Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Bosnia after Dayton

Rusmir Mahmutćehajić

Bosnia is a name for a model of community life shared by the inheritors of different holy traditions. Its history bears witness to efforts to formalize this model in contemporary modes of thought. In an earlier period––the time of the Bosnian Bans and Kings––this model expressed itself in the effort to justify and establish communal life between different Christian communities. Interpretations of Christ developed differently in the various Christian communities. The disagreements were sometimes large, sometimes hardly noticeable. They took the forms defined as Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and the Bosnian Church. No agreements were formally established to assert that no single creed can have priority, nor that the right road lay in dialogue based on the acceptance of the faiths of all participants. However, it cannot be disputed that the tolerance that these communities showed each other testifies to a respect for the statement that "God gave every people their law and their way of life." The realization that other teachings might form a meaningful part of this dialogue may have been the reason for a significant number of Bosnian Church leaders to adopt Islam. This suggests that unbiased research into Bosnian history may produce the conditions necessary to reconstruct such a dialogue.

Only then will it be possible to arrive at a full definition of Bosnia's unity in diversity. In the strength of each community, based on their own holy teaching, the trust necessary for dialogue was planted. As one of God's messages runs, "Had God not driven back the people, some by the means of others, there had been destroyed cloisters and churches, oratories and mosques, wherein God's name is much mentioned." This model of mutual defense and respect has never been incorporated into a political plan, which could serve as a foundation for building a state powerful enough to defend and develop this multiplicity. But this model is present, in the form of the direct assaults committed against it, in all the policies that have been opposed to the concept of Bosnia. These proclaim the goal of "homogenization" on the basis of only one holy tradition and an ideological policy deriving from it. Thus Bosnia becomes a country where Serbian rule and Orthodoxy, or Croatian rule and Catholicism, should dominate, to the exclusion of all others; the possibility of mixed communal life, the tradition most strikingly obvious to all who view Bosnia from outside, is rigidly excluded.

This all contributes to the present reduction of Bosnia's unity in diversity to an Islamicized "Muslim" or "Bosniak" policy. This is calculated to reawaken European

images of Muslims as “Others.” When the theory that agreement between the parties is fundamentally impossible has taken hold, it follows that Bosnia-Herzegovina must be divided, if only to reduce the participation of Muslims in the destiny of Europe. Recent efforts to interpret world events via the “conflict of civilizations” formula are meanwhile justified with the aid of the Bosnian example. In the resulting ideological confusion, the existence of immutable universal laws, and the fact of their violation, is forgotten.

Bosnia is possibly the only European state where the ancient ideas about the multiplicity of holy teaching have managed to obtain a foothold before being consumed by the desire for nation-states. Therefore it suits both sides, Serbian and Croatian, that Bosnia should appear to be a question soluble along strictly nationalist lines but for the obstruction of the Muslim factor. This factor had to be presented as hostile to, and incompatible with, European culture and politics: the campaign was immeasurably furthered by naive nationalist ideologies produced by the Muslims themselves. Thus the three hostile forces include, in addition to the Serbian and Croatian plans, Muslim acquiescence in, or acceptance of, the betrayal of the Bosnian model.

The international community, with all its internal oppositions, hopes to achieve a “new world order,” and this is supported today by prevailing political orthodoxy. The plan also foresees resistance in a significant proportion of the world. Therefore the widening of Western influence is needed to preserve “global stability.” All wars must, in accordance with this approach, be contained, so that the hostile energies inside this confined space are expended in a way that does not endanger wider goals. The areas likely to present opposition are, on the basis of the evidence cited by Samuel Huntington, primarily the Confucian and Islamic worlds. Since political powers may arise in these worlds that could oppose the West’s dominance as the summit of historical development, these areas must be proved to threaten international stability. Next in line is the peril of an alliance between the Orthodox countries and peoples. But such an alliance is reconcilable with the cultural bases of the West, and can gradually be incorporated in the expansion of Western presence toward the East.

A perfect model for the operation of these relationships is offered by Bosnia. Here the “Western world” has no clear borders with the “Orthodox world,” and the situation is further complicated by the Muslim presence. The desire to immediately fix clear borders between them is demonstrated by the position of the Contact Group and their proposal to divide Bosnia into 49 percent and 51 percent portions––the basis of the Dayton Agreement.

Meanwhile, the representatives of the two chief ethno-national ideologies proposed that the “Serbian-Croatian conflict” could and should be solved by dividing Bosnia-Herzegovina. To bring this about the political presence of the Bosniaks had to be erased, and the method used was a campaign of genocide, implemented in all areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina where the two parties had sufficient means and strength.

The success of the anti-Bosnian ethno-national policies depends directly on the weakness of the Bosnian resistance. This weakness was ensured by reducing Bosnian policy to “Muslim” policy. Therefore, the direct associates of the Serbian and Croatian

destroyers of Bosnia are those advocates of a “Muslim” policy, who accept that it is possible to divide Bosnia into ethno-national territories and to form ethno-national states. Both external anti-Bosnian plans depended on the growth of “Muslim policies” convinced that “everyone must have their own state.”

The war against Bosnia-Herzegovina started with its declaration of independence. There was considerable division over the question of how to protect the rights arising from international acknowledgment of independence. There are two ways to interpret this division. The first sums up the case against the West, and the second argues for the defense.

The case against the West defines three aspects of the relations of the Western powers toward Bosnia. The first concerns those areas of policy and influence that are tied to “Western European civilization.” This defined the West’s reaction to Croatian nationalist policy. The second is in regards to the areas of policy and influence of the Orthodox world, which related to the contents of Serbian national policy. Since the West was persistently and energetically striving to establish contacts of cooperation and reconciliation with the Orthodox world, the West’s approach to Serbian policy in Bosnia was not allowed to endanger these relations. Third, any Islamic presence, defined as a significant obstacle to the globalization of liberal democracy and the free market, was seen as a possible obstacle to the “tide of history,” and hence to be suppressed. The defense of the role of the West consists of its intermittent efforts on behalf of Bosnian statehood once the latter was acknowledged: the imposing of sanctions on Serbia, pressures on Croatia, military backing of the peace talks, the implementation of democratic elections, projects for the return of refugees, investment in reconstruction and economic growth, and much more.

The war against Bosnia and Herzegovina began at a time when political awareness of the unity of the country and its history was very weak. In the long period of growth of Serbian and Croatian ethno-national plans, it became clear that the weakening of Bosnia-Herzegovina’s unity was the precondition for establishing a united Serbian and a united Croatian state. The conflict between Serbs and Croats was soluble, according to these plans, “by the division of Bosnia-Herzegovina between Serbs and Croats.” But the agreement was opposed by the Bosniaks. Therefore, the solution of the Bosniak-Muslim question became central to both these plans. This was accompanied by energetic activity to establish the Croatian and Serbian states in their new borders. Bosnia-Herzegovina underwent the division of territory on the basis of “ethno-national criteria.” Every community in Bosnia-Herzegovina felt compelled to define their territory and to establish ethno-national sovereignty within it.

The war was directed from the ethno-national power centers. The ideology of division was deepened by the use of force. Wherever possible, all signs of the presence of Others were excluded and destroyed. Simultaneously, “peace plans” were proposed. Every one of themstarting from the Carrington-Cutileiro plan offered the “territorial re-definition” of Bosnia-Herzegovina into sectors where one of the three ethno-national communities would dominate- “ethno-national territories,” in other words.

All peace plans––the Vance Owen Peace Plan, the Action Plan of the European Community, the Invincible Package, the Contact Group Plan, and the Dayton

Agreement––supported the desires of the initiators of war. In the peace talks, some of the key participants found themselves encouraged to use all available means, including genocide, to establish a homogeneous ethno-national territory.

Bosnia-Herzegovina's population was thus reduced to "three conflicting sides." The war against Bosnia-Herzegovina appeared as a threefold matrix––Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. They were all associated with goals equal in principle, that is, ethno-national division. All saw unity as an illusion. The final solution was, accordingly, the adoption of Realpolitik attitudes toward those holding power and humanitarian protection for the weakest in the conflict.

All struggles to form a model for the defense and sustainability of Bosnia-Herzegovina have been ineffectual to date. Since such a model is feared by those opposed to Bosnian unity, all advocates of defense have been driven from the political arena and smeared in the eyes of the Bosnian public. All supporters of those joint patriotic associations, which in their commitment to defending Bosnia testified to its possibility as a unified state, were rejected as utopianists. In a similar manner, the possibility of constructing a systematic approach at an international level, which could seek support for the Bosnian state in the principles of the international order, was banished. The frame of defense was narrowed, and the forces of division encouraged.

The Dayton Agreement was the confirmation of this trend. It stopped the war but did not exclude either the ruling elites or the organizations of the "warring parties" from the political arena. Bosnia is theoretically possible as a unified state on the basis of this agreement, but in practice and in much of the small print it is clearly divided. The war has stopped, but its causes have not been removed. Separate military (or police) structures have been established, whose relationships with each other are those of "parties to the conflict" who have declared a cease-fire.

This situation in which Bosnia finds itself today can be seen as a crossroads, from which two routes are possible. The first leads to division, by which peace would be brought with the exchange of territory, while the second leads to reuniting the disconnected parts into a stable whole. Considering the events in the aftermath of the Dayton Agreement, the first road is the more likely, for within Bosnia-Herzegovina its advocates are more numerous and better organized than the opposition. Further evidence is offered by the presence of the same ethnonational elites and organizations that brought about the war toward trends of ethno-national homogenization, the non-return of displaced persons and refugees, the dysfunctionality of the joint bodies of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the growth of statehood in the three entities, and the like.

In the second interpretation, the Dayton Agreement offers the interconnection of the divided parts of the country as the only possibility for the future. This road is permanently open, and the presence of ethno-national elites and organizations is only a passing phenomenon.

The establishment of the rule of law is not possible without removing the current obstacles toward division. Removing these will encourage mutual trends toward multi-ethnic state unity. The present forces of division cannot survive if the Dayton Agreement is really implemented. They will try desperately to alter its contents to fit

their original goals, but its acceptance will render such readings impossible.

These forces cannot build any association that would be morally and politically convincing. They can survive only as long as they are sustained in a balance of opposites. They are using themselves up faster in peace than in war, and the vacuum they will leave offers the space to found alliances and groups that would transcend the borders of ethno-national policy and ethno-national territory.

The plans for the destruction of Bosnia contend that Bosnia as a state is not possible, since the Muslims want to establish power over the Catholics and Orthodox as a means to create a Muslim state. Therefore, it suits the destroyers that there should be these intermittent desires on the part of the Muslims, and they regularly stimulate and support such desires. In the process of "Islamicizing" the organizations and institutions of state, the international community saw the betrayal of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which had been internationally recognized, and proof of the claims that the attackers of the state had raised to justify the commencement of war.

In its final result, such an "Islamification" is anti-Muslim in the fullest sense. After the evidence of this process was confirmed, the most important steps in the destruction of Bosnia-Herzegovina were taken: access was blocked to the Adriatic coast, the River Sava, and so on. The advocates of the Muslim state became the enemies of Bosnia's defenders.

In the Bosnia of today, there is little or no diminution of mutual distrust, and the divisions between the entities are turning them steadily into areas of ethno-national government that communicate mainly through international mediators, smuggling connections, and secret political meetings. No organizations that could research and develop sources of trust as a precondition for the recovery of Bosnian-Herzegovinan society have been formed.

Although the ethno-national elites seem to have achieved the major part of their original goals, they are still blocked by the Dayton Agreement. Further overt movement in the direction of division is significantly hampered, if not disabled. The situation is further complicated by the presence of several levels disabled. The situation is further complicated by the presence of several levels of international activity. Bosnia and its divided entities are a part of global politics and the global economy. Only those who stay in touch with international trends can expect to actively participate in this globalization, however. Those who are prevented from doing so by distrust of their neighbors will sink all the deeper into a psychological ghetto, losing all possibility of transcending the borders in which they have enclosed themselves. Establishing connections and dialogue with their neighbors becomes psychologically all the more difficult. The results is mere utopian dreams of distant alliances and irrational policies.

Not one of the political parties now in power can initiate or develop dialogue based on trust between all parties. Their rule is a barrier to alternative political, economic, religious, cultural, and other connections that could ultimately overcome segregation. In the long term, this situation particularly endangers the survival of the Bosniaks themselves, although their current illusory protection conceals this fact. They are left

without a foundation or framework for long-term development. The Bosniaks are a people whose survival is endangered. This fact is worth putting squarely before them and before all the participants in the Bosnian drama. Its concealment endangers all possibility of change.

The Bosnian-Herzegovinan drama can have no positive outcome if this is not founded on those elements of trust between Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs that have been excluded by ethno-national politics. There is no future if dialogue within Bosnia is confined to the context of homogenizing policies and ethnic territories.

Bosnia needs a structured political basis on which to enter the third Christian millennium. The Dayton Agreement stopped the killing and made a start, however minute, toward reunion and the renewal of trust. However, its validation in terms of the aim of preserving and strengthening Bosnia's unity depends on at least nine points:

1. Freedom of movement throughout the whole of the territory, with the establishment of legal supervision of the entire state border.
2. The return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes and the possibility of conditions of living and employment that accord with European standards.
3. Dismantling of anti-Bosnian ideologies and organizations.
4. Trial and punishment for all those guilty of crimes against Bosnia's people.
5. The exclusion of all illegal activities by Serbia and Croatia in the affairs of Bosnia-Herzegovina.
6. The protection of economic unity by establishing customs supervision at international borders, with total freedom of movement across inter-entity lines.
7. Establishing a united plan for the economic reconstruction and development of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the framework of European ties, with the simultaneous promotion and encouragement of those forms of Bosnian culture that have the potential to revive and develop trust between the separate elements in Bosnia's unity.
8. The united planning and implementation of economic transition and privatization, the revival of property rights, the preventing of mismanagement and misuse of money and public assets on the basis of political power.
9. Limiting the capacity of the ethno-national elites to promote their anti-Bosnian ideology through public information and the education systems, the police, the army, and so on.

The intention to destroy Bosnia-Herzegovina was supported by the theory of division as the only way of balancing the opposing sides, although the subsequent tide of destruction and the conditions of the peace agreement clearly show that this approach was mistaken and, indeed, an accessory to crime. Establishing a lasting peace requires the removal of the effects of this approach. A lasting peace is possible only on the basis of accepting unification and state sovereignty of a kind equivalent to that of Croatia and Serbia. This is the basis on which the whole region must be evaluated.

The Dayton Agreement is a byword for success in stopping the Bosnia-Herzegovina genocide. Like every success, it is limited by what defines it. It stopped the war, but it accepted and legalized, at least partially, the goals and architects of the war. It

confirmed the legitimacy of the ethno-national elites and organizations that were responsible for the war. It is a success only because the destruction was not total and because hope remains.

"Afterword" to The Denial of Bosnia, translated by Francis R. Jones and Marina Bowder, (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000)

Published here with the permission of the author, Rusmir Mahmutćehajić.

Previously published: Volume 01 No. 1 (2006): January

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.