

Religious Identity at the Heart of Balkan War

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WASHINGTON — In America's diverse culture, the notion of a civil war charged with religious conflict is hard to grasp.

But religious identity has been present constantly in the antagonisms that have fragmented the Balkans for centuries--setting neighbor against neighbor, Muslims against Orthodox Christians, and Orthodox Christians against Western Christians, who are represented, at least symbolically in the current conflict, by NATO.

More than anywhere else in Europe, religion and nationality merge in the Balkans, making it possible to create potent propaganda and a unique mytho-history that can be used to inspire hatred of "the other."

Yugoslavia sits on an invisible fault line between the Islamic Middle East, and the eastern and western branches of Christianity. Over centuries, each faith has sought hegemony over the religious identity of the region.

"In the Balkans, religious identification became part of national identity, as expressed through language and the communication of the national myth," said Peter Black, a senior historian at the United States Holocaust Museum. "Thus, being Orthodox is part of being Serbian. Americans don't have a single religion--being Catholic or Orthodox or Muslim isn't part of our American identity."

Depending on which experts you talk to, you will hear about two conflicts now in the Balkans. In one view, the Kosovo war has historical and mythological roots in the long conflict between Ottoman Turks and southern Slavs, who are Orthodox Christians.

'War Between Eastern, Western Christianity'

The other war is being fought in the air by NATO troops, who, by bombing the Serbs during the Orthodox Easter--just as the Nazis did in 1941--have played into a view held by some Serbs that NATO is a force of Western Christianity attempting to crush the Eastern Orthodox underdog.

“It really comes down to a war between Eastern and Western Christianity,” said Father Alex Karloutsos, an Orthodox priest in New York.

In the United States, the war’s religious undercurrents have gone largely unnoticed except in the religious communities--Muslim and Orthodox Christian--who see the suffering of their brethren. Muslim relief groups have witnessed an extraordinary outpouring from the nation’s 5 million to 6 million adherents, who have collected more than \$2 million as well as tents, food and medical supplies to send to the Kosovo refugees.

“That is a lot of money for our community,” said Ibrahim Hooper, national communications director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. “This is one of those situations that has really struck people.”

Some Muslims in the U.S. voice the frustration that, even when violence is targeted against Muslims such as Kosovo’s ethnic Albanians, the U.S. refrains from tarring Serbs with the extremist labels sometimes given Muslims.

Americans who are Orthodox Christians feel that the public picture painted of the Serbs by the U.S. media and government officials has tarnished all Serbs--if not all Orthodox Christians--with the same brush as Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, making them out to be a violent, cruel, barbarian people.

Such images put American Orthodox Christians in an awkward position as they struggle to express their sympathy for ordinary Serbs, whose faith they share.

“For a lot of Orthodox in this country . . . there’s great agony, really, as long as this misguided policy is pursued,” Nicolas Gage, a Greek Orthodox writer, said about the NATO bombing. “We have no quarter for Milosevic, but this misguided policy is going to bring tragedy to a lot of people.”

Gage was one of a handful of prominent Orthodox Christian Americans--including columnist Arianna Huffington and Plato Cacheris, the Washington attorney who represented Monica S. Lewinsky--who took out a full-page ad in the New York Times urging President Clinton to refrain from bombing during the Orthodox Easter.

The Clinton administration initially appeared deaf to the protests of the Orthodox community. A planned conference call before the Orthodox Easter between American Orthodox priests and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was suddenly canceled.

However, on Wednesday, Clinton and the deputy director of the National Security Council met with a small group of leaders from the Serbian American community in

a bid to reassure them that the president holds Milosevic, and not the Serbian people, responsible for the crisis in Kosovo, National Security Council spokesman David C. Leavy said. Leavy added that it was the second meeting with Serbian American leaders.

The religious strife in the Balkans stems from centuries of turbulent history, including the arrival of the Slavs in the 7th century, the split between Rome and the Orthodox Church 1,000 years ago and the later arrival of the Ottoman Turks, who rewarded those who converted to Islam.

A number of scholars on the region, as well as Orthodox clergy, underscore that the Serbian Orthodox Church is hardly monolithic in its support of Milosevic.

On the one hand, Milosevic has relied heavily on Orthodox religious symbols to invigorate his political message and justify the persecution of the ethnic Albanians, who are predominantly Muslim.

“It is the manipulation of the Kosovo religious mythology, which was taken over by the most radical elements of Serbian society, that is central to the breaking apart of Yugoslavia,” said Michael Sells, head of the religion department at Haverford College in Pennsylvania.

A study by Sells traced how Milosevic adopted religious symbolism and language to unite the Serbs and incite hatred toward Kosovo’s ethnic Albanians.

The pivotal event was a 1989 commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo Polje, in which Serbia’s medieval kingdom was defeated by the Ottomans, ushering in hundreds of years of Turkish domination.

Kosovo Is Seen as the ‘Serbian Jerusalem’

Kosovo was at the heart of that Serbian kingdom, and Serbs today still claim deep spiritual roots there. Many of the earliest Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries are in Kosovo, and many Serbs vehemently oppose even the suggestion--made by some radical Albanian factions--that Kosovo become part of a larger Albanian state.

“We cannot give up Kosovo, because it is the Serbian Jerusalem. The birthright of the Serbian Orthodox Church is in Kosovo and must remain there as part of Serbia,” said the Rev. Blastko Taraklis, a Serbian Orthodox priest in Mission Viejo who keeps in close touch with the monks and nuns at the ancient Decani monastery in Kosovo.

Despite the fierce sense of ownership of a land that has been occupied predominantly by ethnic Albanians, a number of the Serbian Orthodox priests in

Kosovo, led by the bishop of Kosovo, Father Artemije, have been stridently opposed to Milosevic.

Just last month, before the NATO airstrikes began, several of the Orthodox clergy from Kosovo met in Vienna with Catholics and Muslims from the region to try to form a united force against violence.

“It was a very tense and challenging conversation that nearly broke down,” said Father Leonid Kishovsky, an Orthodox priest who serves as the ecumenical officer of the New York-based Orthodox Church in America.

“But they did manage to walk through this very painful dialogue and came up with a common statement to step away from . . . violence and seek a democratic solution,” said Kishovsky, who was a participant.

But the possibility for peace hangs on a thread, even among clergy who view nonviolence as essential to their faith.

The three dominant religions of the Balkans--Islam, Eastern Orthodox and Western Christian--are not inherently at odds, said Paul Mojzes, a professor of religion at Rosemont College near Philadelphia who grew up in Yugoslavia.

“But the Catholics fought the Orthodox, each claiming they alone had the key to the kingdom of God, and the Muslims fought them both,” Mojzes said. Everyone is “afraid of their neighbors because their neighbors, in the past, have one way or another taken advantage of them.”