

Ugo Vlaisavljević

The Local Ethnic Cultures as Sediments of Past Empires

“The dominant tendency in liberal thought is characterized by a rationalist and individualist approach which forecloses acknowledging the nature of collective identities. This kind of liberalism is unable to adequately grasp the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails; conflict for which no rational solution could ever exist.” (p. 10)

“Democracy, as he (Carl Schmitt) understood it, requires the existence of an homogeneous *demos*, and this precludes any possibility of pluralism”. (p.14.)

Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political. Thinking in Action*, Routledge, 2005, p. 10.

In one of his last interviews, which he gave to Giancarlo Bosetti (1993), Karl Popper received a number of questions concerning the ongoing war in Bosnia. To the question, „Why has this happened?“, Popper responded by pointing out that the nationalism which has thrown the country into chaos and civil war has no solid ground:

„Communism has been replaced by this ridiculous nationalism. I say ridiculous, because it sets against each other peoples who are virtually all Slav. The Serbs are Slavs, the Croats are Slavs. And the Bosnians are also Slavs, converted to Islam“.

Popper argued for military intervention in Bosnia and for applying the „war on war principle“ to the terrorism waged by “war criminals”. Otherwise, he claimed, the Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians, obsessed with their ridiculous nationalism, will „go on massacring each other as long as we allow them to do it. They will stop only if we seriously discourage them“.

If the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are all Slavs, if they have the same ethnic roots, then they have fulfilled if not the most important then one of the most important conditions for making a nation-state. It is to be expected, according to Popper, that they have what John Stuart Mill called “a sentiment of nationality”. If the majority of citizens have this sentiment, then Bosnia and Herzegovina has a firm foundation on which to build its national statehood. As Mill concludes:

„Where the sentiment of nationality exists in any force, there is a prima facie case for uniting all the members of the nationality under the same government, and a government to themselves apart.“

But how Mill defines this „sentiment of nationality“? Let us listen carefully to his words:

„A portion of mankind may be said to constitute a Nationality if they are united among themselves by common sympathies which do not exist between them and any others— which make them co-operate with each other more willingly than with other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire that it should be government by themselves or a portion of themselves exclusively. This feeling of nationality may have been generated by various causes. Sometimes it is the effect of identity of race and descent. Community of language, and community of religion, greatly contribute to it. Geographical limits are one of its causes. But the strongest of all is identity of political antecedents; the possession of a national history, and consequent community of recollections; collective pride and humiliation, pleasure and regret, connected with the same incidents in the past. None of these circumstances, however, are either indispensable, or necessarily sufficient by themselves.“

Are there enough „common sympathies“ among the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina? (It is still question of the day!) If our response is positive, how then explain such deep antipathies and extreme cruelties among co-nationals and neighbors, which unexpectedly emerged during the Bosnian war? Such unimaginable atrocities that shocked the world?

Let us see what might be, according to Mill, a solid basis for the living together of Bosnian people. There are a few important causes that may give rise to “common sympathies” but neither of them is fully acceptable by local nationalists:

- Identity of race and descent;
- Community of language;
- Shared geographical limits.

What is evidently missing is the cause termed “community of religion”. For centuries Bosnian peoples have been deeply divided along religious lines. Except in the time of real-existing socialism and its militant atheism, when they were, at least ideologically, united in “brotherhood”.

What remains from the list of causes is the one which Mill defines as the strongest of all:

- Identity of political antecedents

It is only this cause that Mill has elaborated more fully. It thus implies:

- The possession of a national history, and consequent community of recollections;
- Collective pride and humiliation, pleasure and regret, connected with the same incidents in the past.

This to be called “main cause” is actually the most controversial in the Bosnia case. There is a national history, but there are simultaneously at least three separate national histories. There

are important common recollections, but there are exclusive, mutually contradictory recollections as well. Considering the dominant historical narratives of the Bosnian Croats, Serbs and Muslims (Bosniaks), there is not to be found much overlapping in their collective pride and humiliation motivated by important historical events.

Could it be that all these discrepancies in the common national record are to be ascribed to one and sole cause: the lack of a community of religion? Is religion a source of hatred and intolerance?

This argument may seem plausible, given the recent global phenomenon called “return of religion”. It is very much true that nowadays we are living a powerful desecularisation of the world. It is particularly true for the East European countries that have recently got rid of communism. However, very few scholars will claim that it was a predominantly religious war in Bosnia.

“To assess the role of religion in international politics, it would be useful to distinguish between political movements that are genuinely inspired by religion and those that use religion as a convenient legitimation for political agendas based on quite non-religious interests. Such a distinction is difficult but not impossible... there is good reason to doubt that three parties involved in the Bosnian conflict, commonly represented as a clash between religions, are really inspired by religious ideas. I think it was P. J. O’Rourke who observed that these three parties of the same race, speak the same language, and are distinguished only by their religion, which none of them believe.”

Again we see what make the Bosnian nationalism so “ridiculous”, as Popper put it. Three belligerent parties are “of the same race” and “speak the same language”.

It seems that the only thing that divides one people into three - is religion. And still, the conflict was only allegedly a religious one. This does not mean that we shall go thus far to claim that the local people are not religious at all. If we agree that what happened was by no means a clash between religions, we still have great difficulties to explain the war and especially the postwar socio-political reality of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

How was it possible that religion so perfectly served as a “legitimation tool” for “political agendas based on quite non-religious interests”? What has actually made it so convenient for such illegitimate purposes?

Another, much more difficult question reads: If the only difference between peoples in Bosnia and Herzegovina is that of religion, why they consider themselves and their mutual differences in terms that reach far beyond religious identifications? Each people cherish its own “sentiment of nationality” and the “common sympathies” their members have are so markedly ethnic: in the first place because they believe in their kinship, to have originated from the same roots (Max Weber’s notion of *Abstammungsgemeinschaft*). How to explain the

priority of the ethnic or quasi-ethnic self-consciousness over the religious one, if the only surely identifiable difference between the three peoples is the difference in religion?

If it is relatively plausible to think that in the time of sudden collapse of a totalitarian ideology and in the age of famous “return of religion”, the ordinary people may be made to think about the religion of their fathers as something which is deeply incorporated not only in their souls but in their bodies, it is much less plausible to think that twenty years after the war and twenty-five years after the fall of communism this belief is a mere illusion imposed to everyone by mass media brainwashing.

The right question of the present time, of the time still to be called “the aftermath of the war,” is how the local religious identities have become ethnicized or even racialized. It is there that one should look for answers to the questions like “These three Bosnian nations, are they mere appearances?” or “How was it that religion, i. e. Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism and Islam, played a pivotal role in the massive war mobilization?”

It was during the long reign, over four centuries, of Ottoman Empire that those Bosnian communities that were **communities of faith** in the first place were turned into **communities of fate**. It was religious identity that determined the social and civic status of individuals and linked their life prospects with the general position of their respective religious communities within the imperial order. The share of political power and potential social influence was allocated according to religious group affiliations. Catholic and Orthodox communities were able to survive the enduring rule of Ottomans as it was an empire that had “the most developed model of non-liberal (i. e. exclusively group oriented) religious tolerance.” The local Christian communities enjoyed certain self-governance and “external protection” as “the collective freedom of worship was guaranteed.” (Ibid., p.156)

However, the official recognition and *de jure status* of the Christian religious communities in the Ottoman Empire did not produce a characteristic lifestyle of people living in them: these communities were already fully ethnicized, but on a micro-local, parochial level. All most important distinctive traits required for a community to be aware of its own unique lifeworld and destiny, and to be as such perceived by the neighboring outsiders, were already in place and effective. Any attempt to find out at what point in the past a monotheistic religion became ethnicized is doomed to failure: as it had been always grafted on some previous folk religion and adopted as a new customary religious law.

What the Ottoman Empire probably did produce was a powerful re-ethnicization of the Bosnian Christians on the macro-level. After having been incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, they were confronted with a powerful Foreigner, experienced the strong and irresistible presence of the Islamic faith community and were subjugated to its mighty rulers. Firmly established and long-lasting politico-juridical order re-connected gradually and still very loosely, according to its feudal nature, a myriad of small, family-like village communities of the same faith disseminated all over the country. A network of towns, functioning as nodes of administrative power and trade, allowed for inter-ethnic as well as intra-ethnic interactions.

It is important here to stress the importance of the imperial politico-judicial order, its long lasting and profound impact on the incorporated ethno-religious communities. It was a Turkish Empire and Sunni Islamic State. In this polyethnic and multireligious empire, “as diverse as any in history” (Kymlicka: Braude & Lewis), Islam was a State’s religion, far more important than ethnicity.

“At one point in the mid-sixteenth century, the Grand-Vizier and two of the three Viziers were all Moslems from Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Bosnian influence was so strong in some periods that Serbo-Croatian became the second language in the Porte.”

The religion and the political power, the religious identity and civic identity, were merged. Non-Muslim identity, in contrast to non-Turkish identity, was a sign of the lack of loyalty to the throne. The officially recognized forms of religious affiliation, therefore, had enormous effects on building collective identities of Ottoman subjects. Concerning the issue of re-ethnicisation, i. t. of socio-cultural effects of the imperial establishing of religious identity, of the utmost importance is the fact that Bosnian Catholic and Orthodox Christians were put under the auspices of their respective ecclesiastical authority. To quote Lockwood who quote Stavrianos:

„A primary explanation for the development of nationalities based on religion in the Balkans is that ‘the organization of Christian subjects into millets, each a different religious denomination constituting a separate community organized under its own ecclesiastical authorities, stressed the distinctiveness of the various non-Moslem peoples’.”

This distinctiveness, in effect the awareness of the Christians that they have a separate fate, was reinforced in an almost incomparable way by, what Lockwood termed, „wholesale conversions to Islam“ of Bosnian Christians. This, obviously quite irresistible challenge for non-Muslim subjects indicates that they were exposed, as traditional faith communities, to an “assault of acculturation”. There lies another strong argument for the re-ethnicization thesis: Georges Devereux has termed it “antagonistic acculturation”. To withstand the challenge of proselytism by stubbornly persisting in the faith of ancestors was not enough and was not the end of the story about preserving one’s own group identity. The long-term struggle for survival of the given minority faith community required much more than that. Centuries-long processes of acculturation are by definition irresistible and it is to be expected that they have eroded and deformed what is to be taken as an original ethno-symbolic content of the given Christian community. The typical strategy in this kind of struggle against assimilation was to re-arrange the community’s own ethno-cultural content or “myth-symbol complex”, as A. D. Smith would put it, already full of „foreign bodies“, in order to preserve enough distinctive traits and thus preserve the given ethnic boundaries. The more strong acculturation effects, the more strong is re-ethnicization of the community experiencing them.

What made local Christian communities into distinct self-aware ethnic communities? It was the long-lasting rule of Ottomans and their remarkably religious culture. Religious affiliation defined the identity of individuals and collectives. Whereas it is true that ethnic identity

proper was far less important, *the strong ethnic charge* of religious identity should not be overlooked. To be incorporated in such theocratic imperial order as a minority meant in the first place not to share the same religion as the rulers and to be exposed to a threat of assimilation. Other faiths communities were actually ethnicized, since ‘foreignness’, that crucial concept for understanding the meaning of ethnicity, was defined as belonging to other faith.

Illuminating insights into the relation between religious and ethnic group identity may be provided through an analysis of the very specific identitary position of those Bosnian Christians who converted to Islam. Quite early, even in the first century of the Ottoman rule, they were so great in number as to be a whole nation. However, conversions were individual so that they actually appeared on the given historical scene as a peculiar aggregation of individuals rather than a cohesive group. As Lockwood put it:

“These converts, taken in the aggregate, did not immediately constitute an ethnic group in the anthropological sense.”

It is important to see how they perceived themselves and what identity was ascribed to them by the “referent others”. Christians called their converted neighbors “Turks” but it does not mean that they thought of them in that way. This is a quite ambiguous identity reference. It is true that religious identity in that historical *context immediately reveals its characteristic ethnic charges*. But it is equally true that these converts were coming from pretty ethnicized faith communities and would never, except for a small number of well positioned and educated individuals, be fully assimilated.

„Because of the international makeup of the ruling Ottoman apparatus (including prominent Serbo-Croatian speakers), there was no official differentiation–no formalization of a Bosnian Moslem ethnic group“.

Within the Ottoman Empire they were identified by the term „Bošnjaci“, having a regional meaning not an ethnic one.

„Moslems would sometimes even use the term Turci themselves, when it was necessary to distinguish themselves from Bosnian Christians“.

„They were considered by both Christians and other Moslems, and thought of themselves, as the establishment, and an integral part of the Empire“.

„The Bosnian Moslems were not, of course, a unified group socially, culturally, or conceptually“.

Lockwood concludes his remarks by stating that Bosnian Muslims were „not an ethnic group, though they have all the potential of being one“. This potential will be realized, admittedly to a certain extent, only after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Another powerful empire was required to turn the third faith community of Bosnia into a self-aware ethnic community. It was the rule of Austro-Hungarian Empire that brought about necessary conditions for the

group identity transformation. Bosnian Muslims found themselves in the same kind of position where Bosnia Christian had been in before them: incorporated as a small foreign body (i. e. minority faith community) within the huge body of an empire. The ethnicization of a faith community is a socio-cultural process produced in this state of embodiment. As we have seen from the previous example, the official recognition of a religious minority and the assault of acculturation on it do not exclude but rather complement each other.

In the terms of awakening the people's awareness of their ethnic being, we may state that the Austro-Hungarian Empire was to Bosnian Muslims as the Ottoman Empire was to Bosnian Christians. Therefore, a number of empires were needed to make the local faith communities self-aware *communities of fate*.

However, the crucial moment of the final ethnicization of all three faith communities, when their members, Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Muslims became fully aware of themselves as Croats, Serbs and *Bosnian* Muslims, came with the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Into annexed Bosnia, through their enormous endeavor of industrialization and modernizing, Austro-Hungarians brought new political ideas of democracy and nationalism, they established a modern party-political system based on balanced ethno-religious representation and thus stirred up nationalist sentiments. As Lokwood remarks, "After the Austrian annexation, the process of ethnic differentiation quickened", and it was particularly true of the Bosnian Muslims, for whom „this was a period of heightening ethnic consciousness“.

It is interesting to notice that the Muslims began to think of themselves as a genuine ethnic community "distinct from the Turks and other Moslems of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire" at the time when they were constrained as a minority to considered themselves as Bosnian Muslims, while by Catholics and Orthodox Christians, their awakening to nationality, brought them, as it were, out of Bosnia: as they identified themselves with Croats and Serbs from the neighboring countries.

One ethnic identity became Bosnia-centered, while two others Bosnia-decentered. This distorted situation between the state-identity and the ethnic-identity-orientations remained unchanged since then.

In sum, how many imperial juridico-political orders, how many powerful significant Others, whose "alienness" was defined in terms of religion and ethnicity, was actually required to produce the three "self-aware ethnic communities" of Bosnia and Herzegovina? One empire for Catholics and Orthodox Christians and one more for Bosnian Muslims. There should be added at least two empires previous to the Ottoman, given the fact that Catholics and Orthodox Christians whom Ottoman invaders found *settled all over the country* were most probably converted under the sword of some previously reigning sovereigns. These two Christians faith-communities are in effect great spiritual monuments of previous epochs, marked by victorious military campaigns, forcible assimilations, mass baptism, etc., which took place at the crossroads between the East and the West Christianity, whereby Bosnia repeatedly appeared divided into shifting zones of their influence.

The local ethnic communities are three in number because at least three past empires were so influential to the local population that the acculturation they once exercised has become determinative for the fate of many people.

Each community has its own privileged imperial reference, and simultaneously excludes the similar references of its neighboring communities. They are different because their choice of constitutive imperial culture is not the same. Generally speaking, what has been regarded by one Bosnian community as a very positive imperial influence, once adopted as its crucial segment of identity, for the two others it has been considered as a negative, perilous influence that should be repressed and rejected.

Hence, each community acknowledges its greatest debt to a particular empire. Bosniaks-Muslims to the Ottoman Empire, Croats-Catholics to the Austro-Hungary, Serbs-Orthodox Christians to the Byzantine Empire. Perhaps it is not the Byzantine Empire, but one of its eastern successor states, inheritors of its imperial culture. Perhaps it is not Austro-Hungary, but one of its western predecessors. Anyhow, of the crucial importance is the empire that imparted a religion to one of the three communities, the one that made it a religious community of the present sort – or the empire that made the received faith forever firm and unshakable by turning it into a core of ethnic identity.