

WHAT WENT RIGHT: TWO BEST CASES OF ISLAM IN EUROPE
- CORDOBA, SPAIN AND SARAJEVO, BOSNIA

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Two historic chapters of long-term Islamic presence in Europe should be noted again in the current climate of mutual suspicion and heightened tensions between Christians and Muslims. Medieval Spain and the Ottoman period in Bosnia both merit renewed scrutiny, because each chapter contains some valuable lessons for the historic interaction of complex religious systems. Subsequent history tends to obscure the collective cultural memory of these richly generative chapters because of their later, more tension-ridden dissolution.

Recent research reviewing each of these periods of Islamic presence and influence in Europe is reminding us that within the sustained interaction of complex religious heritages the differences can provide not only friction or stress, but creativity and refinement as well, if properly sustained and structured. A backward glance at these two long chapters in European history with Islam may shed some positive light on the potential for constructive engagement today, despite our numerous current flare-ups and banner-headline culture clashes.

If we were taking cues only from geopolitical strategists and scholars of conflict such as Samuel Huntington (*The Clash of Civilizations*, 1996), Samuel Barber (*Jihad vs. McWorld*, 1996), Meic Pearse, (*Why the Rest Hates the West*, 2005), and Bernard Lewis (*What Went Wrong?* 2003), the literature is rife with explanations of how badly things have gone in this field. Religion-and-conflict has become a standard interpretive paradigm.

It is rarer to find accounts of “what went right,” in the encounters between major religious systems throughout history. This may be a rich vein in which to mine for hints of the quieter chapters unrecorded or sidelined in standard accounts that ordinarily rehearse all the dreary chapters of warfare among the nation states. There may be something about life along the edges of great tectonic plates that not only produces friction but also generates creativity, surprise and intrigue. Inhabitants of such border regions are often renowned for their fortitude, and for hardy and rugged survival skills. Their profiles contrast with the

relative calm of heartland territories, the settled life that takes its own values mostly for granted.

Along the shifting boundaries of the Islamic encounter with Europe, long before the current patterns of economic migration and immigrant communities (e.g. Germany's *Gastarbeiter* or post-colonial Algerians in France), two large-scale engagements have become intrinsic to the collective cultural memories. Although the overall impressions are not exactly parallel, both are remembered (from the point of Europe itself) as largely negative, dark chapters with lingering traces and effects. Of the two, Spain to the southwest remains the brighter, while the Ottoman reign in southeastern Europe constitutes a mostly shadowed realm. Shakespeare and other mythmakers frequently invoke the Moor from the southwest as a symbol of intrigue and the glories of a lost civilization, but children's literature abounds with threats of swarthy hordes of Turk-like invaders from the southeast, replete with curved scimitars and elephants.¹ A different set of memories, however, may be discerned with more careful listening to somewhat obscured historical accounts.²

My own interest in examining the "tectonic" activity between religions grew out of interactions with Eastern Europe that span almost three decades, beginning with studies and residence in Tito's Yugoslavia from 1977. Two of those years I was resident in Bosnia (1979-81). Those two years began an enduring fascination for me with complex interactions of religious groups amid the pressures of contemporary society (in those days of communist rule). Memories from different chapters of religion in society varied widely there, depending largely on whether a given group had enjoyed privileges of alignment with current ruling powers or languished under the yoke of minority restraints.

Further explorations have recently reminded me of some fascinating links between Bosnia's Islamic chapter and its parallels in medieval Spain. At the height of its glory, with its period of Muslim rule and its interactions of complex religious systems, medieval Spain resembled the best of what Bosnia has sometimes been. We'll take a look back briefly at that bright Islamic chapter in Spain, and then trace some links to Bosnia's realities. Some glimpses of al-Andalus provide hints or intimations that this complex interaction of different

¹ See Tolkien's "Southrons" in *The Lord of the Rings*, and C. S. Lewis's "Calormen" in *The Horse and His Boy*.

² Istanbul's residents include many with powerful memories of high points achieved in Bosnia's Islamic culture; Palestinian cafes in East Jerusalem's Old City marketplace with names like "al-Andalus" celebrate the glories of Islam in Spain (Cordoba).

religious systems can indeed “work”— not only for the advantage of one party in power, but rather to the mutual good of each participating group.

Cordoba’s Beacon of Tolerance in Medieval Spain

The account by Yale scholar Maria Rosa Menocal of medieval Spain tells of a 250-year experiment in creating what constitutes a much brighter picture of, as she portrays it, a “culture of tolerance” among Christians, Jews and Muslims.³ It begins in 750 C.E. with the flight of Abd al-Rahman, a refugee from the overthrow of his family’s dynasty in Damascus, as the lone survivor when all the other ruling Umayyads were massacred by the insurgent Abbasids in the heartlands of Islam.

Abd al-Rahman fled to the farthest reaches of his family’s realm, across the Mediterranean Islamic world in search of safe harbor and a fresh start. He crossed the regions of North Africa to take up his struggle in what had been a sleepy province in Spain at the far western fringes of the Islamic world, where he arrived by 755 C.E.

Not content merely to survive, the last of the Umayyads promptly turned his European province into a thriving cultural center in its own right, and proclaimed it an emirate with himself as emir (governor) in 756 C.E. Within 100 years, his successors were proclaiming it the true caliphate (855 C.E.), the spiritual succession in a contested line of authority descending directly from the Prophet Muhammad.

Abd al-Rahman’s new realm was characterized by an “open-hearted and eclectic syncretism” in keeping with the Umayyads and their skill in appropriating the best of what they found in newly conquered lands and cultures. With strong and skillful administration, Abd al-Rahman played down the ethnic rivalries between Syrian and Berber forces in his realm, even when some of them turned for help to the nearby Charlemagne in his ascendancy, forging alliances against their own Islamic rule.⁴ He himself was the offspring of a mixed ethnic heritage (mother Berber and father Syrian). He was therefore kin both to the Berber settlers who flooded across from North Africa earlier in the century (711 C.E.) and to the Umayyad soldiers who led them, agents of his own dynasty (the Umayyad empire).

What makes the case instructive for our inquiry today are not the particular features and dramas of any one of Spain’s constituent religious communities, but what happened in

³ Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2002).

⁴ Menocal, p. 57.

the mixture of all three: Roman Catholic, Jewish and Muslim. What qualities of their interaction made it so fruitful that the impact of those cultural encounters may still be traced in far-flung corners of the world today? ⁵

Menocal cites an observation from F. Scott Fitzgerald to explain some of the genius of the situation; Fitzgerald claims that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time” (in his essay, “The Crack-Up”). She continues,

In its moments of great achievement, medieval culture positively thrived on holding at least two, and often many more, contrary ideas at the same time. This was the chapter of Europe’s culture when Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived side by side and, despite their intractable differences and enduring hostilities, nourished a complex culture of tolerance (. . .). This only sometimes included guarantees of religious freedoms comparable to those we would expect in a modern “tolerant” state; rather, it found expression in the often unconscious acceptance that contradictions—within oneself, as well as within one’s culture—could be positive and productive. Much that was characteristic of medieval culture was profoundly rooted in the cultivation of the complexities, charms, and challenges of contradictions—of the “yes and no,” as it was put by Peter Abelard, the infamous twelfth-century Parisian intellectual and Christian theologian.⁶

Menocal describes this experiment as continuing well beyond the 250 years of actual Islamic rule, since the quality of intense interaction among the religious communities persisted even after Christian powers had re-conquered the territories in Spain. Using the Arabic designation for the region, she notes that

the very heart of culture as a series of contraries lay in al-Andalus . . . It was there that the profoundly Arabized Jews rediscovered and reinvented Hebrew; there that Christians embraced nearly every aspect of Arabic style—from the intellectual style of philosophy to the architectural styles of mosques—not only while living in Islamic dominions but especially after wresting political control from them; there that men of unshakable faith, like Abelard and Maimonides and Averroes, saw no contradiction in pursuing the truth, whether philosophical or scientific or religious, across confessional lines. This vision of a culture of tolerance recognized that incongruity in the shaping of individuals as well as their cultures was enriching and productive. It was an approach to life and its artistic and intellectual and even religious pursuits that was contested by many—as it is today—and violently as at times—as it is today—and yet powerful and shaping nevertheless, for hundreds of years.⁷

⁵ Menocal points to Moorish architecture in 19th-century synagogues built in New York City (p. 12).

⁶ Menocal, p. 11.

⁷ Menocal, pp. 11-12.

If Menocal's portrayal is largely persuasive in the overall patterns, we may understand this complex interaction as sharpening and stimulating each of the religious communities to develop its own resources within the encounters portrayed. The flowering of civilization in al-Andalus, as she describes it, included the introduction of new crops and techniques in agriculture, new patterns of trade and commerce, and new standards for cultural activity such as poetry, and a flourishing of arts and learning unrivalled anywhere else in Europe during the same period. By the beginning of the tenth century, Cordoba, its capital, becomes an exemplary showcase of architecture and wealth. The caliph's library, by one count, is said to have held some four hundred thousand volumes, "and this at a time when the largest library in Christian Europe probably held no more than four hundred manuscripts."⁸ Menocal reports a total of seventy libraries in Cordoba. Its love of learning was palpable and contagious.

Factional rivalries within the Islamic community eventually tore al-Andalus apart, resulting in the end of the proclaimed Caliphate in 1031 C.E. The ensuing turmoil of small and regional kingdoms on the Spanish peninsula did not bring the creative cultural interaction to a halt, however. Menocal shows that the ongoing "commingling of languages, religions and styles of every sort—food, clothes, songs, buildings—took place not only within the Iberian Peninsula, although certainly most vigorously there, but with increasing intensity far beyond the Pyrenees."⁹

While Menocal traces out the far-reaching implications of the cultural achievements deriving from the creative complex interactions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity in the periods following the demise of Islamic rule in Spain, the account for our purposes in this inquiry may be content with finding that the intensity of interactions had produced remarkably fruitful results in each of the constituent religious communities. The wars of conquest and of rival factions and of neighboring empires on the rise did not diminish the positive accomplishments of intense religious encounters. Indeed, rising tensions in the political world only heightened the growing interest on the part of less-civilized neighbors to the north in Europe to acquire and borrow as much as possible from the science and knowledge with which al Andalus had been blessed and burdened.

⁸ Menocal, p. 33.

⁹ Menocal, p. 41.

Remarkable for this inquiry is the recognition that the story begun so long ago in the magical combination of civilizing forces in Islamic Spain has a true and historic footnote in late medieval Bosnia, in Sarajevo. Menocal's account ends where the second part of this inquiry picks up, with the complex issues of ethnic identity and tensions and intriguing cultural influences coming together in the Balkans. The collection of Passover meditations known as the Sarajevo Haggadah, a gorgeous medieval manuscript, was brought to Sarajevo during the Ottoman period by Spanish-speaking refugees, Jews forced out of Spain by the Catholic *reconquista* and the Edict of Expulsion in 1492.

Bosnia's Colorful Legacy

One wonders what parallels to Muslim Spain might be found in the rise of an Islamic presence in the heart of the European Balkans. Bosnia's capital Sarajevo adds the intrigue of its location along the historic fault line between the two major branches of the Christian heritage in the region, Orthodox and Catholic. In any number of centuries since the arrival of Slavic peoples in migrations dating from the sixth and seventh centuries (C.E.), recruitment efforts based both in Rome and in Constantinople (Istanbul today) were zealous to secure the allegiance of the newly arriving tribes for their respective church orbits.

The ancient Hebrew cemetery on one of Sarajevo's slopes is mute but eloquent testimony to the refuge that Jews in many centuries from across Europe found in Sarajevo during Muslim Ottoman rule. Inscriptions on gravestones evidence most of the languages of the European Jewish diaspora, including Polish, Czech and Hungarian. Most intriguing, perhaps, are the inscriptions in Ladino, the variation on Spanish which corresponds to Yiddish in relation to German. Ladino and Spanish inscriptions recall the immigration from Inquisition Spain, and the Ladino language has been maintained to this day in spite of terrors and persecutions, surviving even the Holocaust and decimation of the Jewish population in the 1940s.

The Serbian population in Bosnia is largely rural, and their numbers in the capital city of Sarajevo during the Tito years (roughly 1943 through his death in 1980) were relatively small. Of the major religious establishments in the city, the Orthodox churches were often not able to draw large numbers of participants, except for the primary calendar events such as Christmas and Easter. A sturdy number of stalwarts were on hand at the oldest

of the Orthodox churches during that era, however, to greet occasional visitors and tourists browsing from the nearby *Baščaršija*, the large Turkish-style bazaar.

Orthodox Christians would tell the tale of how the space for their church came to be made available, during a long-ago visit to the city by an Ottoman official. When the Sultan passed by, they said, the petitioners asked for a place to construct their house of worship. He allowed them the space of a single ox-hide. Amid the large-scale construction of monuments and mosques in the 16th century, this surely seemed a meager grant. But the next morning, as he once again passed by their chosen site, the sturdy Orthodox are reported to have shown him a much larger space, now inscribed at its circumference by the thin band of leather cut from a single ox-hide. And for the cleverness of their solution, it is recalled with no small glee that the Sultan granted them the full amount of their request.

This tale, remembered with approval by Serbs and Muslims alike, recounts a quality of interaction that is characteristic of pre-war Sarajevo. There is an intrigue that makes Bosnia itself something different than (and more than) any of its constituent populations whose nearby homelands (Serbia, Croatia, Turkey) are far more homogeneous in culture and religion.

When I lived in Sarajevo near the very close of the Tito era, I resided among its Muslim inhabitants not far from the central marketplace. I discovered an Islamic community on the verge of a modest cultural recovery, complete with a newly opened theological faculty (1977). Just a few years later the city hosted the Winter Olympics (1984), basking in the global spotlight with pristine beauty on display in the rugged peaks and spectacular vistas of its unspoiled terrain.

Invariably when *Sarajlije* (residents of Sarajevo) in the late 1970s learned of my interest in sociology and religion, they would insist that the time for religion to dominate society had completely passed away. Under Tito, they insisted, all the religions are free but not allowed to control society. “It is a private matter for the individual,” they would urge.

The period of communist rule in Tito’s Yugoslavia was, in fact, quite strenuously secular; the particulars of an individual’s religious beliefs or participation were treated as so private that the state declined to include any such polling in census data. While it was of crucial importance to know the ethnic composition of a mixed population such as Bosnia’s (Muslim some 40%, Serbian over 30%, Croat over 20%),¹⁰ there was no simple correlation

¹⁰ The Jewish population of the city of Sarajevo stood at 10-12% during the early 20th century.

between ethnic identity and actual individual participation in the corresponding religious heritage. While Croats are traditionally Catholic, and Serbs traditionally Orthodox, many had given up the vigorous practices of devout adherents. Hence, the estimates of actual religious adherence varied widely (and seasonally, one might observe).

For the Muslim population, the peculiar convention had emerged whereby *Musliman* (“Muslim”) designated an ethnic nationality within the Yugoslav federation, while *musliman* (“muslim”) was used to refer to the religious participants in the Islamic faith community. A person might explain that “I am a Muslim by ethnic heritage, but not in a religious sense.”

I found the Bosnians as a whole (and especially the Muslims, who like the Macedonians had quite recently gained the status of a distinct nationality within Tito’s fine-tuned system of federation and regional balancing of powers), were often more ardent about the virtues of a secular socialist society than were their fellow Croats or Serbs elsewhere in Yugoslavia. They took their role at the literal geographic center of the society quite seriously, even in the latter days of the 1980s when Tito was gone and the separate nationalisms were emerging to pull the different republics apart at the seams. Bosnians would say that “even if the Serbs and Croats rip their territories apart in civil war, we’ll never let it happen here. In Bosnia it would be just too terrible! We Bosnians know how to live together peaceably.”

But just a dozen years later, the house where I lived, the classrooms where I studied, the cafes where we debated and the national library where we tried to find required texts—all were targeted, burned or blown to bits in a frenzy of wanton destruction and ethnic hatred that seemed to come out of nowhere. What is this sudden vicious revitalization of everything that tears people to shreds? Whatever happened to the ideals of the religions that shared the space (however uneasily) for centuries leading up to this madness?

And how could my own Marxist humanities professors at the Philosophy Faculty turn up at the forefront of the most strident and poisoned political factions on all sides?¹¹ Our hauntingly beautiful, beloved Bosnia became a symbol of intractable ethnic hatred and hyper-intolerance, of all that is worst in the human community. How ironic, when for many previous decades it had seemed to embody in part the same rich mix that Menocal describes in medieval Spain.

¹¹ Prof. Dr. Aleksa Buha, the dean of the humanities faculty whose signature graces my *Indeks* (official course register and transcript), became the official spokesman for Radovan Karadžić, currently indicted and wanted for trial as a war criminal at the Hague Tribunal.

Beyond the personal anguish for anyone who knew Bosnia and its inhabitants, the fierce new complex of questions leading to a reappraisal of social and cultural dynamics at work in the conflicts there were never “merely academic,” whether for journalists or generals or humanitarian aid workers who began streaming toward Bosnia’s open strife in the mid-1990s.

So what was the role of religion in all of this? The communist period is widely acknowledged to have weakened the religious communities on all sides. Did that weakness render them each more vulnerable to the crude nationalist manipulations that followed the break-up of enforced communist unity?

If we were simply following the scholarly proponents of conflict theories in the years leading up to the break-up of Yugoslavia, we would observe that the religions of the region over several decades had come to explain less and less of the social realities in Bosnia (and Eastern Europe in general, under socialism). Now, however, during and after a war, the religions are suddenly portrayed as the key interpretive formula for understanding all kinds of mayhem erupting: rape camps, plunder and pillage, torture, massacres and genocide. In the 1970s among my many conversations in Sarajevo, not a handful in a hundred local commentators would have tried to use religion to account for behavior in the marketplace, the public square, the workplace, or even the home and family. Now suddenly the whole world was quite convinced that understanding our most difficult quandaries must turn on crucial concepts of religion.

In the wake of Bosnia’s collapse into fratricidal warfare, my own earlier observations are bolstered by the work of the Slovenian sociologist Mitja Velikonja, who teaches at the University of Ljubljana. His position is close enough to be almost an insider to the partisan realities of former Yugoslavia, yet as a Slovene he is sufficiently removed to take a perspective above the fray, as it were. His review and reflection on the eruption of violence that tore at the fabric of Bosnian culture is entitled *Religious Separation & Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*.¹²

Velikonja portrays each of Bosnia’s three primary cultural and religious traditions following a different path into the conflicts that emerged in the breakup of Tito’s Yugoslavia. Each one also has different memories in the aftermath. It is no small task to sift through the competing perspectives and claims. The story cannot be told without some account of what

¹² (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2003). Cf. also a review of Velikonja by N. G. Shenk, in *Religion in Eastern Europe*, XXIII, 6 (December 2003), pp. 59-63.

was happening in the prior communist period at the federal political level, along with what was being stirred up by separatist nationalisms in the neighboring republics, especially Croatia and Serbia.

To speak of Bosnia is also to invoke the memory of empires: Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and Habsburg directly, along with the wider interplay of great games and petty politics of the Great Powers throughout most of the previous two centuries. Waves of military conquest, border shifts, accommodation and compromise for the sake of survival have left an indelible imprint on each cultural group.

Of all the regional and global powers that shaped Bosnia over the centuries, almost half a millennium of Ottoman Turkish rule is the most influential. From the conquest by Sultan Mehmed II el Fatih in 1463 until 1878 (when the Congress of Berlin gave it to Austro-Hungarian administration, and annexation a few decades later), Bosnia played a key role for Ottoman strategies in Europe. At the time of the original takeover, and in most of the following centuries, the Turks showed substantial tolerance and respectful consideration in their policies for subject populations in their religious affiliations (Christian and Jewish). Under the *Pax Ottomanica*, their “millet” system administered these groups for civil purposes entirely through their own religious structures.

While this pattern of civil government through religious administration reinforced the visible importance of religious leadership directly, it also forged an enduring deep linkage between religious and national identity in the Balkans. Even though nationality consciousness is understood to have arrived relatively late in the Balkans, delayed by at least half a century compared to other parts of Europe, its salience was anticipated and reinforced considerably by the millet system. So whereas ideas of citizenship and political agency emerge rather slowly in the region, they do so through a thick layer of religious identity. A given person was not primarily identified as a Serb, a Croat, etc., but rather as a Jew, an Orthodox (Christian) or a Catholic. An interesting exception: the local Slavic converts to Islam, of whom there were many especially in Islam’s first centuries in the region, thought of themselves as Turks, although not in an ethnic or national sense. This did not even mean they spoke Turkish, necessarily; it was their religious identity in the first place, which carried certain social and economic privileges.

This resulted in the Bosnian Muslim identity being the last to emerge from the tangled mix of religious and cultural identities in Bosnia. But for most Bosnians, in most of

four centuries preceding the twentieth, a person could only become politically aware and active through the mediation of religious officials, whose primary responsibility had much more to do with adjusting to the status quo and maintaining a cozy set of bureaucratic privileges through accommodation with political authorities than with the advancement of national and cultural autonomy per se.

And so it is easily seen that four centuries of Ottoman management in Bosnia made religion politically sensitive, even important. Religion had become the main identifying factor for individual ethnic groups. The primary intellectual forces came from religious circles, and until the Austro-Hungarian invasion and occupation (1878 and following), Bosnia's constituent populations had effectively not yet been politicized into nationalist bodies.

This climate changed rapidly under the subsequent four decades of Habsburg management in Bosnia. The Austro-Hungarians set out to modernize their colony as quickly as possible, spreading electricity, trains, trams, major road systems, museums and monumental architecture throughout the region. Quite like some other recent occupations, they saw it as their task to transform the backward Bosnian society from chaos to cosmos, rescuing the remains of a previous empire from confusion, corruption and anarchy. The new powers would restore order and ensure the equality of all religious communities.

But noble goals were not enough to prevent resistance and reactions, as other invaders and occupiers have also discovered. What the Habsburgs really managed to do was provoke a new nationalist reaction, precisely in and through the politicization of each respective religious community, breeding a new and virulent, confused clergy-led nationalism. The resulting combination of religious historical grievances and new nationalist mythmaking proved particularly poisonous throughout the 20th century.

When the zealous ambition of the Catholic Habsburgs reached as far as annexing Bosnia-Herzegovina (October 1908), the move set off a chain of events that led straight to World War I. Serbs in Bosnia, borrowing heavily from new ideological consciousness across the border in Serbia, made the tasks of occupation most difficult. Their resistance brought down waves of repression, collective punishments and outright state terror by the Empire against undefended civilian populations. World War indeed began in Sarajevo, with young Bosnian Serbs assassinating Austria's Crown Prince, Archduke Ferdinand, in 1914. The Empire struck back with massacres, internment and ostracism. For the first time, some of

Bosnia's inhabitants were being slaughtered solely on the basis of their national affiliation. This ominous tone would impact the entire 20th century. It ended on precisely the same note: genocide, with tentacles that reached out to drag the entire watching world into a maelstrom.

From this point forward, national identity takes over the mythical character formerly reserved to religious identity. The resulting mixture infuses claims with quasi-sacred power: *our* soil is sacred, *our* nation chosen by God, all victims on *our* side are innocent, *our* warriors are heroic martyrs slated for sainthood, *our* sufferings equate to the sufferings of the Messiah, etc.¹³ Particular stress is placed on the idea that anyone not with us is not only dangerous, wicked, etc., but a *traitor* to our faith, our race and our holy cause (since the opponent by definition both should have originally belonged to our side, but is also now opposed to our faith).

Vilification of the opposing faction reached new depths in the 20th century, first with the Serb-dominated monarchy of Yugoslavia between World Wars I & II, when religious bodies were conflict-ridden, undemocratic and infused with religious intolerance, as Velikonja portrays them. In the potent brew of militant clericalism and political reactionism, Yugoslavia's religious communities headed into the bloodbath of World War II armed with anti-Semitism, anti-communism, anti-liberalism, anti-masonry and pro-fascist proclamations from hierarchs both Orthodox and Catholic.

Velikonja describes the "War over Differences" (1992-95), as Presidents Tudjman of Croatia and Milošević of Serbia conspired to carve up Bosnia, while the West's failure to intervene except with feeble gestures of rebuke made matters successively worse. Intellectuals, journalists and cultural workers on all sides fell to the lowest levels of "profane political agitation" directed against enemies, and warlords of all stripes used religious language and symbolism to manipulate media with xenophobia and apocalyptic fear of all other entities. The responsibility for moral and spiritual bankruptcy which devastated every one of Bosnia's religious communities during four years of terror rests heavily on all parties to the conflict.

Religious organizations had been seriously weakened throughout communist rule in Tito's Yugoslavia. The new nationalist states emerging from the collapse of that order were also quite insecure. Each one required some fresh measures of religious legitimation if they

¹³ Cf. Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*, (University of California Press, 1996), for a highly critical reading of this strand in Serbian nationalist mythmaking. Another key source by a knowledgeable former resident of the region is the influential work by Paul Mojzes, now at Rosemont College (PA), *Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans* (Continuum, 1994).

were to secure the consent and cooperation of their fragmented populations. Velikonja calls this process “the frail attempts at re-Christianizing and religio-national integration in post-Socialist countries.”

Never before the twentieth century had Bosnia’s inhabitants been treating each other in these ways: “systematic persecution, mass slaughter, dispossession, forceful proselytizing. Never before had they been forced to seek refuge from the destructive logic of religio-national exclusivity outside their own borders in such vast numbers,” Velikonja insists.¹⁴ Weak new states use poisonous brands of separatist nationalism, combined with cynical schemes to offer weak old religious bodies a shortcut back to a share of power like they once enjoyed in ancient times; the combination is, in the short run, potent and deadly.

Conclusion

The religions of Bosnia had long been tolerant, for at least four centuries. The venomous manipulation of religious heritage and symbolism is not part of the tradition in its deepest sense.¹⁵ Velikonja assigns clear responsibility for the 1990s carnage to actions and inactions of foreign powers and outside forces, rather than to the constituent religious communities. Although far too many local actors were drawn into the fray and committed monstrous acts against their neighbors, this was not the religious heritage at work.

What are the enduring characteristics of the Bosnian chapter of Islam in Europe? And how are these features related to the Spanish chapter we surveyed at the outset?

Where these religious heritages are able to run deep, their witness is in fact enhanced by their mutual interactions. Apart from the baleful impact of corrosive nationalism, and the weakening under severe repression by forces of empire (the ailing Ottomans, and the communists and cold warriors of the 20th century), the Christian and Jewish and Muslim communities of medieval Spain and recent Bosnia alike have made much benefit from their joint engagement. This rich and multi-faceted stimulation, in the best of times and under benign rule, seems to have brought out the best in each tradition. Those memories deserve to be retrieved and indeed asserted over against the current rising cacophony of voices clamoring over culture wars and clashes in Europe and farther afield.

¹⁴ Velikonja, p. 288.

¹⁵ See also the work of Yale theologian Miroslav Volf, whose discussion of religions thick and thin is a penetrating analysis and response to some of the theoreticians of religion as conflict: “Christianity and Violence” accessed at speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2004/03/11_volf/volf-article.pdf. Volf, who is also native to the region, has presented a masterful analysis in his earlier work in *Exclusion and Embrace* (Abingdon, 1996).

As Velikonja observes, “few regions and countries in premodern Europe knew so high a level of religious diversity and tolerance as Bosnia, which is peculiar in that it has never been homogenous (or homogenized).” That texture of tolerance varied significantly from one period to another, he continues. “To be sure, it was never an oasis of peace, toleration, and comprehension between different groups as some have idealized it. On the other hand, it has never been the oasis of persistent hatred and violence as some others have portrayed it to be.”¹⁶

In surveying these two chapters of Islamic presence and inter-faith encounters in Europe, we see some of the texture and supporting evidence for what becomes a key part of Velikonja’s interpretation of Bosnia itself: its resemblance to medieval Spain. His words form a fitting conclusion to this inquiry:

“An analogy to the Bosnian situation is that of twelfth-century Spain, once a hub of multireligious cultural, scientific, ideological, and philosophical exchange and *convivencia*, where the Bible, Qur’an, and Talmud, and ancient and contemporary philosophers and scientists were all cherished.”¹⁷

Remembering what went right in Cordoba, Spain and Sarajevo, Bosnia can help us negotiate more adequately the current challenges and perceived clashes of civilizations and cultures in a world grown too small for half-hearted indifference disguised as thin tolerance or thick intolerance. Scholars and strategists alike may benefit from attending to the emerging patterns in which Bosnians retrieve the strengths of their religious heritages so that each can again mutually enrich the other. The lessons of this lengthy history are both too precious and too costly to forget.

¹⁶ Velikonja, p. 290.

¹⁷ Velikonja, p. 290.