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Country snapshot Bosnia and Herzegovina

By Lejla Hodžić

Since it emerged as an independent state in the 12th century, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been home to a great variety of religious groups: members of the Bosnian Church, which largely disintegrated after the Ottoman conquest; Catholics; Eastern Orthodox Christians; Muslims, Sephardic Jews (following their expulsion from Spain and Portugal in the late 15th century), and Protestants who settled after the Austro-Hungarian occupation in the 19th century.¹⁹ Being at the crossroads of different confessions and ethnic migrations, defined Bosnia and Herzegovina as a multireligious and multi-ethnic country. During the socialist regime in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as one of the republics of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), religion was propagated as retrograde leading to the exclusion of religious communities from socio-political matters, and atheism was endorsed, but not violently imposed, by the political regime.²⁰ Despite being officially excluded from the state-building process under the socialist regime, religion was and continues to be a pillar of ethnic identity and ethnic differentiation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This has had a substantial impact on the creation of a strong relationship between political affairs and religion, which intensified in the years preceding its proclamation of independence in 1992.²¹ Moreover, religion was a decisive element in victimisation during the armed conflict that ensued, since it was the key element of ethnic identity. Despite this context, in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina religious doctrines are often used to support national political ideologies and legitimise new political establishments,²² which have largely been characterised as ethno-nationalist.²³ Consequently, this has instigated a religious revival particularly among younger generations,²⁴ and has strengthened the relationship between politics and religion in present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina.²⁵

Religious composition

According to its legal framework on religious communities, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a secular state where none of the dominant religions or religious communities can be

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- 19 A. Alibašić and N. Begović, 'Reframing the Relations between State and Religion in Post-War Bosnia: Learning to be Free!', *Journal of the Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 19:1, 3 January 2017, p. 20.
- 20 D. Abazovic, 'Rethinking Ethnicity, Religion, and Politics: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina', *European Yearbook of Minority Issues*, vol. 7:1, 2010, p. 321
- 21 Bosnia and Herzegovina declared its independence from Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) after a positive referendum vote on 3 March 1992.
- 22 D. Abazovic, 'Rethinking Ethnicity, Religion, and Politics', p. 323.
- 23 Ibid. p. 323
- 24 US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina: International Religious Freedom Report for 2006'.
- 25 D. Abazovic, 'Rethinking Ethnicity, Religion, and Politics', p. 323.

given official status.²⁶ The state may not interfere in the internal organisation and affairs of the religious communities, while the representatives of the communities may not formally participate in political affairs.²⁷ Taking into consideration the religious diversity of Bosnian society, the law allows the state to provide equal financial support for the cultural, heritage, educational, social and charitable services of all religious communities, provided that these services are supplied in a non-discriminatory manner.²⁸ Freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination on the basis of religion are constitutionally protected categories,²⁹ which may be limited in accordance with the law and international standards for the purpose of protecting public security, health or morality, or the rights and freedoms of others.³⁰

The religious demography of Bosnia and Herzegovina makes it one of the most diverse countries in the region and on the continent as a whole. According to the 2013 census, Muslims constitute 50.7% of the population, Orthodox Christians 30.7%, Catholics 15.2%, while the remaining 3.4% belong to religious minorities (Jews and Protestants primarily) or consider themselves as having no religious belief.³¹ Due to a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion, the three dominant religious groups broadly correspond to the three dominant ethnic groups – Bosniaks are predominantly Sunni Muslims, Serbs are predominantly Serbian Orthodox, whereas Croats are mainly Roman Catholics.³² This strong correlation is demonstrated in the census results, where the ethnic composition correlates almost directly with the religious composition of Bosnian society, with Bosniaks constituting 50.1%, Serbs 30.8% and Croats 15.4%.³³ Indeed, changes in the territorial distribution of religious groups after the wars of the 1990s also correspond to equivalent changes in ethnic composition.

There have been no comprehensive surveys on religious observance recently, but according to the US Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report in 2006, the rate of religious observance varied among different religious and age groups, with higher observance recorded among Catholic Croats, and the younger generations of all three dominant religious groups.³⁴ This is some evidence of the religious revival in post-conflict

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- 26 Bosnia and Herzegovina Official Gazette, Law on Freedom of the Religion and the Legal Position of the Churches and Religious Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, No. 5/04, Art. 14(1), <http://www.mpr.gov.ba/biblioteka/zakoni/bs/ZAKON%20o%20slobodi%20vjere.pdf>
- 27 Ibid. Arts. 14(3) and 14(4).
- 28 Ibid. Art. 14(4). Emphasis is placed on prohibition of discrimination based on religion.
- 29 Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Art. II(3)(g) and Art. III(4), available at <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ba/ba020en.pdf>
- 30 Bosnia and Herzegovina Official Gazette, Law on Freedom of the Religion and the Legal Position of the Churches and Religious Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, No. 5/04, Art. 14(7).
- 31 BiH Agency of Statistics, Final results – Census 2013: Religion, via <http://www.statistika.ba/?show=8#link3>
- 32 US Department of State, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report – Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15 August 2017, p. 2.
- 33 BiH Agency of Statistics, Final results – Census 2013: Nationality, via <http://www.statistika.ba/?show=8#link1>
- 34 US Department of State, 2006 International Religious Freedom Report – Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1 September 2006, available via <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71372.htm>.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was partly triggered by the role played by religion during the conflict itself.

Interreligious issues

Given that religion had played a major role in defining ethnic and cultural groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it became the key element in the victimisation of ethnic groups during the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992–1995.³⁵ Indeed, despite the conflict being characterised as ‘ethnic’, religious identity played a defining role in what we understand as ‘ethnic cleansing’ during the war. For instance, Bosnian Muslims used the designation ‘Muslims’ to express nationhood in the former Yugoslavia’s legal framework, which meant that the term became primarily a cultural and ethnic one, instead of religious.³⁶ For these reasons, the policy of ethnic cleansing was directed at ‘Muslims’ (or Bosniaks today), regardless of their actual religious observance. Moreover, the destruction of mosques and other Muslim buildings during the conflict, has been considered as evidence of the intent to destroy Bosnian Muslims as an ethnic group.³⁷

This historical background has defined interreligious issues and obstacles towards reconciliation in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. Crucial interreligious issues nowadays include the lack of constructive dialogue between groups, religious segregation in education and discrimination of religious communities – primarily returnees. Besides from the creation of the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) in 1997 to promote the shared values of all of Bosnia’s religions, religious leaders have not been sufficiently involved in the peacebuilding processes, especially at the grassroots level.³⁸ The absence or underutilisation of interfaith dialogue at the local level has been detrimental for members of religious minorities returning after the conflict. Most returnees have reported selective enforcement of their rights by authorities, while religious leaders have reported discrimination by local law enforcement agencies in their investigation of acts of violence, vandalism and threats, and in providing protection to victims.³⁹ Religious segregation in primary and secondary education is another important obstacle in achieving an inclusive education system. Religious education is provided in schools, but it usually involves classes on the religion of the majority religious group within the community, compounding discrimination towards pupils belonging to minority faiths.⁴⁰

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- 35 M. Oddie, ‘The relationship of religion and ethnic nationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina’, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 32:1, February 2012, pp. 34–42.
- 36 M. Sells, ‘Crosses of Blood: Sacred Space, Religion and Violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina,’ *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 64:3, 2003, pp. 309–331.
- 37 Morgan, *Op. Cit.* p. 40.
- 38 J. N. Clark, ‘Religion and Reconciliation in Bosnia & Herzegovina: Are Religious Actors Doing Enough?’ *Europe-Asia Studies*, 62:4, 5 May 2010, pp. 677–678.
- 39 US Department of State, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report – Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15 August 2017, p. 7.
- 40 OSCE, Institute on Religion and Public Policy, *Religious Freedom in Bosnia*, 7 October 2008, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/34244?download=true>