

The Profile of Bosnian Islam And How West European Muslims Could Benefit from It

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While the solutions found by Bosnian Muslims cannot be simply copied elsewhere, West European Muslims should study their institutions and intellectual legacy – and learn from their recent past that isolation equals destruction.

Islam in Bosnia in brief

Islam has been continuously present in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) since the early 15th century. Accepting Islam at the hands of the Ottoman scholars and Sufis meant the adoption of the Hanafi *madhhab* in Islamic law, Maturidi thought in theology, and related Sufi orders. Until 1878, B&H was part of the Ottoman state, which was organized according to the principle of organic unity of religious and political authority. Things changed dramatically for Muslims in 1878 when Ottomans handed over Bosnia to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. That was a cultural earthquake, which caught Muslims totally unprepared.¹ After initial confusion and wavering between migrating and staying, the majority decided to stay and started to organize within the existing political system. This process was supported and even initiated by the Austrian authorities. In 1882, the emperor appointed the first Bosnian *Rais al-Ulama*, religious leader. Five years later a school for Shari‘ah judges was established. During the following three decades, Bosnian Muslims fought for the autonomy in education and *waqf* affairs which they eventually won in 1909. For the next hundred years, Bosnian Muslims continued to struggle for the preservation of their autonomy and, at times, their very identity and survival. The two most difficult periods were from the end of WW II to the late 1960s and 1990s. In the late 1960s, the political and economic situation in Yugoslavia generally improved, and religious communities regained some of their freedoms.

By the early 1980s, the Communist regime was already going through its final crisis, and the first problems in Kosovo started. New restrictions on religious activities were imposed, and a number of Muslim intellectuals were sent to prison. Then the Serbian nationalists led by Slobodan Milošević were galvanized, inter alia, by the claim that Balkan Muslims represented a threat to Europe in general and to the Serbian nation in particular. Very soon, first Croatian and then Muslim towns and villages were burning. All but one or two mosques in the territory under the control of the Army of the Republic of Srpska (and later many mosques under the control of Croatian forces in Bosnia) were destroyed, and the Muslim population expelled or killed. Once predominantly Muslim towns in eastern and northern Bosnia have been “ethnically cleansed” of Muslims. Despite Dayton Accords goals, the return of refugees and displaced persons to the Republic of Srpska and parts of Herzegovina

¹ Fikret Karčić, *The Bosniaks and the Challenge of Modernity: Late Ottoman and Habsburg Times*, Contemporary Islamic Thought (Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 1999); Enes Karić, *Prilozi za povijest islamskog mišljenja u Bosni i Hercegovini XX stoljeća*, vol. 1, Biblioteka kulturna baština (Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 2004).

has been mostly unsuccessful. At the same time, on the 30% or so of BH territory that was under the control of BH government forces during the war, Islam has experienced a sort of revival under the auspices of the Islamic Community.

The Islamic Community in B&H

According to its statute (constitution), the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IC) is “the sole and united” community of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, of Bosniaks outside their homeland, and of other Muslims who accept it as their own.² The autonomy of the IC is based on the religious and legal institutions of Bosnian Muslims from the time of the Ottoman administration in Bosnia. The IC is an inseparable part of the *Ummah*. The organization of the IC and its activities are derived from the Holy Qur’an and the Sunnah, the Islamic traditions of Bosniaks, and the requirements of the time. The IC is independent in regulating its activities (rituals, Islamic education, management of Islamic endowments, publishing, charity, etc.) and the management of its property.

The aim of the IC is that all of its members should live in conformity with Islamic norms. The IC protects the authenticity of Islamic norms and assures their interpretation and application. In the interpretation and performance of Islamic religious rituals, the Hanafi *madhhab* is to be applied. The IC dedicates itself to the preservation of the values of marriage and family life, and takes care of the Islamic education and upbringing of its members. The IC is supposed to take care of the religious rights of Muslims and ensure to its members the necessary conditions for performing their Islamic religious obligations. The IC should also organize and support activities which improve the social and financial living conditions of Muslims.

According to the same document, the IC establishes and maintains contact and cooperation with Islamic communities, institutions and organizations worldwide and cooperates with other religious communities and organizations promoting peace, justice and good will among all people. The IC is financed by *waqfs*, membership fees, *zakah*, *sadaqat al-fitr*, *qurban*, the revenue of its profit-generating agencies, funds, gifts, testaments, etc. (see also Box 1, “IC Institutions”).

Understanding the “Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks” or “Bosnian Islam”

The years since the fall of Communism have brought such tremendous changes to Islam and Muslims in Bosnia that it is not feasible to go into all the details here. One development to note is the reintegration of Bosnian Muslims into the wider Muslim world community. In that process, all sorts of ideas from the Muslim world came to Bosnia and disturbed the monotony or homogeneity of Islamic practice in Bosnia. Many local Muslims as well as foreign observers did not like what they saw, and started to talk about an endangered “Bosnian Islam,” without defining it. Nor was everybody happy with this ethno-geographic qualification of what is usually perceived as a universal religion. While not negating the usefulness of this term as a sociological tool, some have preferred to use a phrase from the constitution of the IC: “the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks”. So far, the most significant attempt to define it was made by the then chairman of the IC Constitutional Court, professor Fikret

² The IC has a number of non-Bosniak employees including an imam born in Mecca serving in a village near Zenica.

Karčić whose thoughts on the topic were well received and went almost unchallenged. To briefly summarize his argument, the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks is constituted by the following six elements:

1. Sunni Islam of the Maturidi school in Islamic doctrine, the Hanafi school of Islamic Law, and the relevant Sufi orders.³
2. Belonging to the Ottoman Islamic cultural zone, characterized by – among other things – a strong central authority and the institutionalization of the *'ulama* into a tightly knit hierarchy.
3. The presence of elements of “Islamized” pre-Islamic Bosnian practice such as performing prayers in the open on certain days of the solar calendar. (These elements have been much in evidence and constantly evolving up to the present. The annual event at Ajvatovica is an interesting case in this regard).
4. A tradition of Islamic reformism in interpreting Islam since the mid-19th century. This was an attempt to improve the lot of Muslims, mainly through reviving *ijtihad* and reforming the socio-political conditions of Muslims. In the second half of the 20th century, it became “the official intellectual tradition in interpreting Islam in BiH.” This tradition is not homogenous. It includes modernist as well as more conservative trends.
5. Institutionalization of Islamic religious authority in the form of the “Islamic Community” briefly described above.
6. The practice of living Islam in a secular state.

The dynamic relationship – and sometimes tensions – between these elements are acknowledged. Karčić also observed that two of these elements could be a focus of further development: Islamic institutions and Islamic thought.

If these are the constituent elements, how could one describe the character of the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks that results from their combination?

Characteristics of “Bosnian Islam”

1. *Secularized Muslims*. Since 1878, Bosnian Muslims have lived in a succession of secular states. While Austria and royal Yugoslavia implemented the Shari‘ah in Muslim personal law, the communist authorities closed the Shari‘ah courts in 1946. From then on until 1990, Bosnian Muslims lived in an aggressively atheistic, often anti-religious state. Since 1990, Muslims have been part of the effort to establish liberal democracy. Throughout this time, they accepted the legal status quo in which the religious and moral norms of the Shari‘ah are applicable, while its “legal” norms were also transformed into moral norms.⁴ The IC has repeatedly stated its commitment to the separation of the state and religious communities.⁵ So far, there have been sporadic calls for the reintroduction of optional Shari‘ah courts to deal with

³ Many Bosnian Muslims including many intellectuals believe that the Hanafi *madhhab* is significantly more liberal than the other schools of Islamic law and that most problems in Islamic practice today are result of departure from Hanafi *madhhab*, which is an oversimplification of the situation and hardly a defensible position.

⁴ More on this in Fikret Karčić, “Islam u sekularnoj državi: Primjer Bosne i Hercegovine,” in *Zbornik radova Naučnog skupa "Islamska tradicija Bošnjaka: izvori, razvoj i institucije, perspektive"*, 14., 15. i 16. novembar 2007., ed. Mehmedalija Hadžić (Sarajevo: Rijaset Islamske zajednice u Bosni i Hercegovini, 2008), 423-436.

⁵ Rijaset IZ u BiH, “Nacrt platforme Islamske Zajednice u BiH za dijalog,” <http://rijaset.ba/index.php?id=5756>.

personal status matters, analogous to rabbinical or church courts in some Western countries, but none of these went far enough to draw significant public attention.⁶ At this point, one could only speculate about the possible reaction of the general Bosnian Muslim population to such an initiative. The aforementioned professor Karčić has already voiced his objection to such a possibility.⁷ Others could be expected to support such an idea. However, no serious Muslim individual or group has advocated the introduction of mandatory Shari‘ah rules in any aspect of life. It seems that Xavier Bougarel is right in his conclusion that Bosnian Muslims are irreversibly secularized.⁸

It would also be very difficult to speak of Islamic politics proper in Bosnia in any meaningful sense. By Islamic politics, I here mean a politics that takes Islam as its primary frame of reference. When Islamic symbols and motives are used in everyday political discourse, it is done in order to achieve national Bosniak (Muslim) political objectives, not Islamic ones. So it is more appropriate to call it Muslim rather than Islamic politics.⁹

2. *Civic, non-violent Islam.* Contrary to what might be expected, given their recent experience, Bosnian Muslims have been very peaceful, non-violent, civic, respectful of national laws and norms, open, and tolerant. Despite all the talk about the threat of Islamic terrorism in the Balkans, there have been no major attacks on non-Muslim or western targets (it was actually the Army of the Republic of Srpska that held Western hostages in Bosnia during the war). There has been no massive revenge against Serbian or Croatian targets or quest for extra-judicial justice, despite the disappointment with Europe and the sense of betrayal.¹⁰ It has been suggested by Prof. Karčić that Ottoman normative culture might be one of the factors contributing to this.¹¹

⁶ (Dr. Mustafa Cerić, Grand Mufti of Bosnia), “Declaration of European Muslims,” http://www.rijaset.ba/images/stories/deklaracija/Declaration_eng.doc.

⁷ Karčić, “Islam u sekularnoj državi”; Fikret Karčić, “Bošnjački iskorak u prošlost,” *Dani*, October 14, 2005.

⁸ Xavier Bougarel, “Islam and Politics in the Post-Communist Balkans (1990-2000),” in *New Approaches to Balkan Studies*, ed. Dimitris Keridis, Ellen Elias-Bursać, and Nicholas Yatromanolakis, The IFPA-Kokkalis Series on Southeast European Policy 2 (Dulles, VA: Brassey’s, 2003), 345–360.

⁹ Some researchers have pointed out the considerable de-secularization of the BH public sphere – entry of religion into schools, army, religious symbols in public space, etc. – that took place in the 1990s. Xavier Bougarel, for instance, called it “authoritarian re-Islamization.” Xavier Bougarel, “Kako je panislamizam zamijenio komunizam,” *Dani*, July 2, 1999, <http://bhdani.com/arhiva/109/feljton09a.htm>. While interesting, the thesis requires analysis that is beyond the limits of this paper.

¹⁰ According to a recent study, ca. 70% of Bosnian Muslims believe that a clash of civilizations is going on. That is not much different from the 81% of Al-Jazeera viewers polled in 2006.

¹¹ Personal conversation with dr. Fikret Karčić. This is not to deny the war crimes committed by Muslims, both local and foreign, in uniforms of the Bosnian Army. For instance, this author recently had a Franciscan priest whose old father and several other relatives were killed by Bosnian Muslim soldiers during the war as a guest lecturer in Genocide Studies course at the Faculty of Islamic Studies. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that local Islamic authorities actually reined in the destructive impulses. An analysis of the texts published in *Glasnik*, the official journal of the IC during last twenty years, did not discover any significant case of intolerance or chauvinism. See Omer Kovačević, “Muslimani i drugi: analiza tekstova objavljenih u *Glasniku Islamske zajednice*” (Muslims and Others: Analysis of the *Herald of Islamic Community* articles), graduation paper no. 401, Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo, June 2006.

In this regard, Xavier Bougarel has suggested that Bosnian Muslims have adapted to the condition of non-sovereignty and power-sharing in a multi-religious environment.¹²

3. *Democratic and pluralistic.* Bosnian Islam is essentially democratic, by which I mean participatory, inclusive, and pluralistic. This is probably an irreversible development. The inclusive and participatory nature of the IC begets pluralism,¹³ for a plethora of Islamic trends has always been present inside the IC: traditionalists, Sufis, reformists, modernists, salafis... Before learning to live with others who are different from them, Bosnian Muslims have to learn to live with the differences among themselves. Many IC officials with university diplomas are graduates of non-Bosnian universities. In a sense, the IC is a melting pot. It is premature to say for how long it will manage to keep salafis and modernists together. In the near future, one or the other group might have more say in running the Community. However, any sort of massive exclusion based on ideological differences seems to be out of question.

4. *Nationalized Islam.* This needs to be acknowledged, since it is very relevant in the context of our discussion. Bosnian Islam might be pluralistic when it comes to various Islamic orientations, but it is thoroughly nationalized, and Bosnian Muslims are very pragmatic when it comes to balancing patriotism and faithfulness to their culture with allegiance to their religious principles. In their case, religious and national identities reinforce each other, and it is often difficult to say where Islam stops and national culture begins. Sometimes one has an impression that Islam serves the cause of Bosniak nationhood at least as much as the other way around. In other words, Bosniak nationalism sometimes hides behind Islam.

This characteristic is obviously an obstacle to the export of Bosnian Islamic solutions to Europe. On the other hand, it can be instructive to study this experience of twinning Islam with nationality. It would be interesting to see how constructive Bosnian Muslims have been in crossing ethnic divisions among Muslims. Other questions that might be asked here are: Is the statutory provision about the IC being the community of Bosniaks outside Bosnia, too, becoming an impediment to the creation of similar structures in other European countries? Can there be an institutionalization of Islamic authority along the Bosnian model in multiethnic Muslim communities, or in nations that are not predominantly or almost exclusively Muslim, as is the case with Bosniak nation?

This was an attempt to depict the current situation. However, the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks is not static, and the struggle over the nature of Islam in Bosnia is ongoing. Currently, the challenge seems to be most pronounced at two levels: interpretation of Islam, and the administration of Islamic affairs. At the interpretation level, the influx of Islamic literature, missionaries and Bosnian graduates of Islamic studies from the Arab world during the 1990s has for a while posited a significant challenge. However, the concerned observer may take heart at the latest developments: the IC has reacted decisively, and Salafi/Wahhabi groups have differentiated, with the majority of groups becoming more mainstream-oriented, and a very small minority of radicals. The other challenge from more or less the same group of people was directed at the

¹² Xavier Bougarel, *The Role of Balkan Muslims in Building a European Islam*, European Policy Centre Issue Paper, November 23, 2005, 7.

¹³ Ahmet Alibašić, "Slovo u pohvalu islamskom pluralizmu: Obrazovni i intelektualni profil nastavnika i saradnika FIN-a" (Faculty of Islamic Studies, June 27, 2007), http://www.fin.ba/index.php?option=com_content&id=178.

way Islamic affairs are organized and managed in Bosnia, questioning the “exclusive right” or “monopoly” of the IC to operate mosques, train imams, provide basic religious education in mosques, collect *zakah*, organize *hajj*, etc. It is principally a clash of two Islamic administrative cultures: one that is more commonly present in the Arab world, with individualistic tendencies verging on anarchism, and another, centralized one that is based on the Ottoman tradition of a structured religious hierarchy (though it is not, strictly speaking, uniquely Turkish). And although there has been much talk lately about the magnitude of this challenge or “Wahhabi threat,” I conclude from my own observation and analysis that the critical years were the late 1990s, when ‘Wahhabis’ had money, people and organizations on the ground. Since then, local and global political developments have all worked against the “Wahhabis,” and the IC has also reacted, reasserting its role as the exclusive Islamic authority in the country. Although minor readjustments are possible in the future, no major change is anticipated.

Learning from Bosnian Muslims

There are a number of aspects of Islamic tradition and experience of Bosnian Muslims that West European Muslims might like to consider more closely.

1. *The way Islamic authority is institutionalized in Bosnia*, and the way Muslims are represented in it, could be the most interesting aspect for other Muslims to look at. I mean here the general model, the salient features of which I sketch below, not its details or the practice. This model is important because its structures, institutional setup, and procedures influence the brand of Islam that is produced. I would like to mention three benefits of the IC model, in which respects it seems to be conceptually superior to those of Russian independent muftis, Southeast Asian movements, the Turkish Diyanet, European Islamic societies and NGOs, Arab *Wizarat al-Awqaf* and state appointed *shuyukh* (*‘Ulama al-sultah*), etc. First, having a single Islamic structure means more powerful organization and a better negotiating position *vis-a-vis* state and other actors. Second, self-financing makes such an organization more resistant to unwelcome outside influences, whatever they might be. These two together mean a more autonomous, and consequently more credible, Islamic authority that is able to prevent radicalization. (This does not exclude some sort of relationship between the local Islamic community and transnational Islamic authority if and when it is established. Bosnian Muslims had a very positive experience in this regard from 1909 until the end of the caliphate in 1924.) Third, universal, inclusive membership makes the organization lean towards the mainstream, moderation, and the middle path.

Of course, the Bosnian model has many limitations. One main drawback is the unclear boundaries of the exclusive powers of the IC and the nature of its relations with Islamic NGOs.¹⁴

2. As a specific element of this concept, *the Bosnian Islamic education system* is the second thing West European Muslims might want to examine. In brief, the system

¹⁴ The relations with the wider Muslim Ummah might also become an issue once the Ummah gets a single address, as it were.

combines religious and secular, modern and traditional Islamic education. This aspect has recently been discussed at length both by others and myself elsewhere.¹⁵

3. *The intellectual legacy* and the responses of Bosnian Muslim intellectuals to the challenges of modernity and European culture is the third potentially interesting aspect. However, this legacy has still to be systematized, studied, and presented in major European languages if it is to be accessible to non-Bosnians. For now, the following could be said of it:

- It was formed under conditions of absence of freedom and isolation (which sometimes was a blessing in disguise, since it forced creativity upon some Muslim thinkers).
- Currently, Bosnian Muslim thought is recovering from a devastating war and “digesting” new input from the wider Muslim world into which it has been reintegrated. One hopes that Bosnian Islamic thought will regain its creativity and authenticity soon.
- Bosnian Muslim scholars still need to rethink, justify, and legitimize many Bosnian Islamic practices if they do not want to be seen and written off as simply weak and lax Muslims.
- Muslims often refrain from necessary reforms and changes, fearing that those steps will lead to a slippery slope affecting their faith. The experience of Bosnian Muslims suggests that West Muslims should relax a bit and not lose precious time in hesitation: Muslims can change without losing their faith. Unavoidable decisions must be taken. The dissociation of culture and habits/customs from religious principles is a key step in this process. Of course, looking critically at well-established practices and interpretations requires a significant amount of both knowledge and courage.

4. *The political and social experience.* Muslims should fear isolation as their worst choice and a way to certain destruction. The recent past of Bosnian Muslims suggests that European Muslims should invest in building bridges of friendship with the wider society wherever and whenever they can. (Bridges can be destroyed whenever you want; they cannot be so easily built.) Muslims (like all other weak peoples) cannot count on the necessary support of Europe, the UN, or even the U.S. in matters of life and death. These powers can be very generous in delivering humanitarian aid and development assistance, but not in keeping you alive..¹⁶ The Muslim world, on the other hand, can offer much ineffective piety, plenty of warm emotions, and some short-term humanitarian aid. In such a world, Islamophobia, anti-Muslim propaganda and stigmatization should be taken very seriously, irrespective of their obvious falsity and “unbelievability.” Once people start believing it is already too late.

¹⁵ Ahmet Alibašić and Asim Zubčević, “Islamic Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” in *Islamische Erziehung in Europa. Islamic Education in Europe*, ed. Ednan Aslan, Wiener islamisch-religionspädagogische Studien 1 (Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2008), 43–57; Štěpán Macháček, “‘European Islam’ and Islamic Education in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” *Südosteuropa* 55, no. 4 (2007): 395–428; Štěpán Macháček, “Islamic Education in the Post-Communist Balkans in the Period From 1990 to 2005,” *Archiv orientální* 74, no. 1 (2006): 65–93.

¹⁶ Enes Karić, “Bosnian Muslims between the Balkans and Europe (A Lesson and Hope for the Muslims of Europe),” in E. Karić, *Essays on our European Never – Never Land*. Sarajevo: Oko, 2004. Prof. Karić reverses completely the topic of our discussion and asks: “What Europe for Muslims?”.

By way of conclusion, one may say that Bosnian Muslims have no readily exportable solutions for West European Muslims, but they do have a rich stock of experience based on which a common European Islam could in part be built.

Acknowledgments

This article was first presented as a paper at “Bosnischer Islam für Europa”, Akademie der Diözese Rottenburg-Stuttgart & Vereinigung islamischer Gemeinden der Bosniaken in Deutschland (VIGB), Hohenheim, 16-17 November 2007. My thanks go to Hans-Jörg Schmidt, Xavier Bougarel and Christian Moe for reading and commenting on the article. The opinions expressed here and any shortcomings are of course mine.

SIDEBAR: Institutions of the Islamic Community

The organizational structure of the IC consists of *jama'ahs* (community of at least 100 households), *majlises* (usually a group of not less than 7 *jama'ahs* in one municipality or city), *muftiluks* (*mufti* districts, 8 of them in Bosnia and one in each of Slovenia, Croatia, Sandžak, and Germany), the *Riyasat* (main executive body of the IC), *Raisu-l-'Ulama* (the President of the *Riyasat* and the Grand Mufti or supreme authority in the IC), the Council of the IC (*Sabor* or the IC's assembly) and the Constitutional Court, which resolves internal disputes according to the IC's statutes (constitution).

There are approximately 1,700 mosques and *masjids* (mosques without minarets) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Around 650 of them were completely destroyed during the 1992–1995 aggression against Bosnia while another 530 were damaged. Many are still to be reconstructed. Major educational institutions of the IC are: the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo (est. 1887/1977), Gazi Husrev-Bey Library (est. 1437), Islamic Teachers' faculties in Zenica and Bihać, Gazi Husrev-Bey madrasa (est. 1537) and five other madrasas in Bosnia (Tuzla, Travnik, Mostar, Visoko, and Cazin), one in Zagreb (Croatia), and one in Novi Pazar (Serbia), and the First Bosniak Gymnasium in Sarajevo (est. 1995). Other institutions of the IC are: the Waqf Head Office (1894), the Gazi Husrev-Bey Waqf (est. 1513), the El-Kalem Publishing Center (1974), the Center for Islamic Architecture (est. 1993), the Muslim Information and News Agency (MINA, est. 1990), the Agency for Halal Quality certification (est. 2005), and the Association of the 'Ulama' of the IC (1910). Sufi orders (*tariqahs*) established in accordance with *Shari'ah* and *Tariqah* are also part of the IC.

The ICBH has published its official journal *Glasnik* (Herald) almost continuously since 1933, *Takvim* (the annual prayer timetable and a collection of essays) since 1950, and the fortnightly newspaper *Preporod* since 1970. The journal *Novi Muallim* has been published under various titles since 1910.