

Open wounds: Letter from Sarajevo

by [Donald W. Shriver](#) in the [June 6, 2001](#) issue

A bus makes the long, winding climb up the mountains that surround Sarajevo, and passengers enjoy a spectacular view of the valley where 400,000 people reside. Watching the lights of homes and shops glimmer in the twilight, one might forget that it was from these scenic overlooks that Serbian guns pummeled the city for almost four years, killing 1,500 children and 11,000 adults in a war that took 200,000 lives, uprooted half of Bosnia's 4 million people and destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes.

Many of the physical structures of this capital city and other towns have now been restored. But other damages are more difficult to assess and repair. "Our children went through daily danger to their lives," said one Bosnian recently. "They witnessed blood and death on these streets almost every day. When we read about American children's experience of shooting in your Columbine High School, we think: 'They saw what we saw for two minutes. We saw it for four years.'"

Five years after the Dayton Accords, the question is still raised: Why did the Serbs dismantle this city piece by piece with gunfire? The answers from residents vary: They expected the war to last only a few days; they saw us as the one real multiethnic city in the region, and were dead set against multiethnicity; they wanted to demoralize us, and they knew that to take the city, they needed 10,000 more soldiers. A Serb now living in Republica Srpska has yet another explanation: "Because we wanted to protect and save the Serbs in Sarajevo."

The apparent irrationality of his answer hides an insight into the psychology of evil-doing: We had to kill those Croats and Muslims who think they have a right to live alongside our Serbian brothers and sisters. Our lives are the ones that really count.

Ethnicity above all: that is the heart of the Bosnian tragedy. Thanks to ambitious political leaders and the rivalry of religions, the names "Serb" and "Croat" and "Bosniac" overwhelmed the identities "citizen" and "human." A Muslim army veteran who fought the Serbs and Croats for four years now works for Church World

Service. He tells how, before the war, he had encountered two Serbian boys who spouted a crude slur at him. "They were the ones who, ten years later, became members of the paramilitary gangs who did most of the killing in Bosnia—Arkan and his like. I call them 'Chetniks,' not Serbs. For I know that not all Serbs hate Muslims and Croats."

In *Bosnia: A Short History*, Noel Malcolm concurs: "The atrocities in Bosnia in 1992 were not committed by old men, or even by young Bosnians nursing grudges about the Second World War. The pattern was set by young urban gangsters in expensive sunglasses from Serbia. . . . Though the individuals who performed these acts may have gained some pathological pleasure from them, what they were doing was to carry out a rational strategy dictated by their political leaders—a method carefully calculated to drive out two ethnic populations and radicalize a third."

One well-known Serbian Orthodox leader speaks about the conflict between God and the devil in the onslaught of violence. He is sure that the devil is active in the political leaders and in the hearts of every person who has not learned to love after the example of Jesus. He claims no responsibility on the church's side for the Balkan tragedy.

When asked what the churches are doing to repair the damages of war, he replies that they are trying to get the government to restore church properties confiscated years ago by the communists. He dismisses as enemy propaganda reports of the church's supporting Serbian aggression.

As another Bosnian put it: "Everyone sees himself as a victim now. The perpetrators of the war might as well have come down from the moon!"

Nationalistic division of the world between God and the devil is a powerful story in Serbian history, and the Serbian Orthodox Church has aided and abetted the division for centuries. Of all the Orthodox church bodies in the world, the Serbian identifies most with its nation, and with a tradition of national innocence. Author Branimir Anzulovic concludes that one obstacle to a healthy political climate in the region is "the present hierarchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church; the people who should represent the moral conscience of the nation and condemn the crimes committed in the attempt to create a greater Serbia are instead ardent nationalists and inciters of xenophobia."

Slobodan Milosevic now elicits widespread contempt among Serbs not because of his nationalism, but because he lost the war. In all Serbian wars, the Orthodox Church has been a staunch ally, a willing support to one of the most disastrous political-cultural-religious mistakes of all human history: the collapse of the distinction between nation, state and religion. Croats and Muslims have been guilty of the same mistake, which prompted them, in the wars of the '90s, to duplicate Serbian atrocities.

Those who refuse to identify all Serbs with the devilry of the "Chetnik" gangs are struggling to shake loose from an ethnocentric disease that has destroyed millions of lives in centuries past in the Balkans and across the world. Since 1980, "ethnic cleansing" has been practiced by all sides in the Balkans.

Serbs, Croats and Muslims in the Balkans will never see themselves as political neighbors without some new public affirmations of a shared history. So long as most of these groups write their own history books and teach in their own ethnically segregated schools, they will continue to live captive to historical myths.

Many are eager for establishment of a truth commission, first in Bosnia and hopefully in Croatia and Serbia as well. "We have got to establish the truth about the good and evil on all sides in the recent wars," they say, "so that the victims can tell their stories and the history books can be written honestly." One Bosnian group, NGO Protektor, has begun to collect and publish stories about ethnically diverse neighbors helping each other during the war. This work will add a positive dimension to the truth commissions. So far, however, Bosnian law does not equip its courts with subpoena powers, nor is it likely that such a commission will have amnesty-granting power. So the self-protective instincts of wartime politicians will probably limit the likelihood of their appearance before such a body. The complementary work of the Hague War Crimes Court for Yugoslavia is crucial if international law is ever to take root in the region.

Some religious leaders believe that the only pathway toward a genuine democratic order lies in grass-roots cooperation: village neighbors who help each other rebuild homes, share farm tools and otherwise work together across ethnic lines to repair the economy and the interreligious peace for which Bosnia was once famous. Paul Mojzes, a native of Yugoslavia, observes that the trouble with the seeming peace between neighbors in Bosnian villages was that they drank coffee together but never discussed their religious differences and commonalities. An impressive

number of religious leaders are now trying to build firmer bridges between the religions by bringing together diverse groups to investigate how and if the Christian and Muslim traditions are akin or different in matters of law, war, peace and human identity.

These efforts range from an organization called “Abraham,” led by a German Protestant pastor and Muslim theologian who explore how each religion affirms the value of “the stranger”; to Franciscan priest Ivo Markovic, who has organized a multi-ethnic choir for public musical performance; to an international interdisciplinary collaboration of scholars called Forum Bosnia. Active in some of these efforts are the U.S. Institute of Peace, the World Conference on Religion and Peace, and the Mennonite Church.

Rusmir Mahmutcehajic, president of Forum Bosnia, is a physicist by training, a Muslim theologian and an eloquent apostle for “epistemic modesty”:

If I worship my religion it becomes my idol and therefore is antireligious. Our forum tries to do research on how our respective traditions reject the fundamentalism that says, “I have all the truth and you have none.” If people say to each other, “We are perfect,” there is no room for their improvement! . . . Real religion teaches us that we must assume responsibility for helping the weakest, most damaged people around us. We must stand up for them inside our own communities. If we don’t, we become partners in the evil of fundamentalism.

A thousand years ago, Bosnia was a place where religions lived together in mutual respect. “Almost every child grew up in an environment that included the call to prayer from the minarets of the mosques and the ringing of the church bells from church steeples.” In that environment, respect for a neighbor’s differences derived from respect for the differences between human truths and God’s truth. The question remains: Is religion the enemy or the friend of democratic tolerance in the future of Bosnia?

Any religious organization that preaches and practices genuine openness to all sorts and conditions of people elicits both admiration and perplexity among Bosnians. One example is the tiny Methodist congregation in Mostar led by Zvonimir Vojtulek, minister and administrator of the countrywide United Methodist Committee on Relief. Like its United Nations counterpart, this organization distributes food and other life support without discrimination to Croats, Bosnians and Serbs. Vojtulek tells how he met a fellow Mostar native on the street who asked him in astonishment:

“How can you be a Croat and a native of Mostar and not be a Catholic?” In the answer to such questions lies the road ahead for Bosnia—toward a society that identifies its members first as being human beings, next as citizens, and only then as members of separate religions and ethnic histories. n