
The Profile of Bosnian Islam and What West European Muslims Could Benefit from It

Ahmet Alibašić, MA

I. Islam in Bosnia in brief

Islam has been continuously present in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the early 15th century when the Ottoman armies started invading the country from the east. Unlike the population of Serbia and some other Balkan countries, majority of Bosnians accepted Islam during a slow process that took about two centuries. Accepting Islam at the hands of the Ottoman scholars and Sufis meant adoption of the dominant Islamic legal and theological thought and practice in the Ottoman state: Hanafi *madhhab* in Islamic law, Maturidi thought in theology, and related sufi orders. The position of these two schools in Bosnia remained largely unchallenged until recently (except for the challenge of Islamic modernism since late 19th c.). There are probably several reasons for that but a major one is the existence of a firmly established central Islamic authority called the Islamic Community.¹

Until 1878 B&H was part of the Ottoman state which was organized according to the principle of organic unity of religious and political authority whereby Islamic religious institutions were part of the state administration. The novelty in the Ottoman system was a tightly knit hierarchy of Muslim scholars ('*ulama*', '*ilmiyye*') which was unprecedented in the Sunni Muslim history. Consequently there was little autonomy in interpretation and practice of Islam in Bosnia. Sporadic heterodox movements like Hamzawis were quickly suppressed (1573). On the other side, non-Muslims, and especially Orthodox Christians had their independent religious administrations.

Things changed dramatically for Muslims in 1878 when Ottomans handed over Bosnia to Austro-Hungarian Empire. That was a cultural earthquake, which caught Muslims totally unprepared.² After initial confusion and wavering between migrating and staying the majority decided to stay and started to organize within the existing political system. The process itself was supported and even initiated by the Austrian authorities, who did their best to separate Bosnian Muslims from Istanbul. In 1882 the emperor appointed the first Bosnian *Rais al-'Ulama*, religious leader. Five years later Shari'ah judges' school was established. During following three decades Bosnian Muslims fought for the autonomy in education and *waqf* affairs which they eventually won in 1909, i.e., only after Bosnia was formally annexed. For the next hundred years Bosnian Muslims continued to struggle for the preservation of their autonomy and at times their very identity and survival first in the royal and then the Communist Yugoslavia and independent Bosnia. Two most difficult periods were from the end of the WWII to late 1960s and 1990s. In late 1960s the political and economic situation in Yugoslavia generally improved and religious communities and believers regained some of their freedoms. In the case of the Muslim community the revival was signaled by the (re)construction of mosques, publication of new Islamic periodicals (*Zemzem*, *Preporod* and *Islamska misao*), opening of the Faculty of Islamic Theology, expansion of the Gazi Husrev Bey's madrasa, greater number of students of Islamic studies in the Muslim world, etc.

By early 1980s the Communist regime was already going through its final crisis and first problems in Kosovo started. New restrictions on religious activities were imposed and a number of Muslim

¹ Another very important reason might be relative isolation from the Ummah.

² Fikret Karčić, *Bosniaks and the challenge of Modernity: late Ottoman and Hapsburg Times* (Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 1999). Enes Karić, *Prilozi za povijest islamskog mišljenja u Bosni i Hercegovini XX stoljeća*, Sarajevo, El-Kalem, 2004.

intellectuals were sent to prison. Then the Serbian nationalists led by Slobodan Milošević galvanized Serbs claiming, among other things, that Balkan Muslims represent a threat to Europe in general and Serbian nation in particular. Very soon first Croatian and then Muslim towns and villages including their places of worship were burning. All the mosques in the territory under the control of the Army of Republic of Srpska, with exception of one or two (and later many mosques under the control of Croatian forces in Bosnia) were destroyed and Muslim population expelled or extinguished. Once predominantly Muslim towns in eastern and northern Bosnia have been 'ethnically cleansed' of Muslims. Despite Dayton Accords goals, the return of refugees and displaced persons to the Republic of Srpska and parts of Herzegovina has been mostly unsuccessful. At the same time, on about 30% of the territory that was under the control of BH government forces during the war Islam has experienced a sort of revival under the auspices of the Islamic Community. Other Muslim actors such as Islamic missionary and charitable organizations contributed to that revival as well. The primacy of the Islamic Community in that process is however unquestionable.

II. The Islamic community in B&H

According to its statute (constitution), the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter ICBH) is "the sole and united" community of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, of Bosniaks outside their homeland, and of other Muslims who accept it as their own.³ The autonomy of ICBH is based on the religious and legal institutions of Bosnian Muslims from the time of Ottoman administration in Bosnia. The ICBH is inseparable part of the *Ummah*. The organization of the ICBH and its activities are derived from the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah, Islamic traditions of Bosniaks and the requirements of the time. The ICBH is independent in regulating its activities (rituals, Islamic education, management of Islamic endowments, publishing, charity, etc.) and the management of its property.

The aim of the ICBH is that all of its members should live in conformity with Islamic norms. The ICBH protects the authenticity of the Islamic norms and assures their interpretation and application. In the interpretation and performance of the Islamic religious rituals the Hanafi *madhhab* is to be applied. The ICBH dedicates itself to the preservation of the values of marriage and family life and takes care of the Islamic education and upbringing of its members.

The ICBH is supposed to take care of the religious rights of Muslims and provide necessary conditions for its members so that they may perform their Islamic religious obligations. The ICBH should also organize and support activities which improve social and financial living conditions of Muslims.

According to the same document, the ICBH establishes and maintains contact and cooperation with Islamic communities, institutions and organizations worldwide and cooperates with other religious communities and organizations promoting peace, justice and good will among all people. The ICBH is financed by *waqfs*, membership fees, *zakah*, *sadaqat al-fitr*, *qurban*, revenue of its profit-generating agencies, funds, gifts, testaments, etc.⁴

³ There is a number of non-Bosniak employees in the IC including an imam born in Mecca serving in a village near Zenica.

⁴ The organizational structure of the ICBH consists of *jama'ahs* (community of at least 100 households), *majlises* (usually a group of not less than 7 *jama'ahs* in one municipality or city), *muftiluks* (mufti districts, 8 of them in Bosnia and one in each of Slovenia, Croatia, Sandžak, and Germany), the *Riyasat* (main executive body of the ICBH), *Raisu-l-Ulama* (the President of the *Riyasat* and the Grand Mufti or supreme authority in the ICBH), the Council of the ICBH (*Sabor* or the ICBH's assembly) and the Constitutional Court. There are approximately 1.700 mosques and *masjids* (mosques without minarets) in Bosnia and Herzegovina as the grassroots institutions of the ICBH. Around 650 of them were completely destroyed during the aggression on Bosnia 1992-95 while another 530 were damaged. Many are still to be reconstructed. Major educational institutions of the ICBH are: the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo (est. 1887/1977), Gazi Husrevbey Library (est. 1437), Islamic Teachers' faculties in Zenica and Bihać, Gazi Husrevbey madrasa (est. 1537) and five other madrasas in Bosnia (Tuzla, Travnik, Mostar, Visoko, and Cazin) and one in Zagreb (Croatia) and one in Novi Pazar (Serbia), and the First Bosniak Gymnasium in Sarajevo (est. 1995). Other institutions of the ICBH are: The Waqf Head Office (1894), Gazi Husrev Bey Waqf (est. 1513), El-Kalem Publishing Center (1974), Center for Islamic Architecture (est. 1993), Muslim Information and News Agency - MINA (est. 1990),

III. Understanding “Islamic tradition of Bosniaks” or “Bosnian Islam”

a. Its Constituting Elements

The years since the fall of Communism have brought tremendous changes to Islam and Muslims in Bosnia. Since then so much history has been created that it is not feasible to go into the details now. One thing that is of interest to us here is the reintegration of Bosnian Muslims into wider Muslim World Community. In that process all sorts of ideas from the Muslim world came to Bosnia and disturbed the monotony / homogeneity of Islamic practice in Bosnia. Many local Muslims as well as foreign observers did not like what they saw and started to talk about the endangered “Bosnian Islam” without defining it. Nor was everybody happy with this ethno-geographic qualification of what is usually perceived as a universal religion. While not negating the usefulness of this term as a sociological tool some have preferred to use a phrase from the constitution of the IC “Islamic tradition of Bosniaks”. So far the most significant attempt at its definition was done by the chairman of the IC Constitutional court professor Fikret Karčić whose thoughts on the topic were well received and went almost unchallenged. We are going to briefly summarize his article here. According to him the following six elements constitute the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks:

1. Sunni Islam of Maturidi variation in Islamic doctrine, Hanafi school of Islamic Law and relevant Sufi orders.⁵
2. Belonging to the Ottoman Islamic cultural zone characterized by – among other things – strong central authority and institutionalization of ‘*ulama* into a tightly knit hierarchy.
3. The presence of the elements of “Islamized” pre-Islamic Bosnian practice such as performing prayers in the open on certain days of solar calendar. (These elements are very present until today and have been constantly evolving. The case of Ajvatovica is an interesting case in this regard).
4. A tradition of Islamic reformism in interpreting Islam since mid-19th c. It was an attempt to improve the lot of Muslims mainly through reviving *ijtihad* and reforming the socio-political conditions of Muslims. In the second half of the 20th century this became “the official intellectual tradition in interpreting Islam in BiH”. This tradition is not homogenous. It includes Modernist as well as more conservative trends.
5. Institutionalization of Islamic religious authority in the form of “Islamic Community” we just briefly described.
6. The practice of living Islam in secular state.

The dynamic relationship – and sometimes tensions – between these elements are acknowledged. He also observed that two of these elements could be focus of further development: Islamic institutions and Islamic thought.

If these are elements, what would be the characteristics of Islamic tradition of Bosniaks?

b. Characteristics of “Bosnian Islam”

1. Secularized Muslims. Since 1878 Bosnian Muslims have lived in secular states. While Austria and royal Yugoslavia implemented Shari’ah in personal matters of Muslims Communist authorities closed

Agency for Halal Quality certification (est. 2005), and the Association of the ‘Ulama’ of the ICBH (1910). Sufi orders (tariqahs) established in accordance with Shari’ah and Tariqah are also part of the ICBH. The ICBH publishes its official journal *Glasnik* (Herald) almost continuously since 1933, *Takvim* (the annual prayer timetable and a collection of essays) since 1950, and a fortnightly newspaper *Preporod* since 1970. *Journal Novi Muallim*, under various titles, has been published since 1910.

⁵ Many Bosnian Muslims including many intellectuals believe that Hanafi madh’hab is significantly more liberal than the other schools of Islamic law and that most problems in Islamic practice today are result of departure from Hanafi madh’hab, which is oversimplification of the situation and hardly defensible position.

Shari'ah courts in 1946. From then on until 1990 Bosnian Muslims lived in an aggressive atheistic, often anti-religious state. Since 1990 Muslims have been part of the effort to establish liberal democracy. Throughout this time they accepted the legal status quo where the religious and moral norms of the Shari'ah are applicable while its 'legal' norms were also transformed into moral norms.⁶ The IC repeatedly stated its commitment to the separation of state and religious communities.⁷ So far there has not been any serious request for reintroduction of optional Shari'ah courts to deal with personal status matters, analogous to rabbinical or church courts in some Western countries. At this point one could only speculate about the possible reaction of general Bosnian Muslim population to such an initiative. The aforementioned professor Karčić has already voiced his objection to such a possibility.⁸ Others could be expected to support such an idea. However, no serious Muslim individual or group has advocated reintroduction of mandatory Shari'ah rules in any aspect of life. It seems that Xavier Bougarel is right in his conclusion that Bosnian Muslims are irreversibly secularized.

It would also be very difficult to speak of Islamic politics proper in Bosnia in any meaningful sense. When Islamic symbols and motives are used in every day political discourse it is done in order to achieve national Bosniak (Muslim) political objectives, not Islamic ones. So it is more appropriate to call it Muslim than Islamic politics.

2. Civic, non-violent Islam. Given their recent experience and compared to Muslims elsewhere, Bosnian Muslims have been very peaceful, non-violent, civic, respecting the laws and norms of the country, open, and tolerant. Despite all the talk about the threat of Islamic terrorism in the Balkans, there were no major attacks on non-Muslim or western targets (it was actually the Army of Republic of Srpska that held Western hostages in Bosnia). There has been no massive revenge against Serbian or Croatian targets or extra-judicial quest for justice despite the disappointment in Europe and the sense of betrayal.⁹ It has been suggested by Prof. Karčić that Ottoman normative culture might be one of the factors contributing to this.¹⁰

In this regard Xavier Bougarel has suggested that Bosnian Muslims have adapted to the condition of non-sovereignty and power-sharing in a multi-religious environment.¹¹

3. Democratic and pluralistic. Bosnian Islam is essentially democratic, by which I mean participatory and inclusive, and pluralistic. It probably cannot be different anymore. Inclusive and participatory nature of the IC begets pluralism.¹² A plethora of Islamic trends have always been present inside the IC: traditionalists, Sufis, reformists, modernists, salafis, ... All are in there. Before learning how to live with others who are different from them Bosnian Muslims have to learn how to live with their own differences. Great many IC officials with university diplomas are graduates of non-Bosnian universities. In a sense, the IC is a melting pot of a sort. It is premature to say for how long it will manage to keep together salafis and modernists. (Last elections for the office of *Rais al-'Ulama'* sow some tendencies that would be interesting to observe. The core group around one of the candidates

⁶ More on this in Fikret Karčić, „Islam u sekularnoj državi: primjer Bosne i Hercegovine“, Rijasetov naučni skup, Sarajevo, November 2007.

⁷ Rijaset IZ u BiH, „Platforma IZ u BiH za dijalog“.

⁸ Karčić, „Islam u sekularnoj državi“ i Karčić, „Bošnjački iskorak u prošlost“, Dani, br. 435, 14. okt. 2005.

⁹ According to a recent research ca 70% of Bosnian Muslims believe that clash of civilizations is on. That is not much different from 81% of Al-Jazeera viewers poll in 2006.

¹⁰ Personal conversation with dr. Fikret Karčić. This is not to deny the war crimes committed by Muslims, both local and foreign, in uniforms of the Bosnian Army. I have recently had a Franciscan whose old father and several other relatives were killed by the Bosnian Muslims during the war as guest lecturer for three hours at the Faculty of Islamic Studies. However, evidence suggests that local Islamic authorities actually reined the destructive impulses in (Eg. Ibrahim Husić and a young Muslim soldier). An analysis of the texts published in Glasnik, the official journal of the IC during last twenty years did not discover any significant case of intolerance or chauvinism.

¹¹ Xavier Bougarel, „The Role of Balkan Muslims in Building a European Islam“, European Policy Centre Issue Paper no. 43, 22 November 2005, p. 7.

¹² Ahmet Alibašić, „Slovo u pohvalu islamskom pluralizmu: Obrazovni i intelektualni profil nastavnika i saradnika FIN-a“, www.fin.ba.

was predominantly locally educated). In the near future one or the other group might have more say in running the Community. However any sort of massive exclusion based on ideological differences seems to be out of question. Inclusion of non-clerics further moderates Bosnian Islam and directs it toward mainstream.

4. Nationalized Islam. This needs to be acknowledged since this is very relevant in the context of our discussion. Bosnian Islam might be pluralistic when it comes to various Islamic orientations but it is thoroughly nationalized and Bosnian Muslims are very pragmatic when it comes to balancing patriotism and faithfulness to their culture and allegiance to their religious principles. Religious and national identities in their case are reinforcing each other and it is often difficult to say where Islam stops and national culture begins. Sometimes one has an impression that it is Islam serving Bosniak nationhood at least as much as the other way around. In other words, Bosniak nationalism is sometimes hiding behind Islam (eg. Secretary of the Faculty of Philosophy in Tuzla. The content of Ajvatovica festival is a telling example again).

This characteristic is obviously an obstacle for the export of Bosnian Islamic solutions to Europe. On the other hand, it can be instructive to study this experience of twinning Islam with nationality. It would be interesting to see how constructive have Bosnian Muslims been in crossing ethnic divisions among Muslims especially in Germany. Other questions that might be asked here are: Is the statutory provision about the ICBH being the community of Bosniaks outside Bosnia too becoming an impediment to creation of similar structures in other European countries? Can there be institutionalization of Islamic authority along the Bosnian model in multiethnic Muslim communities, or in nations that are not predominantly or almost exclusively Muslim, as is the case with Bosniak nation?

This was an attempt to depict the current situation. However Islamic tradition of Bosniaks is not static and the struggle over the nature of Islam in Bosnia is ongoing. Currently the challenge seems to be most pronounced at two levels: interpretation of Islam and the administration of Islamic affairs. At the interpretation level, the influx of Islamic literature, missionaries and Bosnian graduates of Islamic studies from the Arab world during 1990s has for a moment posited a significant challenge. However, latest developments with the IC reacting decisively and salafi / wahhabi groups differentiating into the majority of more mainstream oriented groups and a very small minority of radicals placates concerned observer. The other challenge coming from more or less the same group of people was directed at the way Islamic affairs are organized and managed in Bosnia questioning the 'exclusive right' or 'monopoly' of the IC to operate mosques, train imams, provide basic religious education in mosques, collect zakah, organize hajj, etc. It is principally a clash of two Islamic administrative cultures. One that is more commonly present in the Arab world with individualistic tendencies verging on anarchism and centralized one that is based on Ottoman tradition of structured religious hierarchy (but is not strictly speaking only Turkish). And although there has been lately a lot of talk about the magnitude of this challenge or 'wahhabi threat', my observation and analysis lead me to conclude that critical years were late-1990s when 'wahhabis' had money, people and organizations on the ground. Since than local and global political developments have all worked against 'wahhabis' and the IC has also reacted reasserting its role of an exclusive Islamic authority in the country. Although minor readjustments are possible in the future no major change is anticipated.

IV. Learning from Bosnian Muslims

There are a number of aspects of Islamic tradition and experience of Bosnian Muslims that West European Muslims might like to consider more closely.

1. *The way Islamic authority is institutionalized in Bosnia* and Muslims are represented in it could be the most interesting aspect other Muslims would like to look at. I mean here the concept, not the details or the practice. Conceptually the IC seems to be superior to Russian independent muftis, SE Asian

movements, Turkish Diyanet, European Islamic societies and NGOs, Arab *Wizarat al-Awqaf* and state appointed *shuyukh (Ulama al-sultah)*, ... This concept is important because its procedures and structures influence its content. I would like to mention three benefits of the Bosnian IC. First, single Islamic structure means more powerful organization and better negotiating position *vis-a-vis* state and other actors. Second, self-financing makes such an organization more resistant to unwelcome outside influences, whatever they might be. These two together mean more autonomous and consequently more credible Islamic authority that is able to prevent radicalization. (This does not exclude some sort of relationship between local Islamic community and transnational Islamic authority once and if it is established. Bosnian Muslims had very positive experience in this regard). Third, universal, inclusive membership makes the organization lean towards mainstream, moderation, and the middle path.

Of course, Bosnian model has many limitations. One of the main limits is unclear boundaries of exclusive powers of the IC and the nature of its relations / *modus vivendi* with Islamic NGOs.¹³

2. As a specific element of this concept, *the Bosnian Islamic education system* is the second thing West European Muslims might want to examine. In brief, the system combines religious and secular, modern and traditional Islamic education.

3. *Intellectual legacy* and the responses of Bosnian Muslim intellectuals to the challenges of modernity and European culture is the third potentially interesting aspect. However this legacy has still to be systematized, studies and presented in major European languages to be accessible to non-Bosnians. As of this moment the following could be said of it:

i. It was formed under the conditions of absence of freedom and isolation (which sometimes was a blessing in disguise since it forced creativity upon some Muslim thinkers).

ii. Currently Bosnian Muslim thought is recovering from a devastating war and 'digesting' new input from the wider Muslim world into which it has been reintegrated. One hopes that Bosnian Islamic thought will regain its creativity and authenticity soon.

iii. Bosnian Muslims scholars still need to rethink, justify, and legitimize many Bosnian Islamic practices if they do not want to be seen and written off as simply weak and lax Muslims.

iv. Muslims often refrain from taking the path of necessary reforms and changes fearing the slippery slope effect of those steps on their belief. Bosnian Muslims' experience suggests that West Muslims should get little relaxed about it and not hesitate that much losing precious time. Muslims can change without losing their faith. Unavoidable decisions must be taken. Dissociation of culture and habits/customs from religious principles is a key step in this process. Of course, looking critically at well established practices and interpretations requires significant amount of both knowledge and courage.

4. *Political and social experience*. Isolation is the worst choice and certain way to destruction. Therefore it should be feared by Muslims. Bosnian Muslims' recent past suggests that European Muslims should invest in building bridges of friendship with wider society wherever and whenever they can. (They can be destroyed whenever you want). Muslims (like all other weak peoples) cannot count on the necessary support of Europe, the UN (and even the USA) in matters of life and death. They can be very generous in delivering humanitarian aid and development assistance but not in keeping you alive. (*Dobra kobila, slaba čivija*).¹⁴ The Muslim World, on the other hand, can offer a lot of ineffective piety, plenty of warm emotions and only some short-term humanitarian aid. Given such a world, Islamophobia, anti-Muslim propaganda and stigmatization should be taken very seriously irrespective of their obvious falsity and 'unbelievability'. Once people start believing it that is already too late.

¹³ The relations with the wider Muslim Ummah might also become an issue once the Ummah gets a single address.

¹⁴ Enes Karić, "Bosnian Muslims between the Balkans and Europe: A lesson and hope for the Muslims of Europe". Prof. Karić reverses completely the topic of our discussion and asks: "What Europe for Muslims?".

5. *Inter-religious cooperation and dialogue. ...*

V. Three points for concerned Non-Muslims

a. First, more and more Muslims appreciate the sincere concern of Non-Muslims when it comes to the relationship between certain Muslim groups and violence, and Islam and security in general. (Most Muslims however think that non-Muslims do not appreciate the similar concerns from the Muslim side and that non-Muslims are listening only to radicals amongst Muslims, but that is another story). However, non-Muslims would be wise to resist the temptation to confuse and equate lax and weak Muslims with good Muslims. Religiously weak, 'bad' Muslim is not a good Muslim neighbor, colleague and fellow citizen! Non-Muslims should be wary of Muslims who – for their own reasons – tell them what they want to hear but have no standing among the Muslims. They cannot be reliable partners in finding/reaching common understanding with Muslims. (On the contrary, as has recently been revealed such people can get you into great trouble just to achieve their own petty goals. I have in mind Iraqi chemical spy).

b. Second, observing what some non-Muslim quarters try to do lately I feel a need to urge non-Muslim friends also not to cheat themselves: Weak, dependent, controlled, discredited Muslim structures are useless. They are not good partners in anything, especially not in preventing radicalization of Muslims. To do that they have to be credible. To be credible they must be independent and have Islamic legitimacy. To fight extremism and radicalization you – and we - need partners, not clients.

c. Third, the non-Muslim search for moderate Muslims is a very sensitive mission. Non-Muslim concern and stake in this process is acknowledged by many Muslims. However, non-Muslims need to exercise restraint. They may do counterservice to those they want to support. During last several years we have seen papers produced by renowned think-tanks basically advising Western governments to exploit the differences between various Muslim groups in their quest for civic and moderate Islam. It is divide and rule again. First of all no one has the right to tell Muslims what Islam, Bosnian or Turkish, Sufi or Modernist, they have to follow. However, it is perfectly legitimate for others to voice their concerns and offer or withdraw the support depending on common interest. Second, it seems that some political and intellectual circles in the West simply do not get it: Muslims at war is not a good idea for anybody. The lessons from Iraq as well as those from old and new Afghanistan to me seem to be too obvious to elaborate here.

CONCLUSION

Bosnian Muslims have no readily exportable solutions for West European Muslims but they do have a rich stock of experience based on which common European Islam could be partially built.

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Akademie der Diözese Rottenburg-Stuttgart
Im Schellenkönig 61
70184 Stuttgart
Telefon: +49 711 1640-600 E-Mail: info@akademie-rs.de