CHRISTIAN MOE

Religion in the Yugoslav Conflicts

Post-war Perspectives

Introduction

The wars that dissolved Yugoslavia – were they religious wars? One answer might be: What war isn't? War, after all, is a time of existential crisis that confronts young people with their mortality on a massive scale. War involves 'the ultimate sacrifice' on behalf of one's community, and requires legitimation of the highest order. Beyond these truisms, however, religious hatreds have been invoked specifically to explain the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and interfaith initiatives have sought to effect reconciliation. The region is a proving ground for theories about 'the role of religion' in armed conflict situations, a question that increasingly commands the attention of policy-makers and political scientists – a mixed blessing, to be sure.

Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam (2005) has raised the pertinent question: not why is religious conflict on the rise, but why are conflicts increasingly *coded* as religious, rather than as, for example, social or ethnic? Part of the reason, surely, is that this is in somebody's interest. The many possible interests concerned also include those of some religious actors, who are able to argue that if religion (or rather its 'abuse') is part of the problem, it must also be part of any solution. Religious studies scholars, too, should be aware of their possible bias towards casting conflicts as religious, and hence their own research as socially useful, and worthy of attention and funding.[1]

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1   The author, for instance, has for the past two years worked for the Department of Culture Studies, University of Oslo project on 'Religion and Nationalism in the Western Balkans', which is funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In particular, I would like to acknowledge funding for a paper on religion and territorial claims. Considerations of space have precluded including part of that discussion in this article as originally intended. I also wish to thank students on the 'Culture and Conflict' course, on whom I have inflicted earlier parts of this article.

Theories about the Yugoslav wars[2] are closely bound up with political interests in the blame game of contested historiography.[3] Fifteen years on, it is still 'hard to be dispassionate about ethnic cleansing and mass murder' (Rieff 1995: 18), which is probably a good thing. Explanations must nonetheless be read with an awareness of the underlying agendas, the explicit or implicit distribution of blame, the accusations and apologetics.

One cannot describe the extent and nature of the religious dimensions of the conflict without at least implicitly defining 'religion' itself. While nationalism itself might fruitfully be examined as *ersatz* religion inspiring martyrdom and sacrifice, on another level this obscures the significant interplay of religion and ethnic nationalism in this case. The Bosnian conflict in particular has been correctly described as 'ethnoreligious';[4] religious identities have been constitutive of ethnic ones, and they remain closely intertwined. Being a Croat is identified with Catholicism, a Serb with Orthodoxy, and a Bosniak with Islam.

Another question is what constitutes a 'religious' or 'holy' war. In Western Europe this is primarily associated with the struggles during the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. Clearly, the Yugoslav wars were fought not over theology, but rather over political hegemony and the territorial claims of aspiring nation states. If 'wars of religion' are only those that have theological differences, or differences over religious authority, as their *casus belli*, the Yugoslav wars may not be included among them.[5] But these territorial claims were legitimated, in part perhaps even motivated, by a hard-to-distinguish mix of religious and nationalist arguments and symbols. Apparently 'religious' characteristics of the wars, aside from the fact that the warring parties belonged to different religions, include the following: political mobilisation through mass pilgrimages, mythical stories, and the manipulation of dead bodies; the framing of cer-

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2   The Yugoslav wars is a shorthand term and I will not deal equally or in detail with all the armed conflicts (Slovenia 1991, Croatia 1991–2 and 1995, Bosnia 1992–5, Kosovo 1998–9, Macedonia 2001). Religion was irrelevant to the Slovene case taken in isolation, but not to the broader context of the breakup of Yugoslavia.

3   For surveys of the English-language 'instant history' on Yugoslavia, see Stokes *et al.* 1996 and Kent 1997.

4   See in particular the works of Paul Mojzes (1994, 1998a, 1998b).

5   James Turner Johnson (1997: 37–42) has distinguished ten different meanings of 'holy war' of which at least two – war against religion's assumed enemies, and warfare by participants who are themselves made holy by ritual – have some relevance to the Yugoslav wars. Curiously, Johnson does not include the even more relevant category of wars for holy land.

tain fought-over territories as the holy land of the nation, and of the nation as divinely elect or on a holy mission; the belligerent rhetoric of religious leaders before, during, and after the war; the systematic destruction of religious sites, monuments, and records; the ritualised nature and occasional religious symbolism of atrocities;[6] and the consecration of combatants by clergy (see e.g. Velikonja 2003a).

In the following, I am not actually going to answer the question posed at the outset. I will more modestly attempt an inventory of important categories and hypotheses generated in the relevant literature so far, with a few critical notes along the way. I will consider the role assigned to religion in structural, cultural, and actor-oriented explanations of the Yugoslav wars.[7] This three-way distinction is a heuristic device I find useful in sorting out different approaches. Moreover, I believe that each approach has implications for the apportioning of blame that gives it an ideological dimension. In a more or less deterministic way, structural explanations interpret impersonal forces and arrangements as causes of human action, while cultural explanations appear to ascribe causality to symbols and traditional practices. Actor-oriented approaches, on the other hand, are intentional, not causal; here historical events turn on how individuals and political elites choose to define and pursue their interests. Structural and cultural explanations downplay the role of human agency and, hence, of moral responsibility; actor-oriented approaches focus on it.

Structural Approaches

There are purely structural approaches that ignore religion entirely, such as Susan Woodward's *Balkan Tragedy* (1995), which focuses on the social and economic crisis of the 1980s. Decentralised and unwieldy, the state was weakened by a massive debt burden, and further weakened by Western demands for reform. People therefore sought the stability and security the state was unable to provide through a closing of ethnic ranks. Woodward argues that the Belgrade government should have been strengthened,

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6   For example, forced conversions; forced singing of religious songs; forced violations of dietary and other religious taboos; and branding with religious symbols.

7   Dejan Jović (2001) offers a more fine-grained distinction between seven kinds of argument used to explain the disintegration of Yugoslavia: economic, ancient ethnic hatred, nationalism, cultural, international politics, the role of personality, and the fall of empires.

the abolition of Kosovo's autonomy recognised as an economic necessity forced on Yugoslavia by IMF demands, Croat and Slovene secession discouraged, and the Yugoslav People's Army recognised as a neutral peace-keeping force (1995: 382–91). This apology for Milošević's policies, in my view, flatly ignores political realities: Belgrade's and the Army's aggressive pursuit of a strong centralised Serb-led state was precisely what split Yugoslavia and turned an economic crisis into a military one. The economic crisis, and the crisis of political legitimacy that it engendered, is surely a necessary but not sufficient factor in explaining the rise of extreme nationalisms.

Another kind of structural explanation (touched on, for example, by Friedman 1996: 153–61, 182; Malcolm 1994: 202–3), attributes, in part, the various nationalisms to the very nationalities system that Tito set up to manage the problem and that seemed, for decades, to be remarkably successful: the establishment of home republics for each nation, the subsequent decentralisation of decision-making and rise of 'national' party leaderships in each republic, the zero-sum contest over central resources between the republics, and the use of an 'ethnic key' to distribute resources and positions. In the absence of democracy, all these measures contributed to the growing salience of ethnicity and the training of elite groups in making nationalist demands. These observations also have implications for religion, as they explain how the Communist state became an ethno-religious entrepreneur, encouraging the formation of a Macedonian Orthodox Church and recognising 'Muslims' as an ethnic nation.

Cultural Approaches

We turn now to two clusters of cultural explanations, which we might call the 'civilisation-talk school' and the 'myth-to-genocide school'. The former involves an othering discourse of 'civilisation' that ascribes to some or all the warring parties deep-seated and abiding norms and values that are antithetical to our Western civilisation. These theories tend rather pointedly to serve specific foreign policy objectives. They differ over whether they see a clash of civilisations, a clash of civilisations and barbarians, or simply a clash of barbarians.

The first viewpoint is of course that of Samuel Huntington (1996), who sees Bosnia as reflecting a new paradigm of international relations in which conflicts are increasingly between 'civilisations' defined primarily by religious difference. Religion is here a largely undifferentiated, static, essential

category. In Huntington's scheme, Croatia, by dint of its Catholic religion, has the good fortune to be on the side of the West against the rest. This resonates strongly with the Croatian historical myth of being the *antemurale Christianitatis*, the outer defences of Christendom against the Turk, and of Western Christendom against the Byzantine Balkans (Žanić 2005). Croat nationalist leader Franjo Tudjman was a Huntington fan.

Less grand but roughly similar claims underlie the rampant negative stereotyping of Serbs in *Habits of the Balkan Heart* by the Croat-American sociologist Stjepan Meštrović and his co-authors (1993).[8] Retrieving from kind obscurity the theses of the Croat social scientist Dinko Tomašić, they identify an authoritarian strain of Slavic culture called the 'Dinaric', which is connected with a mountain pastoralist population, whose passive-aggressive, power-seeking character is shaped by life in patriarchal extended family units.[9] There are also other, peaceful strains of Slavic culture, but 'Dinaric' power-seeking authoritarianism predominates in Serbia and Montenegro, heir to the ways of the Byzantine and Turko-Mongol empires. While there is admittedly some uncertainty about Croatia, it is again essentially on the side of the West and democracy. This work has been cogently refuted on empirical grounds by Sergej Flere (2003).

A third form of cultural explanation for the war is the cliché about 'ancient hatreds' between feuding primitive tribes, acting according to irrational, pre-modern cultural patterns characteristic of the Balkans. Ethnic identities are assumed to have been distinct and relatively unchanging, and the history of multi-cultural societies is seen as overwhelmingly conflict-ridden. Examples include popular travelogues such as Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, and more importantly, the rhetoric of numerous politicians and officials, in the US and elsewhere, who used this argument to defend non-intervention and 'containment' strategies (see Sells 1996: 124–8). Academic examples are rarer. One might cite a distinguished military historian who found that the Yugoslav atrocities defied conventional explanation to the 'civilised mind', and concluded they could only

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8   The title refers to the view that different and hard-to-change 'social characters' or 'habits of the heart' of different groups may be congenial to democracy or to authoritarianism and aggression. The intellectual pedigree of this approach can be traced to Alexis de Tocqueville, Thorsten Veblen, and Erich Fromm.

9   The notion of 'Dinaric man' as an anthropological category derives from the Serbian ethnographer and polymath Jovan Cvijić. Its influence can also be noted, e.g., in Anzulović 1999: 45 ff. (but cf. 141–2), and Cohen 1998: 64.

be understood by anthropologists studying 'tribal and marginal peoples' (Keegan 1993: xi).[10]

A useful antidote to such 'othering' discourses is provided by John Allcock in *Explaining Yugoslavia* (2000: 383–407). Allcock notes a tendency to highlight traits in Balkan societies that we prefer to ignore in our own (cf. Todorova 1997). Such descriptions miss the 'structured character' of violence in the Balkans, be it the blood feud or brigand-rebel bands,[11] which may be 'patterned, directed, significant, normal and constitutive of the social', though it differs from violence in our societies, where the repressive organs of the state have relatively successfully claimed a monopoly on violence. He calls attention to the meanings symbolically communicated by the rhetoric of violence involved in apparently senseless atrocities. Finally, Balkan culture is not uniquely violent; the role model for young Balkan gunmen in the 1990s was often Rambo rather than a folk epic hero (Allcock 2000: 407; cf. Denitch 1994: 74). To this, I would add that atrocities usually served a chillingly rational military strategy of ethnic cleansing through terror against the civilian population. Cultural analysis is hardly needed to account for their occurrence, though it may account for the specific forms they took.

In the latter regard, Allcock develops some interesting ideas about the connections between ritualised violence and religion. Noting the notorious regional obsession with the *knife* (cf. Anzulović 1999: 131–9), Allcock believes the practice of throat-cutting aims to de-humanise the victim by likening murder to the butchering of cattle. Moreover, however, it may represent 'atrocity raised to the level of sacrament', mimicking the ritual killing of a sacrificial animal (Allcock 2000: 397–8), and that atrocity may provide a Durkheimian 'symbolic focus for solidarity' (pp. 400–2). This is an interesting idea worth exploring, though it needs to be supported by better evidence.[12] Finally, he connects the idea of 'atrocity as sacrament'

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10   For more excitement over the discovery of primitive tribes in Europe, see Michael
      Nicholson, *Natasha's Story* (London, 1993: 16), cited in Kent 1997.

11   On heroic Balkan banditry (*hajduk*s, *uskok*s, *četnik*s, *komitadži*s, *kephi*s, *armatoli*s, and
      so on), see also the colourful account in Gerolymatos 2002: 85–119.

12   Allcock argues that both the victims of massacres and sacrificial animals are de-
      scribed by the same Serbo-Croat word, *žrtve*. But this homonymy is the case in
      other languages as well, yet one would hardly argue that a Norwegian traffic *victim*
      is conceived of as *sacrifice* (to the cult of the car?) just because the same word (*offer*)
      is used. Furthermore, there is no ritual model of animal slaughter in Catholicism
      or Orthodoxy, and so the case of Ustasha or Chetnik militants differs from that of,

to a central work in Serb literature, *The Mountain Wreath* (2000: 397). This leads on into the next group of studies we want to consider.

The myth-to-genocide school, represented by Branimir Anzulović's *Heavenly Serbia* (1999) and Michael Sells's *Bridge Betrayed* (1996), ultimately offers an actor-oriented explanation. I discuss them under the cultural-ist heading, however, because of strong claims they make for the power of myth and symbol to shape human action, at least when ritually en-acted. Sells, for instance, believes a genocide[13] against Bosnian Muslims was 'motivated and justified in large part by religious nationalism … and grounded in religious symbols' (1996: xiii). Anzulović is a Croat-American anthropologist, Sells is of Serb descent and an expert on Islamic mysti-cism. Both have focused on the nineteenth-century transformation of two Serbian myths, the Kosovo myth and the Montenegrin 'extermination of the Turks', into a Serbian national mythology,[14] which they say has been manipulated into an ideology of genocide.[15] Anzulović, concerned with the 'pathology of ideas' (1999: 4), goes further with a sweeping, if selec-tive, review of Serbian history and literature that seems to suggest it is shot through with such pathologies, at least until one starts to consider what a similar reading strategy might turn up in other national cultures.

The Kosovo myth draws on folk epics about the battle of Kosovo in 1389, where a Serbian prince, Lazar, was killed by the Turks. In the nine-teenth century, Lazar occupies a central position in literary treatments of folk epic,[16] and is transformed into a Christ-like figure, who chooses the

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for example, the 9/11 hijackers, whose written instructions describe the cutting of crew members' throats in terms eerily suggestive of the *qurban* sacrifice (Lincoln 2003: 10).

13   While I would hold that the pattern of atrocities against Muslim civilians in the Bosnian war constitutes 'genocide' in the sense of the 1948 Genocide Convention, this remains a legally contested issue. Politically, it is important to note the loose and inflammatory use of the term by all communities in the Balkans.

14   On the national historical myths in the Balkans more generally, see Velikonja 1998 and the major new contributions in Kolstø 2005.

15   Sells defines such ideology as 'a set of symbols, rituals, stereotypes, and partially concealed assumptions that dehumanize a people as a whole, justify the use of military power to destroy them, and are in turn reinforced by the economic, polit-ical, and military beneficiaries of that destruction' (Sells 1996: 27–8).

16   The traditional epic hero was not Lazar or (K)obilić as much as it was Marko Kraljević, a vassal to the Turks. Sells sees Marko as 'a figure of mediation between the Serbian Orthodox and Ottoman worlds' (1996: 37), while Anzulović dwells on the epic hero's extreme brutality, particularly towards women (1999: 13–17). Most aptly, Ranke observed that Marko represents the vassalage of the Serbian nation (cited in Anzulović 1999: 41).

'kingdom of heaven' over an earthly kingdom and even enjoys a 'last sup-
per' with his knights, one of whom, Vuk Branković, is a Judas who betrays
him, while the falsely accused Miloš Obilić (or Kobilić) avenges him by
killing the Sultan.

A key part in the reconstruction of the Kosovo myth was played by
Petar II Petrović Njegoš (1813–51), poet and Bishop-Prince of Montenegro,
through his verse drama *The Mountain Wreath* (1847). The drama portrays
a legendary campaign at the beginning of the eighteenth century to kill
the Montenegrin converts to Islam, carried out on Christmas Eve under
the poet's predecessor Danilo. A multifaceted literary work, it is analysed
in these studies as a 'hymn to genocide' (Anzulović 1999: 54). By constant-
ly referring to the Montenegrin Muslims as 'Turks' or 'Turkifiers' (*potu-
rice*), Sells argues, the poem portrays them as having 'joined the race of
Turks who killed the Christ-Prince Lazar' (1996: 41). Sells coins the term
'Christoslavism' for this idea that 'Slavs are Christian by nature, and that
any conversion from Christianity is a betrayal of the Slavic race' out of
cowardice or greed (Sells 1996: 36, cf. p. 51). He notes that 'Turks' was
a misnomer constantly used by Serb nationalists and clerics in the 1990s
for the Muslim Slavs in Bosnia (1996: 41) – the emblematic instance, of
course, is general Mladić casting the Srebrenica genocide as 'revenge on
the Turks'. Whether it was a misnomer in Njegoš's time, when 'Turk' was
customarily used in a religious sense and an ethnic or racial sense had yet
to be clearly differentiated, is a different matter.

The reinterpreted Kosovo myth assumed a central place in Serbian cul-
ture only in the late nineteenth century. To Anzulović, its association with
Vid's Day (28 July) represents an irruption of Slavic pagan myth into mod-
ern Serb culture that favours a warrior ethic over Christian ethics (1999:
80–5, cf. 13, 25–6, 60, 69–71).[17] In Sells's interpretation, to the contrary, the
national mythology thus 'portrays Slavic Muslims as Christ killers and
race traitors' (1996: 27), identifies them with the Turks who killed Lazar,

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17   The Kosovo myth rose in importance with the 500th anniversary of the battle
      (1889), perhaps because the ruling Serbian dynasty sought legitimation for mo-
      narchic rule in a glorious national past (Malcolm 1998: 79). The day of the battle,
      28 June (15 June in the Julian calendar), had been referred to as Vid's day since the
      1860s; in 1892 it was dedicated to Prince Lazar in the national church calendar,
      and in 1913, after the Serb victory over the Turks in the Balkan wars, it was made
      a national holiday (Sells 1996: 44; Anzulović 1999: 80–5). Anzulović insists that the
      reference is to the Slavic god Vid (Svantovid, Svetovid), not to St Vitus, a martyr of
      the Catholic Church.

and unleashes on them the same violence that the blood libel called forth against Jews (p. xv). Sells likens the Serbian government's use of nationalist propaganda and religious symbols around the commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the Kosovo battle (1989) to the medieval passion play, with its ability to collapse time and incite the audience to commit pogroms. He further interprets the *Mountain Wreath* as placing the killings 'explicitly outside the category of the blood feud', as the Muslim offer of a traditional ceremony of reconciliation is rejected by the Christians on the grounds that it requires baptism. Instead, the conflict becomes a 'cosmic duality of good and evil'.[18] Killing the 'Turkifiers' is explicitly referred to as a 'baptism by blood', and Sells argues, questionably,[19] that the poem portrays this killing as 'an act sacred in itself' that is not sinful but cleansing (Sells 1996: 42–3) – here, we return to the notion of 'atrocity as sacrament'. What matters is not whether this is a plausible reading of the 1847 poem, but whether similar readings informed behaviour in the 1990s, a question to be settled empirically.

In any case, this only accounts for the demonising of Muslim Bosniaks and Albanians, not for the Croat–Serb conflict.[20] A far fresher wound than the Kosovo battle was reopened in official Serbian propaganda against Croats: The massacres of Serbs during World War II in the Fascist Ustaša's 'Independent State of Croatia', particularly in the Jasenovac death camp. What has this to do with religion? Three things: First, this discourse was initiated by nationalist Serb clerics, who started very publicly exhuming the remains of Serb Ustaša victims from mass graves,[21] and warned darkly of a new genocide being prepared by Croat fascists. Second, the

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18 Anzulović (2000: 55–6) describes Njegoš's world view as Manichean rather than Christian.

19 Sells's argument is that the Serb warriors, returning from the massacre, are granted communion without confession, though confession was mandatory after blood feud killings. However, there is contrary evidence in the following verse, where Abbot Stefan generously adds that he takes 'all' upon his own soul (*a ja mičem sve na moju dušu*). In my reading, this suggests the stain of sin is still there, though it is clearly not such a grave sin as to imperil the saintly Abbot's soul.

20 Indeed, Sells has been criticised for 'Occidentalising' Serbs and Croats, ignoring Serb–Croat fighting and the official rhetoric Orientalising Serbs (Hayden 1997, 1996).

21 Verdery (1999: 95–127) has theorised on these exhumations in the broader context of political re-burials in Eastern Europe. She notes that burying the community's sons in the soil consecrates the soil as belonging to the community, as articulated by Serb nationalist writer and politician Vuk Drašković: 'Serbia is wherever there

Serbian Orthodox Church charged the Catholic clergy with supporting the Ustaša, demanded an apology from the Catholic Church for its role in genocide, and denounced the Croat rehabilitation of the wartime Archbishop Stepinac, whose ambiguous relationship with the Ustaša government remains a matter of heated controversy. And third, the Jasenovac death camp was incorporated into the Kosovo myth as the second Serbian Golgotha, in yet another twist to the Christ-killer theme.

This 'nexus of myth and symbol' however, only constituted 'the crosshairs of [the] rifle'; someone had to give the order to fire (Sells 1996: 70). Sells blames Serbian nationalists 'protected by' Milošević (1996: 72); the Church, together with academics and writers, 'became a *servant* of religious nationalist militancy' (p. 79, emphasis added). Anzulović, too, places blame on Serbian political leaders, though he thinks they could not have mobilised support had national myths not been influential with the masses (1999: 145–6). Here we find, in the end, an actor-oriented approach, as well as the suggestion that religion was instrumentalised by politics.

Actor-oriented Approaches

Structural and cultural explanations downplay the role of moral agency and hence the extent of individual culpability. Actor-oriented studies, on the other hand, focus on how interest-driven political elites manipulated nationalism for their own ends. The key issue here, for our purposes, is the extent to which religious elites were autonomous actors.

Actor-oriented studies tend to point to Slobodan Milošević and his clique as the chief instigators of Yugoslavia's violent dissolution. Noel Malcolm's *Bosnia: A Short History* (1994, rev. ed. 1996) and Branka Magaš's *Destruction of Yugoslavia* (1993) come to mind. To Magaš, a Croat leftist in Britain, the Serbian party leadership and the Yugoslav People's Army leadership combined in a 'plot against Yugoslavia', and upset the all-important 'post-war settlement' between national groups in an effort to assert Serb hegemony over Yugoslavia (Magaš 1993: 305, 318, 337–8). Magaš finds a key historical

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are Serbian graves.' Graves matter because, to Verdery, nationalism are 'forms of ancestor cult, writ large', as she finds amply illustrated in Milošević's 1987 speech in Kosovo. When exhumations began in the late 1980s, exhumed remains were transformed into martyrs in the service of historical revisionism, and 'collectivised' by the public nature of the ceremonies. Churches, with their authority over death and burial, naturally, played a part. The past was rewritten not simply in the abstract but by the 'visual and visceral experience' of handling corpses.

reason for this turn of events in the Party purges of 1971–2, which eliminated competent young reformers and left the Party in the hands of second-rate Serb apparatchiks (1993: 328–9).

Magaš's compilation of journalistic reports, like Woodward's compilation of statistics, ignores religion. Malcolm, on the other hand, clearly enjoys himself most when he can delve into the mysteries surrounding religious adherence in medieval Bosnia. His discussion of religious factors tends to dismiss claims that the conflict was driven by religious or other 'ancient' hatreds, documenting the long years of essentially peaceful co-existence between faiths.

Such studies lend weight to the view, pervasive in the region, that political elites 'instrumentalised' religion for their own ends, and that conflict was not independently generated by religion. The crucial question, of course, is whether religion was 'instrumentalized or instrumentalizing' (Velikonja 2003a: 27). Coupled with the thesis that chauvinism stemmed not from religion but from irreligion (an alleged 'moral vacuum' left by Communist atheism), the instrumentalisation thesis is often invoked to exculpate 'genuine' religion from shared responsibility for the Yugoslav war, in what has become a cross-faith apologetic.

R. Scott Appleby's theoretically rich discussion of the Bosnian case in *Ambivalence of the Sacred* (2000: 57–80), a book on religion and conflict, sets out to go beyond such apologetics. Appleby notes that religion offers nationalist leaders a 'powerful justification' for violence against other ethnic groups, and describes the case of Bosnian Serbs, Croats, and Muslim as an 'ethnoreligious' one where religion and ethnicity intertwine so that their precise roles can hardly be disaggregated. Taking an actor-oriented tack, he emphasises how, in the late 1980s, Serb nationalists backed by the Yugoslav army argued for a Greater Serbia, and that religious leaders using religious symbols 'inflamed homicidal passions'. He distances himself from those who 'downplayed the religious dimension of the war' and contended that 'genuine' religious leaders were 'victims of manipulation by secular leaders' but had little influence (Appleby 2000: 60–7).

Taking issue with Paul Mojzes's view that the war was fought 'by irreligious people who wear religion as a distinguishing badge but do not know what the badge stands for' (1994: 27), Appleby notes that religion is not limited to its official expressions, and that the atrocities might well be taken as a sign of 'intense' religion. His key point is that the power of the sacred does not come with a 'moral compass' (Appleby 2000: 68–71). Rather, it is profoundly ambivalent and contains possibilities of both life and death; hence, it is a serious misunderstanding to gloss acts of sacred violence as

non-religious. Crucially, however, within each religious tradition a 'moral trajectory' towards greater 'compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation' can be discerned (Appleby 2000: 30–1). The problem, Appleby feels, lies with popular religious practice that is disconnected from the internal pluralism of the larger tradition and from its cross-generational moral and theological discourse (2000: 67).[22] Such unrefined folk religion may draw instead on 'superstition, racial prejudice, half-forgotten bits of sacred scripture, and local custom' and is easily manipulated. Appleby introduces the notion of 'religious illiteracy', defined as 'the low level or virtual absence of second-order moral reflection and basic theological knowledge among religious actors', as an exacerbating factor in crisis situations. Religiously illiterate masses were easily manipulated by demagogues (Appleby 2000: 69), while the few competent religious actors who tried to challenge the nationalists lacked organization and training in conflict management (pp. 72–3). If one believes in moral progress through discursive tradition, the general argument should be taken seriously, and it has a certain plausibility in this case, given the parlous state of religious knowledge among the Yugoslav population, but one could surely cite contrary examples of religiously illiterate populations that get on peacefully and religious *literati* who do not.

Appleby goes on to define, in contrast, a desirable 'strong' religion with well-developed institutions and 'literate', practiced adherents, as against both the undesirable 'strong' religion of radical fundamentalisms, and the undesirable 'weak' religion of religious illiterates who kept their crucifixes on while raping Muslim women, a kind of behaviour Appleby thinks stems from 'secularization … imposed from above' by Tito. Appleby sees the 1997 establishment of an Inter-Religious Council in Bosnia as a promising move towards 'strong' religion, though he notes subsequent disappointments as its leaders squabbled (2000: 77–8). He acknowledges that 'informed interpreters' are also a problem when they turn to violence (Appleby 2000: 77), but stops short of suggesting that they were a driving force. Instead, the religious leaderships, preoccupied with gaining political influence in an extreme nationalist context, 'led too little and followed too much' (p. 74).

Some think they led quite enough, and consider the clergy also as independent political actors who stoked conflict for reasons of their own. A

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22   Besides this main line of argument, Appleby also more or less as an afterthought develops a Girardian reading of the conflict (2000: 78–9).

prominent example is Vjekoslav Perica, author of *Balkan Idols* (2002), who
has coined the term 'ethnoclericalism'. Before the break-up of Yugoslavia,
Perica dealt with religious leaders both as a journalist and as an official of
one of the state commissions for relations with religious communities; he
himself is a defender of Yugoslavia and its secular civil religion of 'brother-
hood and unity'. He has drawn on his stock of archival sources to produce
a detailed critical history of religious contributions to the conflict.

Perica shows how, both in the *longue durée* and in recent decades, re-
ligious institutions contributed to nation-building (2002: 6). He places
the roots of the hatreds and conflicts of the 1990s in the twentieth cen-
tury where they belong, highlighting the concordate crisis of the 1930s
and the Jasenovac issue. A major point that emerges from Perica's study
is the role played by religious and quasi-religious anniversaries, parades,
processions, pilgrimages, and rallies in the mobilisation of ethnoreligious
solidarity.[23] He points out important parallels with the role of processions
and pilgrimages in Indian religious nationalism studied by Peter van der
Veer (1994).

Another major point is that the increasing nationalism of the self-styled
'Church among the Croat people' can be tied to a broader Vatican strat-
egy of combating Communism through a greater stress on ethnic identity.
Perica also ties the inflammatory rehabilitation and beatification of Bishop
Stepinac (1998) to a Vatican strategy of casting itself as the stalwart oppo-
nent of all the 'three great evils of the twentieth century', Nazism, Fascism
and Communism, in equal measure, which Perica considers a myth. A re-
lated point worthy of note is the focus on 'national' saints in both the Croat
and Serb churches (cf. Anzulović 1999: 24).

At the nexus of these points lies the Medjugorje phenomenon. The ap-
paritions of the Virgin in this small Hercegovinan town since 1980 have
generated a global pilgrimage industry. Perica inscribes Medjugorje in the

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23   What immediately comes to mind is the use of mass rallies by the Milošević re-
     gime, particularly the 1989 commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the bat-
     tle of Kosovo. This rally, with all its religious and mythical subtext, took place
     as Kosovo's autonomy was being curtailed and Albanian institutions harshly re-
     pressed. Perica also shows, however, how a series of mass rallies and pilgrimages
     held by the Catholic Church in Croatia during its 'Great Novena' mobilised believ-
     ers as a political force and served, *inter alia,* to launch the Church's revisionist ver-
     sion of Croat national history. To complete the picture, Muslims in Bosnia revived
     the pre-war popular pilgrimage to Ajvatovica, which served in large part as a mass
     rally for the SDA party.

broader context of the ideological uses of Marian apparitions (most famously Fatima) in the Catholic anti-Communist struggle. At the same time, Medjugorje is at the intersection of the two fault lines running through the Catholic Church in Bosnia: that between the long-established Franciscans and the recently installed secular clergy; and that between the Franciscan province of *Bosna Srebrena* and the unruly Franciscans of Hercegovina. Our Lady of Medjugorje was quickly enrolled by the Hercegovinan friars in their power struggle with the local bishop. Later, she was easily exploited in the Serb nationalist anti-Croat propaganda effort, thanks to the proximity of Medjugorje to a site of Ustaša atrocities, and the close ties between the Ustaša and some friars in World War II. In the 1990s, the Hercegovinan friars again tended towards extreme nationalism, as against the Bosnian friars, who have been an important voice for peace and against nationalist politics. Though Perica's discussion sheds some light on the problem, there seems to be much work left to do to reach an understanding of Medjugorje in relation to the conflict.[24]

Perica lays considerable blame for the conflict on 'ethnoclericalism', which he defines at length, but which might be briefly summarised as an ideology of a tight connection between the ethnic nation, the church, and the state, with the clerical hierarchy occupying the privileged position as guardian of the nation and providing the moral compass of politics. It is an anti-liberal, anti-secular, and right-wing ideology, in which a 'national' church seeks a strong religious influence on (ethnic-based) government, and it carries a foreign policy agenda that seeks Huntingtonian 'civilizational alliances'. Ethnoclericalism is to be found in 'ethnic churches', a development encouraged, as in the Catholic Church 'among the Croat people', by a new Vatican emphasis on ethnicity since the 1960s (Perica 2002: 214–17). Ethnic churches are 'authoritarian-minded and centralized organizations capable of organizing resistance against an outside threat and maintaining stability inside the community', under the hegemonical control of 'the upper section of clerical hierarchies' (Perica 2002: 215). Whereas Anzulović considers the Serb Orthodox Church in particular to be corrupted by the tight bonds with state and nation implicit in its ideology of 'Saint-Savaism' (*svetosavlje*), Perica applies a similar perspective to all three main confessions.

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24 Bojan Aleksov (2004) has given a useful account of the shifting political uses of Medjugorje in the Yugoslav mass media. Zlatko Skrbiš (2005) has analysed its appropriation in Croatian nationalist discourse on national 'chosenness', but does not suggest this is connected to the armed conflict.

Perica articulates the views of many secularist academics from the region that the churches are seeking a return to 'old privileges' through unholy political alliances. The terminology uncomfortably recalls the Socialist labeling of dissidents as 'cleronationalists', and it may be that Perica gives too much credence to archival materials rehearsing accusations of political subversion, fundamentalism, terrorism, etc., churned out against the clergy by the Communist state. A Croat, he is at his best dealing with the matters closest at hand, the Catholic Church. The discourse and actions of the Orthodox Church are also well traced by Radmila Radić (1998) and deconstructed by Milorad Tomanić (2001). As for Islam,[25] one should rather consult the detailed original research by Xavier Bougarel (2001), who takes a similarly critical perspective.

Concluding Discussion

A full historical account, I think, pays attention to political agency and choice, while taking into account how the range of available choices is defined by structural constraints and opportunities and by the available repertoire of socially constructed cultural models and legitimations. In a manifold crisis of legitimacy suffered by a political elite that lacked the charisma of Tito and failed to deliver the accustomed economic progress as Communism collapsed all over Europe, both an incumbent leader (Milošević) and the ascendant opposition (Tudjman, Izetbegović) turned to the available alternative legitimation of nationalism based on ethnoreligious identity. Independently, all three main religious communities had already for some time given refuge to and developed a nationalist

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25   With regard to Islam, discussion has focused on the rise of an Islamic political movement headed by Alija Izetbegović within his broad-based SDA party. The radicalism and influence of this movement should be assessed without either exaggerating or trivialising it. What matters more than that assessment, however, is how Serbs might reasonably perceive their prospects if governed by the author of the *Islamic Declaration* (Cohen 1998: 59), though the import of Bosnian Serb fears lay in facilitating the work of the Belgrade-run Greater Serbian propaganda, rather than causing the war *per se*. The founding and early growth of the SDA was much indebted to Islamic Community personnel (Bougarel 1996: 44–6). The Islamic Community played its part in fomenting Bosniak nationalism. It also took part in the escalating interethnic and interreligious war of words (Bougarel 1995), though I would suggest that this was chiefly a reaction to the barrage of anti-Islamic propaganda.

historical vision, and all initially assumed, despite later disenchantment, that their interests would be served by an alliance with nationalist political leaders. Apart from these similarities, they gave different degrees of support to different policies of different moral standing. The Serb Orthodox Church in particular had since the early 1980s championed the Serb cause in Kosovo, giving a strongly mythical cast to later secular and regime propaganda on this fundamentally political issue. The Serbian Church came not only to support the Milošević regime's oppression of Kosovars and territorial conquests in Croatia and Bosnia, but also to excoriate Milošević for eventually seeking to get the Bosnian Serbs to make peace. In the nationalist enterprise, religious actors are better seen as minor and unequal partners (always excepting the dissident few) than as the unwitting pawns of politicians.

An intriguing underlying theme in many of the studies reviewed here, however, is the attempt to absolve 'true' religion from blame, whether true religion is seen as a shared core of all the faiths or as the exclusive possession of one faith, and whether the apologetic stems from conviction or from tactical concerns. One scholar who has done much to advance the study of the wars' religious dimension, for instance, while portraying the fundamental causes of the war as 'ethno-national' with a religious 'label', added that 'the *concrete historical embodiments* of religions in the Balkans did contribute religious traits to the present warfare' (Mojzes 1994: 125–6, italics added). Perhaps abstract, eternal, and disembodied religion did not, but how do we study it? Even when dealing with 'historical embodiments', as we have seen, one ascribes their violent tendencies to 'instrumentalisation', or one seeks to restrict their violent tendencies to 'weak' and 'illiterate' popular forms (Appleby), or even to an admixture of paganism at odds with 'true' Christian ethics (Anzulović 1999, see also Zgodić in Velikonja 2003b). Tomanić (2001) indicts the Church for having strayed from what he considers to be the originally pacifist stance of Christianity. Even as critical a secularist as Perica (2002: 218–21) ends up locating 'genuine' (i.e., apolitical) religiosity among the small minority churches with multi-ethnic membership that stayed out of the conflict.

Parallels could be cited, e.g. from current governmental discourse on Islamist extremism versus 'true' Islam. Dogmatic commitments aside, there may be good strategic and deep psychological reasons for what, in effect, are either *ad hoc* restrictions of the definition of religion, or appeals to an essentialist definition, or at best an acceptance of the claims of a moderate mainstream learned tradition to authoritatively represent religion as such. Without the understanding that true religion is for peace, the motivation

for religious peace-making efforts is lost. What needs to be questioned, however, is whether it aids the scholarly understanding of religious phenomena. Important policy decisions hinge (or ought to hinge) on such an understanding.

From Appleby's championing of 'strong religion', one might logically conclude that upper religious hierarchies – those educated in their religious tradition and presumably part of its upward moral trajectory – should be engaged in peacemaking efforts, that scarce resources should be expended on training them and strengthening their capacities, that they should have ways to exercise their beneficial influence on society, and that they should have the status and legitimacy that flows from all this. The idea has its obvious attractions for religious leaderships. Perica's argument, on the other hand, suggests that the problem lies with an ideology of 'ethnoclericalism' which is closely associated precisely with the upper-level religious hierarchies. If this is correct, the policies just listed would likely be ineffective or even counter-productive in a crisis situation. In the present post-crisis situation, they would serve mainly to strengthen the religious leaders' influence *vis-à-vis* secular society.

One test case is the Inter-Religious Council, formed in 1997 by Bosnia's top four religious leaders (Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish), on the initiative of an NGO called the World Conference on Religion and Peace. In joint appearances, they condemned violence and reiterated their shared view that the war was not religious. I would suggest that the IRC's achievements with regard to inter-religious reconciliation and confidence-building have been modest, but that religious leaders have indeed co-operated to strengthen the religious communities' position *vis-à-vis* competitors, secular society, and the state. They have promoted confessional religious instruction in schools, condemned criticism of clerics by journalists, and drafted a law on religious freedom and religious communities,[26] which shows a touching solicitude for the established religious communities that drafted it. After this crowning achievement in 2004, the IRC showed strong signs of falling apart, though it has at least managed to meet several times since then.

Any show of inter-religious cooperation may be better than none, and no definite conclusions can be drawn about the relative rightness of 'strong

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26   English translation: 'Law on Freedom of Religion and Legal Position of Religious Communities and Churches of Bosnia and Herzegovina', http://www.wcrp.org/RforP/Conflict/SEE/bosnian_law.html (accessed 30 September 2005).

religion' versus 'ethnoclericalism' on the basis of this single case. On balance, though, this test case seems to favour Perica's pessimism about such religious peacemaking, rather than Appleby's cautious optimism.

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