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FOSTERING DIALOGUE IN A MULTIETHNIC, MULTIRELIGIOUS, POST-WAR CONTEXT IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

By Marko Oršolić

Marko Oršolić is the founder of the International Multi-religious and Intercultural Center in Sarajevo. A Franciscan, political scientist, and theologian, Marko Oršolić founded the International Multi-religious and Intercultural Center (IMIC) in 1991 in Sarajevo, Bosnia, and began another center in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2012. Author of numerous publications, editor of *Nova et Vetera* (a philosophical and theological journal) for over two decades, professor of Franciscan theology, and recipient of state and international awards, notably the 2012 Prize for Peace Activism, he provides an insightful perspective on the role of interfaith dialogue, spirituality, and peacemaking in Bosnian society.

Although scholars and historians differ on how they assess Bosnia and Herzegovina's long history, which boasts a diverse culturo-religious society, it is important to get a sense of how multilayered religious identity is in Bosnia. Marko Oršolić traces the macro historical influences in Europe at large, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular, all the way to the fourth century. This article offers a review of his perspective.

According to Oršolić, the linking of empire and religion, beginning with the Constantinian era, set the “preconditions” necessary for an “instrumentalization of religion to provide an *a priori* legitimization of all state power as God-given.”¹ This fusion between empire and religion eventually led to 1,000 years of imperial reign by three empires: the Ottoman Empire and Islam (1463–1878); Russia and the Orthodox Church (1721–1878); and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Catholicism (1878–1918).² While they all disappeared by the early twentieth century, the empires still “burdened” humanity with their history, leading to

¹ Marko Oršolić, “Multireligious and Intercultural Center ‘Zayedno,’” in *Religion and the War in Bosnia*, ed. Paul Mojzes (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 262–69.

² These dates reflect the time period these empires influenced the region of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

misunderstandings, prejudices, conflict, and a “mistrust that goes to their core.”³

Zoran Brajović, in his analysis of the factors that could lead to authentic dialogue in Bosnia, describes Bosnia’s historical identity as a “multifaceted, universal identity” not involving a fused idea of a nation-state, and therefore attached to “pre-modern concepts of identity that link religion and nation, mainly expressed through specific rituals, traditions and habits.”⁴ This identity was further complicated by atheism and agnosticism promoted in the days of Communism (1945–1991) and the vicious war that marched across Bosnia from 1991 to 1995. In light of this macro-picture, the best picture of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina may be as an intricate tapestry comprised of multicolored and multitextured criss-crossing threads: the often tempestuous history, the complexity of ethnic and culturo-religious identification, the ongoing economic crisis, and the unique political system designed in an attempt to mitigate the nationalist-religious polarization created in the aftermath of the war.

In the midst of this complex tapestry, what is the role of religion and dialogue? Oršolić unequivocally believes that “religion is an unavoidable factor in establishing a functional society and state, and, above all, a permanent peace.”⁵ Because of this, he is convinced that dialogue is not just an optional practice; rather, it is “dialogue or death, multi-religious dialogue or mutual extermination.”⁶ In fact, Franciscans have had a longstanding historic role of encouraging interfaith relations in Bosnia. Their influence stretches back into the fourteenth century,

³ Marko Oršolić, “Das Feinbild und die heiligen Schriften,” in *Schritte zur Versöhnung: Predigten, Bibelstudien, Referate und Dokumente der Ökumenischen Konferenz* (Kecskemét, Ungarn, 21–27 August 1995) (Budapest: Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen in Ungarn, 1996), 90–91.

⁴ Zoran Brajović, “The Potential of Inter-Religious Dialogue,” in *Peacebuilding and Civil Society in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ten Years after Dayton*, ed. Martina Fischer (Münster: Lit-Verlag, 2006), 191. Available at http://www.berghof-conflictresearch.org/documents/publications/daytone_brajovic_civilsoc.pdf.

⁵ Marko Oršolić, “Monoteističko Troglasje,” in *BOS: Zbornik Radova, Izcekujuci Europsku uniju II* (Beograd, 2011).

⁶ Marko Oršolić, “Multireligiöser Dialog in Bosnien-Herzegowina,” in *Multireligiöses und interreligiöses Zentrum in Belgrad*, Tauwetter 2 (Düsseldorf, 2012), 19.

beginning during the time of the Ottoman reign in Bosnia (1463–1878).⁷ However, Zoran Brajović argues that there is a difference between “active-tolerance” and “passive-tolerance” in Bosnia’s history and present story—that although there has been a historic “dialogue-of-life” among Orthodox, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim communities, there is little history of deliberate interfaith collaboration; rather, communities of faith were “existing in parallel structures” that did not intermix.⁸ Nowadays, because of the complex context and the lingering effects of the trauma induced by the war, Oršolić maintains that authentic participation in multireligious dialogue is still an act of “religious and citizen bravery.”⁹

On December 10, 1991, the anniversary of the UN declaration of human rights, Oršolić, among others, founded the International Multi-religious and Intercultural Center (IMIC) in a building of the Jewish community in Sarajevo, Bosnia. The purpose of the Jewish-Christian-Islamic center is to provide a “platform for promotion of inter-religious dialogue and development of discourse on justice and peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina and South-Eastern Europe.”¹⁰ The IMIC emphasizes that tolerance created and maintained by dialogue is the way forward for lasting peace—and the heart of this process is the spiritual dimension. As such, the IMIC is active both locally and globally, in scientific work and research, facilitating interreligious dialogue, and bringing “communities together in prayer, action and day-to-day shared life.” It specifies the following goals: breaking the chain of evil with the help of religions, recognizing guilt, seeking and asking for forgiveness, and finally, cultivating spirituality and religion in order to create peace.¹¹

⁷ Brajović, “Potential of Inter-Religious Dialogue,” 202.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 194–96.

⁹ Oršolić, “Multireligiöser Dialog in Bosnien-Herzegowina.”

¹⁰ IMIC’s stated goals on its website: http://imic.ba/ba/?page_id=2 (accessed January 10, 2013).

¹¹ Oršolić, “Multireligiöser Dialog in Bosnien-Herzegowina.”

On Its Methodology and Praxis

Marko Oršolić believes that the IMIC, created as a nongovernmental organization (NGO), has a unique methodology that is critical for creating a free institution not influenced or controlled by either the state or religious hierarchies. This is vitally important in a context where cooperation can be difficult even among different traditions in the same faith—for example, unresolved grievances from World War II can still sour ecumenical relations between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches—not to mention other faiths. Bosnian Islam is neither monolithic nor easily understood, particularly in light of its ongoing conversations of identity over the last two decades.¹² In 2012, Oršolić wrote, “To include the Islamic Religious Community in the Dialogue is still an adventure although there were sporadic multi-religious encounters before the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”¹³ Because of these factors, it is essential that the three monotheistic faiths be given equal footing in the organization, which is why its board must contain a Jewish, Christian (either Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox), and Muslim theologian.

The IMIC, however, is not just focused on Bosnia and Herzegovina; rather, it cultivates partnerships and contributes internationally so that it can create relations of mutual influence between Bosnia and the rest of the world. “We have to think globally, but act step-by-step locally,” Oršolić commented.¹⁴ In fact, this is a serious problem in all of Southeastern Europe—dialogue happens on an official level, but does not always trickle down into the practical, grass-roots initiatives. Still, Oršolić insisted that IMIC is grass-roots, although admitting, “a big problem is that we are too intellectual. Most of the 2,000 members we have are highly educated

¹² See Deron Bauer’s thoughts on the Bosnian Islam “mosaic” on *EIFD*’s online article section: http://cms.fuller.edu/EIFD/issues/Fall_2012/The_Bosnian_Islamic_Mosaic.aspx.

¹³ Oršolić, “Multireligiöser Dialog in Bosnien-Herzegowina.”

¹⁴ Interview with Marko Oršolić, December 21, 2013.

people.” Looking at their past and present projects and initiatives—which include facilitating joint prayer and meditation, symposiums and projects regarding multireligious dialogue, with a focus on gender issues, European Union integration, human rights, and religious fundamentalism—one can see that the IMIC is involved both at a broader level as well as with grass-roots initiatives.¹⁵

On Challenges and Criticism

In this kind of context, navigating war memories and complex ethnic and religious identities, the Apostle Paul’s injunction to “live peaceably with all” is an ongoing adventure. Oršolić commented: “Lots of shepherds become sheep and start to sound like sheep. That is why dialogue is very hard, complex, and critical. Lots [of critics] have called me left wing because I said that in the Sarajevo [Catholic] cathedral, the Croatian hymn could not be sung because it is a hymn about the State.” Because of the delicate situation, he has often found helpful partnerships outside of strictly Bosnian ones, such as with various embassies, German Protestants, and a partnership with Arizona State University as well as “fifteen churches from Bavaria, Germany.”

The IMIC has also been criticized for its relationships with Protestants, a tiny minority in Bosnia and Herzegovina and often still viewed as sectarian by Catholics and Orthodox. This is particularly true of those with a “nationalistic” bent—meaning that the religious identity serves largely to prop up the greater allegiance to ethnic/state identity. “There are a lot of prejudices against Protestants here,” Oršolić explained.

After Vatican II (1962–1965), however, the Catholic Church began to change its position toward Protestants, both globally and within Bosnia and Herzegovina. “Protestants who confess Jesus Christ to God and men are totally acceptable to us. . . . We are trying to teach younger

¹⁵ Oršolić, “Multireligiöser Dialog in Bosnien-Herzegowina.”

generations that Protestants are legitimate Christians and we need to accept that,” Oršolić intoned. Still, the challenges continue. For example, in the new center Oršolić just opened in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2012, he had difficulty securing the cooperation of the Orthodox Church because of his cooperation with Protestants.¹⁶

On the Future

The IMIC’s vision for local and global initiatives continues to move forward. The Centers in Belgrade and Sarajevo are planning an interfaith summit—marking the United Nations centennial commemoration of the beginning of World War I—with the emphasis on Christian, Jewish, and Islamic spirituality that would promote peacekeeping and peacemaking. In Oršolić’s view, this should be a global focus and goal:

The goal of why we started the center is to not allow anyone (political or religious leadership) to divide people in matters of faith or religion. By religion, we are different, but religion should not divide. Because if we start to divide people religiously, that is the start of extinction for people in Balkans. . . . God gave his revelation to humanity, not to popes or priests, but they master it now and it is a problem for humanity. Slowly we are trying to change that. Churches divide all the time because they think if we work together it is syncretism. But I don’t think it is syncretism. They accuse us of making Catholics into Protestants, but this is not true. We just want honest dialogue and to let the people be who they are.¹⁷

Conclusion

Religion becomes distorted when it is used by political power to achieve aims not consistent with its own Scripture. “When we do not regard our Holy Scriptures from a global-universal perspective, there comes to exist terrible mutual alienation and pictures of the enemy,

¹⁶ Vladimir Ilić, *Verske slobode u Srbiji: Stanje, mogućnosti, prepreke* (Zrenjanin: Centar za razvoj civilnog društva, 2009). The author claims that in Serbia, according to the law from 2006, there are only 7 registered traditional (in fact privileged) and nontraditional (in fact discriminated) churches and religious communities.

¹⁷ Interview with Marko Oršolić, December 21, 2013.

and our faith is misused as a tribal religion.”¹⁸ The three monotheistic religions are now often associated with ideologies, “exploited and abused by sons and daughters of an unjust world, and thus inflict enormous damage instead of offering hope and peace, urgently needed by contemporary humankind.”¹⁹ Because of this, interfaith dialogue, rooted in the spiritual dimension, is both difficult but necessary. According to Oršolić, NGOs that are based in the three monotheistic religions and human rights are a “small oasis” and can work toward the future of peace in a vital and effective way within their societies.

¹⁸ Oršolić, “Multireligious and Intercultural Center ‘Zayedno.’”

¹⁹ Oršolić, “Monoteističko Troglasje.”