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# ***IN HOC SIGNO VINCES: RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM***

## **IN THE BALKAN WARS 1991-1995<sup>1</sup>**

by Mitja Velikonja

*See now, how men lay blame upon us Gods  
for what is after all nothing but their own folly.*

Homer, *The Odyssey*, 1st Book (translated by Samuel Butler)

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### **I. DISCOURSE OF IRRATIONALIZATION**

Some of the most common explanations for the Balkan wars of the 1990s have been that they were, in the final analysis, religious wars, or the consequence of national incompatibilities and cultural differences, or a return of old myths, or a thirst for revenge for historical injustices, or the logical result of the bloodthirsty ‘national character’ of the Balkan peoples, etc. Deliberately or not, both local and foreign commentators perceived these developments as being rationally inexplicable, spontaneous, completely unreasonable, and contrary to any sense of rationality. In sharp contrast to, for example, the Gulf war, the Balkan wars were comprehended and portrayed as *obscure, dirty, mean, uncivilised, cruel*, etc.

Needless to say, every social action--in our case war--has parallel ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ dimensions, which must be studied carefully. Belligerent groups were very often from different religious and ideological backgrounds. If we limit ourselves to the secularized twentieth century, we find mythic constructs, religious rhetoric and archaic iconography at different times and in different parts of the world. Many nations perceived and may still perceive themselves to be *the Most Ancient*, even *Holy, Sacred, or Heavenly*, as representing *Christ among the nations*, as the *Elect*, or having a *God-given mission* to fulfil; others are self-declared *warrants of democracy* or *cultured nations*. In history we remember military campaigns called the *Crusades*; various dictators were glorified as being *sent (or chosen) by God Himself*, or as the *incorporation of the Will of the Nation*; politicians have often referred to religious traditions and values and swear before God at their inauguration. The struggle of the *proletariat* against the

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ruling classes was interpreted in terms of a cosmic struggle between *Good and Evil*; *Holy Wars* were fought in different parts of the world by different religious fundamentalists; the *cleansing* of their different enemies was imperative for many new states and regimes. The juxtaposition of “*Eternal Allies*” versus “*Eternal Enemies*” could be found by many warring sides, as could the notion of the *Last Bastion* of the religion or *civilization* in question. Borders have been perceived as *sacred*, *historic*, or *untouchable*; enemies have often been demonized, animalized, or bestialized, etc.<sup>2</sup>

**It is, of course, not my intention to exonerate any belligerent Southern Slavic religious nationalists; I disapprove of them as much as I do of any militants or fundamentalists. I wish to emphasize that the battle cry *In hoc signo vinces*<sup>3</sup> has been heard across the world throughout the ‘age of the extremes’, to borrow a phrase from Eric Hobsbawm. In other words, the catastrophic Hobbesian war of all against all.<sup>4</sup> is certainly not some kind of Balkan peculiarity, nor is the significance of the role of religion, its rhetoric and its symbols. Therefore, the same questions must be asked anytime these phenomena appear anywhere in the world. Other than the hasty and overly simplistic explanations mentioned above, I view and treat the use--or misuse--of religious iconography, symbols and discourse, and mythological rhetoric in the recent Balkan wars as a very specific version of and regional manifestation of the broader phenomena of the religionization of politics,<sup>5</sup> the nation, place, time, neighbouring groups, and etc.**

**In my opinion, the ‘irrationalization’ of the Balkan wars in first half of the nineties (un)intentionally camouflages the main motives and causes which, in chronological order, are as follows: firstly, the plan to reunite Yugoslavia under the leadership of the non-reformist segments of the League of Communists and Army hard-liners; secondly, prompted by the ineffective policies of the international community, the great-national**

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<sup>2</sup>For an excellent study of the ethnogenetic myths and rhetoric of the Spanish, French, English, Italians, Germans and Russians, see Poliakov, 1999; for religious nationalism and religious references in politics in general, Hastings, 1997; for Russian, German, Nazi-Fascist, Anglo-American national Messianism in general, and French, Austro-Hungarian, Croatian and Serbian Messianism concerning Bosnia-Herzegovina, see Zgodini, 1999; for an analysis of the American perception and evaluation of the Vietnam War and the construction of warrior values, see Resic, 1999; for the relations and rhetoric of the Roman Catholic Church and extreme Right political parties in Europe before and during WW II. (Italy, France, Slovakia, Croatia, etc.), see Wolff, Hoensch, 1987; for (re)new(ed) political mythologies in post-socialist societies, see Tismaneanu, 1998.

<sup>3</sup>According to legend, a cross and the sign *By this sign you will conquer* appeared to Roman Emperor Constantine before the decisive battle at the Milvian bridge near Rome in 312. After the victory, he recognized Christianity as one of the official religions and erected a monument with the cross as a symbol of his triumph.

<sup>4</sup>*Bellum omnium in omnes.*

<sup>5</sup>One of many sociologically significant processes in contemporary societies is the refundamentalization of established religious communities and their close alliance with (nationalist) politics.

**policies and aggressions towards Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. All these goals--reunification and territorial conquests--and the methods in which they were realised, were undoubtedly strategically well organized, »rational« and pre-planned.**<sup>6</sup>

The obvious attempts to 'irrationalize' recent Balkan history, i.e., to reduce the conflict to a matter of nationalist madness and religious zeal, to a spontaneous and somewhat naïve barbarity, a revival of age-old hatreds, etc.--combine two particular dimensions. Firstly, the theoretical: this is the discourse of Orientalism<sup>7</sup> and the thesis (one of the most popularized in the 1990s) of unavoidable cultural conflicts in the contemporary world (in place of the political and ideological conflicts of bygone eras). The second is political: the deliberate avoidance of responsibility and feigned ignorance by the main culprits responsible for the war.

## II. INSTRUMENTALIZED OR INSTRUMENTALIZING?

If we limit ourselves to the religious considerations of the wars, we are faced with a fundamental dilemma. Were religions and religious communities and symbols used by nationalist politics/policies in their grand nationalist schemes? Or, conversely, did they exploit nationalist euphoria and policies in achieving their own religious goals? Were they 'instrumentalized' or did they 'instrumentalize'? In short, did they play an active or passive role in the most recent Balkan history?

I think the answer is that they did both. My answer to these questions may initially seem paradoxical. To certain religious 'integrists,' political developments in the late 1980s and early 1990s presented an excellent opportunity for the long-awaited re-Christianization and re-Islamization of the national, political and cultural identity of "their" nations, and the reaffirmation of their dominant position in society.<sup>8</sup> **The already belated modernist differentiation and pluralization of these societies seemed to have been lost to radical pre-modernist de-differentiation.**<sup>9</sup> Religious institutions rapidly became an important part of the dominant national/political/religious/cultural meta-platform and strategy.

**This total--and totalitarian--alliance between nationalist policies and religious communities and institutions was one of mutual benefit: national, political and, ultimately, military mobilization could not be achieved without religious legitimization, while, on the other hand, religious communities were unable to achieve their goals without the active support of nationalist parties and politics in general. Religious elements became an important part of the process of 'the ethnification of politics and the politicization of ethnicity' (as described by Vrcan, 2001).**<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>See for example Špegelj (1994, 2001).

<sup>7</sup>As developed by Said, 1996; for the images of the Balkans, see Todorova, 2001.

<sup>8</sup>For a broader review of the characteristics of religious dynamics in post-Socialist countries, see Smrke, 1996, 143-189.

<sup>9</sup>This process can rightly be termed "conservative revolution".

<sup>10</sup>For an excellent cultural-anthropological comparative study of the politicization and militarization of folk heritage, oral tradition and epics, legends, mythic motives, heroic characters and the language itself, see [ani], 1998.

**In other words: in this integristic process of religio-national re-traditionalization<sup>11</sup>, one needed and strengthened the other: religious institutions lent legitimacy to and opened perspectives for chauvinist politics, and *vice versa*. Or, in the words of Radovan Karadžić, *not a single important decision was made without the Church* (Mojzes, 1998, 89; for a similar quotation, see Radić, 1998, 176, 177). Likewise, Bosnian ex-Franciscan Provincial Petar Anđelović admits that the Church initially supported the major Croatian political party, but later reversed its policies and became critical of it (Anđelović, 2000, 207, 208). The major Muslim/Bosnian party was also influenced by PanIslamic traditionalist groupings and currents within the Bosnian Islamic religious community (see Bougarel, 1999; L. Cohen, 1998, 58; Zulfikarpašić, 1995).<sup>12</sup>**

The long Balkan tradition of pluralism dates to the Middle Ages: the Balkans have been a place of meeting, symbiosis, conflict, collaboration, syncretism, etc., for several religions (and different sects within them): Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, Bosnian Christian, Jewish, Uniate (Greek Catholic), and some others. In clear contrast to their self-declared universal character<sup>13</sup>, religions in the Balkans (as elsewhere!) feigned specific regional, national, local characteristics: they were/are all ‘ethnized’ or ‘nationalized’ in a similar way.<sup>14</sup> **This becomes particularly obvious in the religio-national mythologies of these nations. The Christoslavic religio-national mythology--in our case that of the Serbs and Croats--consists of two basic beliefs: that Slavs are Christian by nature and that any conversion from Christianity is a betrayal of the Slavic race (Sells 1996, 36, 47, 51). In short, Christoslavism represents radical Pan-Serbian Orthodox or Pan-Croatian Catholic mythology,<sup>15</sup> whose ultimate goal is a national mono-confessional, (and preferably politically), homogenized state.**

But almost identical mytho-logic can be observed also on the third side. According to the advocates of the Bosnian religio-

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<sup>11</sup>Combined with, on the other side, religio-national exclusivism.

<sup>12</sup>There are opposing views about Alija Izetbegović’s maximal ambitions: according to his critic Muhamed Filipović (2000, 14, 15), he wanted to return Muslims/Bosniaks to Islam (which was one of the mottos in his “Islamic Declaration” of 1970, remark by MV) and, after many centuries, to create a Muslim state in Europe. On the other hand, Đemaludin Latifović, one of the main Bosnian Islamic ideologues, firmly rejects that Izetbegović had such plans (Bougarel, 1999, 47).

<sup>13</sup>Except, of course, for Judaism.

<sup>14</sup>“Tribal” elements appeared within Serbian Orthodoxy as well as within Croatian Catholicism. Banac describes Bosnian Islam as “folkloric” or “national Islam”, which is in some aspect a substantial negation of orthodox Islam (Banac, 1994, 5, 6).

<sup>15</sup>In short, *there can be no Serbianism without Orthodox Christianity* (quotation in Radić, 1996, 296); or, on the Croatian side, religiosity seems to be a matter of genetics: *culture and prayer are in our genes, just as faith is in our genes* (Mojzes, 1998, 92).

national integrist mythology, all Bosnians are inevitably Muslims.<sup>16</sup> **One-and-a-half years before the outbreak of war, Izetbegović characterized the Muslims/Bosnians as a *religious nation* (L. Cohen, 1998, 60). Although the role and influence of religious communities and hierarchies before and during the last wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were quite different, all the warring parties employed religious symbols in their national/political mobilization and military efforts. As a rule, dominant religious communities sided with the major political parties of »their« nations. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the result of such collective politics on a largely ‘secularized’ population soon became evident.<sup>17</sup>**

Opinions about the nationalist and militaristic role of religious communities in the Balkans from the late 1980s differ considerably from scholar to scholar. However, the majority claim that the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church was ‘more harmful’ (Mojzes, 1998, 84), than the other two major religious communities. Sells points out that in Bosnia, the Serbian Orthodox Church became a servant of religious nationalist militancy (Sells, 1996, 79), and, at the beginning, supported Slobodan Milošević’s politics (Markotich, 1996, 30).<sup>18</sup> According to L. Cohen, the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina was inclined towards the largest Croatian political party, which was openly pro-Christian, but also wished to preserve its hard-won autonomy (L. Cohen, 1998, 63). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, there were considerable differences in this regard between the stands of Catholic clergy and the Franciscans in Herzegovina and in Bosnia. For Bougarel, the role of the Islamic Community in the nationalist mobilization of the Bosnians was particularly blatant (Bougarel, 1996, 96).

### III. RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN THE BALKAN WARS

My paper concentrates only on one aspect of the recent Balkan wars, namely, the use of religious symbolism by the three warring sides: Orthodox on the Serbian side, Roman Catholic on the Croatian side, and Islamic on the Bosnian side. These examples must be treated and understood in a broader context of the above-mentioned integrist, religio-national mythologies, Christoslavic or Muslim/Bosnian. A comparative

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<sup>16</sup>For *Reis-ul-Ulema* Mustafa Cerić, without Islam, Islamic civilization and Islamic culture, *we are nothing*. For him, the Bosniak national identity, language and the army can focus around Islam (Bougarel, 2000, 92, 93). Some Bosniak authors persistently repeat the historiographical myth that Bosnian Muslims are the descendants of the medieval adherents of the Bosnian Church (wrongly named *bogomili*), who converted to Islam *en masse* after the Ottoman conquest and, for this reason, are the only indigenous nation in Bosnia-Herzegovina (in contrast to the “latecomers” Serbs and Croats). See, for example, M. Handžić, 1940, and A. Handžić, 1994 (and to some degree also Hadžijahić, 1990 and Hadžijahić, Traljić, Šukrić, 1991).

<sup>17</sup>Public opinion polls in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1988 showed that only 55.8 % of the Croats, 37.3 % of the Muslims/Bosniaks, 18.6 % of the Serbs and 2.3 % of the Yugoslavs declared themselves as believers (Bakić, 1994, 72). The situation completely changed a decade later: 89.5 % of the Croats and 78.3 % of the Bosniaks in the Bosnian Federation declared themselves as “religious persons” (Vrcan, 2001, 167); research in Dobož region in 2000 showed that 88 % of the Croats, 84.8 % of the Bosniaks, 81.6 % of the Serbs and 16.7 % of those nationally undefined declared themselves as “very religious” and “medium religious” (Krajina, 2001, 248).

<sup>18</sup>After its break with Milošević, the Serbian Orthodox Church remained loyal to Greater Serbian politics and ambitions and sided with the régimes in Pale and Knin.

and socio-historical analytical approach can, to some degree, elucidate how traditional religious symbols were renewed and how new religious symbols were 'traditionalized' during that period; how they were 'nationalized' and 'politicized'; what elements of religious heritage were most often applied; and how these symbols were exploited for military operations and the politics of ethnic/religious cleansing. Due to restrictions on space, I shall only present a foundation for further, more profound analyses.<sup>19</sup>

### 1. Use of Traditional Religious Symbols.

Universal religious symbols (the cross for the Orthodox and Catholic; the Crescent, the colour green, and Qur'anic inscriptions for Boshniaks), or religious symbols that had already been 'nationalized' (e.g., the Serbian Orthodox symbol /four S's surrounding a cross/, or the combination of the cross and the Croatian coat-of-arms /the so-called *chessboard*/ ), were used regularly by the warring sides, either individually or as part of broader political or military symbolism. They were worn on uniforms, as personal military decor (e.g., badges bearing religious symbols, green bands tied around the forehead with(out) Qur'anic inscriptions, rosaries), and on military equipment and weapons, flags etc. Uniforms and appearance were sometimes inspired by religious or religio-national tradition, e.g., beards and Islamic outfits on the Bosnian side, and Chetnik-like attire on the Serbian side. Some Bosnian military units assumed names that were inspired by their religion, and in which rigorous religious customs were practised (e.g., the *Green Berets*, *El Mujahidin*, *the Green Legion*, *Muslim Brigades*). Among their number were *volunteers* from various Islamic states.

### 2. Use of Traditional Religious Slogans and Salutations.

Some of the most common traditional religious slogans and synthagmas used in military and nationalist rhetoric over the last ten years have been *God and the Croats; God protects the Serbs; A Serb is protected by St. Sava and God; God is most Great*,<sup>21</sup> etc. Salutations included *So help you God, Heroes!* , the three-finger Serbian Orthodox salute, benediction under the sign of the cross, the use of the expressions *brothers* and *sisters*, and many more. Army chaplains--Christian and Muslim--were to be found in almost every military unit; religious

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<sup>19</sup> Anyhow, the parallel approach does not mean that I want to equalize the influence and responsibilities of the three sides for the warfare, which is clearly very different.

<sup>20</sup> *Šahovnica*.

<sup>21</sup> *Bog i Hrvati; Bog i Srbe; Srbina i Sava i Bog; Allahu Akbar* (in Arabic).

<sup>22</sup> *Pomoz' Bog, junaci!*

practices, customs and symbols were introduced to military life, barracks and units. Religious services and rituals, including the blessing of units and weapons, were often conducted by local religious dignitaries. Senior clergymen, such as bishops, conducted the most important services and rituals. They regularly visited their troops in the *liberated territories*.<sup>23</sup> On such occasions, the images of (erstwhile) political leaders and military commanders were displayed alongside icons, images of important religious personalities and symbols.

The sites of dramatic historical and religious events became the destinations and sites of religio-national pilgrimages and rituals (Medjugorje for the Croats, Ajvatovica<sup>24</sup> for the Bosnians, the tombs of second-world-war Ustasha victims for the Serbs); religious feasts were turned into national holidays (Easter, Assumption, Christmas, St. Vitus' Day, the *Bajram*, commemoration of the battle of Badr, and *the night of the Might* ) and were celebrated in public buildings. Marching songs and political hymns declared religio-national unity and unanimity.<sup>26</sup>

On the eve of war, the skeletal remains of fallen and tortured compatriots from World War II were exhumed and ritually reburied; the ceremonial procession carrying the remains of Prince Lazar through Serbia proper, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1988 was of a similar nature. A number of high-ranking religious dignitaries, victims of the second world war or post-war violence, who were tortured and killed *for religious and national causes*, were canonized. Examples are Orthodox Metropolitane Dositej Vasić and bishops Petar Zimonjić, Sava Trljajić and Platon Jovanović in June 1998, and Catholic Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac in October of the same year. In some of the more militant Croatian Roman Catholic circles, similar homage was conferred on a number of important personalities from the wartime Ustasha regime, and on the Serbian side, to Chetnik commanders.

**Contemporary political and military leaders received a flattering religious**

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<sup>23</sup>For example, Patriarch Pavle visited Pale, Knin and the troops besieging Goražde.

<sup>24</sup>Known also as *Bosnian Mecca, small hajji* or *hajji for the impoverished* (see Lovrenović, 2000, 55, 56)

<sup>25</sup>*Lailat at-kadr*, the night when the Qur'an was revealed to Mohammed.

<sup>26</sup>Here are some examples: *The Serbian army are we, All believers in God* (*Srpska vojska to smo mi, svi u Boga vernici*) (Čolović, 1994, 123); or *May our unified voice be heard, There is one God for us all, A Croatian battle is being waged, Attention, all you criminals* (*Nek se ori slovan glas, Bog je jedan za sve nas, hrvatski se boje boj, zločincima stoj*) (Antić, 1996, 36); or *The Green Flag is fluttering, long live SDA, Herceg-Bosna is joyful, our leader is Alija* (*Zeleni se barjak vije, nek nam živi SDA /Stranka demokratske akcije*, Party of the Democratic Action, the main Bosniak party, led by Izetbegović, remark by MV), *veseli se Herceg-Bosna, vođa nam je Alija* (Čanić, 1998, 255).

<sup>27</sup>For examples, see Velikonja, 1998, 328.



reputation as well: Karadžić and Ratko Mladić were said to be *following the thorny path of Christ*. The first received a decoration from the Greek Orthodox Church, which declared him *one of the most prominent sons of our Lord Jesus Christ working for peace* (Sells, 1996, 85). Similar courtesies, exaltation and consecration were afforded by high-ranking Orthodox dignitaries to another controversial protagonist of the Balkan wars--Vukobratović Arkan. For some Islamic believers, Izetbegović became a *fighter for Islam*, sent by God to lead the Muslims along the true path (Zulfikarpašić, 1995, 144, 172), the first person after Muhammad to reveal and fulfil the ultimate truth (Miroslav Jančić in Mojzes, 1998, 94). Saudi King Fahd awarded Izetbegović with a medal for his contribution *to the spread of Islam*.

### 3. Interpretation of Political Developments in Religious Terms.

As Hastings points out (1997, 18), “the Bible, moreover, presented in Israel itself a developed model of what it means to be a nation--a unity of people, language, religion, territory and government.” **In the Balkans, historical and contemporary developments were interpreted in religious terms: analogies were made between contemporaries and episodes and personalities from the Scriptures or the religious history of their own nation. In some Orthodox circles, for example, the Serbs were referred to as *Christ's Nation, the Holy or Suffering Nation, the Bearers of the Truth and Divine Justice, the avant-garde of the Slav world and Orthodoxy*. Serbia was again referred to as *Heavenly*, etc. Similar constructs were also to be found on the Croatian side (*Eternal or Holy Croatia; protected by the Virgin Mary*). The triumphant Croatian military operation “Storm” in August 1995 was seen as *testimony that this nation* (Croatia, remark by MV) *is at certain times touched by God* (Vrcan, 2001, footnote 11 on page 207).<sup>31</sup>**

**In both cases, tragic episodes from the past and present of both nations have been**

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<sup>28</sup> He described himself as the defender of *our tribe and our Church* (Mojzes, 1998, 89).

<sup>29</sup> And continues: “Perhaps it was an almost terrifyingly monolithic ideal, productive ever after all sorts of dangerous fantasies, but it was there, an all too obvious exemplar for Bible readers of what every other nation too might be, a mirror for national self-imagining” (Hastings, 1997, 18).

<sup>30</sup> Even God himself is Serb, according to turbo-folk singer Baja-Mali Knindža (the verse *Bog je Srb, ne boji se Srbine/Bog je Srb, ne boji se Srb* on MC “Pobediće istina”, 1994) (Duijzings, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> An example of Croatian Catholic exclusivism - *Someone said that Europe is ill. That's right. Europe is ill in its wealth. The Croatian nation has preserved its morality and its Christianity*. – is quoted by Buden (2000, 59).

variously interpreted as *Golgotha, the Crucifixion, Calvary* or the *Way of the Cross*, their land has been declared *Sacred*, as *our Jerusalem* or *our Palestine*, etc. The self-victimizing discourse, such as “only our nation/religion suffers,” exculpated political action and military operations. In Karadžić's words, *our deaths, suffering and endurance, we accept as God's grace* (Powers, 1998, 236). Bosnian Muslims were said to be making sacrifices to safeguard Islam by identifying its enemies (Zulfikarpašić, 1995, 172).

As a rule, political decisions and military operations received religious argumentation and legitimations, and were openly supported by some religious media and in public statements made by religious dignitaries. Thus, they were exalted as actions. Examples are, *in the name of God, Manifestations of the Faith, Struggle for Christ and Europe, Sacred Duty, self-defence, war of liberation, fight for the Holy Cross*, etc. Fallen soldiers became *martyrs*<sup>34</sup> or *Knights of the Faith (and the Nation)* who made voluntary sacrifices for their religion and nation *in the struggle against the infidels*. Their tombs and monuments were designed as religious objects (in form and with religious inscriptions and symbols, etc.). All sides searched for the help of their co-religionists, who suddenly became *Ancient* if not *Eternal Allies*. There were initiatives to create a so-called *Orthodox Circle* (an association of all countries with an Orthodox majority), or a narrower *Balkan Orthodox Union*.<sup>35</sup> The Bosnians ‘discovered’ a *long-lasting friendship* with Muslim (Arabic) countries, while the Croats found the same in Western (Catholic) countries and the Vatican.

#### 4. Demonization of the Enemy.

In religio-national policies and military operations, the first step towards the destruction of the enemy is the process of their symbolic dehumanization. In the racial discourse, they become inferior, animal-like creatures. In the religio-national discourse, they are cursed by God. This dehumanization and demonization of adversaries was engaged in by all three sides. As though entrapped in some kind of laboratory of hatred, the enemy was condemned as *genocidal, diabolical*, etc. Myths about religious conspiracies emerged. For Serbian religious nationalists,

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<sup>32</sup>For examples, see Jokačević, 1999 (especially the Introduction).

<sup>33</sup>For the role of the Serbian Orthodox media, see Radić, 1998, 84-86.

<sup>34</sup>*Mučenici* or – on the Bosniak side - *šehidi*.

<sup>35</sup>However, the Serbian Orthodox Church hierarchy did not support these initiatives.

these were about the *Vatican (and German) plot*, and the *Pope's servants (Italy, Austria and Germany)*; *the conspiracy of Western Powers*;<sup>36</sup> *the Green Transversal (Ankara-Tirana-Sarajevo)* and *the conspiracies by Islamic fundamentalists (and Ustasha butchers)*.

If we limit ourselves only to insults related to religious identities, the Serbian extremists (and the Croatian during Croatian-Bosnian clashes) labelled the Bosnians as  *jihad fighters, mujahidins, janissaries, brothers in fez*, whose final ambition was to turn Bosnia into a *state modelled on the Qur'an, an Islamic fundamentalist state*, or a Libyan-style *Jamahiriyah* in which non-Muslims would become *slaves*, etc.<sup>37</sup> In the chauvinistic media, Izetbegović became the *world's foremost soldier of the jihad* or the *leader of the Muslim terrorists*. Croat religious nationalists feared *Orthodox conspiracies* or alleged plans to create an *Islamic state*<sup>38</sup> in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Alarmist discourses also appeared in some Bosnian circles, which identified evil-minded plots, the *Crusades* launched by both enemies' sides and by a *Christian Europe*. Thus, religio-nationalist extremists from all sides justified their policies not only as a defence of their own nation, but also as *shields, last bastions or fortresses of, respectively, the Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim world*.<sup>41</sup> An obsessive paranoia of being surrounded by enemies of the faith triumphed. As Hobsbawm wrote, "there is no more effective way of bonding together the disparate sections of restless peoples than to unite them against outsiders" (Hobsbawm, 1995, 91).

If our faith is *the only right and righteous*<sup>42</sup> one, then that of the enemy (or of religious minorities

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<sup>36</sup>In March 1993, at a funeral for Serbian victims, the local Orthodox bishop stated that *not the standards of God, but those of the Devil – those are the criteria which today's world public is applying in its attitude toward the Serbs who follow the Orthodox faith* (Malešić, 1998, 68).

<sup>37</sup>There were even constructs that Muslims were plotting to put Serbian women in harems (Sells, 1996, 23) or that they were planning to turn Foča into a new Mecca (Malcolm, 1996, 237). For the role of Serbian orientalists in invigorating anti-Muslim feelings, see Norris, 1993, 295-297 and Cigar, 2000; for the role of some circles of Serbian intelligentsia, see Malešić, 1998, 71.

<sup>38</sup>See examples in Mojzes, 1998, 91; Powers, 1998, 222.

<sup>39</sup>In 1992, a handbill signed by anonymous *Muslim Brothers* and addressed to the *Children of Allah* explains that *our fatherland Bosnia-Herzegovina is attacked and enslaved by pagans. Chetniks slaughter us, while Latins* (traditional name for Catholics, remark by MV) *deceive us, they are taking and abducting our land* (D)aja, 1994, 34).

<sup>40</sup>Latić stated that *brutal European encirclement would destroy such a state* (Islamic, remark by MV) *with the atomic bomb if necessary* (Bougarel, 1999, 47).

<sup>41</sup>Paradoxically, the enemies were, on the other hand, sometimes perceived essentially as compatriots but of the enemy faith: according to some mythmakers, Bosniaks were in fact *Islamized Serbs* or *Croats of the Muslim faith* while some of the Bosnian Croats were allegedly *Catholicized Serbs*.

<sup>42</sup>According to research conducted in the Bosnian Federation 1999, 53.7 % of the Bosniaks and 41.2 % of the Croats think that Islam/Christianity is the sole true religion (Vrcan, 2001, 175). Unfortunately, there are no data for the Serbian Republic.

within their own nations) is scorned as being *false, foreign, heretical, superstitious*, and even *sacrilegious*. According to this logic of symbolic diatribes, the elimination of other faiths--religious and ethnic cleansing--becomes a religious duty. Killing is no longer considered as “homicide,” but as a “malicide,” the liquidation of the evil. Many clerics were killed or injured during these clashes and ethnic cleansing campaigns. However, militant religious nationalists also demonized political adversaries and critics within a nation. For example, after abandoning his Greater Serbian policy, Milošević was characterized as *the Antichrist from Dedinje*, his ideology as *sombre* and his régime as alien to Orthodox tradition and the *essence* of the Serbian nation (whereas those in Knin and Pale were deemed to be exemplary). According to PanIslamist Latić, secularized Bosnian intellectuals are *more dangerous to us than the Chetniks* (Bougarel, 2000, 90).

Non-integrist ideas, political parties and individuals were also many times condemned by religious nationalists on all three sides as *atheistic, nihilistic, anti-national, foreign, modernist, pro-Western, liberal, left-wing*, etc. Similarly, the Socialist régime was perceived as being (in) directly responsible for the outbreak of hatred and violence because of its *desertion of the Bible/Qur’an* and because of its *immorality* and Godless, *soulless, secularist* and *anti-Serb/Croat/Muslim orientation*. The false and dangerous logic that there exists only one type of conflict, namely, between faith and nihilism, and that *Extra-Ecclesiam nulla salus*, reappeared.

## 5. Destruction of the Enemy’s Sacred Objects.

In militarist logic, victory is complete when it is accompanied with the symbolic triumph over the enemy. The buildings that were most often systematically destroyed throughout the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina--either in military operations or following conquest--were

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<sup>43</sup>For example, emigrant priest and self-declared Chetnik *vojvoda* Momčilo Djujić’s promised that he will return to Serbia when Vojislav Šešelj and his paramilitary units succeed in *cleansing Serbia of the last Jew, Albanian, and Croat* (P. J. Cohen, 1997, 10); Mirko Jović, one of the Serbian paramilitary leaders, demanded *Christian, Orthodox Serbia with no Muslims and no unbelievers* (Sells, 1996, 80). According to retired Croatian Catholic priest Ante Baković, *these weeds must be uprooted from the new Croatia* (Mihaljević, 1994). Or, *we must change people*, say in the organization “Active Islamic Youth” (AIO) (Karup, 1998). Sometimes it seems that the tragic war was just the first step towards the complete annihilation of pluralism between and within these national communities.

<sup>44</sup>As Anđelović points out, by driving God out of schools, universities, family homes and, finally, out of human souls, Communists *made room for Evil* (Anđelović, 2000, 176).

religious: mosques, churches, chapels, monasteries etc. According to some estimates, 1,000 to 1,100 mosques were demolished, along with approximately 340 Orthodox and 450 Roman Catholic churches and monasteries (Powers, 1998, footnote 68 on page 240; Velikonja, 1998, 309).<sup>45</sup> As has been the case throughout history, the religious symbols of the conquerors were built on the ruins of the sanctuaries of the vanquished. Territory must be symbolically appropriated and the sign of victory engraved in stone. For example, Croatian forces erected a huge concrete cross in place of a destroyed mosque in Počitelj (Vrcan, 2001, 22).

First to raze, first to erect. It is also very symptomatic that sacred buildings were among the first objects to be restored or rebuilt after the war. Reconstruction was often sponsored by foreign countries or their religious communities (Greek Orthodox Church, Islamic Community, often from Saudi Arabia, Roman Catholic Church etc.). The first synagogue to be built in Bosnia-Herzegovina after 1945 is expected to be completed in Mostar by the end of 2002; the foundation stone was laid in early May 2001. Such reconstruction is practically impossible on territory conquered by the adversary. On May 5 in Trebinje and May 7 (2001) in Banja Luka, Serbian extremists held violent protests against the ceremonies dedicating the new foundations for new mosques intended to replace the destroyed ones. These events are sad and not uncommon examples.<sup>46</sup> These (and other less obvious) examples clearly demonstrate that in post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina (here I replace Clausewitz), peace is just the continuation of the war 'with other means.'

#### 6. Eloquent Silence

In such situations, that which is not uttered is as important as that which is. Silence can be more eloquent than words. Not only explicit, but also another indirect symbolic act of religious institutions must be pointed out here: namely, the sinister silence regarding the obvious and systematic persecution and liquidation of believers of other faiths, and the destruction of their (religious) infrastructure. In other words, significant was not only hate-speech but also hate-silence. Only rarely have moderate representatives of the religious hierarchies reacted and condemned the acts committed by their compatriots/co-religionists. What usually happens is that they distance themselves from the blatant manipulation of religious justification, rhetoric and symbols, and explicitly reject religious nationalists of their own faith/nation.

#### IV. UNSUITABILITY OF APRIORISM

Religions, their traditional symbols and rhetoric remain important and extremely persuasive elements of contemporary national and political mythologies and their iconography. Although latently present at all times, they are particularly exposed during the critical periods in a nation's history. As such, they must not be treated as something that is neither *a priori* tolerant nor militant, nor conciliatory or destructive, nor oriented toward friendship or enmity, or zealot well intentioned. In short, they are neither hateful nor peaceful in advance. Their current interpretations and practical activities make them become such. The cross and the crescent are easily transformed into the sword, and the

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<sup>45</sup>The Franciscan order in Bosnia-Herzegovina alone suffered the destruction of four monasteries, twenty presbyteries and twenty-five parish churches and a number of smaller ones (Anđelović, 2000, 162, 163, 167).

<sup>46</sup>In the summer of 1998, "religious" passion was aroused by a proposal to build a mosque at Zamet near Rijeka. According to its opponents, minarets would announce that *Europe had been uprooted from this region*.

brilliance of faith, as understood by believers, turn into the glare of the blade. The step from mythomaniac theory to bloodthirsty terror is a small one; any creed can be transformed into a ruthless beast.

This short introductory presentation illustrates how nationalized, politicized and militarized religious symbolism (and religious communities in general) are not merely the consequence of recent catastrophic events in the Balkans, but also one of the sources--not only the conclusion but also one of the origins. The hidden hypothesis of this outstanding attention to the religious dimensions and iconography of Balkan warfare as promoted by local religious nationalists and some foreign or local simplistic or malevolent interpreters, is that the problems between these nations are irrational and cannot be solved in a rational way. In such a narrow-minded or malicious and destructive discourse, the differences between Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and other nations--Orthodox, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, other believers and atheists--seem too large to be bridged and, as such, becomes the predominant source of the recent hatred and warfare and an instant explanation for it.

Such inciting and irrationalizing discourse can be successfully rejected, firstly, by carefully studying the whole complexity of the causes of the tragedies, i.e. the parallelism between the well planned, 'rational' causes (i.e. *Realpolitik*) and the 'irrational,' mythical and symbolic causes. Secondly, it may be rejected through a profound analysis of this particular aspect, namely, the statements, behavior and actions of religious institutions, the clergy and, indeed, the believers themselves. And thirdly, it may be rejected by recollecting the rich multinational, multireligious and multicultural tradition of the Balkans. Only after doing this may all the involved parties and institutions, including the religious, reflect on their attitudes and activities during this period.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>For consideration on (collective) responsibility and guilt, see Debeljak, 2001.

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