs from personal religiosity as an individual’s endorsed set of beliefs and values. The concept that remains underexplored is the relationship between the personal level of religiosity and intergroup forgiveness, which we examine more closely in this paper.

One can take two somewhat opposing approaches to this particular relationship. One is that personal religiosity is associated with values such as compassion, which, in turn, might be correlated with a higher tendency to forgive former perpetrator groups. Indeed, empirical evidence has identified empathy as an important precursor of intergroup forgiveness BLINDED,

2008). Another perspective is that religiosity might be related to less forgiveness as it naturally strengthens an association with the in-group and further fortifies the intergroup boundaries. This is to be expected particularly with groups whose collective identity is strongly marked by religious components, which is the case with the major ethnic/national groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Socio-psychological literature and research did not examine this relationship in detail.

It has been documented that religiosity is negatively correlated to positive intergroup relations in conflict settings (Kimmerling, 1999; Rynhold, 2005). A recent study by Klar and Schori-Eyal (2015) also found that support for forgiveness was hampered by religiosity. Consequently, and in post-conflict settings, one can expect that religiosity will be negatively related to intergroup forgiveness due to its association with ethnocentric beliefs, having in mind the strong links between religion and ethnic/national identity.

In an inter-religious context, strong religious identity, for instance, can increase the feeling of difference between groups and subsequently lower intergroup contact (Cairns, Tam, Hewstone, & Niens, 2005). In that sense, one could expect a mediation between religiosity and forgiveness by group centrism, which is defined as a behavioral syndrome that includes: uniformity in opinions across group members, in-group favoritism, rejections of outgroups, conservatism, and resistance to change (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & Grada, 2006).

Another body of scholarship posits a positive relationship between religion and intergroup conflicts through framing. Juergensmeyer (2000) thus argues that religion transforms contingent conflicts in the cosmic framework, whereas Avalos (2005) claims that religions create artificial scarcities over sacred goods. What in practice could be just a conflict over contingent resources becomes, per Avalos (2005), a part of a transcendent battle of good versus evil. In that

sense, one could expect that people would show less tendency to forgive crimes framed in religious terms than those framed in purely secular terms.

Several other factors can explain the opposite effects of religiosity on interpersonal and intergroup forgiveness. Firstly, forgiveness is—both in religious discourse and secular discourse—often understood as a very personal and intimate process linked to the original hurtful event. While individuals can grant forgiveness related to their own traumas, they do not feel that similar action in the name of the whole group is appropriate. Wiesel's (1997) famous memoir *The Sunflower* narrates the story of a dying Nazi soldier who summoned him to his room to ask forgiveness for the soldier's actions in the killing of the Jews. Wiesel, still prisoner, walked out of the room, feeling unable to grant collective forgiveness personally. When individuals assume their group identity in relation to another group, they might feel a loss of agency and ownership over the process of forgiving. Secondly, as Cairns et al. (2005) suggests, granting interpersonal forgiveness is simpler than intergroup forgiveness because it is easier to trust a specific individual than have a generalized trust in all members of the outgroup community. Thirdly, when forgiveness is perceived as something that can or cannot be given to a group, instead of a particular individual, individuals can experience certain diffusion of guilt among the outgroup members. A number of studies indicate that restitution and signals of remorse and repentance, when perceived as sincere and genuine, positively contribute to the processes of forgiveness (Carlisle et al., 2012; Fehr et al., 2010; Oliner & Zylicz, 2009; van Tongeren, Burnette, O'Boyle, Worthington, & Forsyth, 2014). Therefore, if an individual assumes that at least some members of the outgroup are in denial or unremorseful, then granting collective forgiveness might seem like a decision in favor of blanket amnesty. Finally, religious systems can have different sets of implications for personal and social life. Believers can see

interpersonal forgiveness as a part of their private piety weighing personal resentment and pain against the, potentially greater, spiritual goods. Granting forgiveness on the group level, however, would need to include additional concerns for the solidarity, reputation, and moral standing of one's own group. In that sense, we do not deal solely with private emotions, but also with social norms that place care for ingroup members before care for others.

In our research, we have opted for a concise operationalization of forgiveness, which is understood as a personal readiness to grant forgiveness to the perceived hostile group (in general) and perpetrators (in particular), accompanied with a positive appreciation of the general rapprochement between the two groups. In the context of ethnically and religiously motivated conflicts, we hypothesize that religiosity will be negatively related to intergroup forgiveness because of the promotion of higher levels of ethnocentric beliefs associated with deeper intergroup differentiation and outgroup derogation.

Religiosity and Intergroup Reconciliation

While forgiveness and reconciliation are often framed together, it is conceptually practical to distinguish the two terms. Even when forgiveness is regarded on the inter-group level, the emphasis is often placed on multiple individuals donning forgiveness. In the influential *Handbook of Forgiveness* (Worthington, 2005), most of the contributors agree that forgiveness is an internal (not social) process that involves prosocial emotions. Reconciliation, on the other hand, can take numerous forms, ranging from interpersonal encounters (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2011) to public ceremonies (Richards, 2017, pp. 319–320). Worthington (1998, p. 129) summarizes succinctly that “[f]orgiveness happens inside an individual; reconciliation happens

within a relationship.” Arguing that forgiveness can greatly facilitate reconciliation while being distinct from it, the author addresses the cases of both “forgiveness without reconciliation” and “reconciliation without forgiveness” (Worthington, 1998, p. 129).

Two recent large-scale studies on the factors of reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina found little disparities between ethnic groups, whereas there was a consistent difference between religious and non-religious respondents. As identified in the text, “respondents who identified themselves as more religious were more likely to support a public reconciliation process and one which would address issues associated with the past” (Wilkes et al., 2013, p. 8). The study, however, does not address the issue of forgiveness, which therefore needs additional attention. The support for “public reconciliation processes” does not indicate any directionality between involved parties, and it might be understood as something that does not threaten the group’s self-image. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is always directional and implies the asymmetry in injury between a victim and an offender. In that sense, it carries a stronger bearing on in-group solidarity. Therefore, we hypothesize that the influence of religion on reconciliation will be lesser than the influence on forgiveness, but that the relationship will be positive.

Methodology

Research Context

This research is set in the post-conflict context of Bosnia and Herzegovina and examines current intergroup relations between two ethnic groups (Bosniaks and Croats). In terms of religious belonging, Bosniaks as an ethnic group in BiH encompasses the majority-Muslim population. Croats, on the other hand, are majority Catholics. The religious terms *Catholics* and *Muslims* are often politicized and used synonymously with national labels in Bosnia and Herzegovina. To a large degree, intergroup relationships in post-Yugoslav countries are marked by the experiences and memories of the war in the 1990s that started in Slovenia and Croatia but soon concentrated in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995). These years were tragically characterized by mass killings and crimes, including acts of genocide, deportation, and rapes, mainly over the non-Serbian population. During the war, Bosniaks and Croats passed through different phases of collaboration and conflict. After an initial joint military front against the units of BiH Serbs (April-October 1992), Bosniaks and Croats entered into a period of mutual disputes and conflicts (October 1992-March 1994) that ended by a ceasefire and the signing of a common peace agreement in Washington (March 1st 1994) which established a joint federal political entity between BiH Croats and Bosniaks. For that reason, in the construction of post-war memories and attitudes, these two groups likely have different points of reference – not only towards experiences of confrontation and crimes, but also regarding the period of military and political collaboration. Nevertheless, it seems that the tenor of intergroup relationships has been lacking trust and intergroup forgiveness (BLINDED, 2008).

The goal of the study is to examine the intergroup attitudes and behaviors of these two groups in the aftermath of the conflict from the early 1990s. This research involves Bosniak participants from Sarajevo and Croats from the city of Mostar.

Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature review above, we have postulated two research hypotheses:

H1: When confronted with narratives about conflicts framed in religious terms, participants will show less tendency to forgive and reconcile than in situations when narratives carry no religious connotations.

H2: Religiosity will be negatively correlated with attitudes towards intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation, but strongly correlated with group centrism.

Study Design

In both studies, participants were randomly divided into three groups. Group A received no narrative about the conflict whatsoever, but only a survey containing measures of pro-social attitudes, religiosity, and group centrality. Group B read a factual narrative about a crime committed on their own group by Croats/Bosniaks based on real and generally known events. Group C received the same narrative with just one supplementary sentence that added a religious framing. The sentence read: “Some witnesses heard that soldiers were shouting, ‘Allahu Akbar’”

(in Croatian surveys) and “Some witnesses heard that soldiers were shouting, ‘God and Croats’” (in Bosniak surveys). Although we expected that insertions of the conflict narrative (especially the ones with religious framing) would influence students’ pro-social attitudes towards outgroup members, the preliminary MANOVA analysis in SPSS 24 showed no significant differences between groups A, B, and C on scales of forgiveness, reconciliation, religiosity, and group centrism.¹ Thus, the initial hypothesis that religious framing of conflicts would produce significant effects on forgiveness and other pro-social indicators was rejected. In the later analysis, all three groups were combined to test the second hypotheses through Structural Equation Modeling conducted in IBM Amos v24.

The surveys were administered via questionnaires in the Bosnian and Croatian languages (for Study 1 and Study 2, respectively). The studies were presented as an investigation of current intergroup attitudes and behavior in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The administration of the questionnaire lasted approximately thirty minutes and all students participated on a voluntary basis.

Study 1

Participants

The survey collected data from 105 students (29 males, 66 females, and 10 unidentified) from the University of Sarajevo. The sample was a non-probabilistic, convenience sample, and participants were recruited on a voluntary basis among students of Economy and Business. Ages varied from 18 to 35 years with a mean of 20.43 (SD=2.12). Only participants who identified

¹ For the Group 1 (Bosniaks): $F(8, 182) = 0.62$, $p = .74$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.95$, partial $\eta^2 = .027$. For the Group 2 (Croats): $F(8, 250) = 1.788$, $p = .08$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.895$, partial $\eta^2 = .054$.

themselves as Bosniaks were included in the final analysis. Among them, 92 identified as Muslims, 6 as atheist/agnostic, 1 as Orthodox, and 6 were left unidentified.

Measurements

Religiosity was measured with three items. The first item measured the importance of religion in participants' lives on a scale ranging from 1 (completely unimportant) to 4 (very important): "How important is religion in your life?". The second item measured behavioral commitment to religious practices: "Except weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious practices?"² This item was measured on a scale ranging from 'never' to 'more than once a week'. The third item measured participant's internal relationship towards his/her religion and faith. Participants were asked to choose a category that best describes their relationship with religion and faith, ranging from "I am not a religious person" to "I am a true believer and accept everything that my faith teaches me."³ Factor analysis showed all of them loading on one factor and the three items formed a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$).

Group centrism was measured with three items. Each item measured a specific indicator of group centrism: *in-group favoritism* ("I feel best in the company of members from my own nation"), *outgroup rejection* ("One has to keep distance towards members of other groups even when they appear friendly" and "Openness and honesty towards other nations sometimes bring more harm than good"), and *conservatism* ("Ethnically mixed marriages are doomed to fail.")

² The item was taken from the European Value Study 2008, See: EVS (2016)

³ Modified version of the scale of religious self-identification, originally developed at the Institute for Social Research (Institut za društvena istraživanja) in Zagreb. See: Bezinović, Marinović, and Jerolimov (2005, p. 139)

Principal component factor analysis revealed a one-factor solution and the items showed strong reliability when used as a scale (Chronbach's $\alpha = .80$).

Intergroup forgiveness was initially measured by five variables, with three variables coming from BLINDED (2008). The factorial analysis suggested a two-factor solution with three variables loading on the first factor and two on the other factor. What might have led to such a solution is the negative phrasing of the latter two variables. Eventually, three items were kept which measured three elements: 1) *personal readiness to forgive the outgroup members as a whole*, 2) *forgiveness of crimes*, and 3) *general perception of social forgiveness* ("I am personally ready to forgive Croats for what they did in the war," "I am ready to forgive Croats as a people, but not individuals who committed crimes," and "There cannot be durable peace without forgiveness."). Those three indicators showed good reliability (Chronbach's $\alpha = .76$).

Reconciliation was measured with two indicators of amicable coexistence and one variable that measured general perception of reconciliation eventualities ("Cooperation between peoples in Bosnia and Herzegovina is indeed possible," "I believe we are capable of building a state together," and "I believe that reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina will take place sooner or later."). These items were adopted from recent work measuring peoples' beliefs in reconciliation (BLINDED, 2017). The three items function on a highly reliable scale (Chronbach's $\alpha = .78$).

With the exception of measuring religiosity, all items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

The predictive model consisted of 4 latent variables (religiosity, group centrism, intergroup forgiveness, and reconciliation). The predictive model and the correlations between variables are shown below:

[see Picture 1 and Table 1]

The measurements show a good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.37$; NFI = .877; CFI = .961; RMSEA = .060 (RMSEA LO 90 = .019 RMSEA HI 90 = .09, PCLOSE = .295). The χ^2 / df value of 1.37 is below the suggested cut-off value of 3.00 (Kline, 2016). RMSEA of .06 also indicates a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999; MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996), whereas NFI value of .877 is a marginal value for a well-fitting model (Bentler, 1992). NFI is, however, sensitive to the sample size. Thus, Bentler (1990) advises the use of the revised index CFI. In this study, with its value of .961, it is above the value of .95, which indicates a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

As hypothesized, the link between religiosity and group centrism was strong and positive. The direct impact of religiosity and forgiveness is negative but not statistically significant. It seems that the relationship is mostly mediated via group centrism, which has a negative and significant correlation with intergroup forgiveness. Intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation show a weak correlation, which supports the initial expectations that those two concepts measure different sentiments and attitudes in post-conflict settings. Religiosity, which was negatively

correlated with intergroup forgiveness, is in this case positively (and significantly) correlated to reconciliation. An alternative model with group centrism as a predicted value and forgiveness as a mediator did not indicate any improvements in fit, so the initial model was kept.

Study 2

Participants

The analysis was done on the data collected from 144 students (39 males, 103 females, and 2 unidentified) from the University of Mostar, identified as Croats, who participated in the survey (age 19-39, $M=20.90$, $SD=1.94$). The sample was a non-probabilistic, convenience sample, and participants were recruited on a voluntary basis among students at the Faculty of Humanities. Out of 144 participants, 137 declared themselves as members of the Catholic Church, 1 identified as Atheist/Agnostic, 1 as a member of the Orthodox Church, 2 as Other, and 3 were left unidentified.

Procedure

For the second study, we used improved and expanded measurements. The concepts were operationalized as follows:

Religiosity. In the second survey, we used an expanded religiosity scale consisting of nine items: 1) I believe in God's existence, 2) I find answers to the most important questions of my

life primarily in faith, 3) Our society would be better if it had more believers, 4) Faith helps me to cope with difficult situations in life, 5) In my life, I follow everything that my faith teaches, 6) How important religion is in your life (from 1-entirely unimportant to 5-very important), 7) How often you feel God's activity in your life, 8) Except weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious practices, 9) How often do you dedicate time to your personal prayer. Factor analysis showed all of them loading on one factor, and three items formed a highly reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$), and the deletion of any item would not further improve it.

Group centrism was also measured by an expanded and improved scale consisting of indicators measuring *in-group favoritism* ("When I choose friends, I take into account their nationality" and "In a situation of crisis, one can trust only members of one's own nation"), *outgroup distance* ("When I am in the company of members of other nations, I have to think about what I say"), *rejection of group heterogeneity* ("It would be best if all people would live in their national regions" and "I respect other nations, but I feel best in the company of members of my own nation"), *conservatism* ("Ethnically mixed marriages are an unnecessary complication"), *resistance to change* ("Openness and honesty towards other nations brings more harm than good"). The principal component analysis revealed a one-factor solution, and items showed strong reliability when used as a scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).

Intergroup forgiveness was measured by an improved scale consisting of 6 variables measuring *personal readiness to forgive* ("I am personally ready to forgive Bosniaks what they did during the war," "I could never forgive Bosniaks the crimes they committed," and "When I hear people talking about war, I always promote forgiveness"), the *external imperative of*

forgiveness (“Even those who suffered tragedies should find the strength to forgive”) and *social consequences of forgiveness* (“There is no durable peace without forgiveness” and “Forgiveness is negative because it can lead to forgetting of victims”). Factor analysis yielded a single factor. Gathered in a scale, items show strong reliability (Chronbach’s alpha = .81).

Reconciliation was measured by three variables: “If I could make political decisions, reconciliation would be my priority,” “I personally hope to see reconciliation between peoples in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” and “My people do not have any reason to work on reconciliation with Bosniaks and Serbs.” (R), with good reliability (Chronbach’s alpha = 0.76).

With the exception of items measuring religiosity, all items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

Results

The results of the analysis are shown below:

[see Picture 2 and Table 2]

The measurements showed a reasonably good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.73$; NFI = .819; CFI = .912; RMSEA = .072 (in the 90% confidence interval RMSEA LO 90 = .061 and RMSEA HI 90 = .082, PCLOSE = .001). The χ^2 / df value of 1.73 is below the suggested cut-off value of 3.00 (Kline, 1988). RMSEA of .072 also indicates a good fit (MacCallum, Browne and Sugawara, 1996; Hu and Bentler, 1999), carrying in mind that the PCLOSE value indicated suggests that the population RMSEA value is greater than .05. NFI at .819 has marginal value for a well-

fitting model (Bentler, 1992), and the same is the case for CFI (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Dunn et al., 2006:316).

The results of the second study were partially different from Study 1, yet the most salient elements remained confirmed. Initially, the second study corroborated the hypothesized strong positive links between religiosity and group centrism as well as high and negative associations between group-centrism and intergroup forgiveness.

Although no direct comparison of the effects between latent variables can be made due to difference in scales, we can still detect some major differences between Study 1 and Study 2. The biggest difference seems to be between forgiveness and reconciliation, which was in much more strongly pronounced in Study 2 (0.72 versus 0.22 in Study 1). Since the majority of the group were members of the Catholic Church, and that group on average showed very high religiosity ($M=4.17$; $SD=0.95$), the reason for this change could be theological teaching. While in Islam, forgiveness is primarily understood in relation to the pardon and amnesty, Christianity puts forward forgiveness as a religious virtue and a spiritual task (Rye et al., 1999, pp. 20–21). The stronger relationship between religiosity and group centrism in Study 2 (0.63 versus 0.48) is much more difficult to interpret in view of these religious teachings since both Christianity and Islam have similar supra-national appeals. In the context of BiH, however, national and religious belonging highly overlap and are sometimes used interchangeably (BLINDED, 2020, pp. 256–259). Further studies could include a separate scale that measures the identification between religious and national belonging, analyzing to what degree participants see religion as an essential element of their nationality.

Additionally, in Study 2, group centrism was also negatively correlated to reconciliation, but the correlation was not statistically significant. The direct correlation between religiosity and reconciliation in the second study is negligent and negative, and it seems to be entirely mediated through other variables. As was the case with Study 1, an alternative model was tested where forgiveness and reconciliation were modeled as predictors of group closeness, which did not indicate any improvements in the goodness of fit. Additionally, expanded models with measurements of empathy and trust as predictors of reconciliation were tested, which showed inferior goodness of fit.

Discussion

This research gives new insights into the role of religion in the framing of conflict-discourses after wars, as well as new findings on relationships between religiosity, group-centrism, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This is important for three major reasons. *First*, this study provides further empirical insights into the relationships between religiosity, reconciliation, and intergroup forgiveness. The initial hypothesis that the framing of conflicts in religious terms would decrease a participant's support for forgiveness and reconciliation was not confirmed. At face value, this goes against the accepted dogma that so-called *religious conflicts* are much more difficult to resolve than non-religious ones. However, it could be the case that framing conflicts in religious terms can have a significant impact on respondents only if it is repeated and systematic, which calls for further studies.

Furthermore, the data suggests that religiosity has robust associations with group centrism, which plays a strong mediating role between religiosity and intergroup forgiveness. As several authors suggested (Jakelić, 2010; Perica, 2004), the dominant form of religiosity in ex-Yugoslav territories is “collectivistic religion.” This form of religion favors group solidarity, puts forward collectivistic, rather than individualized, spirituality, and emphasizes belonging to an ethnicity/nation as a relevant part of religious identity. Therefore, while religiosity might favor in-group forgiveness because it emphasizes group solidarity, it has a much more ambivalent role when it comes to intergroup forgiveness.

Data thus suggests that collectivistic religiosity may be detrimental for improving intergroup relations in post-conflict environments. This, however, does not exclude the possibility that other, more inclusive forms of religiosity could improve understanding between different ethnic and religious groups. Qualitative studies suggest that engagement in inter-religious activities moves from a position of political power towards moral authority, and positive experiences of religious plurality improve prosocial values among religious leaders as well as believers (Funk Deckard, 2012). A recent extensive study on religious leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina conducted by BLINDED (2020) suggests 4 processes that facilitate a move from exclusionary to inclusive religiosity: 1) move from elected nations/groups to participative salvation, 2) move from the idea of ‘clean’ sacred lands to shared stewardship over territory, 3) move from coercive power to moral authority in public discourse, and 4) move from resentment and self-centered victimhood to ecumene of compassion. It is intimated that those four changes could create a shift from solely inward-oriented religiosity towards inclusive interreligious and intergroup dialogue. Further empirical studies could compare the influence of different forms of religiosity on intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation. More precisely, it would be beneficial to

differentiate between groups of believers that practice more compassionate and inclusive forms of religiosity with those who subscribe to religiosity that, while remaining in line with basic religious dogmas, produces exclusivity. This differentiation could make nuances within moderate and high-religiosity groups and explore not only the degree of religiosity but also the type of religiosity.

Secondly, the study demonstrates the influence of different religious ideas on the perception of concepts such as forgiveness and reconciliation. While they are in common discourse often used interchangeably, they still seem empirically distinct and dependent on religious teachings. While attitudes in favor of intergroup forgiveness correlate positively with respondents' support for reconciliation, the strength of that relationship varies. When it comes to religiously heterogeneous societies, it is thus important to understand two important elements: 1) what concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation actually represent and 2) what are specific religious rationales that can be used in support of them. In that way, peace workers and policymakers can develop much more sophisticated and contextuality sensitive strategies of engagement both with the general population and the community leaders.

The final asset of this research is that it tested these questions in a concrete social context, with participants from two different social and religious groups marked by past conflicts. These findings can therefore further research on conflict resolution and peacebuilding. One notable limitation of this study is the small sample of university students. Further studies with larger (ideally randomized) samples of participants from diverse social groups would be beneficial for the replication of these findings. Moreover, due to theoretical reasons (i.e. absence of previous mass-atrocities), we have focused on Croatian and Bosniak students. Studies that would extend this focus towards Serbian participants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as other post-conflict

regions, would be beneficial. The inclusion of the Serbian students could also show whether memories of multiple group-conflicts (in this case WWII and later wars in 1990s) reinforce each other and affect attitudes towards forgiveness and reconciliation even more negatively. We also suggest further improvements of measuring instruments, along the lines of Study 2, where we improved both content validity of the scales used in Study 1 and their reliability. Also, those measurements should take into account geographic and contextual differences in understandings of the concepts involved.

Furthermore, since the respondents were current university students, they did not directly participate in the war-events. The conclusions thus cannot be generalized to the broader population since one can expect that both generational belonging and proximity to conflicts have significant influence on forgiveness and reconciliation. While it might sound intuitive that older generations who directly experienced the war would exhibit a lesser degree of pro-social attitudes, this might not be the case. Generations that directly participated in the war also experienced previous life in a common state, participating often in ethnically mixed events and living in less segregated regions, which might make them desire such a reality again. Further studies that compare different generations could lead to further theoretical developments on the effects of age and generation, the transmission of collective memories, and the possible differences that memory versus post-memory (i.e. memory of the second generation) have on forgiveness and reconciliation.

In conclusion, the role of religion and religiosity in societies and intergroup relations is highly ambivalent. Whilst the creeds of religions are usually universalistic and uniting, they are not always translated as such in concrete practices. Especially in post-conflict settings, religion can be a divisive factor if group centrality becomes too strong in religious identity and behavior.

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Table 1. Standardized regression weights

Variables	Religiosity	Group Centrism	Intergroup forgiveness	Reconciliation
Religiosity	-			
Group centrism	.48***	—		
Intergroup Forgiveness	-.15	-.44***	—	
Reconciliation	.25*	-.45*	.22	-
M ⁺	4.42	2.24	3.60	3.71
SD ⁺	1.26	1.00	1.02	0.87

***significant for $p < 0.01$

* significant for $p < 0.05$

⁺ calculated for the observed variables

Table 2. Standardized regression weights

Variables	Religiosity	Group Centrism	Intergroup forgiveness	Reconciliation
Religiosity	-			
Group centrism	.63***	—		
Intergroup Forgiveness	.22	-.65***	—	
Reconciliation	-.07	-.10	.72***	-
Mean ⁺	4.19	3.18	3.70	3.88
SD ⁺	0.95	0.96	0.84	0.88

***significant for $p < 0.01$

⁺ calculated for the observed variables