

## ISLAM IN CONTEMPORARY BOSNIA: A PERSONAL STATEMENT

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### I

The history of the Bosniaks, the former Patarins and Bogumils and the later Muslims, was best expressed by a Bosnian writer Mehmed Meša Selivović in the following excerpt:

History had never made such a joke with anyone as it did with us. . . We had been torn away and disconnected and were not accepted. Like a branch of the river which had been separated from the mother river by a torrential flood and it had neither a stream nor its mouth of the river, too small to be a lake and too big for a soil to absorb it within itself.

We live at the crossroads of the worlds, on a border of nations; we bear the brunt for everybody, and we have always been guilty in the eyes of someone. The waves of history break themselves over our backs, as on a reef.

Nowadays Bosniaks happen to be the most Western autochthonous Muslim nation, and, apart from that, they also happen to be the most Eastern of all European Muslims. The mere fact that they represent a living bridge between the numerous Western and Eastern aspirations and eruptions has brought a number of paradoxes into their lives. According to their language, the colour of their skin, their Slavic origin and the soil they inhabit, Bosniaks are Europeans. According to the destiny to which they have been exposed in Europe, their faith and the sense of cultural belonging, Bosniaks are in one way or another and in spite of everything, Muslims.

Eurocentrists and Eurochauvinists consider them, because of their Islam, as an alien body and as foreigners in Europe. Eurochauvinism displays scant regard for the fact that both Christianity and Islam came to Europe from the East and that Europe, as far as contemporary religions are concerned, is merely a spiritual offshoot of Asia. Therefore, Bosniaks as Muslim have every right to their European soil as much as their immediate neighbours — the Greek

Orthodox Serbs and the Roman Catholic Croats. And they should also have equal rights to anything which follows consequently from this fact. These rights belong to them because they happen also to be human beings. It would be disastrous both for Bosniaks and for Europe if Europe were to try to dispute this obvious reality.

Nevertheless, Bosniaks are the only people in contemporary Europe who are threatened to disappear from the surface of the earth or to be exterminated as a people and nation. We became painfully aware of this fact after ten genocidal crusades had been launched against us, mostly by the Orthodox Serbs, crusades actuated by ethnic-cum-religious extremism. Practically, the entire modern history of Bosniaks could be seen as intermissions between persecutions, pogroms, genocides and ethnic purges.

These realities can be best seen in our literature and in our historical memory. At the same time, the history of Bosniaks is an account of a continuous struggle for survival. It has always been a struggle, no matter how heavy its cost. The Bosniaks simply refused to surrender even when besieged and attacked from all sides. That is why the Bosniaks are inheritors of the most paradoxical history of all Europe. In fact they are the most glorious and persistent spiritual dissidents of Europe.

## II

The coming of Islam to Eastern Europe is not only the most important turning point in the history of Bosniaks; it is also a turning point in the mainstream of the history of Bosnia.

In Bosnia, Islam is of Sunnī provenance, and spread on the Bosnian soil without their being recourse to any coercion as did the other religions. Bosnia was witness to the phenomenon of the spread of different religions because it did not predominantly choose either Islamization or Christianization. Even today, after the terrible pogroms in the most recent period between 1992-1995, Bosnia is a grand multicultural and multireligious tapestry of land in the larger parts of which Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs continue to live together. It is not a museum-like or fossilized religious situation from the ancient Ottoman or the more recent Austro-Hungarian past intended to be a show case for Western tourists.

Historians of religion could easily recognize in Bosnia, in all its epochs from the fifteenth century on, a filigree that was precise, mixed and indivisible resulting from the facts of life, a mosaic comprised of four communities: Muslim, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Jewish. I could also assert, not only because I am a Muslim, that Islam provided Bosnia with the highest standards of tolerance. Of course, in different times the Roman Catholics contributed to tolerance, particularly the Bosnian Franciscans, then the Greek Orthodox people and, finally, the Jews. Unfortunately, with this last genocide carried out against the Bosniaks in many parts of Bosnia, this traditional, multicultural and multilateral Bosnia seems to be withering away. Europe and the whole world must divert not only much more financial resources but also much more love and care in order to help to reconstruct this traditional Bosnia.

It has been said that Islam in Bosnia is traditionally of the Sunnī provenance. This fact in the culture of Bosniaks means, among many other things, a permeating amalgam which, together with the Bogumil syncretism, formed the nation of Bosniaks.

With Islam in Bosnia new towns emerged or the existing ones prospered, and mosques, churches and synagogues were erected in the centres of these towns. The traditional Bosnia has been known for towns in which the roof tops of mosques and churches almost touched each other. Thanks to many components, and particularly to the traditional forms of Islam, Roman Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy and Judaism, Bosnia became a society of Abraham from which each nation, in accordance with its religious tradition and belief, raised its eyes towards the large skies and appealed to its beloved God according to its own faith and orthodoxy. It could be affirmed that this is the only country in Europe which sprang out from the pages of the Holy Bible and the Qur'ān.

In their culture of housing, in building of their places of residence with sunny windows and ariel windows (*doksat*), in their cult of the usage of water, in the religion-inspired economy of diet, in a horticulture of their architecture which reminds us of Paradise and the Other World, in the shaping of their mosques and mosque roof-tops in harmony with colours which appear from the most remote depths of heaven's blue (*in this way, Nature is imperceptibly transformed into culture and culture into Nature*) — in all of this and in many other things Bosniaks have been living their Islam here for centuries.

We would like to mention that Sufism added a great deal to Islamic tolerance in Bosnia in two ways: within the Muslim community, that is to say, in the tolerance exercised by Muslims towards other Muslims; and in its relation with others; that is, the Muslims could become tolerant towards the members of other faiths, such as Christians, and Jews.

The first traces of Sufism can be identified in Bosnia seven centuries ago. The Sufis came to Bosnia and to its Bogumils from the East, and the Franciscans from the West. A number of Bosniaks became great Sufi authors, a fact which can be seen from hundreds of manuscripts and other documents, and the tens of *tekkes* and the records about them, and also from Sufi orders which can still be found in these parts. *Dhikr*, or a mention of Allah's Names with awe and reverence, is a regular feature of the mosques throughout Bosnia. We see in this the undisputed contributions of living Sufi teachings to the Bosnian Islamic tradition.

Islamic mystics built their *tekkes* in Bosnia usually in the most beautiful Bosnian landscapes, on the hills or near the sources of rivers. The Sufi-inspired literature, particularly a few larger mystical poems, influenced the development of what is usually denoted as *adab* in Islamic culture which refers to the conduct of people towards other people and Nature.

Bosnian Bogumils did not have churches of their own as buildings, but church sites, i.e. places in Nature, usually abundant with beauty, where they performed their prayers. To Sufism has to be attributed the greatest contribution

in preserving such a custom among the Bosniaks, with its entirely Islamicized character and revived by Islamic teachings. Bosnian Muslims replaced their church sites with *du'ā'* (prayer) sites (places in open Nature for performing of Islamic religious services), and the Bosnian Muslim poets sang from the earliest recorded times until now about the sources of water, flowers, gardens and parks. It is not difficult to find many Sufi-inspired poems of such a character in the most recent poetry of the younger generations of Bosniak poets, in the poems published even during the recent war and under the siege.

### III

The world-media, especially the Western, have posed this question for a long time: will the sufferings of the Bosniaks drive Islam in the Balkans to radicalism?

It should be borne in mind that such a radical development, if it happened — may God forbid — would lead in two directions. The first would be in a direction that would affect the relationship among the sections of the Bosnian Muslims themselves concerning the right or true Islam. The subject of true Islam and the internecine bloodshed among Muslims over the issue as to which Islam should be considered as the proper and right one can be seen today, more or less clearly, in some other parts of the Islamic world. I hold that the contemporary problem of the dispute among Muslims about the "right kind of Islam" happens to be the most dangerous issue in the Muslim societies today, and if it is not imported into Bosnia from the outside, this community will remain immune against it just because Islam in Bosnia has had a predominantly traditional orientation.

Fortunately, Bosnian Muslims have been tolerant among themselves for centuries and it is of vital importance that their politicians, intelligentsia, thinking and leading people and groups and above all, the Islamic community — their most fundamental institution — concentrate all their efforts intelligently not to allow that kind of division and polarization among Bosniaks to take place concerning the issue of "better" and "worse" or "right" and "faulty" Muslims, after the horrible genocide and unthinkable atrocities that were committed against their people. Bosnia is European soil and it is very important that the Bosnian Muslims have accepted for a long time until today the principle of practicing, expressing and professing Islam in a civil society and a civil state.

That fact, in the European context and at this time, serves Bosnian Muslims usefully because it secures the professing of Islam without any political prescriptions as to what is the "right Islam". Islam in Bosnia is a common treasure of all the Bosniaks, a precious treasure from which they have been drawing their multiform religious, cultural, artistic, literary, urban, architectural and traditional inspirations.

In such a concept of Islam, which Bosniaks have accepted for a long time, Islam will never become anybody's preserve, nor a handy ploy of politicians using it for selfish, mundane ends. Bosniaks must protect themselves

from themselves, from the different forms of religious, traditional, political and cultural excommunication.

The traditional conception of Islam also respects the Bosniak consensus that the Islamic Community of Bosniaks must be assigned the most esteemed role — a constant vigil over the people's being and its spiritual continuity. The Islamic community is a keeper of such a continuity and the freedom of its activities for all Bosniaks is beyond any doubt.

It is highly important that Bosniaks honour the talented members of their community and pay them respect regardless of whether they happen to be eminent poets, successful actors, commentators, '*ulamā*', painters, leaders of various political parties, etc. Of course, a condition without which Bosniaks cannot exist (the Bosniak *conditio sine qua non*) and what that determines the least common denominator of their mutual reverence and respect is the existence of Bosnia itself and the survival of its people with honour and dignity.

#### IV

Bosniaks, therefore, reached a consensus more than a century ago as to how they would express their Islamic identity and how they will practice their faith in a secular state. The state they support is not chauvinistic towards one a few religion and benevolent to others. Its legislation does not distinguish between recognized and unrecognized religions, but affirms religious rights for all. Freedom of conscience and the right to practice one's faith are recognized without any reservation which has been reinforced by the actual practice of those rights and civic liberties.

Of course, what Bosniaks very often consider, whether they happen to be writers, philosophers, politicians, or religious leaders, is an *efficient Islam*, an Islam that would be a viable proposition in the present world, an Islam that would confer strength and respectability on its followers, in the world, particularly in this part of Europe.

Our historians have counted ten terrible genocides against Bosnian Muslims in the last several decades. Such a number of genocides against Bosniaks is not a matter that concerns the anti-Bosnian satraps and those who launched genocide. This issue is also of concern to the Bosniaks. Bosniaks must think of their Islam as one that is universal and open to more than one interpretation. At the same time it must be efficient and capable of providing a world-view, ethics and culture for a society living in the middle of Europe.

If we cast a glance backwards through at least two centuries of our history, we will notice, from the records such as the press, for instance, that religious thinkers and the Bosnian Muslim intelligentsia had not considered the problem of the dignified survival of Bosniaks in an organized, programme-oriented, institutional and systematic manner. And these were the centuries when history was not at all benevolent towards Bosniaks. Besides, they inhabited and continued to inhabit areas deeply stricken by the terror of history.

Because of all these factors, they should have envisaged at least, if not prevented, their bitter destiny, articulated and given voice to their situation, to

spread a warning signals of the unpending catastrophe, the genocide of Bosnian Muslims by Serbian chauvinists. All this should have been built in the curricula and programmes of their education.

That is why, now that we are aware of the kind of fate hanging over Bosnia, the education of Bosniaks, particularly the anti-genocidal awareness, must be understood as our foremost Islamic duty. Speaking Arabic, English, German, French, to be a first class physician, to write a literary work on the Bosnian destiny — all this would mean service to Islam by the young Bosniak boys and girls, if it were to be carried out purposefully with a sense of dedication to the nation's survival.

Bosniaks have something in common with the European Jews during the current century. Both have witnessed concentration camps, pogroms and numerous emigrations, which outnumber several times the number of people remaining in the country.

But fortunately history is known to God only. He alone knows why Bosnia was set ablaze in 1992, exactly five centuries after the Muslims and Jews had been expelled from Spain. Let us hope that this would not be the macabre sign of the upcoming phase of European history.

Bosnian Muslims are not in the same situation as the Muslims of Bangladesh. When two hundred thousand Bangladeshi Muslims die in a huge monsoon flood, it is, naturally, a very tragic event. But two hundred thousand victims in comparison to the tens of millions of other Bangladeshi Muslims constitute a small percentage of the total population of Muslims of that country. However, two hundred thousand (or more?) fallen Bosniaks is a colossal figure, so colossal that this loss would look like the beginning of Doomsday. We must do everything in order to become aware of it and to make others in Europe and in the seemingly slumbering Islamic world aware of this.

There is no doubt whatsoever that Islam here and in the course of the centuries to come will be for the Bosniaks similar to the ember of fire held by one in the palm of one's hand. Were one to keep holding it, one would get burnt. But if one were to drop it, it would be lost and if this spark, may God forbid, were to become extinguished, it would mean the definite end for Bosniaks.

