

2011

Stephen A. Wynne

MULTI-CONFESSIONALISM IN MEDIEVAL AND OTTOMAN BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

Although often regarded today as a land of intercommunal strife, for much of its history, Bosnia-Herzegovina was renowned for its pluralism and tolerance of various expressions of religious faith.

From 1992 to 1995, Bosnia-Herzegovina, a republic newly reborn after centuries buried within a series of volatile states and empires, literally rent itself in two. Over the course of three-and-a-half years, approximately 100,000 people—more than one-third of them civilians, more than 3,000 of them children—were slaughtered in the most heinous, most egregious outbreak of bloodshed seen in Europe since the Second World War. More than 2 million—nearly half the state’s prewar population—were displaced by a resurgent phenomenon euphemistically branded “ethnic cleansing.” In the process, the economy was destroyed, cultural legacies were incinerated, and the promise of an ascendant multi-ethnic, multi-confessional Balkan democracy was obliterated.

And so, we must ask: *Why did this happen?*

The answer: *Because the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina hate one another. They have always hated one another. They have been at each other’s throats for centuries. In fact, for a millennium. Their hatred is potent, and it is intractable—far too strong to permit an artificial state such as theirs to survive.*

That, at least, is the refrain heard too often throughout the West. It is a neat package, an easy reply—convenient for consciences that otherwise would have recoiled at the scandal of American and European inaction during the onslaught of genocide. Yet, it is *untrue*.

The story of the unraveling of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the blood spilled across its constituent republics, is one of enormous complexity. Rather than merely a legacy of ancient, endemic hatreds among ethnicities and creeds, the violence which consumed what was, until 1992, the heart of the most prosperous corner of the Balkans (and indeed, the communist world), sprang from converging antagonistic elements, and was permitted to proceed in the wake of impotent leadership and insufficient diplomatic will. The convenient myth of hungry, implacable hatreds obscures a fascinating historical record, one that reveals Bosnia as a land of unique religious pluralism—certainly not idyllic, as unquestionably resentments did exist, and did erupt from time to time—but one that was remarkably stable, nonetheless, prior to the advent of nationalism during the nineteenth century.

This paper examines the times before Bosnia was torn by base nationalism and political opportunism. Its aim is to retrace the history—particularly the religious history—of medieval and Ottoman Bosnia, in order to reconstruct a picture of the comparatively tolerant theological landscape that once existed there, and to identify the point at which intercommunal troubles first began to stir during the nineteenth century. In so doing, it aims to provide a better understanding of what has been lost in Bosnia, and to encourage what eventually could be, if its wounded peoples undertake the necessary efforts at reconciliation and a thorough processing of collective trauma. It also aims to expose as false the common, expedient answer: that hatred is an intrinsically Bosnian characteristic, and that nothing can be done to solve it.

At the outset, it is important to note that in recent years, nationalists representing each of the country’s three factions—Serb, Croat, and Bosniak—have asserted the primacy of their particular group in the course of the nation’s history, and laid claim to contemporary Bosnia as a result. However, as historian Noel Malcolm writes, it is essential to understand that:

...the question of whether the [early] inhabitants of Bosnia were really Croat or really Serb...cannot be answered, for two reasons: first, because we lack evidence, and secondly, because the question lacks meaning. We can say that the majority of the Bosnian territory was probably occupied by Croats—or at least, by Slavs under Croat rule—in the seventh century; but that is a tribal label which has little or no meaning five centuries later...to apply the modern notion of [Serb or] Croat identity (something constructed in recent centuries out of religion, history and language) to anyone in this period would be an anachronism. All that one can sensibly say about the ethnic identity of the Bosnians is this: they were the Slavs who lived in Bosnia.¹

Shifting Dominion

The mountainous lands that would become Bosnia-Herzegovina were conquered by Roman armies some two millennia ago. With the implementation of Roman administration, the hallmarks of ancient civilization began to appear throughout the western Balkans. Roads were constructed between growing urban centers, providing for ease of commercial and military transport; Latin became the *lingua franca*, fostering improved communication; mineral deposits in the eastern border regions were exploited, and their wealth—destined to receive the seals of the emperors themselves—sent down the Drina Valley on barges to minting centers in the heart of the Empire.²

By the fifth century CE, however, the Western Empire was unraveling, and Bosnia, the easternmost outpost of Latin jurisdiction, was being engulfed by throngs of barbarian Slavs. Although springing from a single confederation, the Slaveni, these myriad bands were developing separate tribal identities as they spilled across the Balkans. And as they settled into newly conquered lands, the subsummation of one tribe by another became commonplace; as a result, in time, certain tribal names became predominate—chief among them, the Serbs and the Croats.³

During the seventh century, the Serbs moved into what is today Serbia and Herzegovina, subjugating kinsmen there. The Croats, meanwhile, overran fellow Slavs throughout what is now Croatia and portions of Bosnia. Whether these incoming tribes controlled all Bosnian Slavs remains unknown; likewise, writes renowned historian John V.A. Fine, “it is...impossible to determine which parts of Bosnia fell under Serbs and which parts fell under Croats. In time these later invaders were assimilated by the more numerous Slavs but provided names for the resulting population, among whom Slavic culture and language triumphed.” What is beyond question, he notes, is the fact that “the Bosnians come from the same Slavic base as today’s Serbs and Croats.”⁴

Although distinct, tribal Serbs and Croats were closely connected, living and migrating in tandem, and sharing bonds of language and a pantheon of pagan gods.⁵ In their early years in the western Balkans, Serbs and Croats did not unite to form respective states; rather, various tribal rulers oversaw smaller county units called *župas*.⁶ And while the Byzantine Empire was the nominal ruler of the region, its hold was tenuous; in the late eighth century, Charlemagne’s Franks overtook wide swathes of Croat territory. Emerging from Frankish rule approximately a century later, Croatia flourished briefly as an independent kingdom, during which time it reigned over Bosnian territories. Meanwhile, to the east in Serbia, power was being consolidated into a larger principdom, and after

Croatia was beset by civil war, control of Bosnia passed into its hands. After a few decades as a Serbian dependency, Bosnia returned to Croat control, where it remained for another several decades. Beginning in the early eleventh century, a resurgent Byzantine Empire reasserted control over the entire region. Serb-occupied lands were subjugated more thoroughly, as they were geographically closer to the Byzantine center of power; Croat territory, in contrast, lay at the periphery of the Empire, and therefore retained greater autonomy from Constantinople. During this period, local governance of Bosnia passed back and forth between Serb and Croat hands. In 1102, Croatia was absorbed into the Kingdom of Hungary. Likewise, control of Bosnia passed to the Hungarians, but as a more isolated and impermeable land, it was governed as a subordinate whose autonomy would magnify as the subsequent decades unfolded. A brief period of Byzantine reassertion followed at mid-century; after this, Croatia reverted to Hungarian control. Bosnia, however—strengthened by its earlier autonomy and shielded by its impermeability—became a suzerainty of Hungary, a banate that for the first time remained responsible for the bulk of its own affairs.⁷

The Bosnian Banate

From the institution of self-rule in the 1180s to its demise under the Ottomans in 1463, the Bosnian state knew three periods of notable growth and material prosperity. The first, under the reign of Ban Kulin (1180-1204), was marked by particular efforts to develop Bosnia economically. Kulin enacted a commercial charter with the Adriatic port of Ragusa (modern Dubrovnik), and labored to extract the mineral wealth of Bosnian mines. The second, under Ban Stephen Kotromanić (c. 1322-1353), was notable for its incorporation of portions of coastal Dalmatia and the hitherto separate dominion of Herzegovina into the Bosnian realm. Kotromanić also nurtured Bosnia's foreign relations by enacting treaties with Ragusa and Venice and sending Bosnian troops to aid Hungarian forces in quelling rebellion among troublesome Croatian nobles. The third, under King Stephen Tvrtko (1353-1391), saw Bosnia rise to become the most powerful kingdom in the western Balkans. Tvrtko was responsible for expanding Bosnian borders northward into Croatia and Slavonia, and for incorporating most of the Dalmatian coast into his kingdom.⁸

Between these periods of glory, however, Bosnia was beset by considerable political turmoil, and its boundaries were porous and often migratory, changing with the realities of the day:

At various times...Bosnia was divided, either officially or *de facto* as a result of the frequent contests for power between the local noble families. Although the social and political system in Bosnia was basically feudal, it was not the strict form of feudalism in which nobles' estates would revert to the crown if they failed to perform their military duties: the nobles were independent landowners, and were often able to dictate the succession to the Bosnian crown from their position of territorial power. Hence the persistent instability of medieval Bosnian politics.⁹

The most interesting historical feature of the Bosnian state, however, is not its political ambition, territorial acquisition, or economic might. Rather, it is Bosnia's religious exceptionalism that distinguishes it from its contemporaries within the medieval world. At a time when religious heterodoxy

was being crushed elsewhere in Europe, Bosnia opened its doors to heretics, serving as a sanctuary within a wider Christendom loathe to permit deviant theology to take root. Its reputation as a refuge for wandering souls, together with its own half-hearted adherence to Christianity, would from its first days of independence draw the ire of the Roman Curia and ultimately provoke centuries of suspicion and consternation among the defenders of the faith.

A Harbor for Heresy?

Archaeological records indicate that Christianity began to flower within Bosnia during the Roman era; indeed, more than twenty basilicas dating to this period have been unearthed. However, with the coming of the barbarian invasions and the demise of the Western Empire in 476 CE, Christianity withered, and was eventually supplanted by paganism. Later, during the seventh century, Latin priests stationed along the Dalmatian coast were enlisted to re-Christianize the interior lands. Slowly, these missionaries began venturing inland to reclaim Bosnia for Christ. Yet, due to the overwhelming difficulties facing them, promulgation was slow to penetrate the mountainous interior. It was not until the late ninth or early tenth centuries, in fact, that the majority of inhabitants had begun to turn from paganism, and even then, in the remote and impenetrable Bosnian highlands, the rootedness of Christian faith remained shallow and weak—indeed, there is even evidence of pagan traditions, such as worshipping upon mountaintops, continuing throughout the Christian period, and into the Islamic.¹⁰

By the time it emerged as a suzerainty of Hungary in 1180, Bosnia proper—as opposed to largely Orthodox Herzegovina—was an officially Catholic state. Yet its Catholicism was merely nominal, the fruit of poor catechesis. Again, due to its inaccessibility, Bosnia suffered a paucity of well-trained, highly-educated Church leaders; it was a realm in which clergy were renowned for their dismal quality, and where lax religious practices were the norm.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, such soil easily proved capable of nurturing crisis.

In 1192, Bosnia was incorporated into the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Ragusa. However, remote as it was, the Catholic Church in Bosnia operated largely beyond the Ragusan hierarchy's field of vision, and it was permitted *de facto* to appoint its own bishop to govern its affairs.¹² It was not long, however, before political ambition soured the image of Bosnian Catholicism in the eyes of Rome. In 1199, Duke Vukan, the leader of neighboring Zeta (modern Montenegro) received into his court a papal legate. Afterward, keen to gain favor with Pope Innocent III, Vukan began corresponding with the powerful Roman Curia, warning of a wave of heresy rising within Bosnia. Vukan implicated Ban Kulin directly in this matter, stating that Kulin, together with his entire family, had embraced doctrines antithetical to Church teaching, and that as a consequence heresy had claimed more than ten thousand members of the Bosnian fold.¹³

Vukan's letters seemed to confirm worrying reports that practitioners of Catharism, having been driven from the cities of Split and Trogir on the Adriatic coast, had infiltrated Bosnia, where they were provided sanction by Kulin himself. In response to these developments, in 1200 Innocent III notified King Emmerich of Hungary that if Ban Kulin failed to move against heresy in Bosnia, Emmerich himself would be compelled, in accordance with the papal bull *Vergentis in senium*, to depose Kulin, seize his property, and drive him, together with the whole mass of Bosnian heretics, into exile. Justifiably alarmed at this news, Kulin answered the charges against him by dispatching a diplomatic mission to

Rome. He requested that the Pope send his emissaries across the sea to investigate the true state of affairs in Bosnia.¹⁴ Innocent III complied, and in 1203, a council of the Bosnian Catholic Church was convened at Bilino Polje. There, in the presence of papal legate Johannes de Casamaris, Ban Kulin oversaw pledges from Bosnian monks that doctrinal, liturgical, and sacerdotal standards would be upheld, errors would be purged, and that neither Manichaeism nor Catharism would be given quarter within Bosnia.¹⁵

Together with their affirmation of Church norms, the monks' renunciation of errors assuaged the fears of Innocent III; with this, the disquieting problem of heresy seemed to pass. The vows of Bilino Polje were unable to remedy poor catechesis and weak administration, however, and as the thirteenth century progressed, these burdens, together with the political machinations of Hungarian monarchs, accelerated the decay of Bosnian Catholicism. So, too, did Rome's insufficient redress of ecclesiastical and administrative malpractice:

The Roman Curia did not carry out completely the reforms which would have been necessary in the Bosnian Church. The over-large Bosnian diocese was not divided up into several bishoprics, as Johannes de Casamaris had proposed, nor do we know to what extent the strict rules laid on the Bosnian monks by the papal legate were actually put into practice. There seems to be no evidence of the Curia having bothered with Bosnia at all during the ensuing years. At the beginning of the thirteenth century Rome still did not seem to be aware of the true extent of the danger [to its interests]; in the course of the next twenty years it attained truly menacing proportions.¹⁶

Between Ignorance and Intrigue

Indeed, ensuing developments within Bosnian Catholicism—and the circumstances pressed upon it by outside forces—would come to threaten the interest of Rome. However, the question remains: To what extent had heresy penetrated Bosnian Catholicism? At this stage, the question is difficult to answer with any clarity. It seems that there were heretics active within Bosnia during Ban Kulin's reign. He did, in fact, welcome wandering Cathars into his court following their expulsion from Split in 1200. These dualists were symptomatic of a wider wave of heterodoxy that was encroaching from along the Adriatic. Historian Milan Loos writes that "The very first reports of dualist heresy in Bosnia clearly pointed to a connection between the Bosnian hinterland and the ancient towns on the Dalmatian coast. Heretical teachings, already firmly rooted in Dalmatia, travelled inland along with craftsmanship and artistic traditions."¹⁷

However, it is highly probable that the extent of heretical penetration was merely a fraction of what Innocent III had feared. It appears that the central problem afflicting Bosnian Catholicism was theological and liturgical confusion stemming, again, from ignorance and poor catechesis. In character, it evinced a number of divergent features; the Slavonic rite had been retained, and it remained untouched by Gregorian reforms. Even the Bosnian hierarchy was beset by incredible ignorance—and this is the most glaring example of interior weakness. One early thirteenth-century bishop was even reported to Rome for his failings: "The Bishop of Bosnia did not serve Mass in his church, nor administer the sacraments; he was quite illiterate and did not even know the fundamental church rite of

baptism.”¹⁸ Certainly, the Church in Bosnia “was primitive; Bosnians did not know Latin, and few were literate in any language. Thus surely much was wrong in their Catholicism.”¹⁹

Beyond ignorance and interior inconsistencies, Bosnian Catholicism was undermined—almost fatally—by an exterior menace; indeed, it is ironic that for all the concerns that heresy was eroding the position of the Church within Bosnia, the greatest threat to Bosnia’s loyalty to Rome lay outside the country altogether. Ultimately, it was political intrigue that would prove to poison the well. It lay at the root of Duke Vukan’s absurdly overblown accounts of insurgent heretics sweeping doe-eyed Bosnian Catholics from the faith. It would not have been lost on Vukan that by positioning himself as “good Catholic” opposite Ban Kulin’s “bad,” he would gain esteem in the eyes of Innocent III and strengthen his position. Likewise, as an ally of Hungary, he helped set the stage for that kingdom’s encroachment south. For Hungary was not satisfied in its role as suzerain; it wanted to possess the whole of Bosnia. And ultimately, it would be this—loyal daughter Hungary’s political intrigue, together with papal acquiescence—that would spark true crisis for Bosnian Catholicism, turning embittered Bosnians against the Church and igniting outright rebellion against Rome.

Schism—The Rise of the Bosnian Church

From 1180, when Bosnia slipped from its grasp into self-rule, the Kingdom of Hungary had grown increasingly exasperated at the restive state to its south. Scheming to reincorporate Bosnia, it exploited the weaknesses of Catholicism there, exaggerating them as a pretext for reasserting itself into Bosnian affairs.²⁰ Hungary was aided in its plot by new reports emerging from various corners of Bosnia during the 1220s indicating that heresy had taken root in the country. But even these charges were ambiguous. It is unknown whether “heresy” described dualism, some other condemned doctrine, or simply the practices of unreformed monks and their flocks.²¹

Using such reports as fresh ammunition, Hungary successfully lobbied the pope to declare a crusade against heresy in Bosnia and in 1235, its armies began assailing the banate from the north. Although initially successful, the invasion advanced slowly and before completing their conquest, Hungarian forces were recalled, forced to repel a Mongol attack upon Hungary itself.²² The end result was that while Bosnia survived politically, Bosnian Catholicism emerged from the conflict detached from Roman jurisdiction. This cleavage was a genesis point and a prerequisite for what was soon to come. Fine theorizes that with the descent of the Hungarian crusade upon their country, the Bosnians must have begun administering religious matters themselves:

Since we have no knowledge of any religious organization inside Bosnia other than the monastic order, we may suspect that the monks, in addition to their usual activities, had taken on the burdens of ministering to the peasantry. Thus the magister and priors, in addition to their monastic administrative duties, would have assumed the role of bishop and staff for Bosnia. If, as seems likely, the magister of the order prior to 1203 had on occasions, or even regularly, been the Bishop of Bosnia, then his assumption of these tasks [following the invasion] would have been natural.²³

In 1252, in a renewed attempt to undermine Bosnian independence, Hungary convinced the pope to subordinate the bishopric of Bosnia beneath its own. This proved disastrous for Bosnian Catholicism, as it incited the population to revolt; Bosnians understood plainly that such a bishop would serve the interests of Hungary, not their own. Unwilling to abide a cleric of Hungarian extraction, the Bosnians drove the bishop from the country, forcing him to relocate to Hungarian-controlled territory. With this came finality; the Catholic Church within Bosnia was severed from its chief apostle and administrator, and from the wider Church itself.²⁴

As the Catholic Church in Bosnia drifted from the orbit of Rome, it entered into a state of schism, metamorphosing into an independent order known as the Bosnian Church. Unfortunately, there is very little information from this time that accurately reconstructs the character of this unique congregation. Fine, however, theorizes that its essence was that of an autonomous “national” religious body: “Most of the Bosnian nobles would have felt the need for such a church and would have supported it, no matter what its doctrine might be. The Bosnian clergy and monks would have favored such a move, because they were already separated from their hierarchy of foreigners who had attacked them, who lived abroad, and who had little interest in or sympathy for Bosnian conditions.”²⁵

Heretical, or Merely Schismatic?

Due, again, to scant written records, elements of the early Bosnian Church have been the source of fierce debate. Structurally, the Bosnian Church likely recapitulated the form of the Catholic Church in Bosnia prior to 1203, at which time a single magister (who may well have served as Bishop of Bosnia) ruled a body of priors, who in turn ruled a series of monasteries. This method of organization is highly probable, as “there is no evidence of any other clerical organization in Bosnia from which the Church could have formed. Thus...for its hierarchy it utilized the existing administrative organization of the monastic order. Thus the Bosnian Church would, in fact, be the same institution that we met at Bolino Polje in 1203.”²⁶

The nature of the Church’s theology, however is a subject of enormous controversy. Once established, the Bosnian Church was of course denounced by Rome as a schismatic haven for heretics. However, it remains unclear, and therefore contested, whether heresy—to whatever degree it existed—advanced independently, outside the sanctuary of the Church of Bosnia, or whether, unchecked as the congregation was by Roman restraints, heresy grew within and under the auspices of the Bosnian Church itself.

In the nineteenth century, Croatian scholar and historian Franjo Rački suggested a version of the latter, postulating that the Bosnian Church may have incorporated elements of Bogomilism, an earlier heresy grounded in Manichaean dualism, into its body of belief. This theory subsequently enjoyed wide acclaim, and in recent years, it has been used by certain Bosnian nationalists as a basis for their arguments of a separate Bosnian identity, and to explain how easily many Bosnians transitioned from Christianity to Islam following the Ottoman invasion. In recent decades, however, modern scholarship has shed new light upon the Bogomil theory, exposing profound weaknesses, and although still triumphed in certain circles today, the theory has been discredited.²⁷ Fine observes that both Bosnian and (Catholic) Dalmatian sources indicate that the Bosnian Church affirmed the omnipotence of God, and that it accepted the Doctrine of the Trinity, church buildings, the image of the Cross, the cult of

saints, religious art, and portions of the Old Testament—all elements the Bogomils had stricken from their body of belief.²⁸ He concedes that the Bosnian Church might have acquired elements similar to those of the dualists, and perhaps even from the dualists. He also acknowledges the possibility of a continuing dualist current within Bosnia, but maintains that this “remained as it had prior to ca. 1250, distinct from the monks’ organization even after that organization became the Bosnian Church,” as coexistence of the two strains of thought would have been natural in Bosnia: “The Bosnians have always tolerated the coexistence of different faiths whenever outsiders did not force them to violence. Thus, the Bosnian Church could have peacefully coexisted with and even have had relations with ‘Manichees’...”²⁹ Fine asserts that theologically, the Bosnian Church would have retained a significant portion of its Catholic legacy, even as it incorporated divergent elements into its belief:

It seems likely, then, that the Bosnians, in utilizing the monastic order to establish their church, would have tried to preserve the beliefs and practices which that order had had up to that time. Thus, at first we would simply have had a schism, and owing to the ignorance of the monks we would also have found a variety of deviations in belief and practice. As a result of Hungary’s attempts to assert its authority over Bosnia, we would expect the church of these monks to exhibit all the traits that anthropologists would associate with a “nativistic movement”...There would have been a strong desire among the monks, and those who were influenced by them, to maintain what was theirs, what was Bosnian; this would include all their deviations in practices. In fact, if there was pressure by Hungary to change particular deviant practices, this alone would have been strong impetus to make those particular deviations into important practices that had to be kept, and into symbols of their church...

I postulate that the Bosnian Church was organizationally and doctrinally a continuation of the monkish order of Bosnia. In the way I have described, it based its “theology” on its own brand of Catholicism, a combination of uneducated Catholicism and what originally were chance deviations, now through nativistic pride, inflated to assume the role of basic practices. As a result of making deviations from Catholicism into prescribed practice, it could well have earned the label “heretical” from Rome.³⁰

While rejecting Rački’s Bogomil theory, historian Yuri Stoyanov ventures further, describing a scenario in which Bosnia’s Catholic monastic orders merged with the dualist movement during the crisis of the Hungarian crusade, thus giving rise to a Bosnian Church whose theology retained some dualist features:

The evidence indicates that members of the Bosnian Church could adhere to orthodox Christian beliefs and practices, but could, at times, also follow heretical, dualist or pagan traditions, surviving pagan elements remaining particularly active in the diverse religious world of medieval Bosnia. The view that the dualist movement and the monastic order in Bosnia fused to form the Bosnian Church in the turmoil of the Hungarian Crusade answers most of the puzzles associated with the Bosnian Church, if it is accepted, of

course, that the newly formed Church gradually abandoned some of its dualist beliefs and practices on its way to becoming an established ecclesiastical body. Such an evolution would explain the coexistence of heretical and non-heretical teachings and practices ascribed to the Bosnian Church, in which dualism eventually could become ‘a half understood heritage from the past’...³¹

A Flourishing Multi-Confessionalism

By the early fourteenth century, Bosnia was recovering from the turmoil sparked by the invasion of 1235. In 1322, Ban Stjepan Kotromanić attained control over Bosnia, beginning the second of the state’s golden reigns. He sought better diplomatic ties with Hungary, which at last opted to accept Bosnia as an ally rather than a vassal. He also expanded westward, incorporating a portion of the Dalmatian coast into his command. Later, following the death of the King of Serbia, he assumed control of Hum, to the south of Bosnia. It is noteworthy, and indicative of the spirit of tolerance which governed Bosnia, that Kotromanić simply moved into these areas, but made no religious changes. The occupied Dalmatian coast was Catholic in faith, and contained two bishoprics. Hum, meanwhile, was overwhelmingly Orthodox. Neither faith’s institutions were interfered with.³²

Therefore, nearly a century after Bosnia went its own way religiously, we see the materialization of a surprisingly rich and unrestricted theological milieu. The banate had come to act as host to many different faiths. In the annexed lands of the north and the west, Catholicism—a somewhat healthier strain than had existed in the interior a century prior—predominated. In the south, Orthodox Christianity prevailed, a legacy of Serb settlement there. In the central mountainous region, and to a lesser degree, in the east, the Bosnian Church held sway, operating peacefully as the *de facto* national church. In addition, the spirit of tolerance possessing the region—and its autonomy from standard bearers in Rome and Constantinople—permitted divergent sects such as dualism to operate freely. And remarkably, adherents of each particular faith lived in accord with one another. There was no wholesale slaughter, no mass expulsion of one group or another.³³ Essentially, the Bosnian peasantry “viewed religion as a practical matter, focusing on worldly welfare, and it was not uncommon to switch from one faith to another with each change of ruling power.”³⁴ The perspective of the ruling class, meanwhile, was much the same:

Rulers and nobles (unlike their contemporaries in most of Europe, including the nobility of Serbia and Croatia) were indifferent to religious issues. They intermarried and formed alliances across denominational lines; when it suited their worldly aims, they changed faiths easily. They made no attempt to proselytize for their own faiths or to persecute others, consciously resisting foreign (papal and Hungarian) calls to persecute. The expansion of the state did not lead to the expansion of the Bosnian Church’s area of operations (except for a small-scale push into Hum)³⁵

In 1340, Stjepan Kotromanić, in a demonstration of both political expediency and religious goodwill, reopened his banate’s doors to the Franciscans, agreeing to receive the first Catholic missionaries on Bosnian soil in generations. Thus, nearly a century after falling into ruin, Bosnian

Catholicism was resurrected in the central highlands. In 1347, Kotromanić himself embraced Catholicism (likely converting from Orthodoxy), but even after this monumental shift, the Bosnian Church continued to operate freely—and with Kotromanić's support—as a native, third way of the Christian faith.³⁶

Expansion and Demise

In 1353, after a reign of three decades, during which time he transformed Bosnia into a prosperous and powerful realm, Kotromanić died. A period of considerable political instability followed, but by 1367, Stjepan Tvrtko, a nephew of Kotromanić, had assumed command of the country. At this time, the immense Kingdom of Serbia was disintegrating in the wake of its own founder's death. Tvrtko shrewdly lent support to a mighty Serbian nobleman in the power struggle that followed, and was rewarded with a large share of territory once victory was achieved. Its stature was elevated further when, amid the outbreak of civil war across Croatian lands, Tvrtko incorporated into Bosnia most of the remainder of the Dalmatian coast. With this, Bosnia graduated from a mere banate to a full kingdom, thus becoming the most powerful state in the western Balkans.³⁷

With Tvrtko's passing in 1392, however, the third golden age of medieval Bosnia quickly ended. Political turbulence, characterized by infighting among the nobility, was resurgent and hindered efficient governance of the kingdom for its remaining years. Beyond this, Turkish armies were drawing ever closer; over the course of a generation, vast territories to the south and east succumbed before the Ottoman advance.

During these years, Bosnia also experienced a significant shift in its religious balance. Multi-confessionalism continued to prevail, but the proportion of Catholics and Orthodox in relation to the population, as well as their geographical distribution throughout the country, began to change. The Orthodox were an increasing presence, due to waves of refugees that had begun spilling across the Drina River into the eastern borderlands, pushed westward from Serbia ahead of encroaching Ottoman forces. And even as Orthodoxy supplanted its hold over the eastern regions of the kingdom, the Franciscans were initiating a new push for the conversion of Bosnia to Catholicism. Granted protection by the Bosnian monarch, they undertook construction of a number of new monasteries and churches, and were even successful in reestablishing a bishopric within the country.³⁸

Suffering a loss of patronage due to the shifting allegiances of its flock, by 1450, the position of the Bosnian Church had become untenable. Rome added to its burden by launching a new volley of accusations, denouncing it once again as a bastion of heresy. Worse still, in 1453, the head of the Bosnian Church quit Bosnia altogether, taking refuge in the court of the Duke of Herzegovina. Later that year, according to accounts from Constantinople, he converted to Orthodoxy. This was a severe blow to the Bosnian Church, one from which it would not recover.³⁹

By the late 1450s, the continuance of Bosnia as an independent kingdom was becoming increasingly doubtful. The Ottomans continued to approach from the south and east, taking Vrhbosna (Sarajevo) in 1451. Bosnia's leaders, surveying the gravity of their position, recognized that their only recourse was to enlist the aid of Rome. Petitioning the pope for the survival of their kingdom, they received word that aid would indeed come, but at a price. Rome, in a classic case of political brinkmanship, demanded in return the eradication of the Bosnian Church and the reversion of prodigal

Bosnia to the Catholic fold. The answer was not long in coming; the tenuousness of Bosnia's existence had eroded whatever affection its leaders might once have held for the native church, and in 1459, King Stephen Tomaš agreed to Rome's terms. Launching a policy of persecution, he summoned the clergy of the Bosnian Church and offered them the choice of conversion to Catholicism or exile.⁴⁰ Only a handful elected to leave Bosnia; the remainder—some two thousand in number—chose to embrace Catholicism. With that, after two centuries of existence as a unique, national expression of Christian faith, the Bosnian Church was extinguished, undone by the same intrigue that had given rise to it.

Enter the Ottomans

Despite this victory, the resurgence of Catholicism within Bosnia was short-lived. The support of Rome was of dubious benefit, and in the summer of 1463, the kingdom was at last overrun by Turkish forces. The end came quickly and unexpectedly. The Bosnians were lulled into complacency by a hollow fifteen-year truce offered by the Sultan. Once Ottoman diplomats had secured the trust of the monarchy, Ottoman troops, with the Sultan leading them, penetrated into central Bosnia, where fortress after fortress fell to their advance—many without struggle.⁴¹ They executed the king and his entourage, and incorporated Bosnia into their Empire.

With the re-imposition of foreign rule, Bosnia embarked upon a period of radical social transformation. The most pronounced shift affected the religious landscape. Now, in addition to Catholicism, Orthodoxy, bands of dualists and dying traces of Bosnian Churchmen, Islam was introduced into the land. As it had during medieval times, Bosnia entered this period evincing a tradition of religious heterodoxy and tolerance. Among Ottoman conquests, Bosnia proved unique in that, far more than any other occupied Christian territory, Islam was widely embraced there.

The Islamization of Bosnia began with the arrival of Ottoman administrators. The process began slowly, with most of the territory still nominally Christian a generation after the conquest; a census taken in 1489, for example, shows five times as many Christians as Muslims living there.⁴² Initially, Islamization proceeded in two ways: through migration and conversion. Once the kingdom fell to the Turks, many Catholics began evacuating to as-yet unoccupied regions of Croatian and Dalmatia. As a result, large swathes of Bosnia were depopulated. To remedy this, the Ottomans opened Bosnia to settlement, and many Muslims entered from elsewhere in the Empire, resuscitating abandoned villages and homesteads. The arrival of these newcomers demystified the new faith for those Bosnians who had no prior exposure to it. At the end of the fifteenth century, Islamization was gathering pace, and by the 1520s, census data show that the number of Muslims had risen to nearly equal that of Christians. The influx of Muslim settlers had long since ceased; thus we can surmise that this radical increase was the result of conversion.⁴³ Indeed, by this time remnant adherents of the Bosnian Church, as well as Catholics and Orthodox, were embracing the new faith with relative ease.⁴⁴

Interestingly, however, the shift in observance was not limited to Islam. Examining the state of Bosnian society more closely, it emerges that Bosnia was swept by broad waves of religious change. By the mid-sixteenth century, Muslims were found throughout Bosnia, but so too were the Orthodox. In fact the Orthodox were seen in many places throughout Bosnia that only a generation or two prior were completely devoid of them. This is partly explained by migration. As Ottoman authorities opened a depleted Bosnia to settlement, adherents of Orthodoxy migrated into the region to live alongside their

new Muslim countrymen, increasing their presence in the northern and eastern sectors of the territory. In addition to migration, the ranks of Orthodox Christians swelled due to the conversion of many Bosnian Churchmen and Catholics to Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy, in fact, benefited from the new paradigm, as it was officially favored over Catholicism. The Ottomans felt they were well positioned to oversee Orthodox Christianity within their Empire, as its patriarch resided in their capital, Istanbul; if he began to nurture ideas of rebellion or crusade, he could be easily dealt with. Catholicism, on the other hand, was governed from Rome, far to the west of imperial control. Beyond this, the legacy of the Crusades sullied Catholicism in the eyes of the Ottomans.⁴⁵ Reflecting on the phenomenon of conversion sweeping Bosnian society in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Fine observes:

...conversion was a large-scale and multidirectional phenomenon. We find Bosnian Church members converting to Islam, Orthodoxy, and Catholicism and as a result disappearing from the scene entirely. We find Catholics greatly declining in numbers, with many emigrating but also with some converting to Islam and others to Orthodoxy. We find Orthodoxy gaining in numbers but still losing some of its members, particularly to Islam, but even a few to Catholicism. Thus changing religion was a general multidirectional phenomenon; Islam certainly won the most new converts, but Orthodoxy won many. Islam had many advantages, of course: it was the religion of the conquering state, and there were worldly advantages in lining up with the new rulers. Moreover, its worldly success seems to have been a sign of God's favor.⁴⁶

This brings us to the question, however: Why did so many Bosnians embrace Islam, when so many of their fellow Christians in the Balkans resisted? The answer, as Fine explains, is that very few Bosnians had ever been strong Christians:

If one looks at Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Greece, one finds well-organized state churches, with large and thriving monasteries, and an active episcopal structure commanding considerable loyalty. One also finds that in each of these areas one church organization existed without rivals, linked closely to the state or the nobility. In Bosnia, instead of having a single well-organized church as elsewhere in the Balkans, there existed three rival organizations, all of which were weak. No church in Bosnia or Herzegovina had ever had a strong territorial organization, and all three were very short of priests. Moreover, all the discovered church buildings from Bosnia's Middle Ages were small, too small to accommodate congregations of any size. This suggests that nobles, who presumably erected them, built them as family chapels and did not expect the local peasant population to attend. Thus even those who lived near a church building may rarely or even never have attended it. Few Christians were deeply attached to any Christian church or religious community, whether through belief or through sense of community.⁴⁷

In contrast to the flaccidity of Bosnian Christianity, the strain of Islam that implanted itself within Bosnia was vigorous and commanding:

After 1463 Islam—a dynamic, well-preached new religion—appeared...In a locality where Christianity was poorly organized and generally ineffectively preached, it is not surprising to find people without strong religious attachment accepting a new faith. Since the Bosnians had long been shaky Christians, who had dealt with the Turks for half a century before the conquest, they had no strong prejudices against Islam as people from most other Christian lands had. Moreover, religious motives may not have predominated in leading people to accept the new faith...Probably few Bosnians in accepting Islam underwent any deep changes in patterns of thought or way of life. Most of those who became Muslims probably continued to live as they always had, retaining most of the domestic customs and many Christian practices. They adopted a few Islamic practices, which would quickly acquire great symbolic value and would soon come to be viewed as the essentials of Islam.⁴⁸

Beyond the radical transformation of the religious landscape, the Ottomans wrought other sweeping changes to Bosnian society. Upon entering the former kingdom, Ottoman administrators set to work establishing new structures through which to govern the territory. Two elements, in particular, were imprinted upon Ottoman Bosnia: the systems of *devşirme* and the *millet*.⁴⁹

An active Ottoman regime until its abandonment in the mid-seventeenth century, under *devşirme* Christian boys were taken from their families and conscripted into military or administrative service. It was undoubtedly the most unsavory aspect of the new order:

They were not only pressed into service, but were forced to become Muslims and to learn Turkish, and they were not allowed to marry...At intervals of a few years recruiting officers were sent out with powers to conscript young Christian boys between the ages of eight and twenty. There were strict rules which the recruiting officers were required to follow. For example, they were not to recruit Muslims, Jews, members of certain skilled trades, orphans, only children and married men. In practice most of the *devşirme* boys came from Orthodox Christian families of Slav, Greek and Albanian origin. Even if the rules were obeyed, the system was clearly oppressive both to the families whose best sons were torn from them and to the young boys who would never see their parents again. But, as with the press-gang system for recruiting sailors in eighteenth-century England, the rules were often not obeyed. Bribery and the corrupt use of power by unscrupulous recruiting officers were all too common.⁵⁰

Compared to *devşirme*, the institution of the *millet* system was less burdensome to non-Muslims. Although characterized as infidels, Bosnian Christians were, nonetheless, grudgingly recognized for their monotheism. As such, they were not subject to overt religious persecution. Moreover, “Each religious community—or *millet*—was placed under the supervision of its own leaders, who acted as agents for the imperial government in collecting taxes and maintaining order amongst their people.”⁵¹ Of the *millet* system, historian Fred Singleton writes:

On the whole, the system worked as well as any of the administrative systems which functioned in contemporary Christian Europe. The Ottomans depended upon their non-Muslim subjects to conduct the trade of the empire and to provide most of the leading medical practitioners and other specialists. In return, the non-Muslims, although officially regarded as second-class citizens, were free to practice their religion...⁵²

Interestingly, the *millet* system ensured the preservation of Christian churches and monasteries within Bosnia. What's more, leaders of these bastions were assigned specific roles within the Ottoman system. In this way, Christian religious identity endured amid centuries of Muslim domination. As the lone institution sustaining Serb identity throughout Ottoman rule, the Orthodox Church in particular commanded fierce devotion and loyalty from its followers. In fact, "The flowering of Serbian national culture which occurred in the late eighteenth century and which led to the national awakening and later re-establishment of a Serbian state, owes much to the Orthodox monasteries" that persisted under the *millet* system.⁵³

Serbia Begins to Stir

By the early eighteenth century, it became apparent that the Ottoman Empire had passed its zenith. In 1718, battling enemy troops along the Ottoman-Habsburg frontier, the Turks were beaten back, and forced to cede to the Habsburgs a comparatively minor swathe of land beneath the Danube; from this, the Habsburgs fashioned a new province. The province was lost to the Ottomans following renewed fighting in 1739, but two decades of freedom from Ottoman rule had transformed its inhabitants, who were imbued with a new political and cultural consciousness. In the latter decades of the eighteenth century, this consciousness contributed to Serbian self-awakening, and helped inspire increasingly frequent insurrections against Ottoman rule. In time, this new self-awareness, this reinvigorated sense of identity and culture began to sprout among Orthodox Christians throughout the western Balkans—including those within Bosnia—thus marking the genesis of modern Serbian nationalism. In the lands of Serbia proper:

As in other Christian areas of the Empire, but in contrast to predominantly Muslim regions...this political ferment eventually assumed a militant religious-nationalist hue. The local notables sought to use this new development as a way to differentiate themselves both from the officially Islamic Ottoman polity and from sectors in the local elite willing to work within the Ottoman system. Adopting such a confrontational policy served to legitimize the [nationalists'] leadership role in society as well as to mobilize popular support for the elite's goals and emerging political aspirations. This new spirit of revolt against the Ottoman state eventually led to the establishment of an independent Serbian state based on a new nationalist ideology.⁵⁴

Complementing and stoking the Serbian hunger for self-rule was a dearth of opportunity. Within Bosnia, for example—only periodically prosperous during medieval times—the economy stagnated during the Ottoman period. Regarded as a backwater, it was largely neglected in favor of

regions closer to the heart of the Empire. Certain projects were undertaken, such as augmentation of public works and construction of bridges, mosques, and aqueducts, but on the whole, there was little regard for industrial development. In addition, during the seventeenth century the feudal system of subsistence agriculture had been supplanted by the appearance and rapid growth of large, privately-owned Muslim estates. Employing Christian workmen, the estates became breeding grounds for discontent. What's more, the peasantry was burdened by heavy taxation levied by secular and religious authorities alike. The burden of double taxation, compounded by growing corruption, only worsened matters, inciting Christian peasants to revolt. This, in turn, brought savage reprisals from increasingly nervous Ottoman officials.⁵⁵

Shepherding the revolts of the peasantry was a new breed of leader. Benefitting from increased exposure to education, peasant commanders were assigned official duties in their respective localities, as Ottoman administrators hoped they would ensure order within them. In time, however, these leaders began to exploit their privileged positions of rank by galvanizing "communal identification" among fellow Christians: "Uniting a new sense of political identification with an already well-developed religious identification," writes Francine Friedman, "these new Christian elites fostered the gradual development of incipient forms of national divisions within the Ottoman Balkan areas." Such stimulation unleashed strong resentments against the discriminatory ruling order that had burdened the Christian peasantry for generations.⁵⁶

Severance

As the nineteenth century dawned, the rise in Serbian nationalism was prompting ever bolder action against Ottoman forces—and magnifying tensions between Orthodox and Muslims. In 1801, a group of wayward Janissaries, or Muslim soldiers, seized control of a portion of central Serbia and imposed its rule upon the residents. For three years, the situation remained unresolved. Then, in 1804, a group of Serbian nobles met to plot the overthrow of the Janissaries. When the Janissary leaders learned of the nobles' scheme, it rounded dozens of them up and publicly beheaded them in a town square in central Serbia in a massacre later branded the "Slaughter of the Dukes." This enraged the Serbs and in reprisal, they struck Muslims in neighboring villages, killing many and driving others from their homes. The *First Serbian Uprising*, as the campaign became known, marked the beginning of a period of revolution that would, by 1835, free Serbs from Ottoman domination and lead to the establishment of Serbia as an independent state. Ominously, it also signaled that confessional coexistence in the western Balkans was beginning to fray.

Insurrectionists elsewhere in the Empire perceived that the Ottoman realm was rotting, and in Bosnia, fueled by Serbian successes to the east, the Christian peasantry grew increasingly restive. By mid-century, Bosnia was suffering widespread revolts against Muslim landowners. Bosnian Muslims, in turn, were hardening against Christians as a result. By the late 1860s, western visitors to Bosnia reported encountering previously unknown anti-Christian sentiments among Muslim clergy and religious teachers in Sarajevo. Another chronicled that in the period of 1871-1872, one could begin to glimpse the materialization of genuine religious hatred. Not long after, during the summer of 1873, two dozen Bosnian Christian merchants fled to Croatia, where they reported that a number of their brethren had been condemned to death for "fraternizing with the Austrian consul."⁵⁷

At this time, the Ottoman grip on Bosnia was disintegrating. As rebellion mounted, Christians gained footholds in Dalmatia and armed revolts spread into Montenegro. Volunteers from other Slav lands were pouring into the province to aid the Christian cause. The collapse of the old order appeared unstoppable, and Bosnian Muslims reeled at the tenuousness of their hold on power.⁵⁸ As a result, they reacted fearfully—and violently—toward the Christian population. During the winter of 1875-1876, the governor of Bosnia directed troops against the peasantry in Herzegovina with “ineffective brutality.” Anticipating a government takeover, other leaders conscripted their own bands of irregulars and began slaughtering the peasantry. By the end of 1876, hundreds of villages had been incinerated. Thousands of peasants were dead. And over one hundred thousand refugees were traversing the roads out of Bosnia to safer lands beyond its borders.⁵⁹

Thus ended a millennium of multi-confessional coexistence in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

NOTES

-
- ¹ Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 11-12.
- ² Chuck Sudetic, *Blood and Vengeance* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 7.
- ³ Eve Levin, professor of history at the University of Kansas, Lawrence. Taken from personal correspondence with the author on November 8, 2011.
- ⁴ John V.A. Fine, "Medieval and Ottoman Roots of Modern Bosnia," in Mark Pinson, ed., *The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3.
- ⁵ Malcolm, 6-8.
- ⁶ Fine, 3.
- ⁷ Malcolm, 9-11.
- ⁸ Ibid, 13-20.
- ⁹ Ibid, 13.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, 2-3, 8-9.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 14-15.
- ¹² Ibid, 15.
- ¹³ Milan Loos, *Dualist Heresy in the Middle Ages* (Prague: Academia Publishing House of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, 1974), 162-163.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 163-164.
- ¹⁵ M.D. Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from Bogomil to Hus* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1977), 143.
- ¹⁶ Loos, 212.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, 211.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, 162, 213.
- ¹⁹ Fine, "Medieval and Ottoman Roots of Modern Bosnia," 4.
- ²⁰ Ibid, 5.
- ²¹ John V.A. Fine, *The Bosnian Church: A New Interpretation* (Boulder, CO: East European Quarterly, 1975), 136.
- ²² Fine, "Medieval and Ottoman Roots of Modern Bosnia," 5.
- ²³ Fine, *The Bosnian Church*, 148-149.
- ²⁴ Ibid, 149.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Fine, *The Bosnian Church*, 149-150.
- ²⁷ Malcolm, 14, 27-29.
- ²⁸ Fine, "Medieval and Ottoman Roots of Modern Bosnia," 8.
- ²⁹ Fine, *The Bosnian Church*, 151.
- ³⁰ Ibid, 151-152.
- ³¹ Yuri Stoyanov, *The Other God: Dualist Religions from Antiquity to the Cathar Heresy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 224-226.
- ³² Fine, "Medieval and Ottoman Roots of Modern Bosnia," 6.
- ³³ Ibid, 9.
- ³⁴ Tom Gjelten, *Sarajevo Daily: A City and Its Newspaper Under Siege* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 28.
- ³⁵ Fine, "Medieval and Ottoman Roots of Modern Bosnia," 9.
- ³⁶ Ibid, 9-11.
- ³⁷ Malcolm, 18-20.
- ³⁸ Fine, "Medieval and Ottoman Roots of Modern Bosnia," 10-11.
- ³⁹ Malcolm, 41.
- ⁴⁰ Fine, "Medieval and Ottoman Roots of Modern Bosnia," 7-8.
- ⁴¹ Colin Heywood, "Bosnia Under Ottoman Rule, 1463-1800," in Pinson, 24.
- ⁴² Francine Friedman, *The Bosnian Muslims: Denial of a Nation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 18.

-
- ⁴³ Malcolm, 52-53.
- ⁴⁴ Fine, "Medieval and Ottoman Roots of Modern Bosnia," 13-14.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid, 14-15.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid, 15-16.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, 16-18.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, 18-19.
- ⁴⁹ Fred Singleton, *A Short History of the Yugoslav Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 37.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Ibid, 36.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid, 43-45.
- ⁵⁴ Norman Cigar, *Genocide in Bosnia* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 15-16.
- ⁵⁵ Singleton, 39-42.
- ⁵⁶ Friedman, 37-38.
- ⁵⁷ Malcolm, 121, 126, 130-131.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid, 132.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.