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Davide STERCHELE

## The Limits of Inter-religious Dialogue and the Form of Football Rituals: the Case of Bosnia-Herzegovina

*The difficulties with interfaith dialogue are linked, at least in part, to the lack of ritual forms (consisting of rules, ceremonial idioms, liturgy, and repertoires of action) designed to unite and integrate the meta-group formed by the various religious communities. By means of ethnographic research conducted in Bosnia-Herzegovina the author studied the mechanisms with which, under particular conditions, some forms of collective ritual were able to create opportunities for the re-integration of the Bosnian population, which had been profoundly divided after the terrible war of 1992-1995.*

*Comparing the forms of religious rituals and those of sports rituals – in particular of football rituals – the author develops some considerations that can be applied to the general debate about inter-religious dialogue. The comparison brings to light some of the limits and difficulties that religious institutions encounter in giving life to an interfaith dialogue that directly and concretely involves the members of different communities.*

**Key words:** phenomenology – ritual – Bosnia-Herzegovina – football – inter-religious dialogue

*Les difficultés du dialogue interconfessionnel sont liées, du moins en partie, au manque de formes rituelles (faites de règles, idiomes cérémoniels, liturgies et répertoires d'action) ayant pour but d'unifier et intégrer un "meta-groupe" d'individus qui appartiennent à des communautés religieuses différentes. À travers une enquête ethnographique conduite en Bosnie-Herzégovine, l'auteur étudie les mécanismes par lesquels, dans certaines conditions, des rituels collectifs peuvent favoriser le processus de réintégration de la population bosniaque, profondément partagée suite à la guerre de 1992-1995.*

*En faisant une comparaison entre rituels religieux et rituels sportifs, en particulier ceux du football, l'auteur développe des considérations qui peuvent s'appliquer au débat général sur le dialogue interconfessionnel. La comparaison montre certaines limites et difficultés des institutions religieuses lors qu'elles tentent de mettre en place un dialogue qui engage directement et concrètement les membres des différentes communautés.*

**Mots-clés:** phénoménologie – rituel – Bosnie-Herzégovine – football – dialogue interreligieuse

In the course ethnographic studies conducted in Bosnia-Herzegovina since 2003, I examined the mechanisms with which, in particular conditions, some forms of collective ritual were able to promote the re-integration of the Bosnian population, which had been profoundly divided after the terrible war of 1992-1995. Comparing the forms of religious rituals and those of sports rituals – in particular of football rituals – it was possible to develop some considerations that could be applied in a general way to the debate about inter-religious dialogue. The study of football rituals in Bosnia-Herzegovina allows us to bring to light some of the limits and difficulties that religious institutions encounter in giving life to an interfaith dialogue that directly and concretely involves the members of different communities.

Both religion and football have contributed in various ways to the splitting up of Bosnia-Herzegovina and to the division of the population into three different national communities (Mojzes, 1998; Sells, 2003; Vrcan, 2003). At this point twelve years after the end of the armed conflict, both religion and football have the potential to contribute to the pacification and the integration of the Bosnian social system. Instead, religion continues to furnish substantial political support to the nationalist forces, which are committed to consolidating and legitimating the divisions. In the world of football, on the other hand, there has been some movement towards the partial integration of all Bosnians in a single sports community, but these are only the first steps on a difficulty journey, which is both risky and rather uncertain.

In this article I seek to analyse some of the elements that – in the specific case of Bosnia-Herzegovina – allow us to consider football as a potential tool for integration and that, by contrast, make it more difficult to do the same with religion. In particular, I have chosen to concentrate on rituals (religious and football) as *social practices* – and therefore as *forms of action* occasioned by the participants – and on the forms of organisation that such actions and groups assume.

Because such an approach takes its starting point from the Durkheimian distinction between *collective representations* and *social practices* (or between *beliefs* and *rites*), I will begin with some theoretical reflections on the concept of ritual, in the hope of making clear the type of perspective that I have adopted for analysing the Bosnian context.

## **Ritual as a Form of Action**

For many years the work of Durkheim was interpreted primarily as functionalist (Parsons, 1937) and neo-functionalist (Shils and Young, 1953; Warner, 1959; Bellah, 1968). According to these interpretations, which focused attention primarily on collective representations, order and social cohesion would depend on the existence of shared values, and rites are simply the practices through which such values are internalised, celebrated and reaffirmed. These interpretations were subsequently called into question by other theories, that, demonstrating the complexity and the pluralistic nature of ritual, have also sought to analyse its conflictual aspects. If it is true in fact that rituals can be instruments of social integration, of construction of 'us', of maintaining the

*status quo*, of creating and reinforcing power, they can also construct conflictual *arenas* in which established power is challenged and various actors seek to impose contrasting and alternative collective representations (Lukes, 1977; Collins, 1975; Hall and Jefferson, 1993).

Beyond the interpretation of ritual as functionalist and as conflictual, it is possible to consider ritual from yet another perspective – very fertile and interesting – that is, to analyse it from a phenomenological point of view (Coenen, 1981). This is the perspective that I will adopt here for developing some ideas about the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. According to such an approach, rituals are not to be understood as mere celebrations of collective representations that pre-date them, but instead as social practices above all (i.e., as forms of action) by means of which such collective representations are created and renewed, or replaced by alternative representations. When he analysed the ‘elementary forms’ of religious ritual, in fact, Durkheim described first of all a type of action, a non-utilitarian practice carried out in relation to one or more sacred objects (Fele, 2002). And the sacredness of such objects was not one of their immanent qualities, but was, rather, *attributed* to them by the ritual action.<sup>1</sup> It was the outlook that the participants in the ritual assumed with respect to the particular object or symbol that ‘rendered it sacred’: the division of the world based upon the sacred/profane dichotomy depended on what the ritual participants *did* during the ritual itself.

A ritual consists first of all of a meeting or a gathering together (in the same place) of more than one person. It is really the excitement caused by this mutual presence that furnishes a potential emotional weight, which is bit by bit reinforced as the gathered people begin to act – to move, speak, sing, be silent, shout – in a coordinated and synchronised manner, following repertoires of action regulated by a whole set of explicit and implicit prescriptions. The excitement rises as it is expressed, and transports those who participate in the ritual to a different world from that of daily routine, transmitting to them the sensation of being in contact with something ‘sacred’ that they themselves are helping to create. The rhythmic coordination of gestures transforms individual feelings into collective feelings, and makes it possible for the members of the group gathered together to feel part of a moral community. It is a form of ‘coming together’ that creates society through the action of its members; at the same time, in addition to being the product of the action of the people in the gathering, every ritual is in turn a mechanism that acts on those who take part and produces effects in them (Giglioli and Fele, 2001).

### **Religious Rituals and Football Rituals: Common Aspects**

This phenomenological approach enables us to analyse various types of rituals and to compare them with each other on the basis of the form and structure that they assume as collective actions, focusing our attention on what the people *do*, and putting temporarily aside the type of collective representations that the specific rituals create. In this way it is possible to carry out a comparison between religious rituals (setting aside for a moment the doctrinal and dogmatic contents) and

other forms of collective ritual, such as football rituals, demonstrating both similarities and differences. When we do this, we see first of all some common aspects between the two types of rituals.

### *Moral Communities*

In both religious celebrations and in football matches, the members of a specific community come together, share a certain level of excitement, begin to act together, each seeking to adapt their own individual rhythms to the collective rhythm, and by doing so, increase their level of emotional involvement.

The attention of the participants is oriented towards the ‘celebrants’ and towards specific ‘sacred objects’ (icons, altars, crosses, crescents, clothing and accessories; players, balls, flags, shirts, scarves) that help them to ‘visualize’ their belonging to the same moral community and to be aware of being so. Collective rituals presuppose therefore the existence of a ‘church’, in the sense of a moral community whose members are linked together by the fact of acting in unison on the basis of rules, prescriptions, and repertoires of action that they feel bound to respect. In religious rituals the church consists of the clergy and the faithful; in football rituals it is made up of the players, referees, trainers, managers and fans.

### *Rules, Power, Institutions*

If rules and prescriptions exist, it means that someone has the power to enforce them, and perhaps to modify them (Navarini, 2001). Such authority is of a type exercised by specific institutions. Popes, cardinals, patriarchs, bishops, imams and rabbis supply directions as to *how*, *when* and *where* rituals and celebrations must be carried out.

In football, the managers of the international and national football institutions (that is the political hierarchies of FIFA, UEFA and national football federations) establish the rules, sanction infractions, draw up the calendars and select the venues for the matches and the championships.

### *Separate Time*

The religious community and the football community each have their own specific calendars. The rituals of each community are repeated over time with periodic and cyclical rhythms which interrupt the rhythm of ordinary life and separate profane time from the sacred time of collective effervescence.

Further, each ritual event also assumes a particular meaning in relation to wider structures or temporal sequences of which they are a part (for example, the meaning of Bajram is indissolubly linked to the fact that it is preceded by Ramadan; in football, the meaning of a match depends on the results of other matches, on the position of teams in leagues, etc.).

*Separate Space*

Both religious and football rituals are ‘staged’ in separate spaces that are visibly different and set apart from the places in which daily life takes place: both in places of religious services (churches, mosques, synagogues, etc.) and in stadiums and football fields we find different and specific rules regarding how to act, how to dress, and the place where one is authorised to sit. They are non-ordinary places, with special codes of behaviour compared with the daily routine, and with areas that are accessible only to some of the participants and forbidden to others.

**Religion and Football in Bosnia-Herzegovina***Religion*

Religious memberships are fundamentally important in Bosnia today, since the boundaries of ethnic-national divisions – that currently dominate the political and social scene of the country – run in parallel with them.

Until just before the 1992-1995 war, Bosnians shared habits, outlook, and daily practices – work, school, sports – which were common to them and which distinguished them from neighbouring populations. Membership in three different religious communities did not constitute a relevant criterion for divisions between them, partly because the Tito regime had suffocated religious expression and had limited its relevance and influence, relegating it to only the private sphere of individual life, and partly because Bosnian religiosity had never been particularly deep. Another reason was that the habit of living together with religious practices different from their own had rendered them familiar and perfectly integrated into the ‘cognitive landscape’ of Bosnians (Mahmutčehajić, 2000).

However, after the death of Tito, the progressive collapse of the communist system, and the war of 1992-1995, religion re-conquered an ever more central role in the public sphere as an instrument for reinforcing and legitimising ethno-national identities (Bougarel, 1996; Sells, 1996; Vrcan, 1994, 2001). The institutional apparatuses of the three main Bosnian religious communities (Catholic, Muslim and Orthodox) played a fundamental role in the process of polarisation that aggravated the tensions between the different national groups, both before the war and, above all, during and after it (Iveković, 2002). Even when they did not directly support this process, the religious authorities did not oppose it, or at least not with the force and decisiveness that was required. Religious belonging therefore became one of the principal elements of differentiation among Bosnians. Since belonging to a religion was most visible – that is, more easily observable from a phenomenological point of view – it made it possible to distinguish a Bosnian-Serb from a Bosnian-Croat or from a Muslim-Bosnian. In other respects, there are no relevant somatic or linguistic differences between Bosnians. It was above all the war of 1992-1995, and what happened after it, that helped to revive the use of religious practices as an expression of differentiation and of the ‘demarcation of territory’. In many areas of Bosnia, however, this emphasis on religiosity involved only a minority of the population. Moreover,

instead of involving an increase in devotion and spirituality it was a question of the development of a certain formalism supported by an ostentatious display of symbols and signs of religious membership (the beard worn by some Muslims; the use of greetings of 'Arab' origin such as 'esselam eleikum', 'merhaba' and 'allahimanet'; and the crucifixes worn by many Orthodox Christians and Catholics, etc.). However, this religiosity, which was expressed in such an exasperated and marked way – even if only by a part of the population – helped to stress the divisions of Bosnia into areas in which national (or religious) groups prevail over others.

### *Football*

Toward the end of the 1980s, the world of football had also undergone a progressive politicization. The emerging nationalist elites utilised it both as an arena of dissent in an anti-communist key, and as a basis for personal enrichment, of construction of power at the local level and of political self-legitimation in the eyes of their own national group. With the outbreak of the war, each national group set up its own football federation and began to organise its own competitions separately.

After the war, the condition of Bosnian football was disastrous: division into three distinct and separate mono-ethnic federations, extremely low quality, lack of financial and structural resources, power in the hands of incompetent speculators coming from outside the world of football itself. The Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat fans did not identify with Bosnia-Herzegovina's representative team (controlled politically by the nationalist Bosnjak party SDA), but rather with the newly created teams representing Serbia and Croatia separately.

Following strong pressures from the organs that govern football and sports at the world level (FIFA, UEFA, and the IOC) the Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat Football Federations accepted entry into the Bosnian Football Federation in 2002 (even though it meant uniting with that of Bosnian Muslims, the only one to be officially recognised), and agreed to organise the Premier League, the first united Bosnian post-war competition. Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat players began to play for the unified representative team of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

### **Religious Rituals and Football Rituals: Differences**

Having briefly summarised the recent history of football and religion in Bosnia-Herzegovina, I can now proceed to a comparison between religious rituals and football rituals. The comparison will focus in particular on:

1. Forms of ritual
2. Organisational and institutional structures
3. Rules, prescriptions and repertoires for action
4. Ritual places.

### *Forms of Ritual*

There is a fundamental phenomenological difference between the forms of religious ritual and those of football ritual: the former is structured as a 'representation of unity' while the latter is a 'representation of conflict'.

Religious ritual tends therefore to follow paths that unite the participants, that is, to reinforce the integration of the moral community that underlies it. However, in the Bosnian context – in which three religious groups co-exist, none of which constitutes an absolute majority – the general increase in participation in religious rituals amounts to an increase in occasions for gathering together and for collective effervescence which are exclusively for the members of one of the three groups (and from which two-thirds of the population are therefore excluded).

In short, because each religious faith has its own specific rituals, in the Bosnian context the various religious rituals cease to reinforce the internal integration of each single religious community and to underline the differentiation of each with respect to the others.

While the rituals of various religions constitute the basis for distinct and separate interaction, football rituals have a common trans-national, trans-ethnic, trans-religious phenomenological basis that renders it formally similar all over the world. Now that the international community has been able to impose some unification of national competitions, all Bosnians are forced to participate in the same competition, that is, in the same 'ritual chain' whose temporal cadence is governed by a *common calendar* and whose practice takes place within a *single territorial frame*. It was not necessary to invent new ritual forms, ceremonial idioms, repertoires of action, rules and languages: *the members of the three football communities already shared all this, and already had the same necessary ritual qualifications for participating all together in the same football ritual*. The common basis of football rituals has allowed not only the creation of a single Bosnian football league, but also the use of football for building humanitarian projects that have fostered the revival of inter-ethnic relations involving the coaches and trainers of youth teams, children and their parents. The humanitarian project Open Fun Football School has succeeded in getting Bosnian children from all the national groups to play together: Croats and Muslims at Mostar, Muslims and Serbs at Srebrenica, Serbs and Croats at Orašje, etc. On the other hand, there are no religious rituals in Bosnia that can bring together in the same place people belonging to the different national groups, getting them to participate in a coordinated manner using the same repertoire of action, and involving them in a common feeling of excitement and collective effervescence.

### *Organisational and Institutional Structures*

The institutions that govern the three most important religious communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina – Muslim, Catholic-Christian and Orthodox-Christian – are totally separate from one another in terms of organisation and structure. Each of them is involved in guiding and managing a particular religious community, governing doctrinal fields (interpretations of sacred texts, theological formulations, etc.) and liturgical fields (ritual forms, ceremonial idioms,



repertoires of action, rules and languages) in complete independence from each another. There are no *super partes* organs that have the power to force such institutions to accept specific rules. The Inter-religious Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in which the leaders of the major faith groups take part, is an organisation without any power beyond that of discussing questions about official relations between religious institutions, the type of language and behaviour adopted in official discourses (hoping for mutual 'non-demonisation'), and the protection of religious minorities and of their right to profess their own faith.

But the Inter-religious Council is not so much a joint-institution that could impose its decisions so much as an *inter pares* association of organizations whose main commitment is in any case that to preserving the sacredness and the absolute truth of their own religious creed. Each of the Bosnian religious institutions fights in the areas in which its own faithful live as a minority (or have become such because of the war) in order to guarantee them the right to practice their own religion. Concretely, this almost always translates into requests to rebuild their own religious buildings which were destroyed and replaced by those of another religious community (this is how the reconstruction took place of the Mosques at Banja Luka, the Orthodox Churches at Sarajevo or Mostar and the Catholic Churches at Dobož or Bihać). It is a question, that is, of permitting the religious communities to live side by side, in the same place, and to carry out their own religious practices – that is, to *do* their own rituals – without facing obstacles or discrimination.

Anyway, the Inter-religious Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina periodically brings together the leaders of the major religious groups, but does not involve the faithful directly. In fact, there is no structured organisation that could unite the Bosnian faithful belonging to the various religions and that might furnish them with a plan (recognised or recognisable) for common ritual action. For this reason, no common ritual form exists among the diverse faiths at the phenomenological level of the religious practices performed by the faithful in their daily lives. In other words, *there is no form (more or less codified) of syncretism of religious practice*. At this level, religious life is made up more of mutual tolerance than of common action, and one should perhaps speak of a *multi-* or *pluri-*religious society, rather than of living together in an *inter-religious* way.

The situation in the case of football institutions is different. Before the war, Bosnia-Herzegovina did not have three different football federations on an ethnic-national basis: Serbs, Croats and Muslims all took part in the Yugoslav Football Federation, and participated in the local, regional and national competitions that it organised. It was during the war and afterwards that three distinct Bosnian football federations were born, one for each national group.

The creation, in 2002, of a common institution for all members of the Bosnian football community was possible because, unlike the situation in the religious field, there are formal supra-ordinate organisations in football beyond the local, regional and national ones. Such international sports institutions – IOC, FIFA and UEFA – have the power to impose authoritative decisions on local organisations (this power is even stronger in Bosnia because it is supported by the political representatives of the international community). The rule of football – and in a certain sense the meta-rules as well – are established at the supra-national level, and – even

though they are adapted, manipulated, bent or violated in their actual implementation at local level – are formally operative for all of the football federations in the world.

### *Rules, prescriptions, repertoires of action*

In institutionalised religious ritual the repertoires of action almost always follow the invariant sequences of the liturgy, whereas football ritual constitutes a frame of interaction characterised by a greater openness and variability.

The participants in religious rituals do not have much opportunity to influence the performance of the ritual, to contest the internal status quo and the existing hierarchies, or to preserve a degree of autonomy or visibility. Religious ritual does not foresee the expression of internal protest against the establishment of one's own religious group.

Those Bosnians who welcomed the increase in salience of religious membership have shown their approval by increasing their participation in ritual practices. Those who, instead, would prefer to live in a fundamentally secular society do not participate in religious practices (especially if they are non-believers) or else do so in a discrete and non-ostentatious way. Since religious rituals do not normally constitute arenas of conflict open to criticism and to contestation, the choice between participation and non-participation ends up by dividing Bosnians not only between *believers* and *non-believers*, but also between whoever is *pro* or *con* the choices, the styles or the methods adopted by the *establishment* that governs the religious community to which they belong. Utilising the well-known scheme suggested by Hirschmann (1970), we can say that religious rituals do not provide Bosnians with the option of *Voice*. Their choice is restricted to the options of *Loyalty* and *Exit*; and participation in religious rituals amounts to an expression of one's *Loyalty* to the faith community to which one belongs. The choice is therefore between alternatives of the type *pro/con*, *inside/outside* and *loyalty/exit*. Even when non-participation in ritual practices is utilised as a protest, critique or as a way of distancing oneself (that is, as a form of boycott), it is not possible to distinguish it phenomenologically from the forms of non-participation which are simply understood as *Exit*.

In contrast, football ritual displays a greater unpredictability. In the Bosnian case, the participants (players, managers, referees, fans, federation leaders, journalists, etc.) can exploit football ritual as an arena for demonstrating their own refusal or their own acceptance of the new multi-ethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina that came to life following the Dayton accords. An example of the first type is the fact that during some matches played in Herzegovina the fans (Bosnian Croats) of the home team ripped up and burnt the Bosnian flag, in order to replace it with that of Croatia. An example of the second type is the fact that groups of fans belonging to all three ethnic-national groups united together to demonstrate publicly against the Football Federation's leaders, who were accused of ruining Bosnian football with their corrupt and incompetent management. The need to preserve football as a 'common public good' has led fans to mobilise across ethnic boundaries.

The analysis of the Bosnian context seems therefore to suggest that in football rituals it is possible (even if in only a partial and limited way) to perform the *Voice* option.

### *Ritual Places*

During the 1992-1995 war, the goal of the new nationalist elites of creating ‘ethnically pure’ territories led to the need to eliminate the visible symbols of cultural contamination that were typical of the Bosnian *melting pot*. In this sense, the religious buildings were the main targets to eliminate, since the presence of mosques, Orthodox churches and Catholic churches alongside each other concretely and visibly reproduced in the Bosnian mind the multi-faith and multi-cultural character of the society. This is why these tangible signs of peaceful coexistence were erased, razed to the ground and made to disappear. Perica (2002) reports that 1,024 mosques and other Muslim buildings of historic and cultural importance situated in areas under Serb and Croat control were destroyed or damaged – just as were 182 Catholic churches, mostly at the hands of Serbs, while Muslims and Croats were responsible for the destruction of 28 Orthodox churches and monasteries.

The post-war urban landscape of Bosnia is different from that which preceded the war: in many localities, where Catholic and Orthodox churches as well as mosques had previously been scattered around the area, the buildings of only one of the three faiths predominate nowadays, depending on which ethnic-national group ended up as the largest in each place.

In recent years, in the areas that have witnessed a partial return of refugees, churches and mosques that had been destroyed were rebuilt, but these new religious buildings cannot compete (either in number or in scale) with those of the majority group, which have in the meantime continued to proliferate and multiply. Religious buildings have become one of the most powerful symbols of the demand for territorial supremacy, as one can easily see from a vehicle travelling along Bosnian roads. Passing through Doboj, one cannot help but notice the imposing Orthodox cathedral situated at the entrance to the city, its presence further emphasised by bright illumination at night. The same is true of the Catholic church in the centre of the town of Žepče. Even more striking is the enormous mosque at the entrance to Sarajevo, its architectural style more Arab than Bosnian, giving it yet greater socio-political symbolic significance. The real site of excellence in this ‘urbanistic symbology’ is however the city of Mostar, in which the topography of the religious buildings shows beyond doubt the separation between the Croatian part, west of the River Neretva (with its Catholic churches), and the Bosnian part to the East (with its mosques). The rivalry between the two groups is clearly apparent in the symbolic competition for construction of ever higher bell towers and minarets.

This type of *competitive sharing*, that is, of competition for the exclusive use of a “sacred place”, leads to a particular kind of multi-religious co-existence that some authors have defined ‘antagonistic tolerance’ (Hayden, 2002).

Places of football rituals do not convey – even in their appearance – the same potential meaning of ‘cognitive sign of difference’. The vista of a football field or a stadium tells us little (or nothing) about the ethnic, religious or cultural characteristics of the population that lives in the area around it; and even less does it allow us to imagine what is characteristic (in terms of ethnicity, religion or culture, etc.) about the individuals and groups that participate in the football

rituals that take place on that playing field and in that stadium. This is because the football field and the stadium, sacred places in which football ritual is performed, look the same in every locality.

## Conclusions

The significance of my reflections on rituals in religion and football is partial and limited for several reasons.

First of all, they refer to a context that is quite specific (a country currently taken up with the transition from communism and with the traumas – economic, social, and political – caused by the war) and they concern a particular case that cannot be easily generalised to others. Further, as I stated from the beginning, I chose to concentrate on rituals (religious and football) as *social practices*, and therefore on the forms of action occasioned by participants and on the forms of organisation that such actions and such groups assume. It is not my intention to argue, however, that rituals are more important than beliefs, collective representations, grand narratives or the rhetoric of official and institutional discourses performed in the public sphere. On the contrary, it is precisely the tensions and the difficulties of ‘unified’ Bosnian football that demonstrate how, even when common practices exist, antagonistic collective representations can at times preserve divisions between those same individuals who in certain areas of daily life participate in the same repertoires of action.

This reminds us not to overestimate the impact of rituals, as the ethnic and religious divisions in present-day Bosnia are mainly based on other factors – primarily on political options and economic processes. However, bearing this in mind, we notice that rituals can be used as tools for different political goals (i.e. maintenance of the *status quo* versus political change in the direction of an inter-ethnic Bosnia). Religion, as much as football, presents aspects that could potentially lead to conflict and to competition, but could on the contrary favour co-operation and peaceful interaction among different groups. Neither of these two areas is therefore exclusively a factor for division nor, on the contrary, for integration. Nevertheless, comparison between football rituals and religious ones shows that not all rituals can be used in the same way and for the same purposes.

This comparison, by telling us something about the conflictual or ‘pacifying’ potential of religion, could contribute to the general discussion of inter-religious dialogue and stimulate new approaches and hypotheses. Many inter-faith encounters end up by becoming events of a diplomatic-institutional character, in which interaction takes place primarily between the representatives of the clergy and of the official hierarchies, and in which the faithful of the various communities do not experience acting together through a co-ordinated and synchronised set of gestures, songs or words. A phenomenological analysis of these events could reveal further similarities with the form of football rituals: even in inter-faith prayer meetings the group that is together does not act in unison, but is composed of various subgroups whose members synchronise their own actions at other levels, which are uniform with respect to the group they

belong to and different with respect to the others. Inter-religious ritual practices are inevitably more complex than those which regularly take place within each specific religious communities. The latter are based on a repertoire of action that is codified and uniting. It could be interesting, therefore, to investigate *whether*, and *to what extent*, the difficulty in inter-faith dialogue is linked to the lack of ritual forms designed to unite and integrate the meta-group formed by the various religious communities.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Collins (1988) identifies the principal elements of ritual as: physical co-presence (close proximity of bodies), common focus of attention, sharing of the same emotional tonality, and sacred objects (not for their own sakes, but because 'rendered sacred' by the ritual action). With regard to the common focus of attention, this should not be understood as something external to the gathering of persons who participate in the ritual, nor as a particular rational mental state or as an object of abstract thought. The presence of a 'celebrant' or of a sacred symbol can help focus the attention of participants on a unique 'direction'. Nevertheless, the real focus is constituted above all by the attention that the participants pay to mutually co-ordinating and synchronising the gestures anticipated in the repertoire of ritual.

<sup>2</sup> For the analysis of religious symbols used as an expression of differentiation during the Bosnian war, see Velikonja (2001).

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