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# ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS HOMOGENIZATION IN THE BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND THE PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION

By Zorica Kuburić

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Territories and societies write history. In the Balkans, history is marked primarily by wars, divisions, migrations, domination and change. Borders have always been important where heads were often lost. The importance of marked space was confirmed by religious symbols and religious objects, they are important even when they lose their function and their believers—they remain cultural monuments and witnesses of history where one has emerged a winner and the other a loser (Kuburić, Zotova, 2015).

The domination of the winner is displayed as the identity of a majority. In the territory of the Balkans, the majority and the minority are defined through religious and national identity which has the power to politically organize people. The territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina is marked by the civil war and post-war endeavors to establish the relationships of trust and community, not based on the principle of denying religious and national identities, but on the principle of respecting and acknowledging differences.

In Bosnia and Hercegovina, a civil war (1992-1995) occurred among the three dominant population groups: the Serbs who lived in Bosnia and Hercegovina as Orthodox Christians, the Croats who were Roman Catholics, and the newly formed nation of "Bošnjaks" who were Muslims. The conflict around identity was between Muslims who were

mostly descendants of converted, “Turkified” Christians from the conquered territories during the time of the Ottoman Empire and the traditional Christian population. Since the connection between religion and ethnic belonging was strong and at the same time, rooted into the territory that had been fought for, this affected dissociation from those who were not a part of a dominant identity. The breakup of Yugoslavia resulted in divisions among the population according to religious and national belonging in relation to a specific territory, which in that sense, was ethnically and religiously homogenized.

The religiously “others” in the context of Balkans are actually “we” who left their origin and who, according to some, should return and convert to the religion that belongs to them. Yet another motif is to be recognized here, a motif of homogenization and rooting into tradition and belonging. This is yet another step back, a step into the past that inspires and sets in motion the past that serves as a winner-loser memory that seeks revenge.

Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon (2013:20) mentions the importance of Kosovo as a territory where the Serbian identity is formed along with Orthodox Christianity. The Battle of Kosovo, the shedding of blood, the Kosovo Maiden, Prince Lazar, and the nine Jugović brothers were sung about in many epic poems. This has formed myths and motifs with messages of victory and defeat, of love and treason, and enemies of different faiths and ethnicities. The Serbian Orthodox Church cherishes the tradition of remembering Kosovo by preserving many monasteries and churches that were witnesses to the times when they were constructed. (Kuburić 2014).

In this context, Kosovo is seen as a border region where two parallel societies, Islamic and Christian societies exist, with frequent conflicts and parallel lives. Ever since the Battle of Kosovo of 1389 between Ottoman Turkish and Balkan Christian forces, there have been ethnic and religious borders established that are now also territorial. Tension in religious life was the very subject of Duijzings’ research, along with pilgrimage to Kosovo (Duijzings

2005). The key message about Kosovo and Metohija seem to be that time stopped when it was turned into a sacred land. The history of the Serbian Orthodox Church is built more into places of worship than into people, probably because the human lifespan is too short, and man is a fragile creature.

What connects Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina is the majority that belongs to the Islamic faith. The tendency of religious homogenization occurred due to migrations caused by fears of war, death, ethnic cleansing and the ethnic cleansing itself.

Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon (2013) uses qualitative analysis between two statements taken from a Croat of the Catholic faith and a Serb of the Orthodox faith in order to illustrate his hypothesis, which focuses on the connection between the religious idea of the need to convert another to one's own faith, and the ethnic cleansing (genocide) in the conditions wherein religion and nation are so intertwined that it is expected from all members of a certain ethnic group to be members of the same religion. There is a turn that occurs between the use of religion and its misuse in politics, which can be followed by the logics of violence and the suppression of freedom of others to be what they are.

The first quote is from a Croat soldier who gave his interpretation of the message of the "Queen of Peace" in Medjugorje or Mary in Croatian, who appeared on the Croatian soil as a national patron and protector: "We have not done what the Virgin Mary asked... She asked for conversion so that peace would come. We have not converted the non-believers and so we are in war." Therefore, the expression "if not, then" serves to justify the consequences and to shift guilt to victims who themselves choose their destiny. "The cause of the war, according to the soldier's understanding, is rooted then in a failure to convert and a failure to accept conversion." (Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon 2013: 23).

Analyzing the universal position that Mary generally has in Christianity and the local power related to the parochial understanding of Mary is a starting point in the work of Viktor

and Edith Turner in their study of *Christian Pilgrimage in Europe* (Turner and Turner 1978:171). They anticipated the dangers of a great symbol and personage when narrowed into a parochial setting. In such a way, she has become the exclusive patroness of a given community, region or nation, and is then set up against others. In that way, the community, region or nation become the chosen people and claim the divine power that justifies any act. Both the position of the winner and the position of a loser can be equally explained by religion.

The second quote is from an interview with Radovan Karadžić published under the title "The Type of Leader We Need" in *Svetigora* that the author founded in an indirect and incomplete state: "It is clear that the path to salvation of Serbs of the Muslim faith is the return to Orthodoxy. I am saying this completely responsibly." (Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon 2013:25; Mojzes 1998:88)

Dealing with the past in the Balkans is not an easy job. The question is: how do we find a way to come together again without the conversion and without the violence?

The survey of the process of reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina was conducted as a part of the project "The role of religious communities in the reconciliation process in Bosnia" by the University of Edinburgh and the Center of Empirical Research of Religion from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The survey was a follow-up of the 2012 project titled "Reconciliation and Trust Building in Bosnia-Herzegovina, A Survey of Popular Attitudes in Four Cities and Regions: Banja Luka, Bugojno, Mostar and Sarajevo" (Wilkes et al. 2012).

Cities that were included in this research are: Sarajevo, Mostar, Banja Luka, Stolac, Jajce, Tuzla, Srebrenica, Livno, Bijeljina, Brčko, Trebinje, Bihać and Teslić. The survey was conducted between April 1 and July 1 of the year 2013.

A questionnaire was designed by a research team containing questions primarily relating to issues of religious affiliation and beliefs, attitudes about reconciliation and statuses

during the war period in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as questions regarding general information about respondents. Respondents were asked to identify their religious and national identities as they saw fit, though they had the option not to say. The majority of questions were closed-ended questions where respondents could either choose one of the given options or choose not to answer the question. The questionnaire was printed in three languages—Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian. Respondents were approached in public places and asked to fill in the questionnaire.

The survey was conducted on a sample of 2,606 respondents, of whom 1281 were males (49 percent) and 1316 females (51 percent). Stratification of the sample was done partly according to national identity of three constituent peoples as it was intended to get the opinions of those who represent a minority population in a certain region; another part of the sample was drawn from randomly chosen respondents in each of the cities (without national stratification). In regards to the question on how they identify themselves by nationality, 37 percent of the respondents said that they were Bosniaks; 32 percent stated they were Serbs, and 24 percent indicated they were Croats. Others either belonged to some national minority or they did not want to state their nationality. In regards to religion, 35 percent said that they belonged to the Islamic faith, 31 percent to the Orthodox and 34 percent to the Catholic faith. Two percent identified themselves as agnostics, three percent as atheists, two percent as something else, and the remaining three percent did not want to answer.

What are significant steps in the process of reconciliation in Bosnia and Hercegovina?

In regards to the question, “In the process of reconciliation, do you believe that the following steps would be important for the success of the initiative?”, respondents evaluated ten given claims on a Likert-type scale from “very important” to “completely unimportant.” Using arithmetical means, we will present the propositions in order of importance assigned to them by the respondents.

The most significant answer (which has an arithmetical mean of  $M=4.10$  and the smallest standard deviation  $SD=0.992$ ) is recognition of the importance of focusing the reconciliation process on mutual understanding and respecting differences among citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Immediately after comes mutual understanding and respecting commonalities ( $M=4.07$ ). Answers like these indicate the importance of identity, which demands respect for the other, and the different but recognizable commonalities allows greater understanding and closeness. Nevertheless, the emphasis is on respecting differences, because without them, there would not be distinctive identities.

An agreement about historical facts, which would clarify the degree of injustice tolerated by all sides, was found to be very important as a specific step in solving issues about facts from the past ( $M= 3.91$ ). In this process, the respondents emphasized the significance of participants in the war and their willingness to speak about the past in public. As a result, veterans and victims of war come in fourth place, which shows the public how they can change our perception of the past by talking about it with one another ( $M=3.84$ ). A question that aroused the strongest emotions and provoked the sharpest disagreement is the issue of a genocidal program. An agreement about historical facts regarding the genocidal program was especially stressed by the Bosniak respondents and the least by the Serbs. The importance of solving this issue through an agreement on historical facts in relation to the genocidal program ( $M=3.80$ ) stirred the most reactions from the respondents during the survey.

The next step is constitutional reform. Citizens believe that it would end the entrenched confrontation between parties which represent the constituent peoples ( $M=3.82$ ). It is also expected from political leaders on the national level to apologize for crimes committed in the past ( $M=3.79$ ). From political leaders on local levels, it is expected to acknowledge what was done to people from minority populations and to make amends, if

possible (M=3.73). Another option is to give support to memorial occasions of minority communities on the local level (M=3.71), and finally, there is an initiative to offer a special treatment and protection to returnees on the local level (M=3.39). Advocating special treatment and protection for returnees is especially stressed by the Bosniaks, and most strongly by the national minorities.

## **Conclusion**

Results of the 2013 survey about the process of reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina conducted on the sample of 2606 respondents show that there is potential to build a stable society based primarily on civic options that do not advocate for priorities of only one people, but for the common good of all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Beside this qualitative relation to the other, it is necessary to involve those who influence the development of new generations through our educational system, teachers, religious leaders, the laity, and even politicians in order to create an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding and respectfulness of differences towards members of different national backgrounds and religious traditions.

There are many ways to realize the process of reconciliation, and those that are recognized include open dialogue about the past, confessions and apologies, recognizing the victims and respecting their side, and special attention to minority groups that feel vulnerable in certain areas.

In regards to religion, the results of the survey indicate that religion has potential for reconciliation if it is directed at respecting differences of the other, at accepting both differences and commonalities, and not at rejection for the sake of one's own exclusivity. Religious leaders, more than lay people, are in a position to contribute to reconciliation. There are undoubtedly two key aspects of different relations: a position of being a religious



majority in a certain area, and a position of being a religious minority, which was already emphasized in a previous study (Wilkes et al. 2012). Religious leaders will contribute to the process of reconciliation only if they do not exclude minorities in places where their religious community is a majority and if they do not incite extremism in their community in those places where they are a minority.

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