

Fellowship

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And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? How readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind: and thy neighbor as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou has answered right: this do and thou shalt live. But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbor?

—Luke 10: 25-29

After my parents had been sent off to the Trnopolje Concentration camp in northern Bosnia, it was the neighbor with whom my father had coffee every afternoon who stole everything in our home before burning it to the ground.

—Damir

My next door neighbor, the woman who took care of me while mother was working as I was growing up, has now moved her son into our home. They use everything that used to belong to us.

—Dalila

When my best friend could finally talk, three days after she returned after being yanked from my side as we slept in the women and girl's section of the Trnopolje Concentration Camp, I could not believe it. She had been raped all night by seven Serbian soldiers. One of them was our classmate at the Kozarac High School.

—Alisa

Most of us find it hard to believe that only four years ago in the Yugoslav Republic of Bosnia, Roman Catholics (or Croats), Eastern Orthodox Christians (or Serbs), and Muslims lived peacefully together. But the facts speak for themselves. In 1991, the last year before the war, thirty percent of all Bosnian marriages were inter-ethnic or interfaith. In Sarajevo, the Roman Catholic Cathedral, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Grand Mosque, and the Old Synagogue are all located within a block of each other in the center of the old part of town. Ethnic groups that have hated each other for centuries, as some politicians would have us believe of Bosnia, do not intermarry, or locate their houses of worship across the same street.

It is true that Roman Catholics from the Republic of Croatia and Eastern Orthodox from the Republic of Serbia have been fighting against each other for hundreds of years. The situation worsened when, during WWII, the Croatian government allied itself with the fascists and killed scores of thousands of Serbs. (The Serbs were divided between those who fought for the Partisans, Tito's Communist guerrillas, and Chetniks, or Royalists, who fought for the return of the Serbian king).

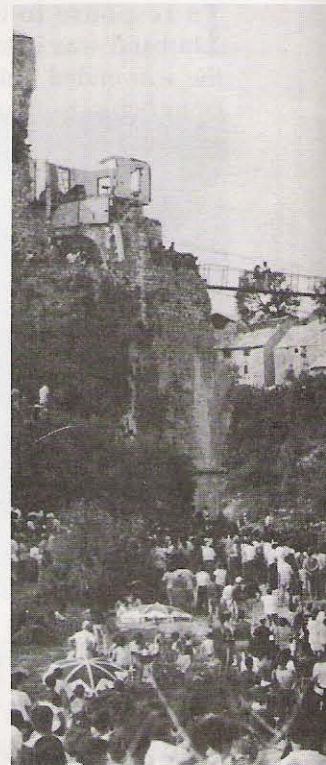
However in Bosnia, the most multi-ethnic of the Yugoslav republics, there is a deep tradition of tolerance and inter-communal living. In 1492, the Muslim leaders of Sarajevo welcomed and protected Jews who were fleeing the Spanish Inquisition. The earliest known European Passover Haggadah, protected for centuries by the

AND WHO IS

by Doug

The Old Bridge of Mostar was built in the sixteenth century, during the Ottoman Empire period, and was considered to be one of the finest examples of Ottoman Islamic architecture (see cover photograph). In 1993, when the government of Croatia and the Croats of Bosnia briefly allied themselves with the Serbs, the Croat militias of Mostar "ethnically cleansed" the Muslim inhabitants from the western side of the city, driving them across the Neretva River to the east. They then turned their artillery upon the connecting bridge.

The destruction of the Old Bridge of Mostar, a physical and metaphorical link between the East and the West, is perhaps the starkest symbol of the breaking of Bosnian society. Photo: Dana Garber



Sarajevo Library, was removed and hidden by its Muslim curators before the Nazis occupied Sarajevo during WWII. It was saved a second time when the library was burned to the ground during three days of direct shelling by Serbian forces early in this current war.

The harmony, grace, and easy intermingling of peoples and religions evident during the 1984 Winter Olympics is more consistent with the history of Sarajevo and of Bosnia than is the deadly sniping and shelling of the urban areas and the murder, rape, and expulsion of civilians (euphemistically called "ethnic cleansing") which has characterized the past three years.

How is it that a people with a history of tolerance and pluralism could plunder, rape, and kill the very people with whom they had been living for so long?

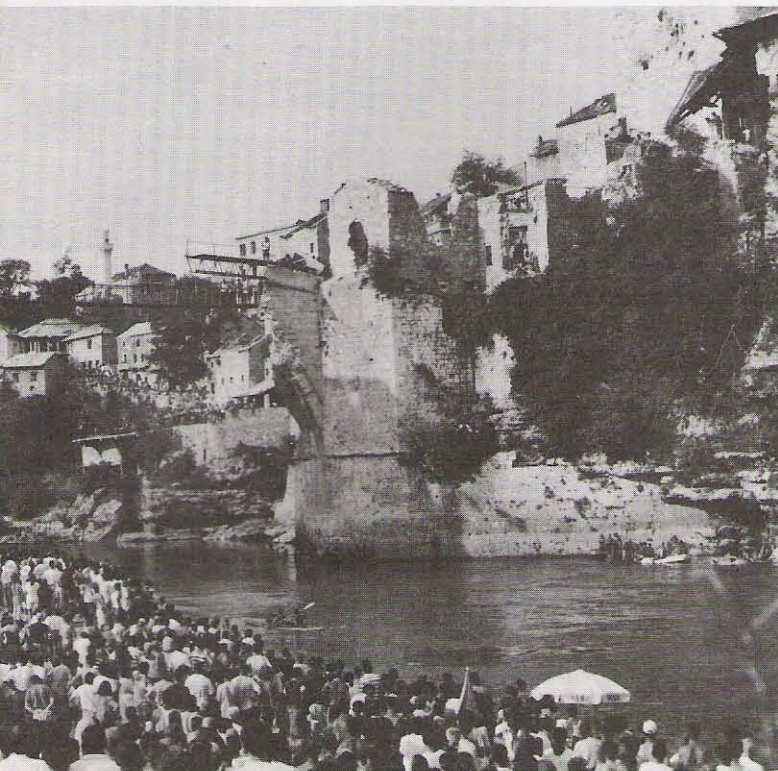
The answer is complex, involving ideology, propaganda, and a failing economy.

In most countries, political leaders "get religion" when the country is in crisis or at war. (Remember how President Bush spent the evening in prayer with Billy Graham the night before he launched the air war against Iraq?) Dr. Frederick Shiels, Professor of History and Government at Mercy College, has found in his study of US military history that only when the President has been able to make a "crusade" out of a war has he been able to receive popular support for US overseas military operations.

Faced with a similar need to rally support, Yugoslav politicians rediscovered an historically deadly

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mixture: a nationalism rooted in ethnicity, supported by religious leaders, and blessed by their "god."

The *New York Times* on Nov. 23, 1993 quoted Zeljko Razmatovic of the Serbian Unity Party: "We are fighting for our faith, the Serbian Orthodox Church. We are fighting for a united Serbian state. This party will believe in God and Serbia." Razmatovic, whose *nom de guerre* is Arkan, is well-known in War Crimes Tribunal records for the appalling cruelty of the destruction that his "Christian" irregular forces wreaked upon the Muslim citizens of northern and eastern Bosnia during the first year of the war, before the Bosnian government had an army.

When ethnicity is identified by religion, and nationality is based upon ethnicity, people of other religions are enemies of both "god" and state. This sort of deadly equation was prevalent in the Middle Ages, when the Crusaders slaughtered Muslims, Jews, and other "infidels" in order to reclaim the "Holy Land" for Christianity.

Ethnicity, nationalism, and religion make a very powerful and dangerous mixture, a poison not limited to one place. At the same time that it is sweeping large areas of Eastern Europe and the former Yugoslavia, it is also growing in the West. Elements of the Christian Right within the US and Western Europe are moving forcefully to identify their governments, citizenship—and at times, race—with Christianity. The more extreme elements of this movement are explicitly racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic and against all religious expressions that are not

fundamentalist Christian.

Worshipping the "god of our tribe" very naturally leads to genocide.

Although religious nationalism has dominated Serbian and Croatian politics for the past five years, official Bosnian government policy still advocates inclusion and citizenship for Bosnians of any ethnicity. But as the rain of Serbian artillery continues, many of the native Croats, Serbs, and Jews have emigrated from Bosnian-controlled cities. Meanwhile "ethnic cleansing" of the rural areas, resulting in the slaughter of Bosnian Muslims by Serbian (and at times Croatian) Christians, has generated tremendous bitterness. These factors, along with the apparent indifference of the Christian West to atrocities against Muslims, has fed a growing Islamic nationalism in Bosnia.

In 1992, Orthodox Christian Serbs "ethnically cleansed" the seventy percent of Bosnia that they took over with the help of the Yugoslav Army and irregular Serbian militias. In July of this year the Serbs "ethnically cleansed" the forty or fifty thousand Muslim inhabitants of the UN-"protected" "Safe Areas" of Srebrenica and Zepa.

Although the term was coined by Serbian politicians, it can and has been used by others as well. Religious nationalism and bigotry breed hatred and brutality on all sides. One month after the Serb "cleansing" of Muslims from Srebrenica and Zepa, the Croatian Army "ethnically cleansed" over 150,000 Croatian Serbs from the Krajina section of Croatia. In both of these situations, the ancestors of the people who were forcibly expelled had lived in those regions for hundreds of years. And at the time of this writing, the Serbian government has announced that it is planning to send the Serb refugees from Croatia to the Kosovo region of Serbia—a region that for four centuries has been populated by Albanian Muslims—thus setting the stage for yet another "ethnic cleansing."

As people of faith struggle to respond to the enormous evils of war and genocide, we must look again at the question that the lawyer asked Jesus two thousand years ago: "But who is my neighbor?"

Those who practice "ethnic cleansing" in Yugoslavia, or racial or religious bigotry here in the US, give the loud answer that their neighbors are only those of the same ethnic or religious group. But there are other possible replies. For more than eighty years, FOR has tried to live our belief that people of all races and religions are our neighbors.

The FOR started the Bosnian Student Project in 1993 to assist Bosnian students, regardless of religion or ethnicity, who have lost their homes or are being denied an education due to war or "ethnic cleansing." We have worked with the World University Service in Zagreb and Sarajevo, and social workers from UNICEF and other agencies in refugee camps throughout Europe, in order to find them.

Because of the nature of the war in Bosnia, many of

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the students we sponsor are Muslim, but among the one hundred and one young people already in the US through this program there are also students with Serb or Croat ethnicity. We currently restrict our program to Bosnian nationals, because the schools of Croatia and Serbia have largely escaped unscathed in this war. Most Bosnian schools have been destroyed or are inoperable due to shelling or snipers.

In our organizing in this country we have explicitly aimed at involving people of all religious faiths. This project, more than any other in the history of the USFOR, has actively united members of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim backgrounds in a cooperative grassroots effort. In some US communities, Serbs, Croats, and Muslims from the former Yugoslavia have all participated in support work for the Project.

In North Carolina, a Jewish family is hosting a Muslim student from Sarajevo. When the student's father was killed as a result of sniper fire, the host family reached out to both Muslim and Jewish religious leaders to assist the young woman to mourn and survive her tragic loss.

In California, a Muslim student whose father had been killed by a Serbian shell in Sarajevo the year before was taken into the home of a Serbian-American Quaker.

A Muslim student whose family was "ethnically cleansed" from Mostar by Croat (Catholic) militia was given a scholarship by a Catholic college in New York, and provided with housing by an African-American Catholic family near the school.

In July, the Jewish host family of a Bosnian high school student in North Carolina received a letter from Jacob Finci, president of the Jewish Cultural-Educational and Humanitarian Society of Sarajevo. "We are writing to express our gratitude for your warm reception and love extended to Larisa Zgonjanin," he wrote. "The Zgonjanins are very well known in our community as old and sincere friends of the Jewish community, and very good neighbors. Professor Zgonjanin, one of the best dentists in Bosnia and a most distinguished professor of the University of Sarajevo, from the early beginning of the war is helping, on a daily basis, all our members. Here in Sarajevo, we are trying to live together with all our friends.... With your help to Larisa, you are helping also all the Jewish community in Sarajevo."

The ethnicity of the family lauded by the Jewish Cultural-Educational and Humanitarian Society of Sarajevo is Muslim and Serb.

Perhaps it is from the Jewish community of Sarajevo that we can learn the best answer to the question that a lawyer asked a rabbi two thousand years ago: "And who is my neighbor?" □

Doug Hostetter is FOR's Interfaith/International coordinator and director of the Bosnian Student Project.