

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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

The Dignity of Diversity in Unity

Rusmir Mahmutćehajić

During the past five years, the International Forum Bosna has held, alone or in cooperation with others, a number of international gatherings to discuss key issues for the modern world and the ways in which they are present and reflected in Bosnia. In each case, the discussion involved the premise that it is impossible to understand the world if any part of it is disregarded or excluded, regardless of how small or insignificant it may be. The reason for this is that every part of the world is the centre of the world in the same way as every other. If it were not so, not even the dignity of every human being would be inviolable.

The Bosnian experience at the turn of the second and third Christian millennia left a bitter mark on all of humanity's aspirations. The world looked on as it proved impossible to curb the destructive antagonisms of individual and collective differences; yet it was the world's responsibility to become involved to prevent the most appalling human suffering and degradation. The war against Bosnia was brought to a halt when death and destruction had become part of the country as a whole. The current political order in Bosnia came into being after the war against the country, its essential features transformed to take different shape.

In such circumstances, in these processes both for and against Bosnia, Europe is seeking its own unification. Part of this quest has become Bosnia's destiny, too. The assurance that unification can be the response to these most recent European afflictions forms part of almost every debate about the future. Unification presupposes a stance in regard to and within diversities. If European diversities are to become unified, they must be viewed in relation to some presumed long-term outlook. When the image of this long-term outlook is accepted as incontestable, the wish to achieve it becomes part of the present. As a result, the dividing line between what that outlook now is and what its future may be remains blurred.

Focusing on a remote possibility in which differences will be unified into a hypothetical whole carries with it many dangers. If people's feelings and attitudes are linked to some possible future unity, there is the ever-present danger of disregarding or failing to understand what is closer to home, both temporally and spatially. We live in the now, at a specific time, place, society and culture. The reality of the way we live cannot be swept aside by some image of the future. Such images may be an anaesthetic to help us endure the painful reality in which individuals and society are

immersed.

But no anaesthetic can be maintained indefinitely. Life unfolds in the reality of the world, and constantly has to come back to it; and the deeper the anaesthesia into which people have been forced, the longer it has lasted, the more painful it is to return to reality. Unification without differentiation, and differentiation without unification, will perpetually manifest themselves as the anaesthetic which keeps people out of politics, culture and the economy as the reality to which they have specific responsibilities.

Worse still, as long as politics, culture and the economy are presented to us as something external and foreign to this part of the world, in which the drama of its actualization is being enacted, human beings as an incontrovertible value will be drawn out of themselves and located in the external world, which will alter so that something may be achieved within it which is independent of human beings as such. This is the nature of every ideology. Ideology sets the political order in the objective world, in the face of which we have to sacrifice some of the crucial determinants of our subjectivity. Among the determinants of the self that are thus sacrificed to ideology are its openness, homeland, and the inviolability of differences. The sacrifices made in this way are for the most part imperceptible, lost in the fog of great promises.

This modern differentiation between ourselves and the world as independent subject and object is becoming an unwinnable, unstoppable war in which we can only **lose**, for in this view we are merely an incalculably small part of the world, set against the entire world in a way that cannot be measured. From a different perspective, we are both our selves and the world as a whole; we human beings and the world are but two faces of one and the same, where human realization cannot in any way depend on the defeat or victory of either side. It is schizophrenic to think in terms of defeat and victory, forcing us to live in an ever greater state of obfuscation. It is impossible to dispel the fog, in ourselves and in the world at large, unless it is lifted in the unity of both. We do not live by bread alone, goes the old saying, though we cannot live without it.

Bosnia's agony, both as anaesthetic and as reality, calls for discussion – which means both listening and speaking. As long as we insist, against the background of overwhelming trauma generated by all our historical experiences, on speaking of our own suffering as greater than anyone else's, those who have suffered are incapable of hearing us. Yet all of us see our suffering as greater than everyone else's, making each of us a participant in the general suffering. Every speaker is thus a potential friend in the quest for knowledge that could enable individuals and societies to find ways to come to terms with and emerge from their suffering. All these questions, and potential answers to them, are to be found in the perennial wisdom that has been available to us for all time. There are treasures of this wisdom in every language, heritage and region. However, we want convincing answers in the reality of our times and the **Weight** of our suffering. If we are to receive them, we must refrain from speaking and instead listen to the other and different. In restraining ourselves in this way, we shall hear of the suffering and joys of the other. The potential relationship between speaker and listener requires that we recognize a third participant, whose qualities are proposed as the higher potential of both speaker and listener in the discussion.

Meetings of thinkers and scholars from the world at large to confront issues of diversity and unity are proposed as a possible contribution to the ever-present need for matters and experiences to be seen in a different light. No human knowledge can be advanced as final and unchallengeable. Everything can be seen in an almost infinite number of different ways when viewed from all sides. To know anything we must see it in every possible way, and must discuss it in such a way that no one is superfluous, given that all things manifest themselves in the knowledge of each of us.

Along with its most recent afflictions, Bosnia has become - to put it in geopolitical terms - the centre of European unification. This is not merely because we are now surrounded by EU members to north and south, east and west. Bosnia is separated by its neighbours from immediate contact with EU countries. As a still unresolved area for nationalist Serbia and nationalist Croatia, Bosnia and its entire drama are a key question for Europe as a whole. If this cannot be resolved, the unification of Europe in the distant future seems to be nothing more than yet another utopian view of the world. There is not one Bosnian issue that is not also a European issue, and vice versa. There can be no unification of Europe unless all its diversities are addressed. It cannot be achieved by avoiding diversity. Quite the contrary: diversities are coming ever closer to Europe as a whole, with almost incomprehensible rapidity. The greater the feeling of responsibility for the future, the more real differences will there be, all seeking their place in the promised unity.

When observers who lack the courage to confront these difficult issues avoid this fact, they differentiate in terms of first and last things. To give form to the delusion of their finding their way out of the ideological maze, they radically deny the existence of anything that could be ur-Bosnia. To say that no such thing exists is the same as saying that a specific person is *ex nihilo*; and this in turn is equivalent to denying the perpetual openness of a specific person to his or her higher potential for the sake of that higher potential itself.

But what is ur-Bosnia? The answer takes in its extension to a wider question: what is urhomo? It is impossible to speak of anything in the world if those two questions are ignored or disallowed. Wherever they are raised in the differentiation between the cosmos and the anthropos, the question of first and last things will reveal itself as the enigma of human dignity. At no time in Bosnia has this crucial question not been present as an aspiration transcending every historical interpretation. Whenever this aspiration was reduced to the image of a single one of its historical actualizations, however, or to some ideologically determined image of the future, nothing could be identified that would provide equilibrium to this reductive approach.

Whenever being Christian was regarded as radically distinct from being Muslim or being Jewish, both the cosmos and the anthropos were disrupted in their very essence, which is capable of receiving an incalculable multitude of forms. Europe consists of an almost uncountable number of ideological promises and betrayals. Every human affiliation is dictated by our ur homo; but when this is denied, separation and discontinuity are readily introduced into any ideology.

No new promise is free of the risk of a fresh betrayal as long as its proponents are unwilling to face tragic experiences. The European Union is a great promise bringing

together individuals and groups, states and regions. The emotional attachment to this promise is more of a threat than a help. Facing all the challenges of the promise resolutely, openly and rationally means being engaged in it constructively. Determining the relationship between this emotional attachment and entrepreneurial involvement can be the measure of both success and betrayal.

Jews, Christians, Muslims and everyone else, with all their diversities, are focusing on this as both citizens and members of nations, as indifferent and as fervent members of collective affiliations. Our will remains what it is only if all options remain open to it; will without potential to choose is no will. But the difference between people can be transcended by no one but God, Who wants it in His manifestation of Himself. Tolerating that insurmountable difference is a precondition for exercising the right to the inviolability of the primal dignity of each of us. Any revolt against difference means denying one's own right to full human dignity. Intolerance towards difference manifests itself as violence.

Civil society is a concept that is still remote from the reality of Bosnia, as indeed it is from the reality of every society world-wide. Wherever civil society is a precious achievement, its fragility in the face of numerous threats also makes life insecure, keeping it on the very brink of collapse. But this distance from civil society or security in its achievements can be overcome only by changing the knowledge, views and conduct of the people threatened by this danger. What do these questions look like in the view of the people who observe the Bosnian drama from a range of perspectives? And what do successful instances of civil society today look like in the eyes of the people of Bosnia?

When people are immersed in social agony they are no longer able to view their position objectively. Others observing the drama from the outside contribute to an understanding of its make-up, which is a prerequisite for a shift in the prevailing knowledge. The participants in the debate on civil society contribute to the development of the contemporary world by both speaking and listening, within and beyond Bosnia. It would seem that they can understand more clearly the presence of the Jewish question, which determines the Jewish drama as a whole. Over the centuries this question has altered in form, but has survived, from time to time making itself felt as destructive outbursts. It is impossible to articulate European identity, either as a whole or as any of its individual parts, without acknowledging Jewish suffering and its culmination in the holocaust. It is an element in every identity that recognizes and accepts that its self is indivisible from the other and different. One must now ask how all these experiences are linked to the present-day Muslim question, or questions. It would appear that gaining a perspective into this relationship between the two sides of the imaginary and real boundaries between people, between guests and hosts, is of crucial importance for humanity as a whole. European diversities cannot be unified if the reason for unification is not one and the same, securing for each individual and every community both their obligations and their rights in the dignity of createdness.

Just as unification and difference are two inseparable sides of the same human totality, so too are individuality and human totality undifferentiated, and yet neither can be reduced to the other. The notion of the differentiation between the individual

and the collective, the private and the public, shows itself to be a model that cannot be consolidated into a sustainable, transferable form. The decisive question for the future of Europe is this differentiation into outlooks belonging to different experiences, primarily those that are experienced here in non-European, non-Christian, non-Jewish and non-Muslim mode. Those who believe they know everything about themselves, even though their reality manifests itself as a lack of knowledge, need insights into the European understanding of the Buddhist, Daoist and Hindu perspectives. Finding out about these perspectives can help raise awareness of the importance of the Jewish view of Christians and vice versa, the Jewish view of Muslims and vice versa, the Christian view of Muslims and vice versa, and similarly in every relationship between diversities that must be transcended without being denied in unicity as the first cause of every unity.

Every affiliation has its own specific language, meanings and symbols, which differ from one to the other. This raises the question of whether these different languages are translatable one from and to another. Translating from one language to another never annuls the dignity of those whose language is being translated, nor of those who speak the target language. Nothing can replace either the original or the difference, but the translation provides both sides with a focus for and meaning of the discussion.

© 2007 *Rusmir Mahmutćehajić*

Translated by Saba Risaluddin - © 2007 Saba Risaluddin

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.