

EVANGELICAL INTERFAITH

dialogue

Fuller Theological Seminary



BETWEEN NATION AND RELIGION: Christian Witness in Southeastern Europe

SPRING
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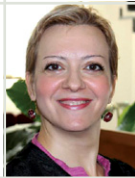


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Summary Statement

The essays in this edition of the journal each take up a basic question: in what ways can Christians living in the countries of former Yugoslavia contribute to the peace of their societies? The two images by artist Marko Podgorščak (front and back covers) help us feel the socio-religious barriers that exist today. Amidst such tensions, Christians from all traditions must reflect on their ethnic, national, and religious identities in order to overcome the past and embody a faithful witness in their societies.

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Vision Statement

This journal seeks to create space for evangelical scholars and practitioners to dialogue about the dynamics, challenges, practices, and theology surrounding interfaith work, while remaining faithful to the gospel of Jesus and his mission for his church.

Views expressed in Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or the seminary. Produced in limited quantities.

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On the Cover:

Marko Podgorščak, *Observers* (2014)

See back cover for more on the artist.

Introduction

IDENTITY AND DIALOGUE:

Seeing the Other as the Face of Christ

Often, when certain countries from Southeastern Europe are mentioned outside of Europe—Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, or Kosovo, for example—people’s only associations are the brutal wars that ended almost two decades ago.

In reality, much has happened since that time; today in the young countries that once made up Communist Yugoslavia there are many confessing Christians who are actively engaging society, working toward the communal good, forming relationships across religious, ethnic, and political lines—and striving to bear witness to Christ as they do so. Still, the current socio-economic and political challenges—high unemployment, economic crises, and corruption across various sectors of society—present ongoing challenges for all Christians who see themselves having a role in maintaining peace and working towards the good in their societies. Such a posture cannot be maintained without fostering living relationships through dialogue across ethno-religious lines.

One of the most significant hurdles for peacemaking and dialogue is the issue of identity; how one understands oneself in relation to others can be a historically loaded process that can usher in either transformation and peace or stalemate and conflict. In this, evangelicals have the potential to play a constructive role in Southeastern Europe as their Christian identity is not tied to state or ethnicity, which can be a source of antagonism and division. As they wrestle with these issues in their own societies, their experiences can contribute to greater understanding for the global church about the role of identity in the dialogue and peacemaking process. In this issue, we are privileged to hear evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox perspectives from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Macedonia that speak directly from their local contexts. Their responses illustrate the possibilities and challenges that evangelicals encounter as they pursue the flourishing of societies in this context.



Catholics praying in Međugorje, Bosnia, a town that became an international pilgrimage destination after a group of children reported seeing apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the early 1980s

Melody J. Wachsmuth is a PhD student at the Oxford Center for Mission Studies.



THE DIALOGICAL ENCOUNTER: Reshaping Identity through Relationship

“A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love.”¹

Recently, a young Bosnian evangelical friend described his experience at an ecumenical prayer gathering he attended on behalf of the Baptist Church in Croatia. “The atmosphere felt cold,” he said to me, “as if there were no real relationships or friendships amongst the religious leaders.” Although certainly there are real relationships across various religious and ethnic lines in this region, my friend still touched upon an important point—ecumenism and interfaith engagement, particularly in a place where the memory of a brutal conflict still plays a role in politics and society, soon hollows into an empty shell of pretense if they never evolve into real relationships.

My last three years in Southeastern Europe have traced a steep learning curve in regard to the complex cultural, ethnic, historical, religious, and political factors contributing to the present mosaic. This has helped me begin to understand how Christians here see themselves and their role in society. The challenge of interfaith engagement in this part of the world is not a clear-cut step across a religious boundary. In fact “Othering”—that is, the reduction of a person or community into a stereotype and generalized assumptions—can take a few different forms. Most fundamentally, ethnic, national, and religious identities are often tightly interwoven, and this fused identity has at times been used to further one’s national interest. In other words, generally in this region, to be Croat is to be Catholic; to be Serbian, Macedonian, or Montenegrin is to be Orthodox; and to be a Bosniak or a Kosovar Albanian (although a small percentage of Kosovars are Catholic) is to be Muslim. Sometimes this ethno-religious identification



can be devoid of religious meaning—for example, it is not so strange to meet a Croatian who self-identifies as a Catholic and yet is agnostic or even atheist. Second, Othering takes place across purely ethnic lines. For instance, there is a sizeable Romani population scattered in countries throughout Southeastern Europe; although they often adopt the primary religion of the country in which they reside, they are generally marginalized by virtue of being Romani and kept out of most conversations. Finally, there is an Othering across Christian traditions—most notably between the historic traditions (Catholic and Orthodox) and the Protestant and evangelical communities, which are in the vast minority.

These different forms of Othering, which have been shaped through history and further demarcated by the regional wars in the 1990s, speak to the fact that identity—both of oneself and of the Other—present a complicated challenge to interfaith engagement. In fact, identity and one’s self-understanding in relation to the Other is directly related to the *quality* of engagement between the two. If two individuals have a genuine relationship, it is possible that not only do the caricatures of ascribed identity dissolve but also that one’s self-identity will incorporate the Other. In this process the

Other can be transformed into a friend and neighbor. Most importantly, the *quality* of engagement directly affects the peace and common good in these societies.

What role can dialogue play in reshaping identity with regard to the Other—whether it be crossing religious, ethno-religious, or ethnic lines? Instead of being permanently locked in war memories, injustices, or historically ascribed identities as one’s *only* association with the Other, a dialogical encounter can form new relational memories that can birth fresh possibilities for communal flourishing. In fact, the apparent incompatibility of historical memories across ethno-religious lines—which is an acute obstacle preventing forgiveness and reconciliation—can actually serve to illuminate one’s own prejudices through the dialogue process. Mohammed Abu-Nimer argues in *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacemaking* that a dialogical encounter can transform perceptions of the conflict and of the enemy after an acknowledgement of the mutuality of their fears: “When that bridge is constructed between the two sides, a powerful connection has been made—one that separates dialoguers from non-dialoguers.” Interfaith dialogue, Abu-Nimer points out, in comparison to a secular or interethnic encounter, can

have a deeply transformative effect because it gives spirituality a central role in the process. The dialogical encounter processed through one’s spiritual identity—that is, one’s deeply held values and beliefs—leads to a “deeper human connection” and becomes the “source” for joint action geared towards community flourishing.²

If spirituality and religious commitment are central in reshaping identity in the dialogical transformative process, what should be the Christian’s response? Miroslav Volf emphasizes in his book *The End of Memory* that Christian identity is unique—in fact,





One of the major problems for the Christian churches and their mission in post-Communist Southeastern and Eastern Europe is the temptation to return to a quasi-Constantinian model of church-state relationship. As the Communist ideology (singular) was being replaced with nationalist ideologies (plural), an intense and, to some extent, a valid rediscovery of national religious identity took place. The churches were given rightful recognition for having historically preserved the sense of nationhood, indigenous language and culture—especially in the Balkans where these were threatened during the centuries of the Islamic Ottoman-Turkish imposition. The churches were also rightfully credited for their opposition to the Communist system and its atheistic worldview, and for keeping alive certain endangered national and spiritual values. On the negative side, however, the discernible shifts “from totalitarianism to tribalism” (issuing in inter-ethnic conflicts and wars) and “from rights to roots” threatened the democratic processes and the development of full-fledged pluralist liberal societies in most of the Southeastern European countries. In their extreme forms, these shifts also present a dangerous resurgence of new national religious totalitarianisms as the national churches gain access to power and reassert their monopolistic claims on religious life and activity in their nations. In these countries belonging to the national church is becoming less a question of theological persuasion and Christ-centered spirituality and more a question of patriotism and bona fide citizenship.”

Dr. Peter Kuzmič

Eva B. and Paul E. Toms Distinguished Professor of World Missions and European Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
Founder and president, Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek

this identity becomes one of *displacement*, pointing to Martin Luther’s depiction of identity as being hidden in God through faith and in our neighbor through love. Therefore, Volf claims, “we are not fundamentally the sum of our past experiences . . . they qualify rather than define who we are.”³

In this region of the world, Protestants and evangelicals provide a witness of identity displaced from ethnic or nationalistic ties, since they are not associated with a national church. In addition, examples from the Catholic Church illustrate what it means to step out of ethno-religious identity in order to partner with evangelicals on projects that will serve to better society. Unfortunately, all too often, mutual prejudices exist across the boundaries of the Protestant, evangelical, Orthodox, and Catholic traditions. Evangelicals frequently have a hard time believing that one can be a true follower of Christ and remain in the Catholic or Orthodox confessions, particularly if they encountered personal opposition when they stepped away from their traditional roots. To Catholics and Orthodox, Protestants and evangelicals are often seen as sectarian or even worse as traitors to one’s nation. And yet, the witness of Christian unity is a vital component to peacekeeping and reconciliation in this context. Despite—and perhaps because of—the ongoing challenges in this region, Christians in Southeastern Europe have unique theological perspectives to offer the rest of the global church.

This issue of *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue* journal includes essays from Christians from various religious traditions and diverse countries of the former Yugoslavia. There is a recognizable coherence in the themes of these collected essays: the necessity of spirituality to the dialogue and reconciliation process, the complexity of identities and how they can both restrict and transform interfaith engagement, and the possibilities for evangelicals to contribute to human flourishing in Southeastern Europe. As such, this issue is not an attempt to revisit the reasons for the wars or to provide a comprehensive analysis of the current situation—there are many perspectives that could have been included to further deepen and broaden the picture. Instead, it offers to the global evangelical church voices from those who are attempting to live out their faith in these Southeastern European countries. We are privileged to hear evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox perspectives from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Macedonia that speak directly from their local contexts.

I suggest you begin with Dr. Kostake Milkov’s essay in which he briefly traces the history of the region in order to explain the complexity of the forces that have shaped religious, ethnic, and national identity over the last 20 years. He then proceeds to narrow his focus and discusses the specific challenges of the Evangelical Church in Macedonia. Following his essay, I encourage you to read through the other essays as determined by your interest. The following is a brief description of the contents of each essay.

Dr. Branko Bjelajac writes about the ongoing difficulties of identity in Serbia—even 19 years after the war. Evangelical communities, he argues, are the only neutral mixing ground and have the potential to witness across all sectors of society. However, discrimination against evangelicals in Serbia abounds, and therefore there is very little interfaith and interreligious cooperation.

Ela Magda discusses how “secondhand” memories have influenced the next generation of youth in Croatia. Because they have been formed by their parents’ experiences in the war, the youths’ sense of tradition and identity remains unchanged or unchallenged. She calls for a “forced” identity crisis through dialogue in order for them to reevaluate their identity.

The praxis piece depicts an ongoing conflict in Vukovar, Croatia—a city largely destroyed in the war—painting a tangible picture of how these forces of first- and secondhand memories play out in current social and political events. Dr. Ljiljana Gehrecke, an Orthodox Christian of German descent, has had a visionary leadership role in the peacebuilding and reconciliation process in Vukovar over the last decade and offers her insights regarding the connection between spirituality and peacemaking.

Julijana Mladenovska-Tešija uses the recent event surrounding gay marriage in Croatia as a lens by which to analyze some of the issues that evangelicals face when they are engaging with their neighbors who may differ from them regarding ethnicity, religion, values, and political beliefs. She argues that making dialogue a normal part of everyday life, both within the church and between the church and society, is critical both for maintaining an open society and for our Christian witness.

Marko Oršolić, a Franciscan, theologian, and political scientist, has played a critical role in peacemaking and dialogue in Bosnian society over the past couple of decades. He offers insights into the complexity and difficulty of interfaith relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and talks about the unique role played by the International Multi-religious and Intercultural Center (IMIC) in Sarajevo for fostering peace.

Authentic followers of Christ in all Christian traditions have a unique role to play in cultivating peace and interfaith engagement; courageously vulnerable dialogue is critical and must begin first in the Christian community as a model and witness to the rest of society. And, as my young Bosnian friend noted, the dialogical encounter that fails to progress into any kind of relationship will remain strictly superficial—identities that remain static lack the communal power to effect lasting change. When the Other becomes a neighbor, however, individual and communal identities become a dynamic narrative influencing the texture of society. **EIFD**

Melody J. Wachsmuth earned MAs in both theology and cross-cultural studies from Fuller Seminary. She has lived in Croatia since 2011 as a freelance mission journalist and researcher and is a co-founder of *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue*. She blogs at balkanvoices.wordpress.com.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, in Luther's Works, 31:371; as quoted in Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 198.
- ² Mohammed Abu-Nimer, “The Miracles of Transformation through Interfaith Dialogue: Are You a Believer?” in *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, ed. David R. Smock (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2002), 15–17.
- ³ Volf, *End of Memory*, 98, 199.



Left to right: A Serbian Orthodox wedding in Mitrovica, Kosovo—a city still tensely divided between Kosovar Albanians and Serbian Orthodox; Saint John at Kaneo church in Ohrid, Macedonia; A Kosovar Albanian man in Pristina, Kosovo.

Kostake Milkov runs the Balkan Institute for Faith and Culture.



Macedonia

THE WITNESS OF EVANGELICAL COMMUNITIES IN CONTESTED BALKAN IDENTITIES

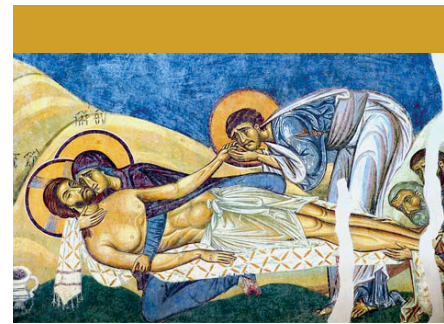
The Balkans represents a geo-political context with a diversity of languages, peoples, cultures, and religions. To the rest of the world, this diversity looks more like complexity, and it is a synonym for political unrest, armed conflict, and most recently, for ethnic cleansing. Historically this region has been a context for power struggles in which different civilizations and empires have tried to claim it for their own realm of influence or control.

These struggles include religious competition as well. The main religious influences upon the region have been Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Islam. More recently, since the second half of the nineteenth century, the region has witnessed the arrival of Protestant denominations. These have not grown significantly in numbers, but nevertheless have made a considerable impact on the shaping of the religious discourse and the interconfessional landscape. The picture is further complicated by the political transition of the Balkan countries following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Except for Greece and Turkey, the other Balkan countries in the early nineties began the transformation from various communist and socialist systems to political pluralism that inevitably introduced the values of Western secularism and consumerism.

The civil wars that broke out during the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the armed conflicts that nearly rushed Albania into a civil war, the post-Communist loss of governmental trust, and the breakup of the social texture in combination with the unchecked influences of secularism and consumerism had enormous social consequences. The common people were faced with the challenge of adjusting from the previous collectivist mentality, where the individual did not count for much, to the values of individualism—the working ethics of the free market.

Alongside this process, the Balkans saw the rise of religious awakenings in each of the respective traditional religious communities. The traditional Balkan Islam has been evolving into something different under the influence of the current global shifts in the Muslim world. From their side, the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox churches have also been trying to reestablish their role in the position they held before Communism.

Historical reinterpretation and reappraisal of the past is another aspect of the process of transition in the last 20 years. Anachronistic identification between the modern ethnic states and their presumed ethnic ancestors abound. For example, ethnic Albanians claim an unbroken descent from the ancient Illyrians. The contemporary Serbs see the creation of medieval Serbian principalities and kingdoms as the blueprint for modern Serbia. In the same manner, the ethnic Macedonians in the Republic of Macedonia are less inclined to view themselves



Depiction of the Virgin Mary with Christ in twelfth-century frescoes found in the Church of St. Panteleimon in Gorno Nerezi

POPULATION:
2,062,294
(CIA Factbook 2012)

ETHNIC GROUPS:

- Macedonian 64.2%
- Albanian 25.2%
- Turkish 3.9%
- Romani 2.7%
- Serbian 1.8%
- Other 2.2%

(2002 census)

RELIGIONS:

- Macedonian Orthodox 64.0%
- Muslim 33.3%
- Other Christian 0.37%
- Other and Unspecified 1.63%

(2002 census)

MACEDONIA



as descendants of the Slavs, who started arriving in this region from the sixth century AD, and more willing to associate with the Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great as a way of anchoring their national identity, which has been disputed by the neighboring states. As it usually goes in such situations of overlapping history and geography, these processes of ideological identification with one's (alleged) ancestors often clash with each other.¹

The consequence of these clashing claims is to identify the other ethnic and religious groups as the age-old enemy or the oppressor who did great injustice in the past. Such ideological differences were often politically motivated and manipulated and, coupled with the rise of nationalism, resulted in the resurgence of old animosities and conflicts.²

The Communist ideal of "brotherhood and unity," with its ideology of social equality, integrated all of these separate national identities fairly successfully. As do almost all left-wing ideologies, the ideal emphasized the significance of developing a classless society, for which the main engine was the global working class. As long as the state apparatus remained efficient, this transnational ideology served to submerge ethnic differences.

Religious affiliation was treated by Communism in a similar vein. The international brotherhood and unity of the classless society had little or no space for longstanding religious differences. Seen as a tool of the social elites to subdue and control class struggle, religious differences were removed from the equation for the development of Communism. As a result, numerous communities that practiced a moderate, Turkish-style Islam were suppressed or marginalized. Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Christian communities shared the same fate of persecution, with the free evangelical churches being more exposed due to their active engagement in evangelism.

That Communism only appeared to be successful in its suppression of religion became obvious soon after its collapse, and forces such as nationalism—which contributed to the downfall of Communism—rediscovered in their respective religious backgrounds strongholds for furthering their nationalistic causes. Nationalism and religion formed strong bonds that perpetuated the myths about the glorious past of pure identities in a supposed golden age.³ These myths furthered the identification of one's national identity with one's religious belonging.⁴ Virtually overnight, the vast majority of the people who emerged from state-enforced atheism took a keen interest in the faith of their ancestors. For Croats this meant reasserting their Roman Catholicism, for Serbs and Macedonians

their Eastern Orthodoxy, while Bosniaks and some Albanians with Muslim backgrounds brought forth Islamic beliefs old and new.

This left the evangelical churches in the region facing significant challenges of how to proceed with their respective ministries that are both faithful to the message of the Bible and relevant for the people they aim to serve.

One of the biggest challenges that evangelical churches face in the Balkans is that they are usually seen as a sectarian deviation from true Christianity. As such, they are subversive to society as they introduce foreign concepts that weaken the social and religious fabric, thus weakening the unity of the nation or the ethnic identity. Usually the evangelical churches are blamed for using material and financial aid for the recruitment of members, indicating the thin line between proselytism and genuine evangelism. This is an issue of which evangelical believers have become increasingly aware. They point out that social activism is part of their identity and a major part of responding to Jesus' commandment to look after those in need. As a consequence, increasing efforts have been made to ensure that any sort of aid will not be used to pressure the beneficiaries regardless of their religious affiliation.

This challenge reveals at the same time the most positive features of the evangelical churches. Generally speaking, as a rule they are not burdened with national identity. Although ethnic and—especially against the Roma—racial prejudices prove to be highly resilient, the only context where interethnic and interracial integration is observable are the evangelical communities.⁵ Being inspired by the response of the New Testament church and the church in the first three centuries which faced suspicion and opposition, they



The Aladija mosque in Skopje, Macedonia

instinctively took the position of the early apologists and polemicists. These early authors wrote treatises, not to insist on political methods and activism that could provide Christians political and social leverage, but rather to address emperors and governors offering their best arguments to show that the Christians were loyal citizens and did not have any subversive elements that could be a threat to the established political order. In a similar vein, the contemporary free evangelical churches by and large communicated in their sermons, writings, and actions that their utmost social goal was to see their country flourish. It is not surprising then that, among the different faith communities, evangelicals are the most prominent in addressing contemporary social issues such as the role of women in the church, gender equality, substance abuse and addictions, domestic violence, prison ministries, and care for the elderly and other vulnerable groups.

justice and compassion—the marginalized and the poor. As a way of fulfilling that justice mandate, the evangelical churches have put a special focus on minority outreach and empowerment of the poor. In the context of the Balkans, this is specifically applicable to the Roma, who are usually the most marginalized people group, continuing to live in an isolated and discriminated social subculture. The several vibrant Roma evangelical churches in Macedonia have shown that the good news that Jesus came to preach as announced in Luke 4:18–19 has spiritual and physical dimensions. For example, in the first generation of evangelical Roma believers, the percentage with an education beyond elementary school is virtually zero, while the second generation is catching up with the average population in Macedonia. This is a true paradigm shift in priorities, and much of it comes from the new perspective on life that the Roma get when they convert to Christianity.

One of the most significant recent attempts initiated by evangelical leaders of churches and charities is the project “Conversations,” in which representatives from the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Muslim community, and the evangelical community gather together to discuss specific issues from their own religious background as a way of explaining their basic beliefs and tenets to their neighbors of different faiths. The gatherings are structured in a way that promotes mutual respect and allows for each side to explain itself and its beliefs on its own terms. The purpose is to understand the Other rather than to prove one’s view. So far, two such gatherings have been organized, and the feedback has been very positive. This is a grassroots attempt to bring the different communities together as a way of charting paths for long-term development of trust that historically and traditionally has been lacking. The context offered a rare opportunity for each side to be able to explain a major aspect of its belief on its own terms. The topics discussed were the Holy Scriptures in Islam and the being of God in Islam and Christianity.

The work of the evangelical churches in Macedonia in providing a neutral mixing ground for people from diverse ethnic/religious backgrounds has not gone very far. There is a traditional mistrust between Islam and Christianity lasting for centuries combined with the ethnic animosity between the Albanians who live in Macedonia and the ethnic Macedonians. One of the effects of this situation is the almost complete lack of Albanian conversions to Christianity in contrast to the conversion of Albanian Muslims living in Albania and even Kosovo. The past and current evangelistic efforts, including those of foreign missionaries, have not produced any visible results.

In light of what has been said above, it seems that the evangelical churches in Macedonia must first work toward a general change of the interethnic dynamics, and therefore contribute towards the efforts to build mutual trust. Otherwise, the neutral mixing ground that they can genuinely offer will remain locked by the prejudices and stereotypes that have developed among these communities at odds with each other.



Top left: Metodija Andonov Cento, Macedonia’s first president, in Skopje after the National Liberation War of Macedonia in 1944. *Top right:* Overlooking Skopje, the capital city of Macedonia. *Bottom:* Named after the Byzantine brothers Saints Cyril and Methodius, this state university in Skopje is the largest university in Macedonia.

In a comprehensive interview I did with evangelical leaders in the region concerning the issues above, the vast majority asserted that one of the most effective principles of witnessing to Muslims is the fact that, in contrast to the traditional mainline confessions such as Catholicism or Orthodoxy, the evangelical movement is transnational. In the face of growing nationalism and ethnophyletism (the combination of church and state) in the countries of the region, it becomes increasingly obvious that overcoming such forces is essential for the development of Christian witness.

The evangelical churches have a vision for the flourishing of all people in one society that makes it especially sensitive to those whom the Bible identifies as the ones most urgently in need of

POPULATION:
1,996,000
(CIA Factbook 2014)

ETHNIC GROUPS:

- Slovene 83.0%
- Serbian 2.0%
- Croatian 1.8%
- Bosniak 1.1%
- Other 12.0%

(2002 census)

RELIGIONS:

- Catholic 57.8%
- Muslim 2.4%
- Orthodox 2.3%
- Other Christian 0.9%
- Unaffiliated 3.5%
- None 10.0%
- Other 23.0%

(2002 census)

SLOVENIA



Left: *The Enthronement of the Dukes of Carinthia* is a depiction by Leopold von Wien (1340–1385) of an ancient democratic ritual of Slovene-speaking tribes.

Right: Ivan Grohar's *The Sower* (1907) captures the Slovenian transition from rural to urban life.

This task for the evangelical churches in the Balkans is ever so important and urgent. The aftermath of the wars that begun in 1991 with Slovenia and ended in 2001 with Macedonia have left us with ruptured societies, deepened animosities, and stereotypical corporate memories of the other ethnicity or religion as evil and genocidal.

The evangelical churches have a historic opportunity to set an example of truly integrated communities that can contribute towards the integration of the wider society. To do that they shall certainly continue to preach the two greatest commandments, but they must also be intentional in answering the question “who is my neighbor” and determining practical steps to act upon that answer in the twenty-first-century Balkans. **EIFD**

Dr. Kostake Milkov finished his master's and doctorate in patristic theology at the University of Oxford. Kosta and his wife, Nada, currently run the Balkan Institute for Faith and Culture (BIFC). He is a visiting lecturer of theology at Evangelical Theological Seminary, Osijek, Croatia, a senior associate of RZIM Europe, and an ordained minister in the Evangelical Church in Macedonia. Since 2011, he has participated in the Langham International postdoctoral research seminar. Kosta, Nada, and their daughter, Gabriela, live in Skopje, Macedonia.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For an overview of the history of the central and western Balkans, see the relevant chapters in Joseph Held, ed., *The Columbia History of Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
- ² An excellent treatment of the Other from a Christian standpoint in the context of former Yugoslavia is Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996). For the treatment of the Other from an Islamic standpoint, see Xavier Bougarel, “Islam and Politics in the Post-Communist Balkans, 1990–2000,” in *New Approaches to Balkan Studies*, ed. Dimitris Keridis, Ellen Elias-Bursac, and Nicholas Yatromanolakis (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 2003), 345–60.
- ³ For concrete examples of ways in which this coalition was manifested in Serbian and Greek society, see Basilius J. Groen, “Nationalism and Reconciliation: Orthodoxy in the Balkans,” *Religion, Church and State* 26, no. 2 (1998). See also Ivan Ivekovic, “Nationalism and the Political Use and Abuse of Religion: The Politicization of Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam in Yugoslav Successor States,” *Social Compass* 49 (2002): 523–36.
- ⁴ Assertions that God and the Croats go hand in hand or that God is a Serb are not new. However, under the influence of violent nationalism, these assertions produced new and sinister consequences as they were literally put into practice in Croatian and Bosnian cities and villages.
- ⁵ See, for example, the website of The Decade of Roma Inclusion, 2005–2015, a strategic attempt made by NGOs, 12 Eastern European governments, and Roma civil society in an effort to close the huge socio-economic gap existing between Roma and the majority society: <http://www.romadecade.org/>.

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Bosnia and Herzegovina

FOSTERING DIALOGUE IN A MULTIETHNIC, MULTIRELIGIOUS, POST-WAR CONTEXT

Although scholars and historians differ on how they assess Bosnia and Herzegovina's long history, which boasts a diverse culturo-religious society, it is important to get a sense of how multilayered religious identity is in Bosnia. Marko Oršolić traces the macro historical influences in Europe at large, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular, all the way to the fourth century. This article offers a review of his perspective.

According to Oršolić, the linking of empire and religion, beginning with the Constantinian era, set the “preconditions” necessary for an “instrumentalization of religion to provide an *a priori* legitimization of all state power as God-given.”¹ This fusion between empire and religion eventually led to 1,000 years of imperial reign by three empires: the Ottoman Empire and Islam (1463–1878); Russia and the Orthodox Church (1721–1878); and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Catholicism (1878–1918).² While they all disappeared by the early twentieth century, the empires still “burdened” humanity with their history, leading to misunderstandings, prejudices, conflict, and a “mistrust that goes to their core.”³

Zoran Brajovic, in his analysis of the factors that could lead to authentic dialogue in Bosnia, describes Bosnia's historical identity as a “multifaceted, universal identity” not involving a fused idea of a nation-state, and therefore attached to “pre-modern concepts of identity that link religion and nation, mainly expressed through specific rituals, traditions and habits.”⁴ This identity was further complicated by atheism and agnosticism promoted in the days of Communism (1945–1991) and the vicious war that marched across Bosnia from 1991 to 1995. In light of this macro-picture, the best picture of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina may be as an intricate tapestry comprised of multicolored and multitextured criss-crossing threads: the often tempestuous history, the complexity of ethnic and culturo-religious identification, the ongoing economic crisis, and the unique political system designed in an attempt to mitigate the nationalist-religious polarization created in the aftermath of the war.

In the midst of this complex tapestry, what is the role of religion and dialogue? Oršolić unequivocally believes that “religion is an unavoidable factor in establishing a functional society and state, and, above all, a permanent peace.”⁵ Because of this, he is convinced that dialogue is not just an optional practice; rather, it is “dialogue or death, multi-religious dialogue or mutual extermination.”⁶ In fact, Franciscans have had a longstanding historic role of encouraging interfaith relations in Bosnia. Their influence stretches back into the fourteenth century, beginning during the time of the Ottoman reign in Bosnia (1463–1878).⁷ However, Zoran Brajovic argues that there is a difference between “active-tolerance” and “passive-tolerance” in Bosnia's history and present story—that although there has been a historic “dialogue-of-life” among Orthodox, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim communities, there is little history of deliberate interfaith collaboration; rather, communities of faith were “existing in parallel structures” that did not intermix.⁸ Nowadays, because of the complex context and the lingering effects of the trauma induced by the war, Oršolić maintains that authentic participation in multireligious dialogue is still an

POPULATION:**3,871,643**

*(July 2014, estimate)
Bosnia's recent census
official results will not
come out until July
2014; the previous
census would be
20 years old.*

ETHNIC GROUPS:

- Bosniak 48.0%
 - Serbian 37.1%
 - Croatian 14.3%
 - Other 0.6%
- (2000 estimate, not census)*

RELIGIONS:

- Muslim 40.0%
 - Orthodox 31.0%
 - Roman Catholic 15.0%
 - Other 14.0%
- (2000 estimate, not census)*

BOSNIA

act of “religious and citizen bravery.”⁹

On December 10, 1991, the anniversary of the UN declaration of human rights, Oršolić, among others, founded the International Multi-religious and Intercultural Center (IMIC) in a building of the Jewish community in Sarajevo, Bosnia. The purpose of the Jewish-Christian-Islamic center is to provide a “platform for promotion of inter-religious dialogue and development of discourse on justice and peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina and South-Eastern Europe.”¹⁰ The IMIC emphasizes that tolerance created and maintained by dialogue is the way forward for lasting peace—and the heart of this process is the spiritual dimension. As such, the IMIC is active both locally and globally, in scientific work and research, facilitating interreligious dialogue, and bringing “communities together in prayer, action and day-to-day shared life.” It specifies the following goals: breaking the chain of evil with the help of religions, recognizing guilt, seeking and asking for forgiveness, and finally, cultivating spirituality and religion in order to create peace.¹¹

On Its Methodology and Praxis

Marko Oršolić believes that the IMIC, created as a nongovernmental organization (NGO), has a unique methodology that is critical for creating a free institution not influenced or controlled by either the state or religious hierarchies. This is vitally important in a context where cooperation can be difficult even among different traditions in the same faith—for example, unresolved grievances from World War II can still sour ecumenical relations between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches—not to mention other faiths. Bosnian Islam is neither monolithic nor easily understood, particularly in light of its ongoing conversations of identity over the last two decades.¹² In 2012, Oršolić wrote, “To include the Islamic Religious Community in the Dialogue is still an adventure although there were

sporadic multi-religious encounters before the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”¹³ Because of these factors, it is essential that the three monotheistic faiths be given equal footing in the organization, which is why its board must contain a Jewish, Christian (either Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox), and Muslim theologian.

The IMIC, however, is not just focused on Bosnia and Herzegovina; rather, it cultivates partnerships and contributes internationally so that it can create relations of mutual influence between Bosnia and the rest of the world. “We have to think globally, but act step-by-step locally,” Oršolić commented.¹⁴ In fact, this is a serious problem in all of Southeastern Europe—dialogue happens on an official level, but does not always trickle down into the practical, grass-roots initiatives. Still, Oršolić insisted that IMIC is grass-roots, although admitting, “a big problem is that we are too intellectual. Most of the 2,000 members we have are highly educated people.” Looking at their past and present projects and initiatives—which include facilitating joint prayer and meditation, symposiums and projects regarding multireligious dialogue, with a focus on gender issues, European Union integration, human rights, and religious



Present-day Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina



The story of religion in Bosnia can be readily observed in the architecture—from the Serbian Orthodox Church, to the mosque, to the Catholic Church.

fundamentalism—one can see that the IMIC is involved both at a broader level as well as with grass-roots initiatives.¹⁵

On Challenges and Criticism

In this kind of context, navigating war memories and complex ethnic and religious identities, the Apostle Paul's injunction to "live peaceably with all" is an ongoing adventure. Oršolić commented: "Lots of shepherds become sheep and start to sound like sheep. That is why dialogue is very hard, complex, and critical. Lots [of critics] have called me left wing because I said that in the Sarajevo [Catholic] cathedral, the Croatian hymn could not be sung because it is a hymn about the State." Because of the delicate situation, he has often found helpful partnerships outside of strictly Bosnian ones, such as with various embassies, German Protestants, and a partnership with Arizona State University as well as "15 churches from Bavaria, Germany."

The IMIC has also been criticized for its relationships with Protestants, a tiny minority in Bosnia and Herzegovina and often still viewed as sectarian by Catholics and Orthodox. This is particularly true of those with a "nationalistic" bent—meaning that the religious identity serves largely to prop up the greater allegiance to ethnic/state identity. "There are a lot of prejudices against Protestants here," Oršolić explained.

After Vatican II (1962–1965), however, the Catholic Church began to change its position toward Protestants, both globally and within

Bosnia and Herzegovina. "Protestants who confess Jesus Christ to God and men are totally acceptable to us. . . . We are trying to teach younger generations that Protestants are legitimate Christians and we need to accept that," Oršolić intoned. Still, the challenges continue. For example, in the new center Oršolić just opened in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2012, he had difficulty securing the cooperation of the Orthodox Church because of his cooperation with Protestants.¹⁶

On the Future

The IMIC's vision for local and global initiatives continues to move forward. The Centers in Belgrade and Sarajevo are planning an interfaith summit next year—marking the United Nations centennial commemoration of the beginning of World War I—with the emphasis on Christian, Jewish, and Islamic spirituality that would promote peacekeeping and peacemaking. In Oršolić's view, this should be a global focus and goal:


The goal of why we started the center is to not allow anyone (political or religious leadership) to divide people in matters of faith or religion. By religion, we are different, but religion should not divide. Because if we start to divide people religiously, that is the start of extinction for people in Balkans. . . . God gave his revelation to humanity, not to popes or priests, but they master it now and it is a problem for humanity. Slowly we are trying to change that. Churches divide all the time because they think if we work together it is syncretism. But I don't think it is syncretism. They accuse us



Muslim graves overlook Sarajevo (left), and the stunning beauty of the sixteenth-century Turkish bridge of Mostar hovers over the Neretva River (rebuilt after it was destroyed in the 1990s war).

of making Catholics into Protestants, but this is not true. We just want honest dialogue and to let the people be who they are.¹⁷

Conclusion

Religion becomes distorted when it is used by political power to achieve aims not consistent with its own Scripture. “When we do not regard our Holy Scriptures from a global-universal perspective, there comes to exist terrible mutual alienation and pictures of the enemy, and our faith is misused as a tribal religion.”¹⁸ The three monotheistic religions are now often associated with ideologies, “exploited and abused by sons and daughters of an unjust world, and thus inflict enormous damage instead of offering hope and peace, urgently needed by contemporary humankind.”¹⁹ Because of this, interfaith dialogue, rooted in the spiritual dimension, is both difficult but necessary. According to Oršolić, NGOs that are based in the three monotheistic religions and human rights are a “small oasis” and can work toward the future of peace in a vital and effective way within their societies. 

A Franciscan, political scientist, and theologian, Marko Oršolić founded the International Multi-religious and Intercultural Center (IMIC) in 1991 in Sarajevo, Bosnia, and began another center in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2012. Author of numerous publications, editor of *Nova et Vetera* (a philosophical and theological journal) for over two decades, professor of Franciscan theology, and recipient of state and international awards, notably the 2012 Prize for Peace Activism, he provides an insightful perspective on the role of interfaith dialogue, spirituality, and peacemaking in Bosnian society.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Marko Oršolić, “Multireligious and Intercultural Center ‘Zayedno,’” in *Religion and the War in Bosnia*, ed. Paul Mojzes (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 262–69.
- ² These dates reflect the time period these empires influenced the region of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- ³ Marko Oršolić, “Das Feinbild und die heiligen Schriften,” in *Schritte zur Versöhnung: Predigten, Bibelstudien, Referate und Dokumente der Ökumenischen Konferenz* (Keckskemét, Ungarn, 21–27 August 1995) (Budapest: Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen in Ungarn, 1996), 90–91.
- ⁴ Zoran Brajovic, “The Potential of Inter-Religious Dialogue,” in *Peacebuilding and Civil Society in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ten Years after Dayton*, ed. Martina Fischer (Munster: Lit-Verlag, 2006), 191. Available at http://www.berghof-conflictresearch.org/documents/publications/daytone_brajovic_civilsoc.pdf.
- ⁵ Marko Oršolić, “Monoteističko Troglasje,” in *BOS: Zbornik Radova, Izckekujuci Evropski uniju II* (Beograd, 2011).
- ⁶ Marko Oršolić, “Multireligiöser Dialog in Bosnien-Herzegowina,” in *Multireligiöses und interreligiöses Zentrum in Belgrad*, Tauwetter 2 (Düsseldorf, 2012), 19.
- ⁷ Brajovic, “Potential of Inter-Religious Dialogue,” 202.
- ⁸ Brajovic, “Potential of Inter-Religious Dialogue,” 194–96.
- ⁹ Oršolić, “Multireligiöser Dialog in Bosnien-Herzegowina.”
- ¹⁰ IMIC’s stated goals on its website: http://imic.ba/ba/?page_id=2 (accessed January 10, 2013).
- ¹¹ Oršolić, “Multireligiöser Dialog in Bosnien-Herzegowina.”
- ¹² See Deron Bauer’s thoughts on the Bosnian Islam “mosaic” on EIFD’s online article section: http://cms.fuller.edu/EIFD/issues/Fall_2012/The_Bosnian_Islamic_Mosaic.aspx.
- ¹³ Oršolić, “Multireligiöser Dialog in Bosnien-Herzegowina.”
- ¹⁴ Interview with Marko Oršolić, December 21, 2013.
- ¹⁵ Oršolić, “Multireligiöser Dialog in Bosnien-Herzegowina.”
- ¹⁶ Vladimir Ilić, *Verske slobode u Srbiji: Stanje, mogućnosti, prepreke* (Zrenjanin: Centar za razvoj civilnog društva, 2009). The author claims that in Serbia, according to the law from 2006, there are only 7 registered traditional (in fact privileged) and nontraditional (in fact discriminated) churches and religious communities.
- ¹⁷ Interview with Marko Oršolić, December 21, 2013.
- ¹⁸ Oršolić, “Multireligious and Intercultural Center ‘Zayedno.’”
- ¹⁹ Oršolić, “Monoteističko Troglasje.”

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Serbia

THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS IN THE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

In the midst of “no-war” (a euphemism for the situation in Serbia from 1991 to 1995 when war was raging in Croatia and Bosnia), a friend of ten years opened up to me: “I feel quite safe here in Belgrade,” Peter said. We had known each other well for some time as we both attended a small, local evangelical community, and being of similar age, we had many mutual discussion topics and interests.

I was not sure what he meant with that statement, so I asked. Peter answered: “You know, as a Croat I feel okay in Belgrade [capitol of Serbia]—people are friendly and I can feel no hate.” Until that moment I had no idea of his ethnic background. I never asked about his nor shared with him my background, as usually it is a nonissue among the evangelicals in Serbia. One may sense another person’s ethnic background by family or personal name, or by a specific accent and the way certain words are pronounced, but among the evangelicals in Serbia, to inquire about such a thing was and is considered to be in bad taste. We all are children of God and by that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. Ethnic, racial, linguistic, and other differences exist, but there is something far more important that binds us together—common faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. As far as I am able to observe, this is normative among the evangelical believers in Serbia.

The former Yugoslav republics are now seven independent countries, and two are already members of the European Union (Slovenia and Croatia), while others are eagerly waiting to join as soon as possible.¹ Despite the evident progress in the developing democracies and the rule of law, it is generally assumed that people are still being assessed along their ethnic lines, and in some instances, shunned because of it. And yet, ethnic distinction in Serbia is not always clear-cut, and this reality can lead to difficulties in identity and group acceptance. For example, a sizable group is that of people from an ethnically mixed background. Apparently, toward the end of “old Yugoslavia,” up to 20 percent of marriages were mixed marriages, and subsequently, the children born had dual ethnicity. My friend Peter, a Croat, is married to a lady from a Serbian background, and their children cannot clearly and easily identify themselves along ethnic lines. However, they do share a regional cultural distinctive: they live in Belgrade and speak “ekavica,” which is the way words are pronounced eastward of the Danube and Drina Rivers—versus “ijekavica,” which is spoken west of the Drina River, or “ikavica,” which is spoken in Dalmatia (the Adriatic seacoast of Croatia and Montenegro).

Another friend, Tomo, a Baptist believer, was born of a Serbian mother and Croat father. Several years ago he decided to immigrate to Western Europe. When he had lived in “his countries,” he had been hurt a number of times, and he shared with me: “In Serbia, they called me ‘Ustaša’ and in Croatia ‘Četnik’”—both referring to Second World War local nationalist Nazi groups notorious for their hatred toward the Other. In other words, because he was ethnically mixed, not only was he not accepted by either group, but also on both counts he was forced into an extreme stereotype representing the “enemy.”

POPULATION:**7,186,862***(Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011)***ETHNIC GROUPS:**

• Serbian	83.3%
• Hungarian	3.5%
• Romany	2.1%
• Bosniak	2.0%
• Other	5.7%
• Undeclared/ Unknown	3.4%

(2011 census)

RELIGIONS:

• Orthodox	84.59%	• Eastern Religions	0.02%
• Catholic	4.97%	• Other Religions	0.02%
• Protestant	0.99%	• Agnostic	0.06%
• Other Christian	0.04%	• Atheist	1.11%
• Muslim	3.10%	• Did Not Declare	3.07%
• Jewish	0.01%	• Unknown	1.39%

(2011 census)

SERBIA

This reality demonstrates the uniqueness of evangelicals in Serbia, as they are generally more tolerant than the general population. A great proportion of the otherwise small number of evangelicals are members of various ethnic minorities—Hungarians, Roma, Croats, Slovaks, Romanians. A number of them are also either from a Serbian background or from a “mixed ethnicity.”² Although the ethnic tension in society has eased in the last decade, those who are Protestant or evangelical believers do not usually consider each other according to their ethnicity, and there are more mixed marriages in these churches than in the wider society. However, history has shown that they have had to change regarding this issue. Ninety years ago, in the newly founded Kingdom of Yugoslavia, ethnic background was quite important. So, for example, the Slovak Lutherans decided to have a separate church organization from the Lutherans who were speaking Hungarian, German, or any of the local Slavic languages. In the 1930s, among the Baptists there was

a struggle between the German-oriented connections and the American ones, and while no one was questioned because of his ethnicity, people tended to gather together in church services conducted in German, Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, or Serbian/Croatian, following their language preferences.

Interestingly, immigrant churches that were founded in Western Europe (Austria, Germany, Switzerland, The Netherlands, etc.) during Yugoslavia’s existence in the 1960s to 1980s, either by new converts or believers who had immigrated for economic reasons, continue to use the old mixed Serb-Croat language and to talk about “our homeland,” “our language,” and “our traditions.” Even refugees and new immigrants after the civil wars in 1990s who were given an opportunity for a new start in the EU countries, tend to be much more tolerant toward the ethnic Others once they become members of local churches. Most of them, although being minorities themselves in another country than that of their origin, tend not to



From left to right: Novi Sad, Serbia; the largest evangelical church in Serbia is a Roma church (top and bottom middle); two people drink from a fountain in Belgrade where legend says you will come again after drinking; memorial in Novi Sad depicting the many families killed in the Danube river during WWII; Serbian family celebrating Christmas.

POPULATION:**620,029**
(2011 census)**ETHNIC GROUPS:**

• Montenegrin	45.0%	• Croat	1.0%
• Serbian	28.7%	• Other	2.6%
• Bosniak	8.7%	• Unspecified	4.9%
• Albanian	4.9%		(2011 census)
• Muslim	3.3%		
• Roma	1.0%		

RELIGION:

• Orthodox	72.1%
• Muslim	19.1%
• Catholic	3.4%
• Atheist	1.2%
• Other	1.5%
• Unspecified	2.6%

(2011 census)

MONTENEGRO

From left to right: The coastal town of Bar, Montenegro, sits in the shadow of the mountain that holds much spiritual significance for the Orthodox, Catholics, and Muslims; Ostrog Orthodox Monastery is an international pilgrimage site—pilgrims come to seek prayer and healing; two Ashkali/Balkan Egyptian Christian leaders (war refugees from Kosovo) stand in front of the three-year-old Evangelical church—a community situated on the city dump.

consider their internal differences. They suddenly become fellow countrymen from “our homeland.”³ However, this is not so in the Western Balkans. Distinguishing people in terms of “them” and “us” seems to continue even today—19 years after the wars in Bosnia and Croatia ended.

Despite the positive evangelical response to the ethnic challenges in the region, evangelicals continue to face many other significant challenges in Serbia. As a result of ethnic and religious identity and nationhood being so tightly interwoven, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the government, and the media have long been negative, dismissive, and even hostile to evangelicals.⁴ For more than two decades now, the tabloid press—and in some cases the mainstream and state media—were under the influence of the so-called sectologians who were mistreating and misinforming the public about Protestants and evangelicals. Serbian Orthodox Church theologians call the evangelicals “the sect of the sects’ sect,”⁵ referring to when the Catholics separated themselves from the “true” Orthodoxy in the eleventh century, and then the Protestants separated themselves from the Catholics in the days of the Reformation, and then the evangelicals came out as splinter groups from the Protestants. Although some of the churches have existed

for around 150 years in Serbia, members still need to work hard to get basic conditions for otherwise constitutional rights: freedom of assembly, freedom of belief, and freedom to be part of whatever religious community people desire. Even the police officers publish textbooks for the police academy in which they debate whether the Baptists should or should not be considered a “church” or just a legal entity with religious associations—which is the formal status of a religious book store or candle store at a graveyard.⁶ When asking for their rights, church representatives are often reminded that their numbers are not significant and, as a result, their voice is heard but not acted upon. This author estimates that all evangelicals, including the members of their families (which is usually how mainstream Christian churches count their membership), do not exceed 40–50,000 in a country of just over 7 million, and there are no more than 100,000 Protestants in all the major denominations.

The social influence and the quantity of aid that has been distributed by Protestants and evangelicals, however, far exceed their minority numbers. During the 1990s, for example, only one refugee and aid agency was permitted to enter besieged Sarajevo (by the Bosnian Serb troops)—it was ADRA, the Seventh-day Adventists’ aid agency. All of us from the former Yugoslav countries were sending help via

only one organization, a Protestant one. It was not a problem then and people used this opportunity to help their friends, relatives, and other people. But, since they were Protestants, there was no public recognition, no thanks from the media. Even when doing positive things, Protestants and evangelicals are being deliberately shunned. Similar stories can be found regarding the aid distributed by EHO (Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization),⁷ the ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency), the Baptist “Tabitha” and also “Love your Neighbor” Organizations. The general population benefited greatly, but had no knowledge regarding who provided help when it was needed the most.

Another example is the “Bread of Life” humanitarian aid agency that was founded by Pentecostals and Baptists in Serbia when the wars broke out in 1991. They have distributed so much aid to citizens of Serbia that they are second only to the International Red Cross. Many have benefited from their help: refugees, internally displaced persons, low-income people, ethnic minorities (Roma and others), and—in the days of international sanctions against Serbia—a number of elementary schools, preschool institutions, hospitals, prisons, and even some universities. However, without media objectively reporting on the aid efforts, the work of Protestant and evangelical aid agencies is almost invisible to the general public. Instead, the media always seem ready to put forth another unsubstantiated attack on the minority churches and organizations—to alert the general population to the “sectarian” danger and aid that “comes to convert people.”

Unfortunately, local civic sector organizations (NGOs and watchdog organizations) are mostly silent when religious minorities are under attack. They tend to extend their attention toward war crimes, political persecution, protection of certain sexual orientations, and the like. Publications (printed and lately online) from Keston News Service, Oxford, UK; Forum 18 from Oslo, Norway; and Center 9 from Belgrade are full of reports⁸ of incidents that have occurred against Protestants, evangelicals, and other minorities in an otherwise relatively peaceful country. Between the years of 2000 and 2005, there were more than a hundred individual incidents and attacks per year, although in more recent years these numbers have dwindled to 50–70: stoning of buildings, hate speech, insulting graffiti, personal threats, death threats, and in some instances even personal attacks. In most of the cases, local police would declare these to be “acts of minors, or some drunken individuals,” almost never considering them persecution proper based on hate speech or acts on religious grounds. Of course, local persecutors would subsequently not be involved in such petty crimes and minor incidents that the police would report. Several years ago, when the Novi Sad Baptist church was stoned repeatedly—up to five times in a month—police would issue a warrant against an unknown perpetrator for the destruction of property or simply just record an incident with no action. No one

was ever apprehended given that, in most cases, police would not investigate such incidents. In some instances, the value of destroyed property was below the minimum amount prescribed by law in order to initiate an investigation. In these instances, police would not even consider such an act to be one of vandalism or destruction. Cases like the one, for example, when the home of a Protestant pastor in eastern Serbia was attacked and bricks were thrown into the bedroom windows in the middle of the night, would not make it into a police report.

Although such stories are still a reality, according to the report from Forum 18 in 2009, surveys showed a decline in attacks, and the media were “less hostile” in their portrayal of religious minorities. This is at least partially a result of Serbia’s desire to enter the European Union, and ongoing attacks were attributed to “extreme nationalists who think that the communities are in some sense traitors to the nation.”⁹ Despite this progress, however, negative media portrayals continue. Those who track violations of religious freedom, public hate speech, and incidents in Serbia can confirm that militant attacks on property and people who belong to religious minorities are usually sparked by printed or spoken words of hate and rage published over the local or even national media. It almost appears as if there is a special war being waged against evangelicals and other minorities whenever it becomes opportunistic to direct the public eye onto some other issues than corruption, the bad economy, and inflation—especially during election time. Governments change, but the attitude does not change very much.¹⁰

It was not always this way; some form of cooperation between different religious communities existed in the past. For example, during 1911–1914, the Christian Student Movement was active at Belgrade University, and its international leader and founder John R. Mott visited Belgrade several times and was always welcomed by the state and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Later, in the period of 1914–1941, the YMCA was also very active in having representatives from various denominations at their meetings and seminars, including Orthodox priests and monks. One of the sponsors of their work was Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, a widely acclaimed Serbian church leader who was also instrumental in bringing together help from the Anglican Church to the Serbian Orthodox Church and the state during the First World War.




Roma man in Leskovac, Serbia, displays his wares.

Today, the interreligious situation is not good. Evangelicals are shunned at every opportunity—especially by clergy in various dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church—and every bit of their social activity (Christmas gifts, Bible distribution, *Jesus* film showings, and material to help social institutions) is publicly scrutinized and criticized in the media. It is common for decades to pass before any local congregation gets its building or refurbishing license from a local municipality. Individual clerks stall the processes because of their personal hate and desire to do harm, believing that by so treating a religious minority, they are being loyal to their majority church. Worst of all, no institution or organization looks into changing the situation. A few seminars for journalists of local media in several regions were organized by NUNS, the Independent Journalist Association of Serbia, in 2005–2007, on how to inform themselves and then present accurate facts about religious minorities. However, one can trace no intention from either state bodies or ombudsman offices—a government office that investigates abuses committed by public officials—to try to improve the situation.

One of the few positive examples where representatives of the Orthodox Church and evangelicals worked together in recent history was the Serbian Bible Society. For more than 20 years now, its president has been the Serbian Orthodox Bishop Lavrentije, while the vice-president, for a number of years, was Dr. Aleksandar Birviš, an acclaimed Baptist preacher, Bible translator, and renowned book author. Today in the Bible society, this position is filled by Dane Vidović, a Baptist pastor and publisher from Belgrade. Another positive example of collaboration was the participation of several prominent Orthodox laymen in the Association for the Protection of Religious Freedom. Unfortunately, the Association stopped its activities in 2010 and was formally dissolved by the founders in 2012.

A prominent Orthodox theologian, Dr. Radovan Bigović, who died in 2012, argued that the majority church (Serbian Orthodox Church) has a responsibility to protect and help minority churches (Protestants and evangelicals).¹¹ This was a lonely voice in a desert of bad wishes and no desire for mutual closer relations. A recent survey on religious tolerance in the northern multiethnic province of Vojvodina showed that people are not tolerant toward the Protestant religious minorities—against those who are “different.”¹² While they allow them to exist (which they consider the meaning of *tolerant*), people would not desire them for neighbors, sons- or daughters-in-law, or even friends. In my opinion, this comes as a result of a longer period of a distorted media picture and intolerance spread by the majority church.

In spite of all the challenges and missed historical opportunities, I believe there is a great future for the evangelical movement in Serbian society. As Francis Schaeffer shared, “the Bible-believing” Christians will ultimately engage themselves with the current needs of society, government, and culture. In Serbia, this can take the form

of helping the needy, organizing even more rehabilitation centers for drug abusers than we have now, serving in the parliaments and governments on all levels, being productive and excellent representatives of the country in science, culture, sports, and religion to the best of their abilities, and so forth. Evangelicals will also be a witness of Christ and point to him as Savior, doing so as salt and light within the culture in which they are embedded. 

Dr. Branko Bjelajac is the director for Global Partnership Development of TWR (Trans World Radio) and author of several books on the evangelicals and Protestantism in Serbia and of a number of articles and reports on religious freedom issues in the Balkans. Born and raised in Belgrade, Serbia, he presently lives and works in Bratislava, Slovakia.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Current candidate countries for the European Union are Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.
- 2 In this region, more of a distinction is made between Protestants (traditions coming directly from the Reformation) and evangelicals. In northwest Serbia, an area called Vojvodina, the evangelical ethnic groups consist of Hungarians, Slovaks, Serbs, Romanians, Croats. In mainland Serbia, they are usually Serbs and Roma (formerly known as Gypsies), Bulgarians, and Macedonians. Protestants are mainly oriented toward their historical membership—Lutherans are 100 percent Slovaks, and Reformed almost all Hungarians, which is also supported by their service language—Slovak and Hungarian. There are now two or three new Anglican churches with mixed ethnicity, and the one formal Anglican chapel in Belgrade has a mixed ethnicity as it serves mostly the diplomatic missions staff.
- 3 There is a local saying in the former Yugoslavia that “somewhere else you are a foreigner to everyone.” This means that since everyone coming from the Balkans is a foreigner in Western Europe anyway, others from your region of origin do not care about your ethnic background—you are an immigrant. Back in Southeastern Europe, however, people continue to view each other through ethnic eyes.
- 4 See Melody Wachsmuth’s introductory article for more background on this interwoven identity and the subsequent result of being viewed as a “traitor to one’s nation.”
- 5 Lazar Milin, *Naučno opravdanje religije: Apologetika 1* (Beograd: Srpska patrijaršija, 1976).
- 6 Zoran Luković, *Verske sekte: Priručnik za samoodbranu [Religious Sects: Self-defense Guide]* (Beograd: Draganić, 2003). Luković is a ranking police officer in Belgrade.
- 7 EHO was founded by the following churches: Slovak Lutheran Church in Serbia, Christian Reformed Church in Serbia, Evangelical Methodist Church in Serbia, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Serbia, and Greek-Catholic Church in Serbia.
- 8 Check, for example, the Center 9 report: “SERBIA: Report on Religious Freedom Issues: November 2008–December 2011,” by Draško Djenović, April 16, 2012, <http://www.centar9.info/archive/article/pdf/164/en-EN/SERBIA:-Report-on-Religious-Freedom-Issues-2009--2011>, which was also published by the International Institute for Religious Freedom as their IIRF Reports vol. 1, no. 5 (May 2012), http://www.iirf.eu/index.php?id=438&no_cache=1&L=&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=436&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=1600.
- 9 Draško Djenović, “Serbia: Religious Freedom Survey, February 2009,” on the Forum 18 News Service website: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1260.
- 10 For more on the situation of religious minorities in Serbia, see Kristian Kahrs, “Belgrade Curve: Evangelicals Fear Greater Power of State, Orthodox Church,” *Christianity Today*, July 1, 2006, online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/july/7.16.html>; and Robert Parham, “Global Baptists Hear Reports of Religious Discrimination, Interfaith Engagement,” on *EthicsDaily.com*, July 27, 2009, <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/global-baptists-hear-reports-of-religious-discrimination-interfaith-engagement-cms-14606>.
- 11 Radovan Bigović, *Crkva i društvo [The Church and the Society]* (Paris: Zajednica Sveti Nikola, 2000).
- 12 See the following for the survey and more information: Dr. Zorica Kuburic, *Verske zajednice u Srbiji i verska distance [Religious Communities in Serbia and Religious Distance]* (Novi Sad: CEIR, 2010); N. Popovic and Z. Sordjan, *Tolerancija kao potreba [Tolerance as a Need]* (Beograd: Centar za toleranciju i medjureligijske odnose, 2011).
- 13 Francis A. Schaeffer, “Names and Issues,” a speech given at the Evangelical Press Association Convention, Minneapolis, May 11, 1983, as quoted in the text available on the Edmonton Bible Presbyterian Church website: <http://edmontonbpc.org/wp/2012/02/names-and-issues-by-francis-schaeffer/>.

POPULATION:**1,739,825**

(Excluding North Kosovo)

*(Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2008 census)***ETHNIC GROUPS:**

- Albanian 92.0%
 - Other 8.0%
(Serbian, Bosniak, Gorani, Romany, Truk, Ashkali, Egyptian)
- (CIA Factbook 2008)*

RELIGION:

- Muslim 95.0 %
 - Catholic 2.2 %
 - Orthodox 1.48%
 - Protestant Evangelical < 1.0 %
- (2002 census)*

KOSOVO

Overview of Kosovo's History and Society

Facts¹

- Kosovo declared its independence in 2008 and is now recognized by the USA and many EU nations; however, Serbia still does not recognize it because of its perceived importance to their spiritual and national identity.
- Kosovar Albanians number about 92% of the population; the Serbian minority shrunk to around 100,000 after the war in 1999.
- Religious affiliation is largely Muslim at 95% with Christianity in the minority: Catholic-2.2%, Orthodox-1.48%, and less than 1% Protestant Evangelical (Several municipalities having a Serbian majority did not participate in the 2011 survey—therefore the Orthodox percentages are low.)
- 28% of Kosovo's population is younger than 15; half of the population is younger than age 28.

unemployment, and corruption, and although recent diplomatic progress has been made at a state level, relationships between Serbians and Albanians continue to be quite tense.

Kosovo law officially recognizes five religious communities: Islamic, Serbian Orthodox, Catholic, Jewish, and the Protestant Evangelical Church. Because the government required evangelical churches to come under one governing body in order to be officially recognized, Kosovo Protestant Evangelical Church (KPEC) was formed, now comprised of 40–50 churches. The small evangelical community faces many challenges in the predominately Muslim country. Artur Krasniqi, pastor of one of the larger evangelical congregations in Kosovo, describes the dominant mentality in Kosovo as “communist combined with Islamic.” According to Krasniqi, after so many years of occupation, Albanians became used to religiously “performing” for whoever was in power. Others describe the difficulty in evangelizing when there is an immediate association between Christianity and Serbia—thus inflaming war memories and years of tension. On the other hand, although in Serbia the Orthodox Church perceives the evangelical community as a “sect,” in Kosovo, they are much more tolerant since evangelicals are converting Muslims to Christianity.

It is a critical time for evangelicals in the young nation of Kosovo—several evangelical leaders noted a rise in political Islam as other nations send money and resources in order to influence the religious climate. More powerful nations such as Turkey are attempting to increase economic and political capital. It can often be a struggle for evangelicals to access their lawful rights in a local context depending on the leadership's inclination. In this critical time, however, evangelicals are actively engaging their Muslim neighbors in various ways—through hosting dialogue events in churches, service projects, and evangelistic outreaches. These efforts have “variable” results, depending on an individual village's orientation toward Islam. As Krasniqi put it, for the time being, Christians are actively trying “to keep their foot in the door so it doesn't swing shut.”



A Serbian Orthodox church and a large statue of Mother Theresa are just a few of the religious symbols in this primarily Muslim country.

Although Kosovo's inhabitants are largely Muslim, a visitor will still see diverse religious symbols dotting the landscape: large statues of Mother Theresa, ornate Serbian Orthodox monasteries and churches dating from the Middle Ages, and over 800 mosques. The small country of around 2 million faces high rates of poverty,

ENDNOTE

¹ Kosovo Agency of Statistics, available at <https://esk.rks-gov.net/ENG/home>, Accessed March 5, 2014. See also <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18328859>.

Ela Magda is the secretary of the women's ecumenical organization World Day of Prayer in Croatia.



Croatia

IN SEARCH OF A CRISIS

Recently, a Croatian evangelical theologian, Dr. Peter Kuzmič, appeared on a Croatian talk show, *Nedjeljom u 2* (trans. “Sundays at 2 pm”), and commented that one can notice a growing nationalist tendency in Croatia. Of course, all throughout history and especially after Croatia’s Homeland war (1991–1995), nationalism was present in Croatia. However, recently the nationalist feeling has become slightly stronger than it was in recent years (mid-2000s).

In 2009, Croatia, along with the rest of the world, entered the economic recession. Many things were happening on the political scene, and a new, left-oriented¹ government was ready to take over; Croatia was on the verge of becoming a member of the European Union and was putting its foot in the door that led to the West, opening up questions of human rights for all people regardless of their national background, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. All these factors, among many others, triggered nationalist feelings in this small, predominately Roman Catholic country.

Croatia is a post-war country, and religion has played a major role throughout history, at times used as a political tool to create nationalist feelings and strengthen national identity—often by demonizing the religious and ethnic Other. Today, 20 years after the last war, the context of the country is changing as it turns towards the West. Religion, in this case the Roman Catholic Church, still plays a role in people’s lives; however, it seems to be only preserving the status quo—in other words, it is still trying to act according to its historic role. Unfortunately, this does not profit the younger generations. They consequently inherit worldviews based on this religio-nationalist identity that is reinforced through secondhand war memories. Young people are not given the space or the impetus to refashion their worldviews, to learn about and meet the Other, and this prevents a way forward.

There is a saying, “the world is left to the young”—a saying often directed to me as a young person, and one I believe to be true. Precisely because of this belief, in this essay I will explore the importance of memory—how mythical memories, the Homeland war, and war memories are influencing new generations of young people, who although they have not experienced the war firsthand, experience parts of it every day through their family, peers, and the media. Further, I will reflect upon how these “secondhand memories” influence their faith and openness to the religious and ethnic Other. Finally, I suggest that there is an acute need for opportunities where young people can experience the Other—the one who has long been the stranger and the enemy—in a different context. In this, the church has an opportunity to exercise its current influence—to use ecumenical dialogue as means of creating a new context in which young people can develop their own worldviews, apart from the memories of their ancestors, and create a new way of thinking that will help transform the society in which they live.

My research and conclusions for this essay primarily come from the available research and my own experience as a young person in post-war Croatia. There is need for much deeper research of this issue, but hopefully this essay is a small step in that direction.

POPULATION:**4,290,612***(Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2011)***ETHNIC GROUPS:**

• Croatian	90.4%
• Serbian	4.4%
• Bosnian	0.7%
• Undeclared	0.6%
• Regional Affiliation	0.6%
• Others/Unknown	3.3%

(2011 census)

RELIGION:

• Catholic	86.3%	• Others and Unknown	1.0%
• Orthodox	4.4%	• Agnostic and Sceptic	0.8%
• Not Religious and Atheist	3.8%		
• Not Declared	2.2%		
• Muslim	1.5%		

(2011 census)

CROATIA

A Yugoslavian scientist and publicist, Ivo Pilar, wrote in his book *Južnoslavensko Pitanje* (trans. “The Yugoslavian Question”) that there is a tendency among the Slavic people to submit to the authority of emotion rather than authority of reason.² The book was published in 1943, but the truth of this statement remains to this day. An example can be found in a recent newspaper interview, where Josip Glaurdić, a Cambridge lecturer, stated that based on research conducted throughout Croatia, Croatian “war time and post-war experiences . . . in large part determine [Croatian] political choices.”³ Though political leadership should be chosen based on efficiency and effectiveness, this research showed that there is a tendency among Croatians to vote with war memories in mind. Twenty years after the war, one has to question the rationale behind people’s choices.

While discussing myths in the Balkans that have shaped Balkan national identities, Paul Mojzes stated that “[c]oncepts of the past and the present are so intermixed that a grievance of long ago is perceived as a present affliction.”⁴ Memories, and especially mythical memories, seem to have always been of great importance for people in the Balkans. In the midst of various turbulences throughout history, Croatia’s national identity, namely its culture and tradition, was kept and reinforced through the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia. Religion not only preserved, but also created a sacred myth around the Croatian national identity. A statue of Ante Starčević, (politician and president of the Croatian Party of Rights in the nineteenth century), who is also known as “the father of the state,” was placed in the main square in Osijek, my hometown, a few years ago. Below the statue is a quote that says, “Only the laws of God and nature are above the sovereign will of the people of Croatia. God and Croats.”

Mythical memories engraved in the Croatian national identity were important political tools in the 1990s war, and they continue to be important political tools today. In recent months we have been witnessing a growing nationalist tendency evident in protests against the placement of two-alphabet (Latin and Cyrillic) signs in areas where Serbs in Croatia live as a minority.⁵ On October 1, 2013, a unit was formed in Vukovar under the name (*trans.*) “Headquarters for the Defense of Croatian Vukovar.” This has strong war connotations because Vukovar, a town that borders Serbia, was a multiethnic town before and after the war. During the war, it became a symbol of love for one’s country and praised as a hero-town, due to the fact that it was under siege for 87 days and eventually could not resist any more; many men and women died defending it, and many

people had to leave their homes. Therefore, when one begins talking about “defense of Croatian Vukovar,” it inevitably stirs up memories of war and feelings of belonging to a sacred nation that will once again defend itself against the enemy. People are making sure the war is not forgotten.

While volunteering as a youth leader at teenage summer and winter camps in Croatia, I observed that it was difficult for the 17–19 year olds to critically think about questions and issues, and often replied



Top: Trains pass on line between Zagreb and Split. *Bottom:* Dubbed the “jewel of the Adriatic” and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the historic city of Dubrovnik, Croatia, perches above the sea.

“Protestants in general and evangelicals in particular are in such contexts looked upon with considerable suspicion as that radical movement which in the past divided Christendom and which in the present, as a modernized, Western faith and thus a foreign intrusion, in its various fragmented forms threatens the national and religious identity and unity of the people. Evangelicals in several of these countries represent the only “non-nationalistic” religious groupings. Their witness to the universality of Christian faith puts them in a position to be reconcilers and bridge-builders across ethnic and confessional divides, as well as proponents for interconfessional and interreligious dialogues. This is at times handicapped by the fact that due to external pressures in the past and because of a lack of non-sectarian theological education until recently, they have developed a “spirituality of withdrawal,” which isolated them from those they should be dialoguing with, and which evolved into a narrow ecclesiastical subculture. One of the major challenges for evangelicals remains, therefore, the development of a spirituality of engagement in both culture in general and other religious communities in particular.”

Dr. Peter Kuzmič
Eva B. and Paul E. Toms
Distinguished Professor
of World Missions and European
Studies at Gordon-Conwell
Theological Seminary

with rather superficial answers without arguments to support them. However, they perceived themselves as adults, and wanted to be able to make their own life choices. As frustrating as it was to encourage young high school graduates to answer questions with meaningful answers, it also makes sense that they cannot give a deeper or a more meaningful critical answer when one takes into account their broader context.

A Croatian news portal recently published an article about the rising identity crisis among young people.⁶ The article's claims are supported by an overwhelming amount of newspaper articles about

growing violence and bullying among youth. However, I would argue that the problem is not so much an identity crisis, but a lack of one. As I shall discuss further on, a crisis is of crucial importance if beliefs and traditions are to be reevaluated.

It is common knowledge that adolescents are impressionable and subject to various influences;⁷ because of that, it is important to think about their context and what shapes their worldview, morals, etc. When thinking about the development of identity in the post-war generation of young people (namely, the generation born during or after the 1990s war) I have found the Canadian psychologist James Marcia's theory very relevant. Marcia talks about the four “identity statuses,” which are “four modes of dealing with the identity issue characteristic of late adolescents.”⁸ One of the statuses is *foreclosure*, which, according to Angela Oswalt, is characterized by “a low degree of exploration but a high degree of commitment.”⁹ This status refers to adolescents who show strong preference towards certain ideologies but lack arguments and personal experience that would explain why those ideologies were chosen.¹⁰ Marcia also states that adolescents in the foreclosure status are “most endorsing of authoritarian values among the identity statuses”;¹¹ they are “lowest on the autonomy scale¹² and highest on need for social approval,”¹³ and are impulsive and less culturally sophisticated.¹⁴ Also, there is a lack of the “crisis” that Marcia mentions when discussing “foreclosures”: a crisis/stressful event that prompts an individual to reexamine and reevaluate her choices, worldviews, etc., and to “experiment with different values, beliefs, and goals.”¹⁵ Therefore, the beliefs and traditions of the family, authority figures, and peers, etc. are “transcribed” onto the young person and remain there if there is no factor that pushes her to question and reevaluate those beliefs and traditions.

When Croatia won a soccer match against Iceland recently, one of the Croatian players started shouting a World War II battle cry that was used by Croatian nationalists *Ustaše*, “*Za dom spremni!*” (*trans.* “Ready to defend our home!”), and the crowd (mostly consisting of younger people) followed. That incident is a textbook example of the mindset of the younger generations in Croatia. When adults refuse to let go of the past, it influences the youth.

Looking at the younger generations today, a pattern can be detected—a lack of personal or collective crisis; a lack of any kind of trigger that could shake the foundations and change traditions. In her article “Adam, Our Father: How the Apostle Paul ‘Improved’ Traditions and Confirmed the Scriptures,” New Testament scholar Ksenija Magda thinks about the reevaluation of tradition and writes,

If one were to think about [Paul's] *worldview* or the *social construction of the world* as it is popular, one must not leave out the force of the *place*. When tension is created between the place and the elements in a realm, this inevitably leads to a re-evaluation of elements which are connected with them, until an acceptable balance is found.¹⁶

Taking this idea for a moment out of Paul's context and placing it in Croatia's, it would mean that when a situation in a place is stirred by new factors, it leads to rethinking and reexamining the situation and searching for a new way of existing in harmony.

New generations of young Croats are raised with mythical memories about the war and the enemy, and are creating a world in which an imaginary war against "the enemy" is still fought every day in football matches, concerts, schools, etc. Young people are becoming carriers of secondhand memories that are molding them into persons who are unable or unwilling to think critically and are emotionally conditioned. Religion remains "the bastion of Croatian national identity,"¹⁷ and unquestioned traditions are still sacred.

Socrates said that people do not do evil because they are evil, but because they are ignorant. How, then, can this ignorance be challenged, and by what method can youth be encouraged to reevaluate the tradition and beliefs in Croatia? I will not attempt to analyze the educational system and suggest that it be changed (although it does need to change), or to reevaluate parenting techniques (although there is need for that as well). Rather, I suggest that a step towards the solution is to create a crisis through dialogue—shaking one's foundations by creating situations where interaction comes spontaneously.

Churches have a distinct role to play in facilitating this process. Unfortunately, churches (of all denominations) have been overly concerned with politics, preserving traditions, increasing membership, and perhaps have been unwilling themselves to reevaluate their own traditions. In other words, churches have not been oriented toward dialogue with the religious and ethnic Other. However, since the churches are a source of traditions that young people grow up in and adopt as their own, it is their responsibility to help young people on their journey to becoming fully formed individuals.

One of the ways churches can do this in the Croatian context is through ecumenical dialogue. In this context, ecumenical dialogue means finding practical, everyday ways of communicating with those who are different and sharing something that transcends traditional and doctrinal differences. Being part of ecumenical dialogue is just the kind of "crisis" that could help young people break through the dead parts of their religious tradition and reevaluate the worldviews that they inherited from their parents and churches.

There are a variety of options churches can use to help young people transcend their context and change their perspective. Using youth culture and things liked by young people to promote dialogue between youth of different nationalities and religious traditions has, in my experience, proven to be effective. When two seemingly different individuals find that they share an interest, doors open in all other areas as well. I have witnessed this as a young theologian studying ecumenics in a foreign country, as a

youth leader at camps with teenagers from Croatia and Serbia, and as a dancer, meeting young people from all over former Yugoslavia who have reevaluated their own traditions in order to share a common interest with someone different. Meeting the Other, learning about her, and sharing with her, brings her closer to us and makes it impossible for us to demonize her. The churches have a unique opportunity to capitalize on this opportunity in order to create a new state of mind and offer a new perspective to young people. Ultimately, such influence could have a transformative effect on Croatian society and create new memories of peaceful coexistence for future generations. EIFD

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In this context, "left-oriented government" means a socialist, more liberal (non-conservative) government, as opposed to "right-oriented," which means nationalist and conservative.
- ² L. von Südländ [Ivo Pilar], *Južnoslavensko Pitanje* (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1943), p. 7.
- ³ "Nama je domovinski rat još uvijek važniji od ekonomije!" last modified on December 8, 2013, <http://www.jutarnji.hr/josip-glaurdic--brojke-ne-lazu--nama-je-domovinski-rat-jos-uvijek-vazniji-od-ekonomije/1145289/> (my own translation).
- ⁴ Paul Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 40.
- ⁵ Although Croatian and Serbian are very similar (in the days of Yugoslavia the language was called Serbo-Croatian), Croatian uses the Latin alphabet and Serbian uses the Cyrillic. See the praxis essay, "Vukovar: Encountering the Other through the Collective War Memory," in this issue for more insight into this ongoing conflict.
- ⁶ "Sve izražena kriza mladih," last modified on June 6, 2012, <http://www.dnevno.hr/kolumne/zlatko-milisa/59525-sve-izrazena-kriza-identiteta-mladih.html> (my own translation).
- ⁷ Marjan Ninčević, "Izgradnja adolescentskog identiteta u današnje vrijeme," *Odgovine Znanosti* 11 (2009): 123.
- ⁸ James Marcia, "Identity in Adolescence," in *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, ed. Joseph Adelson (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1980), 111.
- ⁹ "James Marcia and Self Identity," last modified on November 17, 2010, http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=41164&cn=1310.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Marcia, "Identity in Adolescence," 113.
- ¹² EPPS—Edwards Personal Preference Schedule—is a psychological tool that helps to rate individuals based on their preferences of provided choices. "Report on Edwards Personal Preference Schedule," last modified on October 26, 2010, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/40156050/The-Edwards-Personal-Preference-Schedule>.
- ¹³ Ibid., 114.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 115.
- ¹⁵ "James Marcia and Self Identity."
- ¹⁶ Ksenija Magda, "Adam, naš otac: Kako je apostol Pavao »popravio« tradicije, a potvrdio Pisma," *Obnovljeni život* 3 (2013): 389. Available at http://hrcak.srce.hr/index.php?show=clanak&id_clanak_jezik=162854.
- ¹⁷ Mitja Velikonja, *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Texas: A&M University Press, 2003), 114.

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BE SALT ON EARTH:

Can Evangelical Churches Make a Difference in Croatia?

Editor's Note: Julijana Tešija uses a recent controversial event in Croatia as a window through which to analyze and reflect on the nature of evangelical engagement with those who differ from them.

Battles without the Face of Christ?

December 1, 2013. Croatians voted in favor of defining marriage in the constitution as a “union of a man and a woman,” a move initiated by the Roman Catholic group “In the Name of the Family” and criticized by opponents as discrimination against homosexuals. The month before, the Croatian media (November 12, 2013) informed the public that Roman Catholics, Christian Orthodox, and Protestants, as well as Jews and Muslims should unite and called their believers to support the referendum and protect marriage in the Croatian constitution.¹

The clergy and laity of all faiths in Croatia were united as never before against the right of a sexual minority to marry, and the whole event was considered a victory. At one point I asked a sister-in-faith why she felt so angry while talking about gay rights and the issue of the referendum. What she said shocked me: “Because they started it,” and “because they were the first to attack us with lies and call us conservative and stupid.” She was not wrong. The human-rights associations and gay and lesbian groups in Croatia were severe in their attacks on Christians and the idea of the referendum. The reason I was shocked was because I heard this argument coming from the mouth of a Christian. In my mind, we should make all the difference in the world—we should be the salt and be strong both in evangelizing as well as in loving. And what I felt strongly about the referendum was that despite the victory, we lost our “flavor”: we lost our Christ face.

Just a few months before, on July 20, Pope Francis asked an intriguing question: “If someone is gay and searches for the Lord and has a good will, who am I to judge?” He proposed this view “as a call to Roman Catholic clergy in many countries to speak up and protest when gay men or lesbian women are arrested or discriminated by the authorities of their countries.”² Earlier, Pope Francis also commented on the Argentinean government’s support for a gay marriage bill, urging people against naivety. According to him, what states intend while passing this kind of bill is not only a “simple political fight” but also “an attempt to destroy God’s plan.”³ At first glance, these two statements seem hard to reconcile, but a common assumption links them together: we should state our beliefs and defend them but should never forget that on the “other side” is a fellow human being who might be also seeking for God.

But how should we do it? How should we fight the battle for the kingdom of God on earth against the principalities and the powers, without turning our head away from our flesh-and-blood neighbors, and instead showing the loving face of Christ? Why did evangelicals in Croatia react this way, and how can we engage with others who differ from us in their values, religion, ethnicity, or opinions?

Can Evangelicals Make the Difference?

Evangelicals in Croatia are one of several minority churches recognized by the state. They are considered a “fusion of two leading Christian movements in the 20th and 21st centuries,” namely, evangelical and Pentecostal. While the first focuses on “the Holy Scripture and the Bible as the full authority of Christian belief and living,” the second pays greater attention to

“the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers and the Christian community which implements the truths from the Bible in its everyday experience.”⁴ The same source states that there are around forty Evangelical Pentecostal Churches in Croatia with more than 2,000 believers. The highest spiritual and ruling body is the Council of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Croatia. Out of the total of 4,284,889 inhabitants of Croatia, evangelicals make up less than 0.3 percent, even though we are included in the group of “Protestant churches,” which, according to the 2011 census, is 14,653 (in comparison, 3,697,143 or 86 percent declared as Roman Catholics; 190,143 or 4.3 percent as Orthodox Christians; 62,977 or 1.5 percent as Muslims; and 12,961 as Other Christians).⁵

Our minority status, however, does not necessarily coincide with the quantity or quality of evangelicals’ political and social impact. We were even smaller in numbers when we finally signed the Agreement with the State of Croatia on “Issues of Joint Interest” in 2002 after several years of serious pressure was applied to different high government officials in order to have our position and rights in society recognized. Another example is *Agape*—an Association of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Croatia founded in 1991—as a response to people’s suffering during the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. At a time when churches predominantly chose a side based on ethnicity (the Roman Catholic Church supported Croats, the Serbian Orthodox Church supported Serbs), a small group of evangelical enthusiasts from Croatia led by Peter Kuzmič, a renowned theologian and human rights activist, created one of the first humanitarian relief organizations that supported all people regardless of their ethnicity. “When you believe in the universality of Christ’s love, you believe in internationality and interethnicity of the redeemed community,” says Dr. Kuzmič, who has been quoted by Chip Zimmer as stressing the role of the evangelicals as “bridge builders” between Muslims, Croats, and Serbs.⁶ Last but not least is the example of the Evangelical Theological Faculty founded in Osijek in 1972 as an evangelical and interdenominational educational institution where both students and staff come from different countries and ethnic backgrounds.

Several characteristics make evangelicals in Croatia (and other parts of former Yugoslavia) different and unique. The churches are ethnically mixed: they gather people of different origins and backgrounds (some churches were even established in war-torn areas) to be reconciled under the cross, to worship together as a “wonderful sign of God’s kingdom.”⁷ Believers share a similar religious experience—“feeling of the numinous”⁸—of being called

by the Lord to join his church, which is strongly emphasized and considered vital for the church and its sustainability and growth.⁹ They also share the four distinctive aspects of evangelical faith: conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism, and activism, which form a “quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.”¹⁰

So, what went wrong at the referendum? Why did evangelicals act the same way as the others and fail to embody a crucicentric witness to those with whom we disagreed?

To make the issue clear: I do not intend to say that the voting should have been any different. Every one of us faced the choice to vote in accordance with his/her beliefs, and hopefully after being in a room with a closed door, praying to the Father who sees all but is unseen. What I want to highlight is that in the months prior to and during the referendum, I heard churches and church leaders from all sides telling us loud and clear what we are and how we should think and vote on the referendum. I also heard clergy praying and calling laypersons to join in the prayer for “victory on the referendum.”¹¹ At one point, the call and the prayer seemed so loud that I had the feeling that in all that fighting to prove who was right and who was wrong, we missed asking the Lord for his words of guidance. On the top of it all, we became engaged in aggressive rhetoric, in an earthly battle in which we made a clear division between our love for God and our love for humanity, neighbor and foe, which Jesus never did.

Analysis of Evangelical Response

In light of all this, three things seemed to be lacking, which might prove to be our weaknesses in general: (1) we tend to nurture conflict avoidance instead of openly addressing the real-life issues; (2) we tend to avoid open dialogue that allows diverse perspectives to be heard; and (3) we tend to neglect nurturing loving relationships with those of differing groups.

1. Nurturing conflict-avoidance philosophy

It is my belief that one of the key issues as to why we, as evangelicals, joined the herd and failed to model Christ’s love to those with whom we disagreed is our tendency to avoid talking about conflicting issues within the church. We have sermons about different problems of today (drugs, sex, sexual abuse, homosexuality, home/gender violence); different pastors propose different interpretations—though similar solutions—to these issues. Yet at times their proposed solutions seem distant from real-life problems; they are moral propositions or dogmas that should be obeyed without posing questions regarding their

application. The Thomas and Kilmann grid, which highlights different conflict resolution tools and their success in application, shows that avoidance is a lose-lose position since it does not address the issue at hand. The authors claim it typically works for minor issues and nonrecurring conflicts, but it seems unable to provide a good response for more serious matters and therefore other approaches to conflict resolution might be more useful.¹²

2. Lack of open dialogue that involves different perspectives

The Bible does not offer a comprehensive or a prescriptive answer to the question of how Christians should relate to those different from us. However, it does provide orientation indicators for Christians—both in their engagement in interfaith or faith-secular dialogue as well as for interchurch dialogue. This dialogue should provide insight into the Holy Scripture (theological input), offer prayer for God’s guidance, and also provide examples from life that grounds biblical teaching in real-life situations. Lack of open dialogue creates distrust, which is defined as an expectation that the motives, intentions, and behaviors of another person are sinister and harmful to one’s own interests.¹³ Lewicki, Tomlinson, and Gillespie (renowned scholars in management, negotiation, trust development, and conflict management processes) also confirm that distrust usually causes us to take steps that reduce our vulnerability in an attempt to protect our interests; thus our distrust of others is likely to evoke a competitive (as opposed to cooperative) orientation that stimulates and exacerbates conflict.¹⁴

3. Nurturing loving relationships with our neighbors and/or foes

During the campaign for the referendum, while the Roman Catholics were loud and overwhelmingly present in all media, our evangelical churches were basically silent. Apart from the statement of support to the referendum initiative, there was also an interview on the Croatian National Television with Danijel Berković, a theologian and representative of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Croatia (*Duhovni izazovi*, November 23, 2013). In the interview, he rightly stressed that the referendum was a reaction to partocracy and to the lack of proper public dialogue in Croatia, and warned that it might, in turn, initiate an avalanche of similar initiatives.¹⁵ So the question remains: why did we (as a minority faith) join an initiative that might open a Pandora’s box of future similar coercive initiatives and laws against another minority, and why we did not do anything to enhance true dialogue—even dialogue that includes our “foes”?

In the Quest for Answers

At one point, Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was in the Law of Moses. Mark states that he replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with

all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:28–31 NIV). In the Sermon on the Mount he expands on this to specifically include loving and praying for one’s enemy (Matt 5:43–45).

In light of Jesus’ teaching, as Christ followers, is it not our obligation to unite our love for our Lord with love for our neighbor? Is it not our task to see our neighbors and foes, as well as our brothers/sisters, as children of God and love them too? We are surprised when others see us as conservative, aggressive, and narrow-minded. Are we aware that how we regard the Other (those who oppose our views or disagree with us) reflects our beliefs and how we see and love our Lord?

There are some 613 commandments of different kinds and for different people and situations in the Old Testament.¹⁶ But Jesus highlights love for God and neighbor as the pinnacle of all these commandments—in fact, love for God is inextricably intertwined with love for humanity and is the cornerstone of what it means to be a Christian. Our Lord is saying that we honor God’s love for us if we love each other, and we are forgiven and reconciled after repenting of our sins (remembering our own sinfulness, Matthew 4 and 5). He is asking us to love our enemies and to love them creatively (walking another mile, helping when no one else will), in sincerity and discernment without judgment (Matthew 6 and 7), and with sensitivity and compassion.

The Bible also teaches our posture as we approach our neighbors. For instance, Matthew 18:15–17 details the method of confronting someone who has sinned against you; James 1:19 and Proverbs 15:1 highlight listening and being gentle while slow to anger. We should expect differences to arise both within the church and between the church and society. Our response to these conflicts needs to conform to Christ’s teachings.¹⁷

Concluding Remarks

How can we ensure that church communication based on a dialogue of diverse perspectives does not remain abstract, or even worse, merely turned into a moral imposition as was illustrated by this recent event in Croatia? We can do so by making dialogue an everyday method of communication in the church as well as between the church and society in general.

During almost five months of campaigning for the referendum, I heard no single call to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters to come to us and talk (or us to them, for that matter!). We lacked an open hand and a loving face calling them to Christ. We responded the same way as they did: in anger and with a desire to win. We supported a coercive law on purely religious grounds, and we were part of the majority that imposed their religious views on others and restricted the civil liberties of our fellow citizens. Whether we should

have entered into the battle with the state is another issue for analysis. But whether we should have gone about it in this particular manner is a question that should be raised now and always.

In these kinds of situations, Thomas and Kilmann first propose compromise as a solution, but second, and even better, collaboration. While the first looks for a “mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties,” the second “involves an attempt to work with others to find some solution that fully satisfies their concerns.”¹⁸ This can be done by applying open dialogue that can defuse tensions and keep situations from escalating. It can also promote understanding of different positions and offer resolutions to conflicting matters and reconciliation between conflicted parties. But above all, it can bring those who seek Christ closer to him as they witness his love, kindness, firmness, and gentleness reflected in ourselves. This is especially true in times when prejudice and hatred are all too common, when extreme views dominate the understanding and incite identity-based appeals, and especially when politicians use divisiveness as a strategy to win. Is this recent situation an example of our being drawn into the political rather than a faith-related battle? Only the future will tell. **EIFD**

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ENDNOTES

¹ See “Katolici, pravoslavci, protestanti, židovi i muslimani zajedno pozivaju: Izidite na referendum i zaštitite brak Ustavom,” by IKA (Catholics Information Agency), November 13, 2013, on Bitno.net: <http://www.bitno.net/vijesti/hrvatska/izidite-na-referendum-i-zastitite-brak-ustavom/>.

² “Not Afraid of Reality”: Pope Praised for New Stance on Gays,” Spiegel Online International, July 30, 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/human-rights-groups-praise-pope-francis-for-new-stance-on-gay-priests-a-913833.html>.

³ “Pope Francis on Gay Marriage, Unmarried Mothers . . . and Journalists,” The Guardian, March 13, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/13/pope-francis-quotations-by-him-about-him>.

⁴ “Croatia (Evangelical Pentecostal Church) – Participating Member” webpage on the World Assemblies of God Fellowship website: <http://www.worldagfellowship.org/fellowship/countries/croatia> (accessed January 9, 2014).

⁵ Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2012: <http://www.dzs.hr> (accessed January 9, 2014).

⁶ Chip Zimmer, “Turning Enemies into Friends: An Inside Look at the Life and Passions of Peter Kuzmic,” available at The Peacemaker website: <http://www.peacemaker.net/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=khLUJ3PHKuG&b=6131017&ct=8648095¬oc=1> (accessed January 13, 2014), and ETS/AGAPE Report, “Evangelical Theological Seminary and Agape Ministries,” on Europe Missions of the National Presbyterian Church website: <http://npceurope.org/index.cfm?main=ETSKuzmic> (accessed January 13, 2014).

⁷ Peter Kuzmic, from Zimmer, “Turning Enemies into Friends.”

⁸ See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1923).

⁹ These findings correspond to T. Rainer and E. Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God’s Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 63, 68.

¹⁰ David Bebbington, quoted in Carl Trueman, *The Real Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2011), 14.

¹¹ Throughout Croatia prayers were organized for the “success,” “victory,” and “support” of the referendum. See <http://www.tportal.hr> or <http://www.dnevnik.hr>, <http://www.croative.net>, <http://www.hu-benedikt.hr>, <http://www.dubrovniknet.hr>, etc.

¹² See in more length, Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann, *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (Mountain View, CA: CPP, Inc./Xicom Incorporated, 1974). An overview of their model can be found on <http://www.kilmanniagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki> (accessed January 13, 2014).

¹³ See Roy J. Lewicki, Edward C. Tomlinson, and Nicole Gillespie, “Models of Interpersonal Trust Development: Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Evidence, and Future Directions,” *Journal of Management* 32 (2006): 991; available at <http://jom.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/32/6/991>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 998.

¹⁵ See “What Is the Type of Dialogue in Croatia,” on the Evangelical Pentecostal Church of Croatia website: <http://www.epc.hr/hr/aktualno/vijesti/kakav-je-nacin-razgovora-u-hrvatskoj,530.html> (accessed January 20, 2014).

¹⁶ “A List of the 613 Mitzvot (Commandments),” on the Judaism 101 website: <http://www.jewfaq.org/613.htm> (accessed January 9, 2014).

¹⁷ The life of the triune God is a helpful model to consider. See, for instance, the model proposed by Miroslav Volf in *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). He explores the relationship between persons and community in Christian theology and finds the foundation for the Christian church in the Trinity, which is viewed as union in diversity. Volf argues that the Word and the Spirit are distinct but inseparable from the Speaker of the Word and Breather of the Spirit, and no divine “person”—neither Father, nor Son, nor the Spirit—ever acts independently in any activity.

¹⁸ Thomas and Kilmann, *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*.

Further Reading

Theological

- Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Abingdon, 1998).
- Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory* (Eerdmans, 2006).

Sociological/Historical

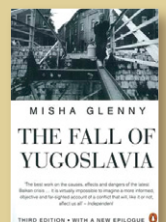
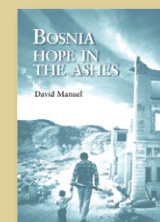
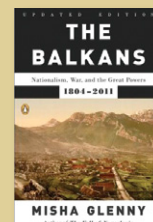
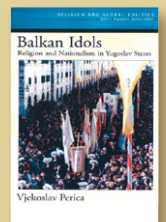
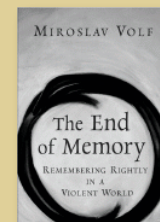
- Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

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Vukovar

ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER THROUGH THE COLLECTIVE WAR MEMORY

An Orthodox Christian Discusses the Complexity of Peace and Dialogue

An interview with co-founder and current advisor to the European House Vukovar (Europski Dom Vukovar) Dr. Ljiljana Gehrecke

The fall of Vukovar—a city in the far eastern reaches of Croatia just shy of Serbia’s border—is Croatia’s quintessential collective memory of their homeland war’s devastation and horror. An important cultural and industrial center before the war, it was also a prime location for a power struggle after Croatia declared its independence in 1991. The Yugoslav People’s Army and Serbian paramilitary forces surrounded the town in a horrific three-month siege and bombardment: thousands were either killed, wounded, executed, or forced to evacuate, and 85 percent of the buildings were destroyed. The war ended in 1995, and in 1998, Croatians began returning to Vukovar.¹ Today, Serbians are in the minority, and although substantial gains have been made towards the cultivation of a peaceful society, divisions and deep wounds remain.

In 2013, hostilities resurfaced in Vukovar after the Croatian government decided, in accordance with its minority rights legislation, to promote the use of the Serbian language in areas where the Serbian minority was greater than a third. Although Serbian and Croatian are very similar languages—in fact called “Serbo-Croatian” during the time of Yugoslavia—Serbian is written in Cyrillic while Croatian is written with a Latin alphabet. Protests and resistance quickly formed in Vukovar against the possibility of having Cyrillic appear on administrative signs, climaxing when hundreds of people, primarily veterans and survivors of the war, gathered to destroy the newly placed signs. By December, Croatian protesters had collected over 680,000 signatures in order to force a referendum calling for reformation of the minority language rights legislation, although the Croatian government is staunchly promoting the minority rights in accordance with their recent European Union entrance.²

Despite those working against peace, many have developed and are developing initiatives to facilitate dialogue, tolerance, and relationships across religious and ethnic lines. The European House (EH), founded in Vukovar in 2000, states part of their mission as “initiating and supporting the overall socio-economic development of Vukovar in order to anchor peace in the region.”³ One of their

specific objectives in relation to this mission is to facilitate mutual trust, understanding, and tolerance between ethnic, religious, and political groups. Ljiljana Gehrecke, an Orthodox Christian of German descent, was born and raised in Vukovar and remembers how good life was before the war—there were no differences between the Serbs and Croats. But changes were ushered in when “politicians came to tell them [the citizens] that they cannot live together. It is easy to manipulate uneducated and frightened people,” she said.

In 2004, the EH began a process of building cooperation with various religious groups: Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Adventist, Greek Catholic, and the Islamic community. When Ljiljana first invited all the leaders to meet together, she was afraid no one would come. To prepare for the occasion, she visited each of the religious communities to listen to their sermons. “The sermons were not



Vukovar still bears damage from the war.

good,” she said. “Each group was telling their members to be in community [socialize] only with their own group.” Much to her surprise, representatives from each religious tradition did come to the event, although none of the leaders greeted each other when they walked in and even refused to look at each other. To begin that first meeting around the table, Ljiljana asked each religious leader to take a five-minute period of silence and pray in his own way that the meeting would be positive. The meeting itself was productive as the leaders all agreed that they should work against division between the religious communities. The end of the meeting was telling, however, as everyone quickly slipped out afterwards, ignoring the food spread that was waiting for them.

As the meetings progressed, taking place every two months, Ljiljana recounted how they began to form relationships with each other, talking and joking as if they belonged to one community. They held roundtables where each religious leader was able to share about his own tradition. For seven years running, they held a concert where religious groups would sing their own songs and they also held ecumenical prayer meetings. Until around 2010, the cooperation was continuing to grow, and every year on Europe Day, the leaders would come to a prominent hotel and meet each other. All the citizens could walk by the big windows and see their religious leaders laughing and talking to one another.

Three years ago, politics began seeping back into the mix—that is, the focus began to drift away from open engagement back towards favor of one’s own religious and/or political interest. First, the

Catholic priest started saying he didn’t have time to come to the gatherings anymore, and then the Orthodox representatives decided not to come if the Catholics were not coming. The Muslim and evangelical groups continued, but this year, out of the eight religious groups in Vukovar, six did not attend. The only two that came were from evangelical groups.

Certainly, this is now exacerbated by the rising tension from the language script debates. In Ljiljana’s view, ordinary citizens want to move beyond this, but the social pressure is very high to conform to one’s particular ethnic group—in general, if one is Croat and therefore Catholic, there is pressure to be against the Cyrillic. If one is Serbian and therefore Orthodox, there is pressure to support the Cyrillic signs. According to Ljiljana, some religious leaders were actually encouraging the protests against the use of the Cyrillic letters.

Ljiljana believes that the religious leaders should be providing appropriate leadership to mitigate this conflict.

Without a spiritual approach to the conflict, there will be no resolution. The politicians can never resolve the issue of reconciliation and forgiveness and neither can the social scientists. Because forgiveness is a [matter] of the spirit. The power for reconciliation and forgiveness can only be found on the spiritual path. Without forgiveness and reconciliation, there is no life in Vukovar. And the leading role here should be played by the church groups and leaders.

Three and a half years ago, the two evangelical churches who are still attending the interfaith gatherings started and continue to facilitate a project called the “Valley of Tears to the Valley of Blessings.” Once a month, they organize a night of poetry and song, using the arts as a way to build bridges and facilitate relationships. The monthly gatherings have grown to around 100 people, including people from each of the religious and ethnic groups.

“A kingdom divided cannot stand,” Ljiljana concluded. “There is not a family who can work well when there is division. All citizens in Vukovar want to live in peace and live well. . . . A peacemaker is very important. We are not doing it because we are thinking of the later kingdom but because the kingdom is in our hearts already.”

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Barbara Matejčić, “Vukovar Still Imprisoned by Its Bloody Past,” *BalkanInsight*, February 21, 2012, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/vukovar-still-imprisoned-by-its-bloody-past>; or Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: The Death of a Nation* (New York: Penguin Group, 1996).
- ² Boris Pavelić and Josip Ivanović, “Croatia: Serbian Language Dispute Creates Discord,” *BalkanInsight*, December 26, 2013, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/croatia-serbian-language-dispute-sparks-discord>.
- ³ See the *Europski Dom Vukovar* [European House Vukovar] website, <http://www.edu.org/spip/spip.php?rubrique6> (accessed January 7, 2013).





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My idea was to show interfaith dialogue in the region, especially between young people, on a symbolic level. Although almost 20 years have passed since the end of the war, its consequences are still vivid. Faith is no exception. People do not truly communicate and are distant from each other. That is why I chose a specific location (impacted by the war) where I placed people of different religions. They all co-exist in the same place, but their ideals and religions do not allow them to truly communicate, while the ruins of war only increase the gap. However, hope still lingers as they are waiting for a better time to come—but no one has yet taken the initiative.

About the Artist

My name is Marko Podgorščak (born March 15, 1985), and I work at a local television station in Osijek as a cameraman. Although I studied to be an electrical engineer, through the years I found my vocation was really to be a photographer and cinematographer. Working at a television station first introduced me to this aspect of art, and since then photography and filming have been great passions of mine. When making short movies or taking photographs, I cannot say that I follow strict rules or themes because each work requires a unique approach for it to become a true piece of art.

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