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THE ECLIPSE OF THE LIGHT OF THE WORD IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

By Jadranka Brnčić

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The light of the word is its clarity and transparency, and its space is free speech (and occasionally silence). “Parresia” (Gk.: parrhēsia) is a phrase or figure of speech in ancient rhetoric, which a speaker uses when speaking openly about unpleasant truths concerning an individual or society. Parresia is completely honest, direct, and bold. When a speaker proclaims views different from those of the majority, she or he risks the loss of popularity, a political scandal, or sanctions. At the same time, one engages in open and free speech because one thinks that telling the truth is one’s ethical duty. Parresia is an essential feature of democracy—the core of civil courage and commitment. An engaged Christian today is a person who expresses her or his Christianity in conjunction with the best in human culture. Such a person feels responsible for the common good and pleads for it in two ways: committing oneself to dialogue by affirming basic human values, as well as publicly criticizing everything that is not in accordance with or inhibits this affirmation in the world and in the church.

The Bosnian Franciscan magazine Svjetlo riječi (The Light of the Word) was an advocate of such open speech. What happened in June, 2013, to its then-chief editor, Fr. Drago Bojić, professor of communication at the Franciscan Faculty of Theology in Sarajevo and Director of the International Multireligious Intercultural Centre (IMIC) “Together” in Sarajevo, is a symptom of what is happening in post-socialist countries that experienced post-war trauma. It

1 This article was originally published in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Fall 2013), pp. 601-608, It is used with the permission of the editors of J.E.S.
is a symptom of the painful process of forgiveness and revisions of memories, as well as of the
difficult struggle for democratic dialogue in the context of harsh neoliberal economic policies.

Franciscans have been continuously present in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1291. The first
issue of *Svjetlo riječi*—a monthly magazine published by the Franciscan Province Bosna Srebrena,
which is the only Western, Christian, and Catholic institution that, due to the dialogical efforts of the
Franciscans, survived the reign of the Ottoman Empire—has been published since April, 1983, with
the intention of bringing together news of religious, cultural, and social life and of providing critical
commentary in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Fr. Luka Markešić, the provincial at that
time and one of its founders, stated: “The Franciscan Province Bosna Srebrena has launched *Svjetlo
riječi* in order to, in the spirit of Vatican II, cultivate an honest and open dialogue with others: with
Christians and their churches and communities, with Muslims and the Islamic community, with other
believers and people of different beliefs and worldviews.”

Hegemony and ideological repression of national identities in socialist Yugoslavia was the main
neuralgic part of the process that started with the collapse of communism. The chain of disintegration
of multinational states, supported by unprocessed traumas from the past and the awakening of tribal
mythological consciousness, seemingly could not have happened differently except by war. In the
multinational and multiconfessional Bosnia and Herzegovina—which in socialist Yugoslavia used to
be a model of coexistence in diversity—the traumas were more complex and the solutions more
problematic. Both Croatia and Serbia attempted to lay political claims over its statehood.
Subsequently, under the influence of outside Islamic extremists, it was “claimed” by Muslims. The
torrent of religiosity has taken on collective, socially enhancing, cultural, and ethno-mobilizing
character. It resulted in declarations more cultural in nature than witnessing of faith. Becoming
closely allied with national identity, this religiosity still nourishes the rhetoric of a sacralized
nationalism. The folkloric elements of religion have become more important than the spiritual
elements. All

three major religious faiths in the former Yugoslavia—Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Islam—often serve as a social parody or caricature.

*Svjetlo riječi* transcended the narrow confessional and ecclesiastical frame. In the last twenty years it was the only medium providing space for criticism and dialogue not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but in all of former Yugoslavia, especially in the Catholic Church. In the 1990’s—the war years—its contributors persistently resisted the ruling nationalisms. They neither surrendered to political blackmail nor supported tribal fervor, but they advocated for individual dignity, peace, and dialogue among hostile people, pleading for a Bosnia and Herzegovina undivided into ethnic cages. They unsparingly criticized the church leadership that had turned to serve political elites as well as the undereducated believers who often consumed the inflammatory rhetoric of politicized religiosity.

Articles published in *Svjetlo riječi* during the thirty years of its life were constantly exposed to criticism and sporadic or orchestrated attacks. They were not only criticized by political and ideological opponents but also by some individuals from the same (Croatian) people and from the same (Catholic) Church. The interview with Bojić, published on the website “Prometef” (“Prometheus”) on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the publication, was used as a reason finally to silence *Svjetlo riječi*. He was dismissed from the position of editor-in-chief, and his departure resulted in an entirely different concept for the magazine. In this controversial interview—although neither the first nor the only time—he criticized (perhaps somewhat overgeneralizing) the “national parliamentary” politics that advocated the separation of Croats from an integral political and social state of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the so-called “Herzeg-Bosna,” and he did it because certain Catholic Croats were “participants (sometimes even creators) of such politics,” which resulted in “the persecution of Bosnian Croats in Herzegovina.” He did it primarily because they, due to such politics, remained “silent about the persecution and atrocities against people of other faiths

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3 Herzeg Bosna was a temporary, unrecognized mini-state in Herzegovina under the control of Croat forces during the war of 1992–95 (ed.).
and nationalities, especially against Bosniaks.” “In informal conversations with these Catholic Croats [there] comes to the fore”—said Bojić—“the monstrosity of their politics, the absence of any self-criticism or even empathy for the tens of thousands of people who were victims of ethnic cleansing, but also their frustration and bitterness because the Herzeg-Bosnian project was not carried to the end.” In his interview Bojić spoke about the institutional abuse of religion, about corporate responsibility of Herzegovinian Franciscans for the politics of ethnic cleansing, about profiteering identification of Catholicism with Croatianism, about established nationalism that carries in itself the potential for future evil, and also about the faith event and “soft-core-spirituality” propagated by means of the Medjugorje shrine (“whose whole ‘theology’ is based on lies and manipulations”).

Perhaps the majority of Catholic Croats from southern Bosnia and Herzegovina, acting in a more homogeneous national milieu, openly supported the concept of Herzeg-Bosnia—the concept of that quasi-state’s annexation to Croatia, or at least creation of their own entity within the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina—only to protect endangered Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Outside of Herzeg-Bosnia, Croats remained only a small minority or just enough that they could not seek any political rights.) But, nothing can really justify the avoidance of responsibility for the kind of means that were used for such “protection” [of Croat rights]—especially not among those who call themselves disciples of Jesus. Do we need to re-state that the goal does not justify the means, that the human being is more important than any national or religious ideology and belonging? Do we need to remind ourselves that Jesus was radically opposed to violence? How could such radicalism be accepted in the Church, some of whose servants were blessing rosaries hung on rifles ready to fire at others? How can the messages of Medjugorje be interpreted as a confirmation for their own politics? How can convicted criminals and creators of nationalist policies be hailed as “heroes” and “martyrs” without expressing any regrets over the hundreds of thousands who were banished from their homes and the thousands killed because of such a policy? Is not speaking the

5 “Bosniak” is the name currently agreed upon for the indigenous Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina to whom recognition was granted not only as a religion but also a nationality [ed.].
truth—not as an abstract religious-ideological term but about real happenings—the primary human obligation and duty, above all on behalf of victims for whom our silence will not help heal their trauma, in the name of children to whom we owe the memory that will not cause a new round of bloody conflict? Ignoring the effects of nationalist politics and justifying them as having been necessary to defend the so-called “vital interests” of Croats and Catholics in Bosnia, the greatest damage is being done to the Catholic Croats themselves.

As is stated in the official letter to the Friars Minor on June 15, 2013, from the provincial superior of the Franciscan fathers of Bosna Srebrena, Fr. Lovro Gavran, the motive for the dismissal of Bojić was the written request of the provincial superior of the Franciscan Fathers of Herzegovina, Fr. Miljenko Šteka. Šteka demanded that Gavran and the Franciscan Fathers of Bosna Srebrena “apologize for these publicly stated, unproven, slanderous words” and that they sanction parts of Bojić’s interview on the “Prometej” website. Šteka expressly called on Gavran to “proceed on your authority.” With this request, Bojić’s statements in the interview were raised to an “official” position of the Province Bosna Srebrena, which was why Gavran felt called to respond, or, rather, it gave him a chance to accomplish what some of his supporters in the Order had long wanted. In an interview with the Catholic news agency of the Bishops’ Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Gavran said:

In the interview, Fr. Drago arbitrarily called to account the Herzegovinian Franciscans and they were struck and felt insulted. Their provincial superior reacted. Our administration required Fr. Drago to apologize to the Herzegovinian Franciscans and to the readers of the mentioned website, who might be shocked and confused by his intemperate statements. Since Fr. Drago failed to do in an appropriate manner and in due time, he was removed from his office. That’s all. ⁶

Indeed, he promptly dismissed Bojić. Furthermore, as punishment he assigned him to be chaplain in Busovača (a position that Bojić did not accept, because he felt punishment was not justified), stating that the reason for his (Gavran’s) action was the letter from the provincial superior of Herzegovinian Franciscans, but the reason for the sanction was “failure to comply

⁶ See http://www.ktabkbih.net/info.asp?id=38647.
with the decision of the Administration Board of the Province”—therefore, insubordination and disobedience.

This, however, is unfair, unexplained, and illegitimate, but, legally, it is how the Catholic Church leadership understands power. Bojić only wanted to encourage open space for public discussion of the realities that were being kept quiet, but the church leadership roughly silenced him, which showed the extent to which they give priority to their own will to power over dialogue and respect for freedom of human conscience and the human person.

The majority of contributors (about fifty of them) and the former editor of Svjetlo riječi, all prominent intellectuals, canceled future cooperation with the magazine (which continues to come out with a completely altered group of contributors)\(^7\) and sent a letter to Gavran asking him to reconsider his decision, emphasizing that dismissal of the chief editor “is not just a matter of internal relations in the Franciscan community, or a question of affront to our integrity, but rather a destructive act against the humanization of public space in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”\(^8\)

Interference by the provincial superior from Herzegovina in another Province and the replacement of Bojić are unprecedented. Gavran logically relativized the motive, replacing it with another; he switched from the accusation of slander to an accusation of disobedience, thereby avoiding dealing with the real content of the first accusation. Fr. Ivan Šarčević, longtime editor of Svjetlo riječi (prior of Bojić), in a letter to the management of both Orders and to authors, which was published in the Sarajevo daily newspaper Dani and then on the website “Prometej,” commented:

It is a well-known process of perversion within the Church that follows all those who have been or are socially critical. Specifically, from the political accusation, accusation for free thought and open speech, it switches to accusation for lack of ecclesiasticism

\(^7\) In an editorial introduction to the September, 2013, issue, which is signed by Fr. Matko Ešegović, there was no explanation to readers why there is a sudden change of editor-in-chief, just a bit of hypocritical thanks to “Fr. Drago, as well as to all contributors who were unanimously cooperating with him” and a call “for further cooperation.”

and Franciscan obedience, for breaking the Franciscan and ecclesiastical unity.  

Journalist Viktor Ivančić called what happened to *Svjetlo riječi* the repression of free, critical thought,  but the violent dismissal of Bojić from the post of chief editor goes beyond even a typical attack on media freedom. Punishment by removal from a position of power, without explanation, certainly reveals more than disagreement with the statements in the disputed interview. In fact, relativizing and even denying the real reason for the dismissal is masking what really caused it, namely, statements about which nobody wants to talk openly. Is it not unusual for someone who feels “slandered” publicly to refute the allegations in the same or another medium in order to clarify misunderstandings and remove possible untruth? Being in solidarity with those who try to conceal the truth, rather than with a brother who wants to speak openly about it—and, most importantly, not with the victims of policies that had been targeted against them—both provincials are involved in a conspiracy of silence. This is, in fact, a new acceptance of the crimes about which they were silent. Moreover, renouncing Bojić’s freedom to talk about the “institutional responsibility” of Herzegovinian Franciscans in the last war, they are fleeing again from that responsibility. The provincial of Herzegovina is not even trying publicly to refute Bojić’s “accusations.” The Bosnian provincial (about whom there are questions of how truly familiar he is with context of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, since at the time of the war he lived in Albania), in sanctioning Bojić, actually legitimized such irresponsibility and then confirmed it in his “Letter to the Brothers,” published in the official bulletin of the Province in July, 2013, in which he autocratically threatened misfits with expulsion from the Order.  

The argument of the authority was placed before the authority of the argument. It is a typical argument, unfortunately, which we know from other situations in the life of the Church. When anyone criticizes the Church leadership, he or she is accused of betraying the

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srebrenoj-i-institucionalna-odgovornost.


Church (or even God)—not just for talking about the content of the criticism that might eventually lead to the questioning of the authenticity of the power given to them “by God.” To require from the Church’s members unquestioning obedience and the renunciation of their own conscience and freedom and to intimidate and blackmail them for disloyalty is a mark of totalitarian regimes in which the individual is depersonalized. It is against the spirit of Vatican II, which advocated open discourse, despite occasional questioning of open speech in the work of the Council itself. Documents of Vatican II and Church documents on the media, *Inter mirifica* (1963), *Communio et progressio* (1971), *Aetatis novae* (1992), as well as many other directions of a lower rank—all insist on the principles of truth and freedom of speech and opinion. It is even stated explicitly that every member of the Church not only has a duty to speak openly and critically but also that this right cannot be denied by anybody, not even by the head of the Church.

The situation of the abuse of power reveals a deeper crisis than the crisis caused by political divisions and their interpretations, for this is a crisis within the Church in relation to its core mission. From this perspective, it is a very important issue of education of the faithful in the post-socialist countries for a critical understanding of the consequences of coupling religion and nationalism, which is not in the spirit of the gospel if it legitimizes even the least violence, as well as the cleansing of collective memory imbued with such a plot. Such education would help shape a mature political community and enable a new dialogue between the state and the Church in order to commit themselves to the common good.

The dismissal of Bojić and the sanctions against him—and what they really mean—

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12 The Pastoral Instruction *Aetatis novae* (“On Social Communications on the Twentieth Anniversary of *Communion et progressio*”) (February 22, 1992) emphasizes the important role of the media in the service of dialogue with the world. In the part on the ecclesial communion, among others things, it states that “that the faithful . . . have ‘the right, indeed at times the duty, to express to the pastors their views on matters concerning the good of the Church’ because ‘[a]mong the members of the community of persons who make up the Church, there is a radical equality in dignity and mission which arises from baptism and underlies hierarchical structure and diversity of office and function; and this equality necessarily will express itself in an honest and respectful sharing of information and opinions’” (*Aetatis novae*, no. 10; emphasis in original; available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_22021992_aetatis_en.html).

13 Along with removing him from his editorial work, the Administration of Bosnian Franciscans forbade Bojić
provoked strong reactions in the media. Such reactions, however, did not contribute to the cause that *Svjetlo riječi* and Bojić promoted—free and open speech—but, unfortunately, led to louder political polarization of a vulnerable and fragile society living with a sense of permanent threat.

On one hand, reactions, especially in the Croatian media, were full of resentment because of the denial of the right to speak openly. On the other hand, in the Herzegovinian media, there were many stereotypes about an “evil, dark” and the other “good, light” side. Highlighting the difference in the vision of the political situation of individual Bosnian and Herzegovinian Franciscans misses the problem. On both sides there are a significant number of those who, regardless of which community they belong to, have different views. Generalizing those differences means ignoring the possible consequences of such polarization; it blocks and almost prohibits a responsible, common future.

The lowest level of response among Herzegovinian Catholic Croats—and there are not few in number—is the one that seeks to discredit collaborators of *Svjetlo riječi*, especially the Bosnian Franciscans among them, by insulting them and charging them with being among the mercenaries of Muslims, Freemasons, Communists, quislings, etc.

“Quieter” reactions came from those who, although agreeing with Bojić’s claims, but not with the way in which they were expressed, offer reflections about abstract, comradely love for the sake of which it is not good “to make waves” or about Bojić’s criticism of Herzegovinian Franciscans’ participation in Herzeg Bosna politics for exposing the “dirty laundry” of the Church, which should be “washed” only within the community and not in public. Some do not even share their views publicly simply because of opportunism or fear of losing their positions and perhaps benefits. Such reflections ultimately lead to the same goal that the Church leadership wanted. Not to speak publicly and severely, thereby risking oneself, means not to talk openly, and not to talk openly means to participate in the logic of silence.

The third type of reaction is individual gossip, the reaction of people more familiar with
the situation in the Province of Bosna Srebrena. They are criticizing the way in which the editors and authors-friars of *Svjetlo riječi* were running its entire policy of open speech. In fact, they resent that their eagerly pointing a finger at someone else’s mistakes is something like an “extorted confession” and that they may sometimes have cared about their own belonging to the “intellectual elite” rather than trying to find ways to speak openly without causing sharp clashes. Some well-meaning critics, moreover, ask whether the self-sufficiency of the Bosnian Franciscans of *Svjetlo riječi*—and sometimes their mutual disagreements—may not have led to weaknesses in the system that could then be attacked in order to discredit them all.

The pastoral instruction *Communio et progressio (C.E.P.*) says that “in order that this dialogue may go in the right direction it is essential that charity is in command even when there are differing views. Everyone in this dialogue should be animated by the desire to serve and to consolidate unity and cooperation. There should be a desire to build not to destroy. There should be a deep love for the Church and a compelling desire for its unity” (*C.E.P.,* no. 117). However, the urgency and importance of open speech when very important ethical issues are in question should be taken into account above all, as well as should the very nature of public media as a space for open speech. Indeed, it should not be “interference with the freedom of expression of writers with different convictions nor is it intended to discourage diversity, ordinarily taken for granted in a particular area” (*C.E.P.,* no. 140). *Svjetlo riječi* faithfully followed these guidelines; their capable and gifted editors and authors performed the task with professional and technical competence.

The eclipse that happened to *Svjetlo riječi* is not an isolated case in Bosnia and

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5 See *C.E.P.,* no. 138: “That part of the Catholic press which is of general interest publishes news and opinions and background articles about all the facets and problems and worries of modern life. This it does in the light of Christian principles. It is the task of the Catholic press to balance, to complete and, if necessary, to correct the news and comments about religion and the Christian life. At one and the same time it will be a glass that reflects the world and a light to show it the way. It will be a forum, a meeting place for the exchange of views. This press needs talented men and funds if its professional competence is to be above dispute.”
Herzegovina and in Croatia, but it is a symptom of what is happening in the Catholic Church in many
parts of the world. It is enough to recall the conspiracy of silence in the Church hierarchy in many
countries during the outbreak in public of the scandals of pedophilia and financial wrongdoings.
Among Christian brothers and sisters and among laity and church leadership, what is missing most is
open and free speech. Therefore, the term “parrhēsia” necessarily has to be imported into theological
discourse as theologumenon and in pastoral Christian discourse as a daily devotional practice.
Likewise, it is necessary again to elaborate a theology of conscience and dialogue with the world, as
well as the relationship among the gospel, the church, and culture.

In the Gospels the word parrhēsia appears in more than thirty places, and each time it is
about Jesus’ open and merciless attitude toward hypocritical individuals and his invitation to his
listeners to the same engagement. In European languages, parrhēsia translates as to speak openly, to
do nothing in secret. Every time it is about Jesus’ relationship to individuals whose main
characteristic behavior was hypocrisy. Jesus spoke openly what he saw and thought; he spoke
publicly to all without distinction. He criticized the hypocrisy and vanity of those scribes and
Pharisees, his compatriots, and those of the same faith, who loved to show off religious symbols to
the believers—putting on them a huge burden and, at the same time, as Jesus said, “speaking one
thing and doing another” (see Mt. 23:1–7). Open speech is absolutely indispensable whenever there
appears some gap between people—not to condemn people who live in such a gap but to expose the
system that makes it possible.

E.g., Mk. 8:32; Jn. 7:4, 10:24, 11:14 and 54, 16:25 and 29, 18:20; Acts 4:13, 29, and 31, 9:27
and 28, 13:46, 14:3, 18:26, 19:8, 26:26; 2 Cor. 3:12, 7:4; Eph. 3:12, 6:19; Phil. 1:20; 1 Tim. 3:13;
Philem. 1:8; Heb. 3:6, 4:16,
10:19 and 35; 1 Jn. 2:28, 3:21, 4:17, 5:14 (variously translated as speaking plainly or openly or boldly or with confidence).