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The Contexts of Religion and Violence

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Lessons From Srebrenica

The Danger of Religious Nationalism

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Introduction

[1] In 1995, more than 7,000 Muslims were killed in Srebrenica in what was one piece of a planned bid for territory and power. What did religion have to do with this massacre? Articles of religious faith did not motivate the war in Bosnia, nor was it fought in an effort to convert or to impose the institutions of a faith. Thus, it was not a religious war, *per se*. Religion, however, was instrumental in this war in two important ways. First, religion became the primary factor in defining ethnic groups, thus providing a mechanism for the ethnic separatism that was a primary political goal. Second, religious rhetoric and religious symbols were used both to gain public support for the war and to provide a justification for Serb aggression, and the subsequent Bosniak response. In this paper, I will briefly outline the use of religious symbol and rhetoric in the conflict and how this use increased in a mimetic way as the conflict continued. Second, I will show how the role played by religious justification continues to make it exceedingly difficult for religious leaders or groups to participate in subsequent acts of reconciliation and reparation.

[2] I offer this paper not only as an academic exercise but also from deeply felt political concerns. The results of co-opting religion and religious language to serve the cause of ethno-national ideology in Bosnia should be taken as a lesson of great importance for the twenty-first century. Religious rhetoric is increasingly used to foster a nationalist ideology in

my own country, the United States. We live in a time when the dreams of unity and rationality fostered by the Enlightenment are giving way to an increasing fragmentation and polarization of speech and thought. The war in Bosnia, culminating in the genocide at Srebrenica, provides a lesson in the dangers of going down the road of religious nationalism, for both the short and the long term.

Religious Rhetoric in the Bosnian War: A Quick Overview

[3] The ethnic cleansing that culminated in the massacre of Srebrenica was not religiously motivated, in a direct sense. It was not rooted in tenets of the Orthodox faith, nor directly promoted by Orthodox religious leaders. However, religious mythology and overtly religious language were used to promote aggression by the Serbian population, both in Serbia proper and in Bosnia. We find the roots of this mythology in nineteenth-century Serbian ideology, which created a cult of the medieval Serbian kingdom, defeated and lost in the battle at Kosovo Polje. This battle is portrayed as a nationally-defining historical and spiritual event (the development of such a myth was not uncommon in Europe during the rapid transformation and rising nationalism of the nineteenth century). Within this myth, the defeated Prince Lazar is represented as a symbol of both the suffering Christ and the suffering Serbian people. Michael Sells (n.d.) has done an excellent job of chronicling the use of the Kosovar myth in inciting Serbs to participate in the war in Bosnia, the most famous instance of which is Slobodan Milošević's speech on June 28, 1989, the six-hundredth anniversary of the battle between Orthodox and Muslim forces at Kosovo Polje, in which he noted that Serbia was "the bastion that defended the European culture, religion, and European society in general." Although the mention of religion in this speech is brief, the subtext is obvious, that Serbia was the last bastion of Christian Europe against the Muslims. More explicit were posters sold at the rally depicting Christ, Prince Lazar, and Milošević himself, as a new iconic Trinity (Malcolm: 213).

[4] References to religion, by both ecclesiastical and military leaders, become more explicit and more frequent during the war. I illustrate with only a few. Metropolitan Nikolaj, the primate of the Orthodox Church in Bosnia, proclaimed at Easter 1993 that those who accepted the leadership of Karadžić and Mladić were "following the difficult road of Christ." Mladić stated that the problem of Bosnia would be solved if only the Muslims would convert to Orthodoxy (Sells 1996: 81-82), while Karadžić declared in 1994, "Our faith is present in all our thinking and decisions, and the voice of the Church is obeyed as the voice of supreme authority" (quoted in Mahmutćehajić: 68; see also Mojzes: 89). At an SDS rally held in Sarajevo's Zetra stadium, Karadžić proclaimed, "Tonight even God is a Serb!" (Mahmutćehajić: 70).

[5] We must not confuse rhetorical references to religion with religious observance. Many, if not most of the Serbs who fought in the militias and in the Bosnian Serb army were not religiously observant. However, they wore religious symbols on their uniforms and used semi-religious rituals. A gross example is the wedding of the militia leader Željko Raznjatović, better known as Arkan, which was steeped in religious symbolism – he wore a huge cross and his bride was dressed as the "maiden of Kosovo," a Mary Magdalene figure in Serbian religious iconography. This use of religious symbolism entails the implication, stated by Arkan himself, that "we are fighting for our faith" (Sells 1996: 82).

[6] These references to faith refer to the community rather than the tenets of Orthodoxy. After all, Orthodoxy, like all forms of Christianity, follows Jesus, who taught that we should love our enemies, turn the other cheek, and do good to those who hate us. “Our faith”, in Arkan’s statement, is not a reference to church teachings, but is coterminous with “our people.” This primacy of community is reinforced in the words of theologian Georges Florovsky, “Christianity is a liturgical religion and the Church is first of all a worshipping community” (quoted in Mylonas: 37). Fr. Želko Teofilčić, Orthodox priest in Srebrenica, confirmed this, stating that his primary work is the liturgy. However, the autocephalous nature of Orthodoxy links state and church, and, at times, this link has allowed the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) to “leave behind its primary duties” for a political cause. According to Patriarch Pavle, “a priest had to be a teacher and a judge, and to pull a gun to defend himself and his family” (Biserko 2002: 85). Fr. Želko wryly noted, in a recent interview, that a church labeled Serbian Orthodox does seem to put ethnicity first and confession second. Religion follows the state.¹

[7] The use of religious rhetoric and symbolism was not confined to the Serbian side. Although the Bosnian government consistently supported a multi-ethnic state, critics pointed to Alija Izetbegović’s 1970 *Islamic Declaration* (republished in 1990) in which he wrote: “the first and foremost conclusion is always the incompatibility of Islam and non-Islamic systems. There can be neither peace nor co-existence between the Islamic faith and non-Islamic social and political institutions” (98; quoted in Mahmutćehajić: 44). Bosniak forces, like their Serb counterparts, used Islamic symbols – green bands or bands with Quranic inscriptions tied around the forehead, units named Muslim Brigades, El Mujahidin, etc. Izetbegović was described as a “fighter for Islam, sent by God to lead the Muslims along the true path” and was awarded a Saudi medal by King Fahd for contributing to the spread of Islam (Veliknoja: 9). Both imams and priests blessed the troops for battle.

[8] The importance of religious symbols can also be seen in the wide and intentional destruction, then reconstruction, of sacred buildings and monuments. It is estimated that throughout Bosnia approximately 1000 mosques, 340 Orthodox and 450 Catholic churches and monasteries were destroyed (Powers: 240). 92% of the mosques and virtually 100% of the minarets in Serb held territory were destroyed or heavily damaged. In Srebrenica, all five mosques were destroyed, one as recently as 1997, after the Dayton Accord was signed (see Riedlmayer). The locations (except for the Bijela džamija, or White Mosque, reconstructed in 2002) are given over to weeds and rubbish, or, as has so often been the case throughout history, symbols of the victor are superimposed on the ruins of the vanquished in order to mark one’s territory. In Srebrenica, a cross erected at Stari Grad (after 1995) and plans to erect a church in Potočari have become flashpoints of controversy. In the nearby village of Konjić Polje, an Orthodox church constructed on land belonging to a Muslim woman (Mrs. Fata Orlović) became a locus for violent clashes as recently as September 2004.

¹ A more problematic example is the blessing of the Serbian Scorpion unit by an Orthodox priest (Abbot Gavriilo from Holy Angels monastery in Sid, Serbia), as shown in the recently released videotape of the execution of Muslim prisoners from Srebrenica. In a statement issued June 12, 2005, the Serbian Orthodox Church condemned the killings, yet noted that the blessing of soldiers is traditional in Orthodoxy.

[9] One notes an upward spiral in religious rhetoric and the use of religious symbols that has abated, but not ended since the war. This follows the pattern of mimetic rivalry set out by theologian René Girard. He understands the relationship between violence and religion as following a pattern in which the desires, then the actions, of those who are locked in conflict become imitative. We see this, perhaps best, in the response of the Bosniaks. Though they begin initially with little use of Islamic symbolism and rhetoric, as Serbian accusations mount, the Bosniaks begin to instantiate these accusations. Religious symbols increase, and the trappings of state become increasingly Islamic.² (We see an eerily similar mimesis between the Croats and the Serbs. Franjo Tuđman said, “Whatever the Serbs do, we do also.”³)

Religion: the Used or the User?

[10] The increase in religious references that we see throughout the war and in its aftermath raises the question of whether religion in Bosnia is the instrument of nationalism or has nationalism also become an instrument of religion. One notes that churches and mosques were among the first objects restored or rebuilt after the war. Reconstruction of sacred spaces has brought in monies from religious and political communities of various nations, including Greece, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Italy. Religion is taught in the schools.⁴ Women in downtown Sarajevo appear in hijab. The January 2004 Law on Religious Freedom confers on religious communities a legal status and protection beyond any previously held in the country. So has religion become a beneficiary of its own politicization?

[11] Omer Spahić, the first Muslim to return to the town of Srebrenica, told me “no” and finds this frenzy of construction ironic. “People turned to religion [after the war] but it was an illusion. Now the mosques and churches are empty. Religion is not that important” (personal communication, June 2003). The US State Department Religious Freedom Report for 2004 notes that the rate of religious observance is low among all faith groups (About.com). Religious literacy, despite the teaching of religion in the schools, remains equally low among all groups.⁵

² For example, at a rally in Grebak in 1996, an address by Izetbegović was mixed with Islamic music and verses from the Quran (see Ramet: 284).

³ The relationship between the Catholic Church and the HDZ (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica) is beyond the scope of this paper. As a church that is not autocephalous and that must take leadership from Rome, this relationship was never as clear-cut as that between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Milošević regime. Although the Catholic paper *Veritas* published rhetoric that sounds similar to that used by the SOC (for example, in 1992, an article by Josip Beljan states, “The cross of Christ stands next to the Croatian flag”), Ivo Banac notes, “the ideologists of Croat nationhood, almost to the last practicing Catholics, resisted the equation of Catholicism and Croatdom” (108; see also Bellamy).

⁴ In theory, religious education classes in public schools in Bosnia-Herzegovina are optional. The reality is that in some municipalities children who do not choose to attend these classes are subject to pressure and discrimination from peers and teachers. In other locales, including most of the Republic of Serbia, only the religion of the majority of the population is offered in the public schools (see Russo).

⁵ Adult religious education is practically non-existent among the three religious groups in Bosnia. This has led to a perception, expressed to me by the architect in charge of the rebuilding of the bridge in Mostar in June 2003, that religion is only for children and not needed for adult life.

[12] Sonia Biserko, head of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Belgrade, agrees that religion has not benefited by its tie to the state. She notes that an atmosphere of intolerance continues to be promoted by the SOC, but to little effect. Since October 5, 2000, the SOC has abandoned all pretense of separating church and state and has become a primary voice for pan-Serbian unity. An example is the speech given by Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović at the funeral of assassinated Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić. Radović used the occasion to probe old wounds, drawing a comparison between Djindjić and Vozd Karadjordje, a Serbian martyr slain by Muslims 200 years ago, then calling to mind the various sufferings of Serbs in the recent war. According to Biserko, Radović's speech "ominously indicated that the Serbian Orthodox Church cannot or will not make a break with extremist policy and distance itself from some political dignitaries. The words uttered by the Metropolitan are in reverse proportion to Serbia's interest in getting its relations with neighbors in the region harmonized" (2003). Though the war in Bosnia ended ten years ago, the link between religion and politics has proven more lasting, to the detriment of the faith communities themselves. Politicians cynically display religious icons in their offices, but do not observe the faith. Conversely, sermons continue to promote political agendas, especially around election time. To paraphrase Mitja Velikonja, religion manages a certain continuation of the war "with other means" (13).

[13] The imam and the Orthodox priest currently serving in Srebrenica speak of the same problems among the faithful in their community – problems of drug addiction, depression, loss of faith, loss of meaning. The loss of trust in religion, of a spiritual anchor, is perhaps the greatest tragedy of the religio-nationalist link. In 2004, the two religious leaders in Srebrenica spoke to me of joining together to address these problems within the community. Now the political rhetoric of the priest has made this an impossibility. Religion co-opted is religion destroyed for the use of the people.

[14] Still, I would like to end on a note of hope. Hope is possible in both the groups and the individuals who are working toward rebuilding trust. This happens most easily when persons of differing ethnicity work together on a common project, and such projects have been sponsored by a variety of religious and non-religious NGOs (non-governmental organizations) (for a summary of successful NGO projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina, see Peuraca). Hope is also possible in the return of both groups to the teachings inherent in their traditions regarding treatment of the other, and the holy work of hospitality. I experienced the greatest hope for Srebrenica and for all of Bosnia in the summer of 2004 during a brief visit to a farm outside of Bratunac. There, two women, one Serb, the other Muslim, shared a stove in a burnt out shell between their respective houses. They joked and argued together as to whose cups were the better ones to serve the visiting American scholar. For them, the war was over, ethnicity had ceased to matter, and religion was all about serving the wayfarer. As Pope John Paul II noted in his 1997 visit to Sarajevo,

Building a true and lasting peace is a great task entrusted to everyone. Certainly, much depends on those who have public responsibility. But the future of peace, while largely entrusted to institutional formulations, which have to be effectively drawn up by means of sincere dialogue and in respect of justice, depend no less decisively on a renewed solidarity of [individual] minds and hearts (quoted in Zovkić).

It is my prayer that all of Bosnia will find this same path to reconciliation. It is also my prayer that enough scholars in my own country will speak of the lessons of Srebrenica and of the dangers of religious nationalism to cause us to turn away from the religious rhetoric and divisiveness that shades our own political institutions.

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