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## Review of Akšamija's "Letter Pismo, Brief, List, Risālah"

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**Mehmed Akšamija, ed. *letter pismo, brief, list, risālah*. Sarajevo: Vesatija Center for Dialogue, 2017. Hardbound, approximately 400 pp. ISBN 978-9958-065-12-5. Distributed free of charge. The book can be obtained by request via WeTransfer or info@cdv.ba. Email: cericmustafa@gmail.com**

**Review by: Paul Mojzes, professor emeritus, Rosemont College, Pennsylvania.**

This is an unusual book with an unusual title, the subject matter of which is an unusual man with unusual ideas. The educational path of the book's subject, Mustafa Cerić, the Grand Mufti Emeritus of Bosnia, almost seems designed to prepare him for an unusual task. Born in 1952, he graduated at the age of twenty from the Gazi Husrevbegova Medresa in Sarajevo. As a beneficiary of President Tito's good relationships with the Arab world, he enrolled and graduated from the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo in 1978. Thus the young Mustafa received one of the finest classical traditional Islamic scholarly educations. This fully prepared him to understand and promote what we sometimes call "the East." Several years later, he became an imam in Greater Chicago, IL, which in turn afforded him the opportunity to enrol in one the West's finest institution of humanistic and theological learning, the University of Chicago, where he was mentored by one of the finest Islamic scholars teaching in the USA, Dr. Fazlur Rahman. In 1986 he received his Ph.D. and immersed himself not only in Islamic studies, but also in comparative religious studies, specifically Judeo-Christian-Islamic studies. The East and the West met and fused in this ambitious young man.

For a short time, Cerić taught at the International Institute for the Islamic Studies in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, but he felt called to return to his native Bosnia when the tragic disintegration of Yugoslavia and genocidal killings of Bosniaks (Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina) unfolded in the 1990s. He understood that this part of the world needed a man with his preparation, education, and convictions. But Dr. Mustafa Cerić, arrived in Bosnia with more

than intellectual gifts. His charisma--the gift of speech, of persuasion, of leadership—quickly got him elected to the top position in his religious community: in 1993 he became the acting *Raisu-l-Ulama* and then, in 1996, the fully elected head of the learned Muslims of his country, also called the Grand Mufti, the supreme juridical and religious leader in the country. He received two seven-year appointments as Grand Mufti, interacting often with friends and foes in chaotic conditions in a country in which three ethno-religious communities that often have radically different conceptions of the past, present, and future, must coexist. He had to navigate treacherous waters, competing with Bosniak, Serb, and Croat politicians, religious leaders, and foreign governors. Through all of this, his ultimate goal, always, was to find a way for the Bosniak people to cherish their identity and work with reluctant neighbors, to make the state, the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, survive and flourish in a Europe and a wider world of conflicting rivalries. It goes without saying that in these efforts, *Reisu-l-Ulema* Cerić necessarily caused controversies: some ardently supported his activities while others criticized him for venturing into the political arena and for his alleged political ambitions.<sup>1</sup>

It is not our aim here to describe or analyze this still precarious world, but to review a luxuriously printed large folio book in which the work and the ideas of Grand Mufti emeritus Mustafa Cerić are so skilfully and artistically presented. Readers will notice the multilingual title—a misnomer in this reviewer's view, as the majority of the content is not *letters* but *writings* of many genres in English (about half of the 400 or so pages), in Bosnian,<sup>2</sup> German, Polish, French, and Arabic. The many translators did a commendable job, as did the editor, Dr.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the well-known Croat Catholic sociologist, Jakov Jukić (aka Željko Mardešić) pointed out the crossover among all Balkan ethnoreligious groups of clerical figures speaking and acting as politicians and political figures acting and speaking like clergy.

<sup>2</sup> For readers not familiar with the Balkans, the language of Bosnian is easily comprehended by Croatians and Serbians and understood by other Balkan Slavs.

Mehmed Akšamija, along with other numerous contributors and reviewers representing diverse nationalities and religions.

The book focuses on the Grand Mufti's attempts at interreligious, interethnic, and intercultural reconciliation. The original impulse for Cerić's reconciling mission seems to come from the 1965 letter by the Polish Catholic Bishops' Conference sent to the German Catholic Bishops, at a time when the wounds of World War II had not yet healed, offering forgiveness for the destructive and inhumane damage in the distant and recent (Nazi) past. The Polish bishops simultaneously asked forgiveness for the damage that the Poles inflicted upon Germans. This exchange took place during the Second Vatican Council and the German Bishops, though still divided into West and East Germany, thankfully accepted the olive branch of the Polish bishops. In 2015, the Polish ambassador to Bosnia invited Grand Mufti Cerić to Rome for the anniversary of this time of reconciliation through forgiveness. Not only Grand Mufti Cerić, but fifteen of his colleagues, other muftis and prominent Bosnian Muslim academic and religious figures signed a document making a similar appeal for forgiveness and healing, an appeal that was oriented toward the future more than the past (signatures on pp. 46-47).

Nor was this the first such bold appeal by Bosnian Muslims calling for being accepted and accepting others in turn, namely reconciliation. Cerić's lectures and panel presentations also focused on European Muslim identity, Islamic cooperation for a peaceful dialogue around the world. He participated in Vatican fora with Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI, meetings at the United Nation, numerous Islamic-Christian and Islamic-Jewish dialogues—events too numerous to list, much less describe. Many of these are inspirational to thoughtful readers or hearers.

In the opinion of this reviewer, the most relevant of Cerić's work is, the "Introduction: A Declaration of European Muslims" (pp. 92-109), delivered in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, in

February, 2006. It is considered by many to be the most eloquent rejection of terrorism by the Bosnian Muslim community. The declaration is also printed in Bosnian, German, French, and Arabic. Cerić considers it the distillation of five years of his thinking on the unique, though precarious, position of European Muslims, a multi-ethnic and multicultural amalgam of indigenous Muslims (such as the Muslims of the Balkans who were Europeans for centuries), immigrant Muslims (those who have moved to Europe from Asia or Africa), and their children who were born and raised in Europe but are often uncertain of their identity). In the declaration, he addresses these fellow Muslims, and he addresses the non-Muslim Europeans, many of whom have conflicting attitudes toward Muslims, and readers around the world, who increasingly live intermingled with Muslim minorities. This essay seems so important and so relevant that as editor of *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* I obtained permission from the author to reprint it in this issue. I trust that this will increase the circulation of this document and result in creative, compassionate and constructive dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims in Eastern Europe and more widely. Another, more formal document, entitled “A Declaration of European Muslims,” follows on pp. 103-117. It is written in the form of formal communiques and in my opinion does not match the persuasiveness of Grand Mufti Cerić’s initial essay, hence we opted to publish only Cerić’s initial essay.

With the election of a populist leader in the USA, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant venom spews forth with more intensity and in greater volume, often couched in national security language. It is now confounding both friend and foe and has the potential for world-wide violence. The sane and compassionate voice of Grand Mufti emeritus Mustfa Cerić is an important antidote to extremist alarmism.