

In His Own Words:

Ivo Markovic on Faith, Religion and Nation

In religion it is really important to understand that on the one hand, we have faith. The existential and personal experience that one lives with a God and that God influences my life: that is faith. Religion is an external and social expression of the integration of my religious being into society and the church.

Regarding religion in Bosnia, we have three main religions: Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity and Islam. *[Catholicism is practiced primarily by Bosnian Croats, Orthodoxy by Bosnian Serbs, and Islam by Bosniaks.]* Our churches and faith had not been dragged into the conflict that much at the beginning of the war. The most powerful and purest religious movement happened in this region between 1988 and 1991. Many priests sensed the mobilization of negative nationalistic passions and tried to oppose this evil by using symbols of faith and morals and ethical Christianity, Islam and Orthodoxy. That was beautiful. People tried by to turn people towards God to stop this evil.

But this became a religious war because politicians saw that they could use religious elements that were connected to national identity for a forceful entrance into a war. They used this so skillfully and precisely that it is unbelievable.

To understand how they were able to do that, you have to know that Communism created over 10,000 experts in manipulation of information. Capitalism in the west uses capital and money as power. They rule with capital and economical propaganda. But Communism was living by ideological propaganda. So, all these experts -- former communists -- moved into the nationalistic movement. Instead of communism, they used nationalism.

In nationalism they found that religion is the most beneficial propaganda machinery for spreading the propaganda of fear. So, Serbs as Orthodox Christians are threatened, Muslims are threatened, Catholics are threatened. So they were using religion -- not faith but religion -- initially to create fear. That fear reduces man into an animal who in turn initiates threats that again produce fear.

So you see, that is completely the opposite of religious principles. That was a horrible instrumentalization and manipulation of religion. And our religious leaders and churches due to the force of manipulation did not adapt well. Sometimes they would react but prophetically they did not respond.

The basic problem with Orthodoxy, Islam, and Catholicism is the internal deep connection between religious and national. The content of national identity is linked with religious identity. Religion created those identities together with tribal elements, language and cultural elements. So, religious identity is a basic content of national identity.

Religions don't differentiate enough between national and religious areas. During history, and especially during communism and the old Yugoslavia, religion preserved the nations. Nations always tried to absorb other nations: Serbs absorbing Croats, Muslims absorbing Serbs, etc. There were always attempts to absorb each other, but religions preserved those identities.

Now nations -- Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian -- don't want to reject the role of the church as a preserver of nation. That is hindering religious workers from doing their religious job. It is very easy for religious clergy instead of working with people to help them come closer to God, to move into preaching national ideas.

In order to understand religious communities; we always talk about the Pope and Bishops and those super-structures but the essence of faith is that the individual has a fate. But individuals cannot live alone. For the fate you need a community. The basic power of a religious community is the place where believers come and pray. That is this church or mosque. The local religious leader or priest has most of the power in the religious communities. The local priest is in reality a Pope. This is where you live the fate... this is where believers are. This is what counts.

Now, how the priest in this church works with believers about the dialogue, and reconciliation is what matters the most. This is where the power of church is. All this church's super-structure is there to coordinate and connect all churches and influence it more or less. But the local clergy plays a decisive role.

[In Croatia and Herzegovina] our politicians realized that the Bishop's Conference and Bishops are unimportant. Who is important is the local priest who works with a religious community that has voters. That is how they manipulate with voters. For example, HDZ [the nationalist party which headed Croatia until 1999 and still has strength in Croat areas of Bosnia] has been giving 10,000 DM each year to each priest's parish. They don't give that to the church because they love the church or because they love a priest but to buy priests who are now mostly poor and need money for the upkeep of church, for the religious community, for pastoral activities, etc.

So, whoever gives money -- they are blessed. Then the priest is invited for a party meeting and that is how it is shown that church is with that party. So when worshippers see where the priest goes for a meeting, most of them will vote for that party... at least 80%. There is a manipulation from that side. It is political manipulation.

Just because of the connection of nation and religion, many of our religious leaders and religious communities were not prepared because they did not recognize well enough the difference between national and religious ideas.

It is very difficult to be spiritual and religious. It is difficult to pray to God. For that man has to change radically. He must: study, pray to God, read, be an intensive soul-searcher and have a good soul. So, in this difficulty of trying to be spiritual, it very easy to move into the national where desires rule. Therefore, very often religious clergy become national workers. That is a betrayal of our mission.

Many people today — many national churches rather — stress the connection between nationality, ethnicity, and religion. I think that this is an atavism. It's a thing of the past and this connection doesn't help either the ethnicity or the religion. The Serbian Orthodox Church only loses with its "Serbianism" just as the Catholic Church loses with its insistence on "Croatianism." The Catholic Church is not only what we call today the Catholic Church. It's the "Roman" Catholic Church. There is something above the idea of nation when Christianity of one area gets enslaved by nationality, it damages itself, it injures itself.

We have to have differentiation. Religion helps man to find some kind of purification within the substance of his being because religion helps the person to find God and to found a community of people that is governed by God. I have surveyed more than 600 people [of all religions in Bosnia] and I have not found one that says that we do not believe in the same God.

There are some theologians who now say because of nationalism that we [Christians] do not believe in Allah or some Muslims don't believe in Christian God. But nobody dares to write anything about it. They just talk.

There is also something that churches criticize a lot and that is participation in the culture. The representatives of all religious institutions -- when they see a Muslim who goes to a Catholic Church or if Catholics go to a Muslim cleric, it is attacked as being Christianization or Islamisation respectively. For example, one Catholic man accepted an invitation of a Muslim to listen to a reading of the Koran. Later when I ask people why they do that and they tell me that Muslims are believers as well and they also pray to God, so if that prayer helps why not? I don't denounce my religion by doing that.

Muslims who come to Catholic churches in Sarajevo also say that by coming here they give the support and respect to Christians who live their fate. That participation in the religious group is not negative at all. It is not Christianization as people might accuse us of, but a very beautiful and mutual coexistence of different religions who accept that God works on all sides. Through that religious inspiration, every human being -- no matter what religion or ethnicity they might be -- should be our brothers and sisters.

We really need communication in Bosnia. We live close to one another. People these days of so many different cultures and identities live next to one another and they simply don't communicate. And this is where xenophobia happens and fear.

In essence our religions have remained pure. Now we have to work on designing religion as the creator of sense, foundation of values, creator of honesty, spiritualism, essence and stability of a being. I believe that religions need to go back to their original roots. I really hope that now after being satiated with nationalism, there will be a truthful movement towards the faith and need for real religious inspiration.

The main task of the religions here, now, is to awake themselves and realize what is their job. Our job is to help people to live with God, and to organize a religious community in which fate could live, grow and expand. And moreover, to accept other religions not as *wrong* approaches to God but as *different* paths to God where God is at its creation. I think, that religions have a chance to determinedly contribute for peace this way.