

Mato Zovkić, *Dialogue between Catholics and Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Sarajevo, CNS, 2018, pp. 401

One of the best proponents of ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Msgr. Mato Zovkić (1937-),¹ is the author of this book written in English (23 included papers), and German (5 papers), which has a symbolic photo at its cover: a joint meeting of the Pope Francis and the religious leaders of the city Sarajevo, that *Jerushalayim chicko*, or small Jerusalem as Jewish people used to call it for centuries. Whole book can be downloaded in its PDF version with previous payment from this link of the Publisher: <https://www.cns.ba/cns-izdanja/dialogue-between-catholics-and-muslims-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

This book is the finest testimony that Msgr. Mato Zovkić, professor emeritus of Catholic Faculty of Theology, University of Sarajevo, for decades has been building the better bridges among Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims and Jews on the outskirts of Europe,

¹ See for further info about prof. dr. sc. Mato Zovkić: <https://kbf.unsa.ba/blog/our-team/mato-zovkic/>, as well as: https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mato_Zovki%C4%87, and <https://verbum.hr/autori/zovkic-mato>.

and who is still the beacon of ecumenism and inter-religious, inter-cultural dialogue and relations for the Archdiocese of Sarajevo and the Catholic Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina with other Churches and Ecclesiastical Communities.² Monsignor Mato Zovkic, a New Testament scholar, holding for several decades responsibility for relations with other faith communities (almost from 1969), is still actively involved in interfaith dialogue initiatives,³ regularly participating in scientific conferences dealing with biblical and ecclesiological topics, as well as ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

This book is yet further evidence that the main Christian institutions, like the Holy See and the Archdiocese of Sarajevo, including the Catholic Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole, are developing a program of creating better understanding of all traditional religious models, and Islam in particular, the religion that is the youngest offshoot on the Abraham tree of

² See *Building Bridges in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, ed. by Michael Ipgrave, available at the following link: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/building-a-better-bridge-muslims-christians-and-the-common-good> (Georgetown University Press, 2008: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2tt50w>).

³ See <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/people/mato-zovkic>.

testimony of One God.⁴ Of course, there is no alternative to dialogue, especially as Zovkić portrayed it “at the threshold of the third millennium the dialogue is possible and necessary in view of implanting spiritual values in a secular Europe”. It is in this broader sense of dialogue that Zovkić speaks of mutual relations between Catholics, Orthodox, Reformed Christians, Muslims and Jews in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina on the threshold of the third millennium with firm belief that it can and should motivate us in this region to foster inter-religious dialogue and engage as believers in building up a tolerant civil society.⁵ Despite of all our differences, according to him, the mystery of Jesus, though understood differently by Christians and Muslims, invites us to deepening dialogue as a double-way road without premeditated plans.

On some way, the book under this review corresponds as a Catholic answer to Open Letter of 138 Muslim leaders of October 13, 2007 to Christian leaders and copy-

right holder of this Letter is the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman, Jordan,⁶ which *in continuo* was actively related with Pope Francis and especially with his own coming to Bosnia and Herzegovina fostering Christian-Muslim dialogue and cooperation following the path of Vatican II and his immediate predecessors.

I am not reluctant to say that the mission of dialogue in Bosnian and Croatian context with publishing this book is strengthened and moved to the next stage of fusion of all our common efforts from distorting each other's faith and history to mutually acceptable presentations without any kind of mockery. Connected with this issue is his pointing to the efforts of faith communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina in educating their congregations for peace as a practical benefits and contribution from their own side in reestablishing our pluralistic society simultaneously discussing some institutional tasks and possibilities and God's commandments as shared ethical values and obligations. This is ongoing healing process in this fractured country about which professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr from the GWU wrote:

Bosnia lies at the heart of the European continent, at once a witness to the reality of Islam, a bridge between

⁴ See my speech delivered at the Pontifical Gregorian University published in: *Stop trafficking in human beings: together it's possible* (Proceedings of the international conference “21st Century Slavery-The Human Rights Dimension to Trafficking in Human Beings”, May 15-16, 2002), pp. 193-195.

⁵ See his paper “Possibilities of Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina”.

⁶ See www.acommonword.com.

*the Islamic world and the West and for most of its history a living example of religious accord and harmony between the followers of the Abrahamic religions. Today in a world so much in need of mutual religious and cultural understanding, Bosnia can play an important role far beyond the extent of its geographic size or population, provided it remains faithful to its own universal vision of Islam threatened nowadays by forces both within and outside its borders.*⁷

This is amazing book much needed for mentioned healing process of the war wounds and scars not only in population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including our whole region, but for any place of our mutually interdependent and interconnected world which is crossing through tragic conflicts, destructions, expulsions, and “humane resettling”, as well as the challenges of religious education for civil tolerance, which offers a picture of Muslims as non-threatening fellow citizens who have the

right to be different in plural democracies. In addition, Msgr. Mato Zovkić portraying Christians and Muslims in countries issued from ex-Yugoslavia is deeply convinced that despite diverging views of past cruelties and present tensions, their believers can contribute to building up a pluralistic civil society. It is quite obvious from reading this book that we are caught on the horns of a dilemma: will we focus on our differences, or on what we have in common, the issue which makes up or breaks up the picture of the modern world, reinforcing or weakening the trust in the unity of that world.

Unfortunately, destructive national chauvinism and religion identity politics have torn Bosnia apart of our own communalities, and not only Bosnia. As far as I myself can understand the author, one of the aims of this book is to show that recent internecine violence does not represent the true face of traditional Bosnia, but that Bosnian tradition, properly understood, could serve as a model not only of, but also for inter-religious relations in Europe and the world. So in this sense the 1992-95 war between competing ethno-religious particularisms, styled “the war against Bosnia”, is not a genuine outgrowth of the Bosnian spirit. However, even after all those tragic events, the awareness is growing of placing reliance on this model

⁷ In the very beginning of his Preface to the Bosnian translation of *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (Harper San Francisco, 2002) a book translated by two dear colleagues and the very author of this review within a very short period of time on the occasion of the anniversary of the tragic events of September 11 2001, the esteemed Professor S. H. Nasr from the George Washington University is offering a remarkably faithful picture of Bosnia.

of thinking and living as the only possible and realistic prospect for an acceptable future in a world containing different religious and ethnic communities. Not only that Christians of different denominations in Bosnia and Herzegovina with Muslims and the Bosnian Sephardim can contribute towards inter-ethnic reconciliation, but they have to do that according this a contextual analysis towards peace-building in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It's the main goal of Inter-religious Council in Sarajevo⁸ despite diverging views of the state *which* slow down reconciliation efforts, because forgiving and asking forgiveness among ethnic communities in this country and ex-YU countries has no alternative.

Islamophobia is seriously portrayed in political context of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well, including the state of the church and theology in this country with the stress on the fact of drastic reduction of the Catholic population after the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. Also, mentioned are the letters of reconciliations of the Polish and German bishops from 1965, which are still inspiration for integration in Europe, reception of Vatican II teaching on the Eastern Orthodox Churches by Croat-Catholic and Serb-Orthodox theologians, as well

as shared experience of Christians and Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding religious instruction in public schools (programs, textbooks, subject evaluation). Unavoidably, paper on the future of religion in Europe in the context of secular states and its cultural pluralism is enclosed, because "our common future is at stake".

We can find there short papers on Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Catholic approach to religion in the countries of transition where state is secular, not secularist (with the same difference in English language between traditional and traditionalist), faith and national identity of Catholics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, human solidarity in a multi-religious society with the stress on a Catholic approach, the Catholic Church in Bosnia Herzegovina and five more written in German followed by Index of names and authors.

As for papers in German, they are dedicated to the following topics: inter-religious dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Muslim's dialogical and polemical views of Christianity; Religious communities between individual rights and ethnic-religious identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina between dialogue among themselves and nurturing peace in the relations with other faiths; and the reluctance and negotiations to honour much loved

⁸ See web-site of Interreligious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina: <https://mrv.ba/>. E-mail: office@mrv.ba.

Pope John Paul II with statue in front of the Cathedral of Jesus' Sacred Heart in the Oldtown in Sarajevo for his own peace efforts.

Thus, the obvious question upon reading Zovkić's book is the following: how can we reinforce the aspirations for a traditionally positive multicultural co-existence, shaken up and brought up to the edge of survival by the unfortunate events during the period between 1992 and 1995 and by an unnatural situation maintained to this day in one way or another? Another way of putting the question is: how do we support the construction of a stage for peaceful co-existence through dialogue with due respect for all the Bosnian individualities and varied cultural frameworks, without their violent destruction on the one hand, and without becoming prey to nationalistic illusions of uniqueness on the other.⁹ Otherwise, that Bosnian writer (D. Sušić)¹⁰ was quite correct in his statement: "May the Lord have mercy on this land. Until it finds its identity, there is not much we can ask for in this country".

At last but not least, personally I am honoured and privileged to write this short review of this

book following in the footsteps of Card. Michael L. FITZGERALD,¹¹ and whole-heartedly I recommend this book for the students of philosophical and theological seminars, as well as intercultural and inter-religious studies, i. e. to all serious *seekers* of Truth who are deeply dedicated to peace and dialogue as a double-way road.

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⁹ See my book *Situating the Bosnian Paradigm: the Bosnian experience of multicultural relations*, New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2008, pp. 195.

¹⁰ *Pobune (Revolts)* by Derviš Sušić, Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1991, p. 91.

¹¹ See Card. Michael L. FITZGERALD, in *Islamochristiana* 45 (2019), 473-474. He is a British cardinal of the Catholic Church and an expert on Christian-Muslim relations. He has had the rank of archbishop since 2002. At his retirement in 2012, he was the papal nuncio to Egypt and delegate to the Arab League. He headed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue from 2002 to 2006. Pope Francis raised him to the rank of cardinal on 5 October 2019. For further info visit: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_L._Fitzgerald.