# Apostolov, Mario (Sofia). 1999

## The Frontier between Christianity and Islam. Conceived as a Zone of Contact, Conflict, and Co-operation

The objective of this study was to show that the frontier between Christianity and Islam should be interpreted as a zone of contact in a global, regional and local perspective. I looked into the history and the contemporary collective interpretations, practices and institutions of Christian-Muslim relations, in order to show that they reflect the concept of a zone of contact. The constructivist project in social theory maintains the view that exactly these dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world by social actors shape the way human action and interaction transforms the world.[1] People create civilisational frontiers because they need a structure for their social relations. From these follows the crucial practical implication of constructivist theories: the possibility to illuminate important features of social relations, which were previously enigmatic. If the zone of the Christian- Muslim frontier in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean is a region without regionalism, this is largely because it has been interpreted as such by social actors and social relations have been constructed in this way.

Consequently, and this is the major implication of constructivism for this study, if I have shown that the frontier between Christianity and Islam is a zone of contact, where the alternative of conflict or co-operation is open, there is no place for statements about the inevitability of conflict based on identity in the Balkans and the Middle East. Constructivism holds that dynamic social relations face the possibility of both cognitive evolution and institutional selection. A proper institution building can hopefully deal away with the major causes of conflict in the zone of contact. This is a major distinction from the postmodernist ideas about the frontier, mentioned above, in which the atomistic subject has limited, if any ability to act upon the surrounding environment. Even if the postmodernist ideas about the interspersal of communities and the reinforcement of functional frontiers contributed to our understanding of the frontier, one should go beyond them in order to explain the social dynamics of the frontier.

A major implication of this idea is the necessity to re-construct the institutional foundations of the system of accommodation of groups with distinct cultural identities on the state and regional levels. As far as religious identity is a form of political identity, the prospective institutional structure should not be limited to simply guaranteeing basic cultural rights of minorities, such as the freedom of worship, speech, and association.[2] There should be more political participation and dialogue involving all groups.

The interpretation of the Christian-Muslim frontier as a zone of contact, conflict or co-operation can apply to other civilisational frontiers in the contemporary world - Hindo-Muslim, Sino-Muslim, etc. Understood as both a barrier and a bridge, an area of mixed populations, but above all as a functional element in the structure of world society, the generalised concept of the civilisational frontier may become a major empirical contribution to the development of the constructivist project, which some see as a middle ground in international relations theory, and as a bridge from the traditional theories about international relations to postmodernism and theories of world society.[3] The concept of the zone of contact as a functional frontier in global society can servew as the basis to interpret conflict across the frontier as a functional element of social relations, which can be acted upon.

[1] Adler, Emanuel. "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," European Journal of International Relations, vol. 3, no. 3, 1997, p. 322.

[2] Kymlicka, Will. "Misunderstanding Nationalism," Theorizing Nationalism, ed. by Ronald Beiner, New York, SUNY Press, 1999, pp. 131, 138.

[3] Adler, E. "Seizing the Middle Ground," p. 322.