

Discussion

How to Arrive at a Judeo-Christian-Islamic Culture and Civilization¹

Enes Karić*

I am delighted to be invited to speak at this gathering, even though I am unfamiliar with many of the subjects to be discussed.

The organizer of these meetings in Sarajevo suggested “Christianity and Islam: An Islamic Perspective” as the title for my talk. I have chosen another. Regardless of the title, I must admit that this is a difficult subject for me to address, as if I were standing at the foot of a mountain range of which the peaks are now lost in clouds silhouetted against a blue sky. Besides, what is Islam these days if not what Muslims make it? What is Christianity these days if not what Christians make it? If so, can we even consider a comprehensive overview of these religions, not to mention a prediction of the consequences of such a view? It is because of these hurdles that I found the topic to be interesting and one that I wanted to share with you. I was also encouraged to address you today because of a set of facts. The first deals with where this meeting is being held, Sarajevo. Sarajevo is a city with a multi-religious history about which much has been written. Unfortunately, there have been too many neatly phrased fallacies and untruths coming from the pen of historians of all the confessions represented here.

* **Enes Karić** is a professor of Qur’anic studies and history of the interpretation of the Qur’an at the University of Sarajevo. He was dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo (2003–2007) and served as Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1994–96). His research interests include Islamic and Arabic culture, philosophy, theology, and modern ideologies. His publications in English include: *Essays (On Behalf) of Bosnia* (El-Kalem, 1999), *Essays on Our European Never-Never Land* (OKO, 2004), *The Black Tulip* (Connectum, 2011), and *Contributions to Twentieth Century Islamic Thought in Bosnia and Herzegovina I* (El-Kalem, 2011).

Sarajevo is also a helpful metaphor, not to mention paradigm, for both fruitful and unhelpful discussions, dialogue and debates between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. I believe there is no need to reiterate that the history of Sarajevo is an integral part of European history, of the history of Muslims and, in the wider context, of Islam itself. The most recent history of Sarajevo, particularly the 1992–95 siege, has been replete with tragedy, especially for the Muslims of and in Europe.

I occasionally think, however, that I am one of those optimists who regard that seemingly interminable siege of Sarajevo by Serbian forces as an unforeseen, unplanned disjunction in the overall course of modern European democracy, a kind of unexpected rock fall blocking a wide road, which sensible, diligent and well-meaning people soon cleared away, leaving the road open again. Although we cannot banish from our minds Sarajevo and the many other besieged towns and cities, it is better to base our hopes on the concept of the open city. In 1683, Ottoman imperial forces laid siege to Vienna, but this should not now dictate our attitude towards the modern Republic of Turkey, any more than should the citizens of Sarajevo view the modern Republic of Austria through the lens of the suffering inflicted on this city by the Austrian military leader Prince Eugene of Savoy, who burned the city down in 1697. Between now and the day after tomorrow we could simply recall the sad history of cities under siege and the unpredictable twists of fate that people are faced with; but I believe that we shall not blaze a trail to peace by eternally bewailing the sufferings of cities under siege. Besides, this eminent gathering in Sarajevo is not designed to address history, though it is not a bad thing in the pursuit of peace to remember the horrific bloodshed of the 1992–95 war in Bosnia, a war that we never believed would happen, and even when it did, we often thought that the world was perpetually at war, and that peace between people was the exception.

With that war more than a decade behind us, and thanks to the peace that does exist in Bosnia (still largely under the auspices of Europe and the U.S.), we are increasingly inclined to say that there was no religious conflict in Bosnia. Yet the war cannot be properly explained without taking into account its religious dimension.

The other fact that encouraged me to address you has to do with Bosnia and Herzegovina. I am convinced that what I have said of Sarajevo could equally well be said of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole, and of the encounter between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in this country.

It should go without saying that this encounter was often peaceful and to the good fortune of all. True, the encounter between the three Abrahamic religions in Bosnia and Herzegovina often ceased to be a happy one; at times, the faiths began to compete for ill rather than good, even to the point of conflicts fraught with hatred and enmity. We have occasionally seen something similar in present-day Europe: disturbingly provocative words and actions, the media stigmatizing certain groups, political discrimination, and the rejection of the secular system by certain Muslim groups.

In the generally peaceful atmosphere being encouraged in Europe nowadays, however, we soon forget these incidental features. One cannot, of course, say that all European countries aspire equally to peace, whether that is at home, elsewhere in Europe, or beyond. The fact that European troops are still engaged in armed combat in Afghanistan says a lot.

HOW CAN THE HISTORY OF WORLD RELIGIONS BE READ THROUGH THE LENS OF CONTINUITY?

I assume that the Balkans has appealed to you insofar as it is a region of Europe that has borne witness for more than a millennium to ever-increasing encounters between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. I maintain that the Balkan experience of common living, of *convivencia* among the followers of different faiths, or even the experience of conflict between them with all its tragic consequences, is of great importance for the Europe of today, that democratic megastate project that has been advanced since 1945.

I know you are aware that many people in Europe have described the Balkans as a region that has yet to become part of Europe, or as a powder keg, or even as a region in which everything is topsy-turvy. Even now one quite often hears such phrases used to describe the Balkans in certain Western European circles. Does one of the reasons for these adverse views of the Balkans lie in the fact that indigenous Islam in Europe took root and has been expressed in such a distinctive manner in this very region? Would the Balkans have been so denigrated by various theories if there had been no Muslims living here—Muslims who were here in the past, and who now have such a high profile in the region's demography, geography, history, culture, and civilization? These are questions that we need not answer now, but as we seek answers, we shall be dogged by doubts and misgivings.

Yet given what is likely to happen in the twenty-first century in the Mediterranean area and Europe, the Balkans is an extremely important region, one that will certainly yield peace in the years to come. From Istanbul to Zagreb, many cityscapes resembling those of Damascus, Beirut, Cairo, and Jerusalem can be seen—cityscapes with mosques and churches, as well as the occasional synagogue as a faithful escort. Although such signs of communal culture are not present elsewhere in the world, globalization should help to disseminate all traditional faiths throughout the world.

The Balkans, like other parts of the Mediterranean region, is not an area dominated by a single faith. The Balkans is the spacious homeland for centuries' old indigenous Orthodox, Catholic, Islamic and, in places, Jewish microcultures. As well as recalling the bitter experiences of conflict and war, we should never forget the long periods of peace in the Balkans.

It is of particular interest to analyze the presence of inter-religious peace, cooperation, and tolerance at times when the Balkans was ruled by great empires. Discord between the different faiths and their followers in the Balkans arose when these empires began to weaken or when, as happened from time to time, they treated religions that were not that of the court, crown, sultan or emperor in a segregatory manner. It is my view that in the Balkans of today, with its many small states, part of the reason for many of the region's peoples and countries wanting to join the European Union is that they see it as a modern empire (one without a crown, emperor, king or sultan). It is hoped that the European Union will bring with it the chance for peace for Christians, Muslims, and members of other faith communities, as well as non-believers; for law and order for all the peoples and nations of the Balkans.

Of course, this optimistic view of the Balkans is only sustainable if the region is viewed through the lens of the philosophy of continuity. However, if the religions of the Balkans and the Mediterranean area are viewed by reading and (or) seeing their history as discontinuous, then there will be nothing to prevent us from acting like the worst kind of xenophobes by designating a particular faith in Bosnia or elsewhere as an import and the others as indigenous; one culture as non-European and the others as European.

The Balkans, like every other region where the traditional world religions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism have met and mingled, has not lost but greatly gained in the wealth of its spiritual continuity. Christian, Islamic, and Jewish continuities have

persisted, thereby creating transient acculturations of space and syncretisms, which have then complemented one another.

To put it metaphorically, the space marked *the day before yesterday* by Judaism gained even greater spiritual continuity with the arrival, yesterday, of Christianity and, *today*, of Islam. But equally, no one who observes the Balkans, the Mediterranean area, or Europe with the eyes of continuity would ever claim that Judaism vanished the day before yesterday, or Christianity yesterday, or that Islam ceased to exist today. It is the task of peace-loving people to promote the coexistence of different times in the same space and of different spaces or corners of the world at one time. Historically, it has been shown that the emergence of the Christian East did not mean the eradication of the Jewish East, nor did the Muslim East eradicate the Jewish or Christian East. And we could, indeed we should, say the same for the Christian, Islamic, and Jewish West.

The tradition of Islam in Bosnia and the rest of the Balkans is not a matter of discontinuity, but of continuity, just as is the tradition of Christianity in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. It is a continuity built up over many centuries, just as those many centuries are embedded in that diverse and distinctive continuity.

What is definitely undermining the traditional and religious space and continuity of enduring Europe and the Mediterranean region (and indeed of the world at large) is rebellion against the limits set for humankind by the Bible and the Qur'an. Among these limits are the fact that men are men, and women are women; that marriage and family are essential to ensuring the harmony of one's descendants; that all have the right to a natural birth and to a father and mother; that all have the right to preserve the integrity of their person and personality (and not to have them copied by cloning); and that all have the right to die with dignity. All traditional Christian and Muslim believers could be allies in the worthy defense of these principles; and this alliance would be good for every other believer, and indeed for all non-believers.

As long as we remain at the mercy of ever more powerful weaponry, the greatest discontinuity of humankind and one that is capable of destroying this world as if it were a mere trifle, what chance have we of giving a voice to these Biblical and Qur'anic limits that have been bestowed on humankind?

I believe it is now much more important, in this age of the machine and of ozone holes, an age when nature itself is rebelling against the products of all three industrial revolutions combined, that we begin to concern ourselves with this kind of discontinuity.

HISTORY AS A PITFALL FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

It is not my intention here to deal with history, with the remote or recent times when Christian and Muslim could with equal justification and on sound evidence identify their good and their bad centuries, their good and their evil face.

Those who live perpetually in the past are at risk of treating their history as an *age of glory*, even though they are often unaware that it has been conceived by projecting backwards into the past. A selective reading of history is a snare and a delusion that often arises in dialogue. It may be the most dangerous of traps for our present understanding of religions and believers of different faiths, particularly in Europe and in the West as a whole, given their current military, economic, cultural, and civilizational prowess. For the very reason that they possess such immense secular power, Europe and the West now bear the greatest responsibility for ensuring world peace.

In this age of globalization, which is supposed to open up the entire world to everyone no matter their religion, it is especially dangerous to exploit history and historical rights. If the wish is for all to be open to everyone else, shall we find this project impeded by our separate, distinct (micro) histories, histories that are local and not global?

Where the religious geography of our European continent is concerned, I should like to note that neither Christianity nor Islam came to Europe from Europe. Their original homeland and their roots are in the Semitic Middle Eastern triangle formed by the Red Sea, Jerusalem, and Mecca. From there they reached Europe in much the same way—disseminated by local or conquering empires, missionaries, and their cultures, civilizations, and philosophies; as well as by their worldly wealth, power, and influence.

As regards the European continent, permit me to remind you that the Byzantine Empire helped to spread Orthodoxy and the Ottoman Empire to spread Islam, along with the demographic expansion of Orthodox nations and of Jewish colonies. And do not forget the Austrian Empire, and later Austria-Hungary, which helped to spread and give stability to Catholicism.

No believers in Europe (or anywhere else in the world), be they Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, could have spread their views of the world to come without the blessing and the resources of this world, however transient this world and eternal the world to come. Each has known times when its followers were unable to resist the charms

of the golden calf, regardless of the warnings of our scriptures that it is pagan, and accursed.

I mention all this for a variety of reasons, but one in particular: we Muslims feel a sense of trepidation whenever we hear it said that Europe as a megastate should be defined as a solely and exclusively Christian continent. It is more. Europe is also a Muslim and Jewish continent, as well as a secular one. No matter if it is East or West, there is the shared existence of the Christian, Muslim, and Jew. As a result, we should all make every effort to ensure that the phrase *the Judeo-Christian heritage* becomes the *Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage*. Only thus shall we be fair and equitable towards our shared future; and only thus shall we recognize what has been the reality for centuries, on both sides of the Mediterranean.

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM TODAY—THE DANGER OF IDENTITY MONISM

You are eminent leaders of the Franciscan order, which has been actively conveying the message and voice of Christianity worldwide and throughout Europe, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, for centuries. It is precisely because you have had a feeling for distinctive local and regional features that it is good to remind you, now that you are here in Sarajevo, of the multitude of past and present human identities

You have also promoted dialogue within Catholicism. Orders such as yours promoted internal pluralism, pluralism within Catholicism. They have proved to be forces for encouraging dialogue within their faith, as well as interfaith dialogue. There is much in your Franciscan tradition that reminds us Muslims of the tradition of the Sufi orders in Islam.

This brings us to the important issue of identity. These days the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina describe you as Franciscans in Europe, European Franciscans, or the like. They talk about you as if there is nothing but identity monism, but this is so far from the truth. Little or nothing is said of the fact that there are Spaniards, Frenchmen, Germans, and Austrians among your ranks. The media also fails to mention your regional identities, such as whether you are Catalonian or Bavarian, as well as your personal identities, such as whether you are vegetarian or fans of Bayern, Real, or Ajax. It is possible, of course, that these other identities pale in comparison to you being a Franciscan, that your Franciscan or Catholic identity is what is most important to you.

Nonetheless, it is equally possible that something else from your kaleidoscope of identities is what most matters.

The absence of identity monism also holds true for Muslims. Just as it is not correct to consider Christians only as Christians, so it is not correct to think of Muslims in Europe (or anywhere for that matter) only as Muslims. They too may be Spaniards, Bavarians, vegetarians, or fans of Real.

Of course, there are a number of Muslim associations, forums and institutions that identify and promote themselves in their activities as Muslims and nothing else. This is not a bad thing in itself if it is affirming universalized Islam, or if the wealth of local, national and even tribal microcultures imbued with Islam is demonstrated within local societies. This would hold true for Christian associations, forums, and institutions that promote the Christian identity to the exclusion of all others.

Yet for the Christian to believe that *Europe equals Christianity* is quite unfounded. Not only does the universalism of Christianity transcend Europe, but there are other Europes—there is a civic Europe, a secular Europe, and a Europe of regions, all of which have their own identities. Although the Muslim may not have to deal with the issue of whether *Europe equals Islam*, it is unwise of the Muslims in and of Europe to emphasize solely their Islamic identity, and not to develop other identities simply because of the totality of Europe, which includes the political.

Politically speaking, there is a democratic Europe, a liberal Europe, a social democratic Europe and here and there, most regrettably, even covert segments of fascist Europe. For the Muslim minority, Western Europe is not only an opportunity for them to migrate but also a place where they can develop their own indigenous European political identities, cultural identities, and world views. They can develop and share these identities in association with Europeans who are of other faiths or who hold other world views.

For the Muslims in Europe, *supplementary* identities neither involve mimicry nor introduce the *principal* identity through the back door. A democratic, civic Europe is no threat to Muslim identities as long as the Muslims themselves accept such a Europe as their homeland, its states as their states, its civil rights and freedoms as their own civil rights and freedoms.

Many of the identities of Muslims and Christians do not coincide with religious identities, but neither do they desecrate, taint or deny them. A multiplicity of identities

constitutes an opportunity for people of different faiths—Christians and Muslims, for instance—to work together.

Finally, I believe that Christian-Muslim dialogue is perhaps one of the most important global needs that we face today. Christianity and Islam constitute a single entity at the planetary level, their followers intermingled and often living together in the same society.

It has been demonstrated that social patterns for the peaceful coexistence of different people and nations, different believers and non-believers, cannot be taken from the remote past. Those times are long gone, and we cannot turn the clock back. We need to turn our attention to creating new patterns of coexistence. Europe's democratic development since 1945 could be a good model for societies and states in the Middle East where there is a Muslim majority.

On the other hand, much of humankind is now responding to the messages of Islam and Christianity. Even in this technological age, nothing can replace God—not nuclear weapons, not the global village of the media, not the promises and resources to be gained from cloning.

World peace must now seek its resources in the messages of Islam and Christianity. Hence, the tough but noble task imposed on those who interpret Islam and Christianity, of presenting the fundamental teachings of their faiths peaceably, and of affirming within them the principles of peace and human dignity.

NOTE

1. This is an edited version of a talk given on 11 October 2007 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina at the Eighth Assembly of the Union of Friars Minor in Europe.