

# Muslim initiatives and projects for inter-religious dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Adnan Silajdžić, PhD**

University of Sarajevo – Faculty of Islamic Studies, Sarajevo

## Summary

My presentation will consist of three short sections. In the first, I shall say a few words about inter-confessional relations in the former Yugoslavia, and their repercussions on the events of the war in BiH; in the second, I shall speak about the quality of inter-religious relations during the war (the question of the role of the churches and religious communities in war and conflict situations, a somewhat more complex period since there are already three divergent historiographies on the subject, so that we have to fall back more on our own observations and critical reflections when forming a judgment on specific events), and after the signing of the Dayton Agreement (here we should keep in mind international mechanisms and institutions, and certain individuals from international political and diplomatic circles, since they played then, and continue to play now, a very important part in the current transition processes in Bosnia and the region as a whole – I shall of course touch on only a few of these questions); and finally, in part three, I shall be speaking from the perspective of the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the opportunities and prospects for inter-religious dialogue in the future development of Bosnia and Herzegovina's society.

**Key words:** Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox, Bosnia and Herzegovina, conflicts, spiritual and religious freedom, interreligious dialogue, reconciliation.

### Inter-religious relations in former Yugoslavia

RELIGIONS PLAY A MAJOR PART in constructing our world, or more accurately, people's lives, individually and collectively, in peace, freedom and justice; for regardless of how it is received, religion can both connect and divide people. Faith as such can be a source of spiritual and cultural exchange, a source of understanding, respect, tolerance and solidarity between people (as indeed it is by its very nature); but it can also be a powerful factor in drawing boundaries between people and a source of retrograde views on the evolution of the world (religion acquires this other face in various theological interpretations). There are numerous reasons, of a historical, cultural, ideological, economic and religious nature, dictating the dual impact of religion.

Regrettably, the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, like many others in this world of ours, are familiar with both faces of religion – both the principle of centuries of multireligious cooperation (the principle of Bosnian unity in diversity) and the principle of primitive national and ideological divisions. Though inter-religious relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina developed in the context of cultural and spiritual exchanges between its peoples (sadly, we do not yet have a single comparative or phenomenological study on the experience of the cross-cultural mingling of the Islamic, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian cultures in language, food, behaviour, lifestyle and so on), it should be stressed that, historically speaking, they have to a greater extent been marked by national or ethnic conflicts in which the religions played an important part (I have in mind, in particular, their influence on the national differentiation of the country's various peoples).

Past wars (and in particular the war of aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina) show that the Balkans became a zone not of contacts but of conflicts between civilizations, and that instead of being a force for integration, religion had a disintegrative impact, in support of conflicts

in the region. For the purposes of our discussion I shall highlight the three most important reasons: the boundary phenomenon, the ideological misuse, or abuse, of religious memory, and an unacceptable lack of knowledge about others. I place the boundary phenomenon first, because former Yugoslavia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular, was a region of boundaries between different worlds, civilizations and regions. Geographically and culturally, Bosnia and Herzegovina is Europe's westernmost region of the "Orthodox Christian world," the easternmost part of the "Roman Catholic world," and the region of Europe most strongly marked by the presence of Islam. The well-known Croatian sociological Željko Mardesić would say that it is on boundaries that great cultural and civilizational values have been created, but that they have also been regions of horrific conflicts. (Jakov Jukić, 19997.; Fernand Broudel, 1992.) In my view, in socialist Yugoslavia, or in the sociological reception of international relations of the former federal state, this fact was passed over in silence, and as a result there were wholly unobjective efforts (of a kind ideally suited to the political philosophy of the socialist regime, of course) to idealize inter-confessional relations. Incidentally, these took place mainly at events, or formalities, marking religious holidays (Christmas, 'Eid, Easter, Hanukkah), the opening of religious buildings, and the like. What I mean is that there were no true inter-religious contacts during the communist period; they were for the most part reduced, as I have suggested, to the collective expression of religion as a mere formality. In fact, communism rejected every possible value of secular, civic, modern states apart from the secularization of religion – that is, it tolerated secularism to the extent that its philosophy restricted the limits of religion. At the same time, secularism undermined the ideological system itself, with its ideas of *individualism* and *pluralism*, which slowly eroded the idea of the communist collectivity. With the break-up of Yugoslavia, massive and serious national and religious incoherence, or rather inadequacies (the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina's lack of knowledge of and respect for one another) were to erupt, to a great extent in some national communities and to a lesser or unknown extent in others, into appalling brutality (destruction, slaughter, murder, rape, forced expulsions and so on).

It is important, in this context, to turn our attention to the experience of the ideological abuse of religious memory. The eminent French sociologist Paul Michel rightly said that politics had never been either

convincing or effective in the Balkans, which was why it always had to resort to religion as a vitally important compensation in the achievement of its political ends. (Željko Merdešić, 2007.) In fact, it resorted to the mechanism of the recollection or memory of the past, the cultural essence of every religious tradition. What I mean by this is that if you cannot convince someone by economic and political arguments (as could neither Milošević and Karadžić nor Tuđman and Boban) that it is a bad thing to live with other people (Muslims), the only thing left, if you are to achieve your nationalist, ideological or mundane political objectives, is to turn to the powerful mechanism of religious memory in which there is no place for the other.

In addition to the boundary issue, and the abuse of religious memory, it is also important to note the unacceptably low level of knowledge and acknowledgement of the other, the outcome of the serious religious and ecumenical neglect of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Regrettably, the Serbs found no place for Catholics, and above all for Muslims, in their Orthodox faith; and the reverse was also true. Karl Jaspers rightly noted that no one person or one people can contain everything, for if it were so, interpersonal dialogue would be absolutely pointless and indeed impossible – and yet in dialogue, like nowhere else, we need another person who is different from us in every way. (Karl Jaspers, 1967.) In the process of sacralization of the national, slogans like “God and the Croats,” “God is a Serb,” or “God is on the side of the Serbs,” cannot designate anything other than a kind of “arrogation” and “nationalization” of the Truth (God) – yet every religion teaches that God is above every image, every concept, every nation or ethnic group. In this context it is important to examine the role and responsibility of the churches and religious communities, or their leaders, which I shall now address.

### **The historic responsibility of the churches and religious communities**

At the very start of this section we need to raise the question to what extent the religious communities contributed to inflaming religious passions and inciting religious hatred and the consequent religious violence that was indubitably present in the recent events in Bosnia and Herzegovina. To my personal knowledge, the religious communities,

or their leaders, though paying lip service to peace and condemning violence, behaved in such a way as to contribute to the separation, discrimination, persecution and annihilation of individuals and peoples. The use of religious semantics and symbolism, and the ecclesiastical eucharistic blessing of soldiers as they left for the battlefield (images transmitted around the world by television), are clear evidence that religion, or the churches, were drawn into the war. It is entirely fair, therefore, to speak of the ideologization of the churches and religious communities, for which their leaders bear the greatest responsibility, though not to the same extent or in the same order. It was the Orthodox Church that first put itself at the service of the Serb national ideology, followed by the Catholic Church. Sadly, the Islamic community, in line with functionalist sociology, responded with almost the same concepts and ideologemes. The initiative to erect a large Orthodox cross above Sarajevo on the spot where snipers killed thousands of civilians in the besieged city is clear enough evidence that there are still powerful forces at work that are counting on the mechanism of religious memory as a tool for the future.

Instead of fulfilling their fundamental mission in history of dedicating themselves to people's spiritual and religious growth, which is so necessary to modern societies passing through deep crisis, the churches in Bosnia and Herzegovina all too readily accepted, and even became complicit in, the process of the total political profanization and division of society, and instead of acting out of their religious universalism to even out or render natural the differences between people, the religious communities often reduced the universal meanings of religion to ephemeral values. The religious became the profane, and religion became the new politics. It was a time when the language of theologians and priests was often in contradiction to the informal assumptions of ordinary believers. Uncritically doing deals with the political centres of power, many young Christians, Muslims and others turned their back on the traditional religions, finding the meaning of life in their own discovery of the Sacred (I have in mind here the crisis of traditional religiosity in the postmodern period and the phenomenon of diffusive or extra-institutional religiosity of the modern age). (Bryan R. Wilson, 1976.)

This nonchalant acceptance of various political authorities and ideologies testifies to the form of political religion that was wholly subordinate to secular or ideological ends in Bosnia and Herzegovina

just after the war came to an end. The international community (among them Swani Hunt, former US ambassador in Vienna, who gave the final push to almost a year of painstaking work by the World Conference on Religion and Peace) literally forced the leaders of the great religious communities to set up the Inter-Religious Council, headquartered in Sarajevo, to conduct dialogue. The Council was established with the aim of halting the process of the flagrant politicization of religion, and was modelled on developed European countries where efforts were being made to counter every kind of political religion with peace movements. Regrettably, the Council was not derived from the real, inner life of religious people in Bosnia, but became a political institution needed by the international community to compensate for the absence of institutional inter-religious dialogue that would have freed Islam and Christianity from all earthly or secular constraints. It is no wonder, then, that instead of developing ecumenical dialogue from within, it wasted its efforts mainly on signing political or protocol-style agreements and deals. Any sincere priest will thus observe a certain discrepancy between official inter-religious dialogue and the grass-roots friendships between people of different confessions. These two paths are mutually exclusive, for the ecumenism of their convictions differs: the Council is more political, that of ordinary believers more religious. This brings us to another important question: are the religions in Bosnia and Herzegovina capable of creating a climate of effective, meaningful dialogue out of ideological values? The answer is short and unequivocal: No! This is why they need to start to free themselves from every kind of political abuse – world-wide, not selectively, in the sense that Islam is burdened with ideology and other religions in the west are not, or vice versa: this applies to Hamas, and the IRA, and ETA, and the Zionists, and the Khmer Rouge, and so on – on account of which God revealed Himself as the source of universal freedom for people.

### **There can be no open, sincere dialogue without a return to authentic faith**

If religious institutions, or ideologically projected values, are unable to create a climate conducive to fruitful, meaningful dialogue between the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, what is the solution? In my view, the only way out of our situation is for people to return to their authentic faith, free of all self-interest. The purpose of every revealed religion is

to return people to God, so as to save their human souls and, as a result, to establish justice, peace and order in the social community.

We Muslim Bosniacs thus believe deeply that dialogue with the people of the Book (*ahl al-kitab* – a Qur’anic phrase that indicates Jews and Christians) is not primarily dictated by the problems of this secular, pluralist-structured world with all its challenges confronting us, nor because migrations and the process of transition mean that Muslims and Christians are now involved together in the development of modern culture, working at the same machines, attending the same universities, going to the same nursery schools in Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Mostar, Niš, Jajce, Podgorica, Novi Pazar and so on.

The need for such dialogue derives from the very nature of Islam and its teachings on the One God, since this is the fundamental commandment to Muslims in the Qur’an: “People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we associate not aught with Him, and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God.” (3, 64).

Almost the very first verses of the Qur’an (2, 2-4), the Muslim holy scriptures, speak of openness to earlier divine revelations, which are understood within the Islamic notion of history as part of an unbroken continuity. Later, there are verses on the prophets who preceded the Prophet of Islam, who are referred to, along with their messengers, with the utmost respect (4, 136). Finally, there is a specific example of respect for the religious freedoms of others in reference to the Christians, which has its own historical context in circumstances in the life of Muhammad, a.s., who continually emphasized to the Muslims that the sacred is one, that religion is one, but that it manifests itself in different ways in thought, language and religious practice, for God “will take a witness from each nation” or, as it says in the ancient tradition (*lex aeterna*): “God has created for every nation its own law and its own way.”

We do not therefore expect Orthodox Christians to be religious in an Islamic way, or Catholics in an Orthodox way, and vice versa. This is why we cannot and will not believe that a Christian priest can hate a Muslim simply because his creed does not mention the name of Muhammad, a.s. (though regrettably, recent European and Balkan history is full of such instances) or that an imam (a Muslim religious leader) can hate a Christian believer simply because the Christian creed states that the Logos or God became flesh (the Son of Man) – *Ho*

*Logos egento sarx* (and there have been such examples among us). When it is so, it is a clear sign that their national, political and ideological affiliation (Croat, Serb or Bosniac) is stronger than their reverence and godliness, which includes the principle of divine omnipresence in this world (*Vestigia Dei*) and of our being created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*); in other words, it is an indicator of religious errancy and spiritual death. (Hafizović Rešid, 2002.)

Evidence that inter-religious dialogue and ecumenism are the underlying focus of Muslim educational institutions can be found in statements made by a number of non-Muslim thinkers from Croatia, Germany, Austria, Italy, America, France and elsewhere last year in the amphitheatre of our Faculty (among them Donald Reeves, a retired Anglican priest; Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury; and John Voll, a representative of the Prince al-Walid bin Talal Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding) and, in particular, three inter-religious symposia (Catholic-Jewish, Catholic-Muslim and Catholic-Orthodox), published in various periodicals (*Glasnik, Vrhbosnensia, Novi Muallim*). These statements cover a very wide range of historical, cultural and doctrinal topics on the need and opportunities for inter-religious dialogue in general and from the post-war perspective of Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular. Inter-religious encounters by professors from our faculty with professors at the faculty of theology in Zagreb, the Franciscan theological college and Vrhbosna Catholic theological college in Sarajevo, and participation by our professors in local (Foča, Banja Luka) and international symposia, round tables and conferences, send a message to the general public in Bosnia and Herzegovina and abroad that dialogue between the great world religions is a strict religious obligation and that, to use a phrase by Tomislav Šagi Bunić (a post-Conciliar Catholic theologian from Zagreb, “there is no other way!”

Not only is there no alternative to dialogue, we at the Faculty of Islamic Studies have been developing a theology of dialogue with increasing commitment over the past several years. We are trying to articulate a new paradigm of inter-religious relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina which, despite the doctrinal and cultural, civilizational differences between the country’s peoples, now more than ever before calls for us to construct a new “ethos for Bosnian politics and the Bosnian economy“ (as Hans Küng would say). (Hans Kung, 1993., 2007.; J. Derrida, 2002.) They are not only responsible for eschatological questions, they

are discovering their shared responsibility for confronting the historical destiny of humankind and the complex historical situation of Bosnia, and thus must engage in dialogue the better to exercise their mission in regard to the great questions that prompt each of us to a constructive and affirmative attitude towards ourselves, the world of nature, and a polycentric human society that will affirm, within the unified state, the individual religious and national identities of our country.

In other words, what is now important for dialogue is how far a given religion is concerned with our present state of affairs, and to what extent it is faced with questions about our destiny. At a time when nature and modern societies are profoundly sick, and when another holocaust is technically feasible, this side of inter-religious dialogue is now more important than mere academic chatter, theological subtleties and intellectual hair-splitting. Applied to our context, this means that instead of appealing to some supposed exclusive right to the Truth, the religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be working together to eradicate various forms of immorality, drug abuse and so on; instead of competing to see who can build more or bigger religious edifices, they should jointly be concerned about people, as the living Temple of God, about eliminating poverty, and creating the conditions for a more normal social life. It means that participants in dialogue remain true to their conscience as believers, but are prompted by their belief in God to work shoulder to shoulder to resolve the serious problems people are facing; each brings to the task what God has bestowed on him or her, and thus becomes a sign and tool of Divine action.

This is why, when delivering presentations of this kind, I often appeal to Muslims and others to join the shared task of reflecting on how God wants us to live the universal Abrahamic tradition in the early 21st century. This is not a task that can be carried out solely by legislation or pressure, but rather by bringing up our children and educating our congregations in a new spiritual and cultural world paradigm capable of addressing major crises. In this context, I should like to draw attention in particular to the contribution of a highly-respected professor of Catholic theology, Mato Zovkić (who is also Vicar-General of the Vrhbosna Archbishopric), for his original comparative works, translations and reviews. His immense contribution to the development of ecumenical and dialogue theology, his contribution to the weighty subjects of other, non-Christian religions, are worthy of being the subject of special

critical studies, and I hope that some of them will soon be published. (Mato Zovkić, 1998.)

In this regard, we of the chair of dogmatics and comparative religion, guided by the well-known hermeneutic principle that every religious, ethnic and cultural group or community should be able to express itself in its own language and not express the spirit or individual aspects of their teachings and culture out of pre-determined, ideologically projected value systems, modes of thought and patterns of behaviour, have enabled our students to gain direct familiarity with the fundamental topics of Christianity by studying the original texts of Christian authors (it is not so long since our students learned about Christianity from books by Muslims). I have myself compiled a *Chrestomathy of Texts on Christianity*, consisting of texts written by Christians and dealing with Christianity in the domain of revelation, the faith of the Church and theology, while along the same lines Fr. Luka Markešić has compiled a *Chrestomathy of Texts on Islam* written by Muslim authorities. We shall continue to develop this project with specialist reflections on the topics that we believe are of particular interest for all Bosnia and Herzegovina's citizens. This principle does not, of course, relativize the possibility and indeed the need for mutual critical study. This is why I ask Christians in Europe to allow Muslims to speak for themselves in their faith, and Muslims who come from various cultural backgrounds to listen to what sincere Christian believers have to say about themselves.

Another form of institutional cooperation with Christian teaching establishments I am proud to be involved with is student exchange. In line with the Bologna requirements, a number of students who have expressed the wish to gain greater familiarity with certain aspects of Christianity have been given the opportunity to attend courses at the Franciscan theological college, which we have recognized and included in their overall course marks. We expect similar requests from Christian teaching establishments in our country. This enables our Faculty not only to contribute to a new atmosphere of inter-religious and cultural dialogue, but also to encourage the establishment as a unified, integrated university of Sarajevo, a condition of our joining the academic community of United Europe.

Catholic theologians too, both diocesan and Franciscan, are helping to create such a climate. They are giving more space in their periodicals, *Vrhbosnensia* and *Bosna Franciskana* respectively, to topical issues that,

since 11 September 2001 for example, have captured the public interest in a redefinition or re-examination of East-West relations (the Islamic and Christian civilizations). To be exact, they have enabled competent Muslim authors (of whom, praise God, we have some in Sarajevo now) to expound in the pages of their periodicals numerous questions that, consciously or unconsciously, are treated extremely simplistically in much of the world's media and ours at home – questions of jihad, the shari'a, the status of women in modern societies, the historical role of the Prophet Muhammad, a.s., various forms of Muslim political theology (the relationship between religion and politics, religion and the state, religion and government, religion and law), Islamic radicalism, fundamentalism and the like. There is no doubt that they have helped to eliminate many of the prejudices about Islam in the modern world and international relations that ordinary Christian believers (and also priests and theologians) have been particularly burdened with in Bosnia and Herzegovina in recent years. (Đurić, P. Marko, 2010.)

## Conclusion

The conclusion we may draw from all this is that the proximity or physical presence of two or more religions in one place, as is the case with us in Bosnia and you in Switzerland, is not in itself sufficient for their followers to be fully aware of other religions or of the religious freedoms of others. More important than that is sincerely getting to know each other and consistently following the principle of religious freedom as advocated by Holy Writ, free of all ideological and theological prejudices – freedom for God, that is, not freedom from God in the name of this or that national ideology or myth, the freedom without which it is impossible to construct any kind of social tolerance. The reaffirmation of the principle of tolerance will lay the groundwork for healing the tragic consequences of the war and consolidating peace in the Balkans. In this regard, the religious communities and believers can each, out of their own sacred tradition, make an immense contribution to social peace and respect among people. This would lay the foundations for the demystification of the “ideological and political” abuse of religious sentiment on the one hand, and open up new directions or guidelines for inter-religious communication (individual and collective) and education. In short, it would open up greater opportunities for reconciliation between people in post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina.

If they represent revealed religions, Muslims, Christians and Jews, and all the other religious peoples living in Bosnia and Herzegovina (or the European Union), should behave in accordance with their eternal, unalterable messages. I myself would like Jewish, Buddhist and Christian theologians to enrich me existentially with their religious understanding of the world (the truth of life and death), and I truly enjoy their interpretations of the world. If we are unable to enjoy the beauties of other world views (the captivating metaphysical worlds of other religions) then we must acknowledge to one another that we have turned into profane, mundane institutions which, instead of the divine have accepted exclusively human norms of behaviour, and that there is little prospect of true dialogue with the future against the background of our Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious traditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or citizens in the European Union.

---

**Bibliography:**

- Broudel Ferdinand, *Spisi o istoriji*, Srpska književna zadruga, Beograd, 1992.
- Derrida Jacques, *Kosmopolitike*, Stubovi kulture, Beograd, 2002.
- Đurić P. Marko, *Rušiti zidove i graditi mostove u duhu*, Zagreb, 2010.
- Hafizović Rešid, *Muslimani u dijalogu sa drugima i sa sobom-svetopovijesne i hijeropovijesne paradigme*, El-Kalem, Sarajevo, 2002.
- Jaspers Karl, *Filozofija egzistencije*, Prosveta, Beograd 1967.
- Jukić Jakov, *Lica i maske svetoga*, Kršćanska sadašnjost, Zagreb, 1997.
- Küng Hans, *Novi svjetski ethos za svjetsku politiku i ekonomiju*, Zagreb, 2007.
- Mardešić Željko, *Rascjep u svetome*, Kršćanska sadašnjost, Zagreb, 2007.
- Zovkić Mato, *Međureligijski dijalog iz katoličke perspektive u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Sarajevo, 1998.
- Wilson R. Bryan, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion*, Oxford, 1976.