

The Balkans
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The curse below was revived with a vengeance at the 600th anniversary commemoration of the death of Serb Prince Lazar at the battle of Kosovo in 1389. Religious nationalists in Serbia accuse not only the Ottoman Turks who fought Lazar, but also the Balkan Muslims of today of being stained with the blood of Christ-prince Lazar.¹

Whoever is a Serb of Serbian blood
Whoever shares with me this heritage,
And he comes not to fight at Kosovo,
May he never have the progeny
His heart desires, neither son nor daughter;
Beneath his hand let nothing decent grow
Neither purple grapes nor wholesome wheat;
Let him rust away like dripping iron
Until his name be extinguished.²

In a Passion play, the actors who kill the martyr (Jesus, for example, or Imam Hussein) exit the stage quickly to avoid being pummelled by the audience. When an excited crowd rushes the stage to beat the actor, time is collapsed. The crowd reacts not as an audience watching a representation of a past event, but as if they were actually living the original event. While stage re-enactment was not an important part of the Kosovo pageant of 1989, a similar collapse of time was evident. The relics of Lazar were transported around Serbia, arriving at the monastery nearest the battle site on the feast day of Lazar (Vidovdan). There they were ceremonially unveiled for the first time in history. Slobodan Milošević then mounted a stage on the battle site and, with a backdrop of Kosovo symbolism and before an excited audience of more than a million people (some of them waving his picture alongside images of Lazar) boasted of his plan to revoke Kosovo's autonomy.

This time collapse was tied to other powerful symbols: 1) the sacred space of the 'Serb Jerusalem' – as Kosovo, with its magnificent monasteries of the medieval Serb kingdoms, is called by Serb nationalists; 2) the historical memory of atrocities suffered by Serbs in World War II – a memory heightened by ritual disinterment in the late 1980s of remains of Serb victims amidst calls for revenge and the stereotyping of all Bosnians, Albanians, and Croats as genocidal; and 3) false claims by Serbian bishops and academics that Albanians in Kosovo were engaged in mass rape, systematic annihilation of Serb sacral heritage, and genocide. Religious nationalists exploited the mythology of Kosovo throughout the 'ethnic cleansing'. Paramilitaries wore shoulder patches depicting the battle of Kosovo, sang songs about the Kosovo battle, forced their captives to sing songs, and decorated themselves with medals named after heroes of the Kosovo battle.

The nexus of primordial time, historical memory, sacred space, and accusations of present genocide – all brought together around the 1989 Kosovo commemoration – was inflamed further by a particularly virulent form of Orientalism. In the 19th century, Serbian nationalists made explicit the portrayal of Prince Lazar as a Christ-figure: a Last Supper with twelve knight-disciples, including one traitor, and a Mary Magdalene figure. The most important work of 19th century Serb nationalism was *The Mountain Wreath*, a verse drama published in 1857 by the Montenegrin Orthodox bishop known as Njegoš. It opens with Serb bishops and knights deciding to 'cleanse' Montenegro of non-Christians. The Vlad (Prince-Bishop) summons the Slavic Muslims and offers them a last chance to convert. The Muslims reply that Orthodox and Muslims are one

people and request a 'godfather' (*Kum*) ceremony through which blood feuds were healed. When Serb elders reply that the ceremony requires baptism, the Muslims suggest baptism for the Christian child and ritual tonsure for the Muslim child. The inter-religious *Kum* ceremony is rejected and the Muslims are driven away as 'Turkifiers' and 'spitters on the cross'. The play ends with a glorification of the Christmas extermination of the Muslims, the annihilation of all traces of their existence, followed by ritual communion (without the confession obligatory after all killings) for the Serb knights. In the view of the Njegoš, the antagonism between Christian and Muslim is not only age-old: it is eternal, built into the very structure of the cosmos. *The Mountain Wreath* was reprinted and disseminated in 1989. Later, Serb nationalists celebrated the 'cleansing' of villages in Bosnia by posting on the Internet verses from *The Mountain Wreath* celebrating 'the extermination of the Turkifiers'.³



PHOTO: US MEMBER OF THE SFOR IN DOBOJ

This concept of 'Turkifier' reflects Christoslavism, the notion that a Slav who converts from Christianity is transformed ethnically into a Turk. Twentieth-century writers (both Catholic and Orthodox) combined Christoslavism with racial ideas. Conversion was simultaneously a race-betrayal and race-transformation that left one perpetually outside of the 'people' and placed one alongside those with the blood of the Christ-prince Lazar on their hands. Ottoman rule was portrayed as one of unremitting savagery in which the Ottomans 'stole the blood' of Serbs and Serb culture and destroyed the great monasteries of Kosovo. Ironically, the latter claim is often made on tours of the monasteries that in fact survived very well the five centuries of Ottoman rule.⁴

The monasteries also survived centuries surrounded by Kosovar Albanians. Yet, motivated by repeated false claims that the 'Turks' (i.e. the Albanians) were destroying the monasteries, Serbian militias destroyed thousands of Islamic monuments in areas of Bosnia they controlled, including major masterworks of the 16th century such as the Ferhadiya in Banja Luka and the Coloured Mosque of Foča. In Sarajevo, the Serb army burned the National Library (more than a

million volumes and a hundred thousand rare books) and the Oriental Institute (with over 5,000 manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Slavic, and Aljamiado). One goal of destroying the evidence of shared civilization was to help establish as fact the Serbian nationalist myth, which holds that Muslims and Christians never were 'one people' and are doomed to repeat age-old antagonisms. Tragically, Western policy makers and especially UN commanders adopted the aggressor mythology of inevitable age-old hatreds to excuse their refusal to protect the victims of 'ethnic cleansing' or to allow them to defend themselves. In Kosovo, Serbian religious nationalists have been equally methodical in effacing identity – from libraries and mosques to wedding rings and identity cards.⁵

Bosnian Serb leader Biljana Plavšić, a biologist and former head of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Sarajevo, announced in 1994 that:

[...] it was genetically deformed material that embraced Islam. And now, of course, with each successive generation this gene simply becomes concentrated. It gets worse and worse. It simply expresses itself and dictates their style of thinking and behaving, which is rooted in their genes.⁶

As shown by Plavšić and her formerly secularist and communist colleagues, the effectiveness of the Kosovo nexus of religious and historical mythologies is not dependent upon self-conscious beliefs or sincerity. For leaders like Plavšić and their followers, it provides an alternative system of logic that makes plausible their sudden conversions and justifies their acts to themselves and their audience.

A Bosnian refugee told me the following story: When her Serb neighbours protested against their participating in 'cleansing' the Muslims, Serb paramilitaries shot them dead in front of their son and then forced the son into the army. The Muslim woman's husband was the *Kum* (godfather) of the Serb son. Break the inter-religious *Kum* bond, which presupposes that Christians and Muslims are 'one people', is the currently the goal, just as it was in *The Mountain Wreath*. Proposals to validate that goal and partition the Balkans along religious lines, placing Balkan Muslims in economically and politically untenable enclaves (landlocked equivalents of Gaza) would lead to further violence or – if the consistent history of non-Christian ghettos in Europe since 1096 is any guide – to an even worse outcome. Meanwhile, the Bosnian Muslim family has preserved the home of their Serb friends for the return of the son, for whom they are now searching.

After years of propaganda, Njegoš-style mythology, and complicity in genocide, Serbian society has been radicalized. Serbia's most popular politician is Vojislav Šešelj, an open proponent of annihilation of Kosovar Albanians, and its most popular celebrity is the indicted war criminal Arkan. Even so, when the radical elements in a society are defeated, a society can turn quickly to its better values (witness the transformation of formerly fascist states after WWII). The inter-

national community can support the many who still refuse the ideology of religious apartheid or it can betray them by ratifying 'ethnic cleansing'. The stakes are high, both for the moral universe we will inhabit and for the already delicate relations between the Islamic world and the West. ♦

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Notes

1. The full argument and documentation for the following remarks are found in Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2nd edition, 1998) and at the Bridge Betrayed War Crimes and Human Rights documentary page at <http://www.haverford.edu/relg/sells/reports.html>
2. Translated by Milorad Ekmečić, 'The Emergence of St. Vitus Day', in Wayne Vucinich and Thomas Emmert, eds., *Kosovo: Legacy of a Medieval Battle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 335.
3. Bishop Petar Petrović II (Njegoš), *The Mountain Wreath*, translated by Vasa Mihailovich (1986).
4. This essentialist view of Islam has been adopted by the popular writer Bat Ye'or, who bases many of her generalizations on the writings of Serbian nationalists. Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), p. 239.
5. See Andras Riedlmayer, 'Bosnia's Cultural Heritage and Its Destruction' (Philadelphia, 1994), videocassette, and the photo essays on the Community of Bosnia Web page: <http://www.students.haverford.edu/vfilipov>
6. Biljana Plavšić, *Svet*, Novi Sad, September 1993, cited and translated by Slobodan Inić, 'Biljana Plavšić: Geneticist in the Service of a Great Crime', *Bosnia Report: Newsletter of the Alliance to Defend Bosnia-Herzegovina* 19 (June-August 1997), translated from *Helsinkička povelja* (Helsinki Charter), Belgrade, November 1996.

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Burning of the National Library in Sarajevo by Serb shelling in late August 1992.