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**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE BOSNIAN  
CONFLICT OF THE 1990s:  
THE TOWN OF FOČA AS A CASE STUDY.**

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Louis Tozer is a graduate student in history at University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies. His academic interests lie in the chaotic scenes war and ethnic cleansing forced upon civilian populaces. His research and study has dealt primarily with the break-up of the Former Yugoslavia and the Bosnian war, as well as the forced and voluntary population movements in Poland that occurred during the aftermath of World War II. Currently he is researching the prosecution of sexual violence in war and why the ICTY was the first court to successfully convict rape as a crime against humanity.

A common western stereotype of the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the 1990s is that it was the culmination of a deep-seated, subconscious ancient hatred between three diametrically opposed and incompatible ethno-religious groups. These groups are commonly defined by both ethnicity and religion, and they formed the main actors in this conflict. The Croats are defined as Catholics; the Serbs as Serbian Orthodox; and the Bosniaks as Muslims. The importance of religion in the conflict itself is a disputed factor, indeed, religion seemingly took on a different understanding to that of theology and faith, instead referring to one's ethnicity. This is important in understanding how religion affected the conflict. Another perception in the West was that the conflict was inevitable due to an orientalist opinion of the Balkans as a war hungry region on the periphery of Europe, where ancient hatreds existed. The following quote by Bill Clinton, the US president at the time, illuminates this generalization: "their hatreds were five hundred years old."<sup>1</sup> This commonplace opinion implies that history had rendered it impossible for the aforementioned groups of people to live together, yet they had done just that under a Titoist government, which largely sought to

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<sup>1</sup> Mitja Velikonja, *Religious Separation & Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 256. (Hereafter, Velikonja, *Religious Separation*.)

limit religious influence. Such a view also worked to legitimate a lack of intervention in the conflict. However, after Tito's death, and a widespread economic and political crisis in Yugoslavia in the 1980s, religious institutions gained increasing political freedom and were able to manoeuvre more independently, enjoying a trend of "desecularization and increasing religiosity."<sup>2</sup> The re-invigoration of religious institutions in the public sphere during the build up to the conflict, coupled with clear attacks during the violence on religious symbols as "all mosques in Foča were blown up and the ruins razed to the ground"<sup>3</sup> indicates, how religion clearly played at least some role in Bosnian conflict of the 1990s.

Religion is often a highly contentious subject and similarly the topic of religious influence on a violent conflict, such as in Bosnia, can expect to be contentious and laden with paradoxical viewpoints and theories. One such theory that can be disseminated from this topic, is that of Michael Sells, a historical scholar of Islam, and his book *The Bridge Betrayed*, which offers the opinion that the main cause of the conflict was a belief, in what he calls Christoslavism. This notion of Christoslavism is explained as the belief that "Slavs are Christian by nature, that conversion to another religion entails or presupposes a transformation or deformation of the Slavic race,"<sup>4</sup> and that these, therefore deformed Muslims, are essentially traitors to their Slavic identity. This idea of Christoslavism is imperative to Sells' understanding of the religious aspect of the conflict as it is directly linked to the targeting of Muslims by both Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbians. He is unequivocal in his viewpoint that the war aims of the Croat and Serbian military forces was the annihilation of the Muslim, cultural and social identity in the Balkans, as a form of revenge. He believes this proves his theory of Christoslavism as it indicates the will to

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<sup>2</sup> Lenard J. Cohen, "Bosnia's 'Tribal Gods': The Role of Religion in Nationalist Politics" in Paul Mojzes (ed.) *Religion And The War in Bosnia*, (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 51. (Hereafter, Cohen, "Tribal Gods".)

<sup>3</sup> ICTY, Judgment summary, Prosecutor v. Kunarac et al. Case No.: IT-96-23/1, 22 February 2001, 1. (Hereafter, "Kunarac et al. Judgment summary".)

<sup>4</sup> Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion And Genocide In Bosnia*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd., 1998), xv. (Hereafter, Sells, *Bridge*.)

cleanse the Balkans of so called “race traitors,”<sup>5</sup> who are the Muslims who had betrayed their Christian origins during the Ottoman rule. This is a rather simple explanation for what is undeniably a very complex conflict, and Sells’ theory has one standout pitfall. In claiming his theory of Christoslavism, he does not offer an explanation for the conflict between the Catholic Croats and Serbian Orthodox Serbs, nor the short-lived alliance between Croats and Bosniaks. One simple example of this, can be found in Mostar, where Serbs were driven out by a Croat and Bosniak alliance, before “the two communities which were roughly equal in size, turned against each other,”<sup>6</sup> before reaching a peace agreement in 1994. Sells’ also seemingly ignores the geopolitical aims of those who orchestrated the myths that caused interreligious tensions and violence. This illuminates how Sell’s notion of an essentialist conflict between Christians and Muslims, as per his idea of Christoslavism, does not fit the nature of the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Sells’ idea that Christoslavism can explain the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina fails to deal with the vast complexities involved. Those complexities are acknowledged by Paul Mojzes, who makes clear that he believes the conflict was one influenced by a wide range of factors. Mojzes claims that religion was just one of the following important factors: “contemporary economic, social, religious, and political as well as ancient hatreds,”<sup>7</sup> which combined to form the causation of the conflict. He also references that in relation to the conflict, religion lost its understanding as a theology and as practise of faith, but instead became codified as a form of ethnicity and culture. In understanding this Mojzes coins the term ethnoreligiosity, defined as “a specific symbiotic merger of one’s ethnic and religious heritage as a means of providing a sense of personal and collective identity.”<sup>8</sup> As socialism crumbled in Yugoslavia during the economic and political crisis of the 1980s, religious

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<sup>5</sup> Sells, *Bridge*, 144.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century*, (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011), 174. (Hereafter, Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*.)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

institutions unevenly regained varying degrees of autonomy from the government. This coupled with a loss of socialist identity, rendered some people to re-identify with religion. He states this led to rivalries between religious groups as claims of inequality were made regarding economic benefits. Mojzes believes these rivalries fostered feelings of groupness, and in a region where language and appearance were generally very similar between nations, religion became the most obvious and important marker of identity. Mojzes claims that religion as a form of identity was unaffected by the practise of religion, but was determined by a person's cultural and familial lineage which constructed a person's ethnicity and therefore religious identity. This offers a more encompassing theory for the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina than Sells' theory as it attempts to explain the close relationship between religion and ethnicity. This close alignment of religion and ethnicity offers a strong argument for why religious symbolism was a reoccurring theme in the conflict, yet it also generalizes that entire nations were overcome with this sense of rivalry, leading to escalating tensions and a revision to previously common identities and cultural markers. Thusly, this ignores such instances of inter-religious community spirit and the five percent<sup>9</sup> who continued to identify as Yugoslav. A pertinent example of this can be found in the anti-war demonstrations that took place in Sarajevo in the build up to the conflict, as well as the ethnically Serb Sarajevo population who remained during the siege.

A slightly different theory, elucidated by Vjekoslav Perica in 2003 delivered the term ethnoclericalism into the Bosnian conflict debate, in reference to a combination of "ethnically based nationhood and a 'national church.'"<sup>10</sup> This means that national church leaders would play an important role in the nation and therefore the government, a very different proposition from the secular government that existed during the Socialist Republic of

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 366. (Hereafter, Mann, *Democracy*.)

<sup>10</sup> Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). (Hereafter, Perica, *Balkan Idols*.)

Yugoslavia. Essentially, Perica states that religious institutions took it upon themselves to strongly emphasize the ethnic element of their institution, claiming that “national churches became hallmarks of nationhood.”<sup>11</sup> Perica strongly believes that the national churches in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina acted more as self-serving nationalistic ideologues, than as theology based religious organisations. This theory relates to the significance of religion in the conflict, because church structures pushed a nationalist and anti-secular agenda into political discourse. For instance, the Serbian Orthodox Church repeatedly brought the WWII Jasenovac Ustasha death camp to the forefront of public debate, implying that it was a Catholic supported camp for the death of ethnic Serbs and therefore Orthodox followers; thusly stirring interreligious tensions in public debate. This supported a constructed narrative of genocide of the Serbian people through myth, constructing victimhood and martyrdom as a part of the Serbian people’s story. In addition to this, in 1990 the Serbian Orthodox Holy Synod held many commemorations of the Second World War, “with special emphasis on Serbian Orthodox Church casualties during the war in the Independent State of Croatia,”<sup>12</sup> as well as demanding that the Pope visit Jasenovac and commit “an act of repentance.”<sup>13</sup> Perica’s theory is clear, the overt use of religious symbolism via commemorations, the turning of Jasenovac into a holy site; demands for a papal apology for Serbs death at Jasenovac; and the mass celebration of the 600 year anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, are examples of the Orthodox Church behaving as a nationalist organization. By doing so, the church abetted and legitimized the violence that ensued in Bosnia in the 1990s. Perica’s theory implies that the ramping up of tensions in the prelude to conflict in the 1990s, was initiated by the Orthodox Church, and its increased public nationalist rhetoric, and that this

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 154..

“extremist Serbian kind of ethnoclericalism affected Croatian Catholicism and Bosnian Islam and eventually was espoused by their leaders.”<sup>14</sup>

Ethnoclericalism offers a compelling argument for understanding why religious symbolism was so prevalent during the Bosnian crisis. It explains how religious institutions, through the embellishment of their importance to national identity, helped to instigate the conflict. This is true because it pushed nationalistic narratives on the public as each of the three religious groups involved sought out greater political privilege and feared the growing privilege of the other. It seems highly agreeable that the way religion created a national identity via ethnoclericalism; played a significant role in the conflict as the increased nationalist rhetoric would have increased interethnic tensions, particularly through the Orthodox church's stream of Jasenovac and Serb genocide references. However, in creating the image of religious institutions as being only religious in name, instead acting as nationalist movements, Perica invites scepticism. This is because it seems unlikely that religious leaders were defaming other religious groups for purely nationalist motives with the intent to incite violence. Religious institutions were attempting to carve out a more prominent role for their church in the new political climate. Yet, political leaders who exaggerated ethnic differences manipulated this rise in religious discourse. This is illuminated by Radovan Karadžić who said himself “the church is highly important for all Serbs, and it is irrelevant whether one believes in God or not,”<sup>15</sup> highlighting how politicians saw religion as no longer referring directly to religious faith, but as a political instrument with which to mobilize populations. Perica essentially makes clear that in Bosnia identity became convoluted and religion no longer merely referred to one's faith, instead it referred to one's traditional and cultural heritage and it was used to identify people, regardless of whether that person saw themselves in such a way.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

Another historian who has concerned himself with the significance of religion in the Bosnian conflict is Mitja Velikonja, whose theory holds, in some senses a resemblance to that of Mojzes and Perica. Instead of attempting to coin a new term that could be broadly used to define the religious significance, he has instead drawn the conclusion that religious significance is itself limited, and filled with hypocrisies. He makes clear that he considers the conflict to lack any real religious motivation and was instead a “classical war of aggression with clear geopolitical goals.”<sup>16</sup> However, he understands that belligerents used religious symbolism and rhetoric plentifully and that the religious leaders “failed to condemn incidents that they themselves sometimes incited,” summarized as “hate silence.”<sup>17</sup> Essentially, Velikonja argues that religious organizations allowed themselves to support the conflict, as aims regarding increased political privilege and governmental influence were considered inextricably linked to that of the nationalist belligerents. The religious organizations actively allowed their symbols to support the conflict, as “religion and ancient myths gradually and intentionally became an important means of national and political mobilization.”<sup>18</sup> Velikonja goes on to explain that even though many religious leaders, during or after the conflict publically declared their support for peace and a reconciled multi-religious Bosnia-Herzegovina, they were in many cases the same leaders who had previously “tried to justify violence, religio-national homogenization, ethnic cleansing and *just* wars,”<sup>19</sup> therefore making them hypocrites. Velikonja considers religion itself, in a pure sense, to have had very little significance in the conflict itself other than as a source of mobilization potential for the belligerents. Yet, instead of simply implying that religion was manipulated by nationalists, which he does state, he also believes that religious organizations similarly manipulated

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<sup>16</sup> Velikonja, *Religious Separation*, 292.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 293 (refers to both quotes in the sentence).

<sup>18</sup> Velikonja, *Religious Separation*, p. 262.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p . 285.



nationalist groups for their political aims, as “religious institutions lent legitimacy to and opened perspectives for chauvinist politics, and vice versa.”<sup>20</sup>

Velikonja’s theory of mutual exploitation to reach political and geopolitical goals is convincing, as it seems clear that religion offered a form of legitimacy of the violence, and religious organizations saw themselves as benefactors from the violence. For instance, politicians exploited ancient myths, purported by religious institutions, as Serb politicians often referenced the time of Ottoman rule over Serbia; in a manner that focused on the subjugation of the Serbs under a dominant Muslim ruling class. This was used to mobilize Serbs against Balkan Muslims. These ancient myths were appropriated by politicians from religious institutions to fuel rumors, such as in Foča where it was spread by nationalists that the “Muslims planned to transform their town into a new Mecca.”<sup>21</sup> This helped exaggerate tensions between ethno-religious groups, regardless of how unlikely the claim was and legitimize violence. Velikonja’s theory is so poignant because it explains how this mutual exploitation between politicians and religious leaders, was extremely powerful in mobilizing and influencing individuals to commit acts of violence. However, no matter how false the religious motives may be in terms of non-religious people using religion to justify criminal acts; the use of religion to manipulate people to commit violence renders religion significant.

In 1991 the census of the town of Foča, situated in Eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina, recorded that of a population of 40,000 “51.6 percent were Bosniak, 45.3 percent were Bosnian Serbs, and 3.1 percent other,”<sup>22</sup> showing a borderline equal division of Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs cohabiting. However, during the conflict this was altered considerably. On the 7<sup>th</sup> April 1992 a Bosnian Serb led military attacked Foča taking full control of the town after nine days, after which a dramatic campaign of ethnic cleansing took place, leaving a Bosniak

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 288.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 245.

<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Bosnia and Hercegovina "A Closed, Dark Place": Past and Present Human Rights Abuses in Foca*. 10, No. 6 (D). (New York, London: Human Rights Watch, 1998), 12. (Hereafter, Human Rights Watch, Bosnia).

population of ten<sup>23</sup> in post-Dayton Foča. The campaign of cleansing in Foča took on a stark religious element and tone as referenced by the ICTY which detailed not only the aforementioned destruction of all mosques in Foča but also that the designated purpose of the campaign was “to cleanse the Foča area of Muslims(...)even the town’s name was cleansed.”<sup>24</sup> The name Foča was replaced, until international pressure forced its return, by Srbinje, which translates as “the place of the Serbs;”<sup>25</sup> explicitly stating the war aim in Foča. Additionally, a seemingly clear policy of ensuring the Muslim population left Foča took place, via the creation of mass fear through stark violence and the creation of detention camps. The ICTY states during this time various forms of torture, inhumane conditions, beatings, rape and murder were common. The Bosniaks were targeted, according to the Bosnian Serb Dragoljub Kunarac, a commander in the Bosnian Serb army in Foča, who was later found guilty of torture, rape, and enslavement; because of the need for “gaining supremacy” over the Muslims.<sup>26</sup> Even though we can assume that the accused would be trying to limit his accountability in court, it still makes clear that those who he targeted were Muslims; we can thus infer the Bosnian Serb military in Foča did likewise. Even though Muslim was the demographic term used for Bosniak, it still implies that religion was the dominant marker for who was to be subjected to inhumane treatment, as illuminated by Mojzes’ theory that religious heritage and ethnicity had merged. Additionally if the accused was willing to discuss the urge to gain supremacy over the Muslims in an international courtroom, then we can infer that this was a diluted stance because the accused would surely play down any anti-Muslim sentiment he may harbor when questioned in court; further highlighting how strong anti-Muslim sentiments may have been in Foča.

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<sup>23</sup> ICTY, Judgment, Prosecutor v. Kunarac et al. Case No.: IT-96-23/1, 22 February 2001, para. 47. (Hereafter, ‘Kunarac et al. Judgment’.)

<sup>24</sup> Kunarac et al. Judgment summary, 1.

<sup>25</sup> J.M. Selimović, “Challenges of Postconflict Coexistence: Narrating Truth and Justice in a Bosnian Town” *Political Psychology* 36, 2015, 2:238. (Hereafter, “Challenges.”)

<sup>26</sup> ‘Kunarac et al. Judgment’, para. 577.

In Foča male and female Bosniaks were divided into separate camps such as KP Dom for males, in which beatings and murder were common, and Foča High School and the Partizan Sports Hall in which women and girls were systematically raped. This population divide and their following treatment allows us to understand why so few Bosniaks were left in Foča by the end of the conflict. Foča offers an example of violence and practically complete and successful ethnic cleansing, that the later Srebrenica massacre in 1995 does not. The events in Foča took place very early on in the Bosnian conflict, proving that the immediate and clear attempts to rid Foča of all Bosniaks was indicative of Bosnian Serb and Serb wider war aims. Furthermore the events of Foča became significant later for the ICTY, as the Kunarac et al case in Foča saw the first successful conviction of rape as a crime against humanity and as a war crime. This is vital in understanding the significance of religion as it showed how the humiliation and degradation of Muslims was a clear policy.

The following quote offers a deeply emblematic insight into the religious nature of the violence that took place in Foča, as during an incident of rape a Bosniak woman claimed that the following was said to her: “You will see you Muslim. I am going to draw a cross on your back. I’m going to baptise all of you. You’re now going to be Serbs.”<sup>27</sup> This event described by Witness 51 at the ICTY, occurred at a house she was taken to from the Partizan Sports hall where she was repeatedly raped. Coincidentally this occurred on the night that the Aladža Mosque, the most prominent mosque in Foča was destroyed. This quote helps compound the theory that religion no longer took on just religious sentiment, but that it also clearly registered as an ethnic measurement. When the man in question threatens to baptize the woman he implies that the result of the baptism will be the conversion of the Bosniak woman into an Orthodox, and that this will automatically register her as a Serb. This is a very pertinent example of Paul Mojzes theory of ethnoreligiosity, as it shows how the lines

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<sup>27</sup> ICTY, The prosecutor v. Kunarac et al, Case No.: IT-96-23/1-T, Wednesday 29 March 2000, 1278-79.

between religious faith and ethnicity were particularly convoluted. Additionally, it can be used as invocative of the wider violence and destruction in Bosnia as it illuminates the desire among the nationalist paramilitaries and other organizations for complete homogeneity. This illuminates how the power of religious rhetoric originating from the churches and the advancement of this rhetoric politicians into nationalist policies, affected the agency of individuals in the conflict, and their apparent motives.

Using Foča as a case study allows us to uncover how religion was used to create fear in order to mobilize violence as it was claimed Foča was “under threat of a Muslim fundamentalist coup;”<sup>28</sup> this corroborates with wider feelings of national Serb victimhood. Religious leaders like Arch-priest Dragan Terzić incited feelings of religious persecution, through claims that Serbs had long been oppressed and brutally subjugated, and questioned “whether the rest of the Serbs would stand by and watch.”<sup>29</sup> This pushed communities apart and hardened political loyalties along ethnic and religious lines. Additionally, it implies the need for ethnic Serbs to raise arms in the apparent defense of their religious heritage across the region. Witnesses at the ICTY from Foča, and indeed other trials, regularly reference that the accents of aggressors were of Serbian descent, as witness 192 explained that when soldiers selected women to rape that they were from Serbia and Montenegro as “one could recognise them by their accent, by the way they spoke.”<sup>30</sup> Although locals were also involved in violence, as evidenced by the case of Dragan Zelenović, it does also suggest that religious leaders and their calls to arms did have a material affect on the ground. In this sense religion was important as it formed the backbone of these political loyalties, giving nationalist politicians who reference religion a support base. Religious persecution was proved by the ICTY, as “the imprisonment and confinement of non-Serbs at the KP Dom was carried out

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<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch, Bosnia, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Radmila Radić, “The Church and the ‘Serbian Question’” in Nebojša Popov (ed.) *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis*, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000, 256.

<sup>30</sup> ICTY, *The Prosecutor v. Kunarac et al*, Case No.: IT-96-23/1-T, Monday 15 March 2000: 3079.

with the intent to discriminate on religious or political grounds.”<sup>31</sup> The reasoning for this persecution originates in the political differences, in relation to secession from or remaining in Yugoslavia, and the territorial land grab that followed. Political stances in this sense were largely defined by people’s religious heritage and ethnicity, and political leaders benefitted from this by utilizing “religion as an instrument for generating élan and political support,”<sup>32</sup> highlighting how religion had become entwined by the politics of the conflict.

Religion certainly played a role in the Bosnian conflict, as was made plain from the above. Its significance lay primarily in how religion became heavily connoted with ethnic identity and nationhood. It seems clear that one’s nationhood became very important in terms of identity and political stance, whilst socialist Yugoslavia fell apart. Politicians and religious leaders used religion as an instrument to mobilize and influence, as both used emotive language to instil religion as a part of culture and therefore to demarcate others, and mobilize religious fundamentalists and nationalists. This is vital in understanding the desecration of religious symbols during the conflict, as mosques came to stand for the Bosniak ethnicity and the political claims of the SDA (Stranka Demokratske Akcije, a predominantly Muslim party), and vice versa with Orthodox and Catholic symbols. Religious significance therefore lies in the manipulation of religious elements of society for overall political gains.

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<sup>31</sup> ICTY, Judgment, Prosecutor v. Milorad Krnojelac. Case No.: IT-97-25-T, 15 March 2002, Para. 438.

<sup>32</sup> Cohen, “Tribal Gods,” 65.

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