



# Journal of Religion & Society

---

The Kripke Center

Volume 12 (2010)

---

## The Ambivalence of Medjugorje

### The Dynamics of Violence, Peace, and Nationalism at a Catholic Pilgrimage Site during the Bosnian War (1992-1995)

Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon, Harvard Divinity School

#### Abstract

Focusing on the use of Marian imagery from Medjugorje during the Bosnian War (1992-1995), and employing R. Scott Appleby's use of the concept, sacred ambivalence, this essay will examine how a religious image proclaiming peace can also support violence and war. It will show that a Croat nationalist ideology at work during the war interpreted Mary's peace through a hermeneutic of violence, where violence was *necessary* to restore peace – defined under this ideology as a landscape of political, religious, and cultural homogeneity.

#### Introduction

[1] Medjugorje, both town and Roman Catholic pilgrimage site in southern Bosnia-Herzegovina, has grown into one of the largest Marian devotional sites in the world, surpassing Fatima and rivaling Lourdes (Herrero: 137). In this rural village in 1981, six local children claimed that the Virgin Mary appeared to them and identified herself as the “Queen of Peace,” and Medjugorje soon became a sign of hope for millions throughout the world. Yet the Marian apparitions involved not only peace, and the story of Medjugorje is far more complex than one might expect from a rural pilgrimage site at the edge of Europe.

[2] Focusing on the use of Marian imagery from Medjugorje during the Bosnian War, I will examine how a religious image proclaiming peace can also support violence and war. I will draw on R. Scott Appleby's reworking of the term “sacred ambivalence” as an analytical

resource to understand religious extremism. I will argue that Croat ethnocentric political ideology interpreted Mary's peace through a hermeneutic of violence, where violence – in the form of armed conflict, ethnic genocide, and war crimes – was *necessary* to restore peace – defined under this ideology as a landscape of political, religious, and cultural homogeneity. This road to peace generated ethnic partition, communal warfare, and the reorganization of the former Yugoslavia by violent means. And the image of the Virgin Mary, as a central component of this ideology, was the symbolic fulcrum that made the hermeneutic coherent and potent.

### Background

[3] Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, word of Mary's apparent presence spread. The pilgrimage site became so popular that nearly 25 twenty-five million pilgrims visited between 1981 and 2000. Pilgrims journeyed even during the war and in spite of the ecclesiastical conflicts that flared around the parish (Herrero: 147; Gaspari).

[4] The shrine's broad appeal continues to this day, crossing confessional, economic, and national lines. Catholic centers have been dedicated to Mary of Medjugorje throughout the world, but the phenomenon reaches beyond the borders of Catholicism, attracting both Protestants and Muslims (Sells: 107; see also Cheston). With 150 confessors working every day, Medjugorje has heard more confessions than any other parish in the world (Gaspari). The movement<sup>1</sup> has also won over notable theologians, including Robert Faricy of Gregorian University, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, and René Laurentin. Even Pope John Paul II expressed his support: "If I were not the Pope, I would probably [have] visited Medjugorje by now" (Gaspari).

[5] As the popularity of Medjugorje spread, Yugoslavia itself began to weaken from a series of global, political, and economic shifts. In 1980, the long-time leader and strong man of Yugoslavia, Marshall Josef Broz Tito, died, leaving a power vacuum that was never completely filled. Due largely to the end of the Cold War and the withdraw of U.S. and European financial subsidies, Yugoslavia experienced a general overall decline in GDP, investment, and industrial and agricultural growth beginning in the late 1970s (Perica: 308-9). This crisis continued through to the Yugoslav wars, reaching a negative 20% GDP growth rate for Yugoslavia as a whole by 1992 (Ramet 1995: 374).

[6] As Medjugorje gained momentum as a holy site, the country around it descended into factional religious- and ethnic-based warfare not equaled in Europe since the Second World War. Armed conflict began in the early 1990s, continued into the latter half of that decade, and ended with the break up of Yugoslavia. Although for obvious reasons there are no economic figures available for wartime Bosnia, it is accurate to say that the war effectively destroyed Bosnia-Herzegovina's economic capacity, creating a country with an unsteady foundation for the future (Ramet 1995: 414).

---

<sup>1</sup> Juan Herrero has termed the tangible aspects of this phenomenon, listed above, as the "Medjugorje movement" (139). For the purposes of this study, "Medjugorje movement" will refer to such tangible aspects, unless otherwise specified: the pilgrimage center, the pilgrimage industry, and the movement of pilgrims, locals, and religious that associate themselves with the pilgrimage center and the Medjugorje cult. The "phenomenon," itself, will refer to the complete picture, to the apparition events and the total effects and consequences thereof.

### Medjugorje and Wartime Croat Nationalism

[7] The Medjugorje phenomenon's sacred resources, in addition to its financial resources and effects, were used by violent Croat nationalist groups to support their ambitions during the war (Herrero: 162). Indeed, Marian symbolism – especially that of Medjugorje – was a powerful marker of identity and was central to the ethno-nationalist conception of what it was to be Croat.<sup>2</sup>

[8] Medjugorje came to hold a central place in the Croat nationalist imagination before, during, and even after the war. For Hercegovinan nationalists, there was no place more sacred than the precincts of Medjugorje (Vulliamy: 227).<sup>3</sup> As Franjo Tudjman, president of Croatia during the war, reportedly stated, the apparitions in Medjugorje “presaged and ignited the reawakening of the Croatian nation” (Herrero: 162). Indeed, the Virgin of Medjugorje was seen as the protectress of the Croats in both Croatia and Herceg-Bosna, the Croat region that broke from Bosnia-Hercegovina during the war. She was the *advocata fidelissima Croatiae*, “the most faithful advocate of Croatia,” their Queen (Perica: 158). Priests preached that the enemy – at times Muslim, at times Serb and Christian – could be beaten back by the power of Croatia's greatest protector, Mary. The pastor of Medjugorje parish, when the apparitions first began, called on Croats to “pick up their swords, put on their uniforms, and stop the power of Satan!” (Herrero: 162). Indeed, Mary's appearance in Croatia at the advent of division and war was a powerful affirmation to Croat nationalists and their aims.

[9] In Medjugorje itself, the use of Marian symbolism linked the phenomenon semiologically to violent nationalist ideologies. Nazi symbols such as Maltese crosses and swastikas decorated the statuary of Medjugorje's merchant shops (Sells: 107). Busts of President Franjo Tudjman – who had aimed to annex pieces of Bosnia-Hercegovina, and who before his death was rumored to be guilty of war crimes as significant as Slobodan Milosevic – stood next to statues of the Madonna in merchant stores located at the center of town. Citizens sang Marian hymns next to patriotic, Croat folk songs, both in Medjugorje and during public events in the Croat Republic (Bax 1995: 78). Even after the war, the national emblem of Croatia decorated front doors, rocks around the pilgrimage paths, and the two major pilgrimage trails of Apparition Hill – where the first apparitions occurred – and Mt. Krizevac.

[10] Croat and Bosnian-Croat armed forces and militias also employed Marian symbolism, linking Medjugorje to the Croat military and paramilitary establishments. Marian prayer beads and the use of prayer were the “trademark” of Croat defense (Mojzes 1998a: 92). After the war in 1998, the Croatian army took pilgrimages to Lourdes and Rome, and an elite, 400-soldier section of the army took a pilgrimage to Medjugorje, where they “pledged” allegiance

---

<sup>2</sup> Croat nationalists were not unique in this. Serb nationalists drew from their own tradition and the popular martyr myths of Prince Lazar, who battled Ottoman expansion unsuccessfully in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> Perica gives a thorough discussion of the use of Marian imagery in organizing the Croatian nationalist movement in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the use of specific liturgies and symbols for that purpose (157-158, 167, 168, 172).

to Mary (Mojzes 1995; Perica: 342). Even children walking up the pilgrimage trails in Medjugorje were said to have sung militant *Ustashi* hymns along their way (Herrero: 161).<sup>4</sup>

[11] Shifting political boundaries during the war also aligned political with religious space. The breakaway Croat nation of Herceg-Bosna contained the precincts of Medjugorje and its borders coincided with those of the Franciscan province in Hercegovina. For many Croat nationalists, this annexation and the fact that Medjugorje was never attacked during the war sacralized political boundaries and made Medjugorje a *de facto* spiritual capital of the Croat people in that area. In the eyes of many Bosnians, Serbs, Muslims, and even Croats, Medjugorje was a prime symbol of and central source of inspiration for “Croat fundamentalism” (Perica: 336).

### Medjugorje and Crimes Against Humanity

[12] With these spiritual resources, Croat nationalists, both local and national, used the legitimacy gained by Medjugorje to carry out war crimes and crimes against humanity. I will give just a few examples to demonstrate that such usage occurred at several levels of Bosnian and Croat society.

[13] The first example is of local ethnic cleansing that occurred at the very outbreak of war. After Herceg-Bosna succeeded, both the Croatian foreign ministry and Herceg-Bosna attempted to deport more than 10,000 Muslim men to third world countries in 1992. Within one summer, 45,000-50,000 Muslims had been “cleansed” from the Mostar area alone – a city not far from Medjugorje (Vulliamy: 323). Croat forces also razed mosques and Muslim cultural sites throughout western Hercegovina (Perica: 11). Not even the military was spared from cleansing. With the partition of Herceg-Bosna from the Bosnian government, the HVO – the Bosnian-Croat army – began to “cleanse” its ranks of non-Croats, that is, Muslims.

[14] Although journalists and scholars focused mostly on Serbian concentration camps during the war, the Croat nationalist entity, Herceg-Bosna, maintained at least five of its own, and all were within a two-hour radius of Medjugorje (Sells: 109). These sites included the most notorious Croat camp, Dretelj, located about an hour drive over the mountains from Medjugorje. Camp prisoners – mostly Muslims – were beaten, tortured, forced to work late into the night, subjected to anal and bestial sex, and made to sing Croat nationalist songs. The rations of food and water were so meager that some prisoners had to drink their own urine to survive (Vulliamy: 323; Silber and Little: 300). Even the U.N. Security Council, a body that distanced itself from direct intervention in the Bosnian conflict for most of the war, declared that these camps were comparable to the brutal Serbian camps and demanded their closure (Silber and Little: 300).

[15] The number of prisoners held in these five camps is unknown, since both the Red Cross and the U.N. High Commission on Refugees were denied access to most of them (Vulliamy: 330). Estimates suggest, however, that of the 6,474 prisoners counted in the 51 camps run

---

<sup>4</sup> The *Ustasha* was the World War II Croatian state set up by Mussolini and overseen by the Nazi Army. It set up its own concentration camps – the most notorious being Jasenovac – and, according to German troops in the area during World War II, rivaled the Nazis in brutality and genocidal acts.

by the three different factions in Bosnia (Serb, Croat, Muslim) and that the Red Cross (ICRC) gained access to, over two-thirds (4,400) were held in Croat camps (Silber and Little: 299). Even if not entirely accurate, this shows the contribution of Croat nationalism to the atrocities committed during the war.

[16] In addition to the camps, Bosnian Croat forces carried out several campaigns against the Bosnian Federation, the internationally recognized government in Bosnia-Herzegovina they were supposed to protect. They forcibly removed Muslims from the city of Prozor, as well as numerous other towns in central Bosnia (Vulliamy: 222). The worst fighting, however, centered on Mostar. The Bosnian-Croat army employed tactics – including those employed by Serb and Bosnian-Serb forces – condemned by the international community and leading human rights organizations (Vulliamy: 233, 325, 328-29). The Bosnian-Croat forces had originally been allies, so Bosnian-Muslims were unprepared for the onslaught. From the beginning, food was scarce among the Bosnian-Muslims, and nothing was wasted. Everything was rationed down to “the last gram of flour” (Rieff: 124). In the end, the siege was so crippling that the Muslim side of the city was likened to a concentration camp (Rieff: 341).

[17] As Herrero pointed out, solid evidence that the Franciscans directly contributed to these atrocities is hard to establish (162). There were reports, however, that individual Franciscans took up arms during the conflict. Bax reported that Franciscans helped organize and mobilize militia units (2000: 319 n. 6).<sup>5</sup> Mojzes wrote that the Sarajevan publication, *Danas*, reported that the “gun-toting Franciscan friar,” Father Duka, was seen accompanying Croatian troops in battle. Mojzes blames the Catholic leadership for this, since nothing was done to reprimand Father Duka, or any other priest for that matter, who had participated in the fighting or the atrocities (1995: 130-31).<sup>6</sup>

### **Medjugorje and the Wartime Economy**

[18] Medjugorje, then, was a symbolic and religious resource for Croat nationalism before and during the war. It also figured in the illegal wartime economies that deprived peoples further inland of needed supplies and food, and was a financial resource for Croat paramilitary groups that helped commit the atrocities for which the Bosnian War became infamous.

---

<sup>5</sup> Bax’s work is a unique ethnographic study of Medjugorje and of western Herzegovina that covers the Bosnia War period and the decade leading up to the violent conflicts of the 1990s. The reasons for this scarcity of scholarship have many roots, not the least of which was the political situation of socialist Yugoslavia, which historically discouraged ethnographic fieldwork and investigation. There was a general unwillingness in the Tito-era government to authorize research that could aggravate nationalist grievances. Such grievances had their roots in the inter-ethnic turmoil and massacres of World War II. These roots were buried and obscured as a matter of state policy, which favored Yugoslav national – not ethnic – identity (2000: 333). Bax’s investigations are more invaluable since local records in both Medjugorje and in the district seat of Citluk were destroyed during the war (2000: 318 n. 2).

<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that all Catholic laypersons or clergy were a part of what is described here. Indeed, there were outspoken clergy and laypersons who denounced the atrocities and corruption of the HDZ regime and its ethno-nationalist policies, including leading bishops and cardinals, who had begun to separate themselves from the HDZ later in the war.

[19] Despite the general and severe declines in the regional economy, Medjugorje remained an exceptional economic stronghold both during and after the crisis. As Perica states, Medjugorje, “the Herzegovinian backwater,” remained “a prosperous oasis amidst a generally devastated land” (311). This is partly due to the continual influx of money and capital from its lucrative tourism trade during the 1980s and into the 90s (Ramet 1995: 33). Medjugorje had developed sophisticated financial operations centered in or originating from the shrine. The seers, themselves, had brought in considerable sums through both “seer-centered patronage networks” set up to provide for the pilgrims’ spiritual needs, as well as the seers’ international contacts and business ventures (Bax 1995: 22 n. 21, 50; Perica: 311). Even during the war, the tourism trade continued to reap profits, and though it did so at a diminished level, it remained a powerful contributor relative to the area’s general economy. Quoting claims by Laurentin and Guerrero, Herrero reports that the tourism trade was Medjugorje’s main support, comprising as much as three-fourths of Medjugorje’s economy by 1994 (162). As the site’s location, situated miles behind the front lines, shielded it from the severe wartime economic conditions and infrastructural damage that plagued most of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Medjugorje was able to take advantage of its location, and its Madonna, to keep afloat during the crisis.

[20] Tourism is only part of the picture, however, and Medjugorje’s involvement in wartime black markets and illegal economies played an even larger role in the area’s prosperity during the war. For example, Laurentin and Guerrero’s claim is not consistent with the other social and economic data available, which argues against peaceful tourism as the major economic contributor. Only 200,000 pilgrims journeyed to Medjugorje during the four to five years of the Bosnian War, in contrast to the annual average of 1 million pilgrim visitors per year before the war – a decline of 95%. As a result, the tourism pilgrimage economy must have plummeted in significance. Indeed, the reports of Mart Bax, a Dutch anthropologist that researched Medjugorje on site both before and during the war, confirms that the number of pilgrims steadily *declined* as the number of Croat refugees and soldiers centering themselves in the town dramatically *increased* (1995: 78).

[21] The immigration of soldiers and victims of war to Medjugorje, and not pilgrims, seems to have been the stronger demographic trend during the conflict. It was pillage, then, and illegal economies, and not pilgrimage, which was the most significant contributor to Medjugorje’s wartime economy. By the middle of the conflict, landlocked Bosnia-Herzegovina and her larger cities were besieged and cut off from the outside world. Western Herzegovina, on the other hand, which includes Medjugorje, was one of the few secure areas for funneling both weapons and humanitarian aid into Bosnia (Rieff, 28; Vulliamy, 260). The town of Medjugorje was in a prime strategic position to take advantage of the black market and arms trade that flooded the western Herzegovinan economy during the war. As the main avenue for humanitarian aid, Medjugorje became the nexus of a rare supply corridor for weapons, cars, alcohol, tobacco, and drugs – all of which were in high demand in Bosnia during the war.

[22] This situation empowered local mafias at the expense of war victims and law and order. Due to the arms embargo during the conflict, the Bosnian government’s main access to weaponry was through regional mafias and militias, which made considerable sums on Bosnia’s isolated defense. This high demand and subsequent increase in income made local

mafias, including those around Medjugorje, politically powerful. The situation in Medjugorje was so extreme that Perica referred to the wartime town as the “Las Vegas of the Balkans” (343), while David Rieff called Medjugorje a “party town” (28, 132, 135; see Vulliamy: 259).

[23] Medjugorje’s illegal economy soon became a financial resource for Croat nationalist paramilitary forces. Local units of HVO, which was “responsible for numerous atrocities during the war,” benefited from the moneys destined for the pilgrimage center (Herrero: 161). The HVO stopped and confiscated badly needed shipments bound for Muslim populations in war-torn areas further inland (Vulliamy: 261). Like the local mafias, army and paramilitary groups then sold these originally free supplies to besieged Bosnians at highly inflated, black market prices. This increased the one-way flow of hard currency outside of Bosnia, debilitating the rapidly shrinking nation and its economy, while supporting nationalist groups that aimed to annex Bosnian territory.

[24] Even more importantly to this essay, the HVO received direct support from charitable funds raised with the use of Medjugorje and its Marian imagery. One example, the British-based organization “Medjugorje Appeal,” purportedly raised £20 million for humanitarian aid on behalf of a local orphanage in Medjugorje. These funds, however, were used to buy military equipment and uniforms and to finance HVO military engagements, including the destruction of non-Catholic religious sites (Perica: 338-39; Herrero: 162).

[25] Moreover, the leaders of the Medjugorje movement collaborated to use the illegal economy and the plight of those impacted negatively by the war to support Croat paramilitary groups. The previous example of the Medjugorje Appeal involved leaders of the Medjugorje spiritual movement. Ivan Dragicevic, one of the six original Medjugorje seers, as well as two Franciscans, Fathers Slavko Barbaric and Jozo Zovko, who were both instrumental promoters of the Marian apparitions early on in the movement, helped organize the Appeal’s campaign to fund the HVO (Perica: 338-39; Herrero, 162).

[26] For the local Franciscans, Mary’s apparitions were not only a source of inspiration for church members but also a source of authority and economic power for the order. Medjugorje as religious center provided the Franciscans not only with funding but with a “parallel magisterium,” that is, an independent source of moral and spiritual authority (Bax 1995: 21, 35, 35 n. 8-10, 36). The six seers at Medjugorje transmitted theological messages believed to have come directly from a divine source, thus bypassing the doctrinal monopoly of the traditional magisterium – the central teaching authority of the Church embodied collectively in the bishops. In other words, the Franciscans, intentionally or unintentionally, were establishing a “sacral monopoly” with Mary at its center (Bax 1995: 68). Some of the child seers even proclaimed that the Virgin was critical of the local Bishop of Mostar, directly challenging his authority (Herrero, 145). This allowed the Franciscans in the area to hold on to more of their assets, which were bound for the diocese, a relatively new spiritual presence in Hercegovina. This independent base of doctrinal authority and economic power made the diocese and the Franciscans inherent competitors and slowed the bishop’s efforts to consolidate his own authority in the historically Franciscan-dominated area.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> The tension between the order and the diocese has its roots in the Franciscan arrival in the region. The Vatican established the Franciscan order in Bosnia in the early fourteenth century to stem off what it

[27] Both within the military and without, then, the Marian symbolism, ritual, art, and cultus of Medjugorje was used to legitimate then mobilize a violent Croat nationalism. Croat paramilitary groups and Croat nationalists utilized the symbols and resources, both sacred and financial, of the Medjugorje movement, as well as the economy the shrine's presence created, in carrying out war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and a political and cultural realignment in the region.<sup>8</sup> It was, in this sense, a divisive force in the region even within the Church hierarchy and legitimized the annexation of southwestern Bosnia-Herzegovina. Marian symbolism and the resources of Catholicism were used to create the bloodiest European conflict since the Second World War (Cohen: 54, 64; Ramet 1995: 162).

### Medjugorje and the Ambivalence of the Sacred

[28] There was a definite religious dimension to this conflict, as other scholars and journalists have shown. Religion was not the only marker of ethnic identity in the lands of former Yugoslavia, but it was an important and active one during the war (Perica: 12). So to better understand this conflict, I will use a concept in the study of religions as an analytical tool to tease out how religious imagery purporting to support peace can also be used to inspire and legitimate violence.

[29] The term "sacred ambivalence" originally referred to the fluid definition of what cultures hold to be sacred or holy. In many cultures, a sacred object or person can be holy and yet unclean and even dangerous, depending on the situation, location, and timing. R. Scott Appleby broadened the applicability of this concept to help analyze the phenomenon of religious extremism. In his work, *Ambivalence of the Sacred*, Appleby investigated why different religious activists, hailing from the same tradition and employing the same religious resources and symbols, could employ completely divergent methods and hermeneutics (i.e., violent and non-violent) for their religious activism. According to Appleby, religious experience creates an interpretational challenge within a tradition that is never ending, one

---

considered to be the Islamic influence of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina until the late nineteenth century. The Franciscans, then, were the only major Catholic presence in the area for hundreds of years. As such, all Church lands, parishes, schools, and monasteries were under the control of the local order, including those in Medjugorje. This monopoly, however, did not hold. As Ottoman control waned in the Balkan peninsula, the Austro-Hungarian Empire annexed Bosnia and oversaw the implementation of a secular ecclesiastical structure. The Austro-Hungarians were eager to counter what they perceived as the entrenched and populist influence of the local and often indigenous Franciscans, who had become generally sympathetic to the local population and their aspirations. Until recent years, the Franciscans looked to the local population in Herzegovina to supply new members of the order (Perica: 144). With this new hegemony, land ownership and local influence shifted from the order to the secular hierarchy. Slowly but effectively, the bishops managed to win Vatican support and brought more and more church lands and parishes under Mostar's direct supervision. This threatened not only to diminish the popularity of the Franciscans among the local populace but to weaken their centuries-old political and economic means of independence, as well (Herrero: 143). The Franciscans were on the verge of losing most of their holdings and jurisdictional authority until 1981, when the miraculous occurred: the Virgin Mary, herself, appeared in the Franciscan parish of Medjugorje.

<sup>8</sup> A number of top HVO (the Bosnian-Croat army) leaders have been indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, including Dario Kordic, president of the HDZ in Bosnia-Herzegovina, who was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment by the tribunal (United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia [<http://www.icty.org>]).

that is continuously trying to feel out the meaning of the sacred and how religious actors should respond to it in the world (55). This reaction will change, depending on time and place, between violent and non-violent interpretations of religious experience.

[30] The image and symbolism of Mary of Medjugorje can be termed ambivalent following Appleby's formulation. It combines seemingly contradictory possibilities of the sacred or holy and can be used as a source of legitimacy for both violent and non-violent responses to conflict. At the same time that Marian symbolism and the tangible aspects of the Medjugorje cult, such as the pilgrimage center and industry, have provided inspiration and hope to pilgrims, it has conversely inspired and supported nationalist aims and crimes against humanity. Thus, Mary of Medjugorje, as an ambivalent symbol, combines the destructive with the generative conterminously and contemporaneously.

[31] Appleby's formulation brings us back to the fundamental question underlying this essay: "does holiness *preclude* the use of violence? Or, in certain situations, might holiness *require* the calculated use of violence?" (34). The Croat nationalist answer is yes and employs a hermeneutic of violence where both holiness and peace *require* aggression and even bloodshed. Marian peace, in this particular case, is not the transformative absence of violence but its strategic use toward what was, in the end, a political goal. And that nationalist goal was the restoration of a perceived and ideal cosmic equilibrium between ethnic nations where religious, cultural, and political boundaries were synonymous, the populations within those borders homogenous, and relations with other national and religious groups exclusivist.

[32] Under this ideology, nationalists saw Bosnia's diversity as upsetting this cosmic equilibrium, and because it was a sacred equilibrium, it had to be restored, and in one of two ways. The first was religious conversion, and as we will see in the case of Bosnia, also ethnic conversion. The second was violent elimination of the non-Catholic and non-Croat from the perceived boundaries of Croat culture, that is, ethnic cleansing. Both methods had as their aim the homogenization of culture and the unity of religion, polity, and culture, and Marian symbolism was a key, energizing component in this ideological framework. Mary requested the conversions, and it was Mary who was envisioned as the force protecting the ethnic purity of Croatia, rallying its defense, and legitimating nationalist ends (Herrero: 141-42).

[33] In order to draw out the details of this argument, I will examine this Croat ethno-nationalist vision of peace. In doing so, the limitations of this analysis must be clearly articulated. The Bosnian conflict and, indeed, Yugoslav society, with its many layers of culture and identity, are complex. The explanation provided here is not meant to be a blanket statement for all Croats or even all Croat nationalists. Being a Croat religious nationalist in this regard ironically does not necessitate that one also be devoutly religious nor does it even exclude atheists. A religious nationalist uses religious imagery, symbols, claims, and rituals to further the reach and potency of the ethno-nationalist ideology. It is not, however, necessarily a claim to any sort of religious devotion or spirituality, as such. Mojzes sums this up quite well: "Paradoxically, the current Balkan wars are religious wars fought by irreligious people" (1995: 208). This explanation will, however, isolate and analyze one such religious vision that is presented in numerous studies of Croat nationalist ideology during the war and, hopefully, help us understand more clearly how peace was used in the

name of violence. To do this, we will look at the sacredness of political borders and the relationship of borders and identity under this hermeneutic.

### National Boundaries as Sacred: Construction and Violation

[34] The danger of ambivalence in Marian symbolism is “. . . that Mary, in principle representing global *communitas*, has in practice become, in each of her numerous images, exclusive patroness of a given community, region, city, or nation” (Turner and Turner: 171). Or to paraphrase this quote, Marian symbolism can combine the unerring omnipotence of a universal deity with the parochial interests of a national guardian. The image of Mary, here, is understood through an exclusivist hermeneutic, created by the conflation of transcendence and nationhood, where the virtue of Mary’s peace and protection is restricted to specific populations. Only a small step of logic is necessary, then, for the Virgin’s providence to be restricted to certain groups and to be judgmental against those outside the favored group.

[35] In the specific case of Croat culture, the Virgin Mary developed over the last two centuries into a primary identity marker and central symbol for Croat nationalists (Perica: 317). According to this ideology during the Bosnian War, Mary as *Gospa* oversaw Croat culture as its protector and queen.<sup>9</sup> She guarded the integrity of the nation, its people, institutions, art, culture, and of course, the dominance of Catholic faith in national life.

[36] Mary’s strong association with the Croat nation was no accident. Both religious and secular leaders intentionally worked over several decades toward this synthesis. During the Croatian independence movement of the 1970s and 1980s, the Catholic Church in Croatia, including the upper echelons of the hierarchy, worked to achieve a “100%” fit between Catholic and Croat identities (Denitch: 30). Nationalists such as Franjo Tudjman campaigned for a central role for Catholic dogma in policy, education, and culture. Tudjman believed that the Catholic Church “had been the only organized force which had provided consistent resistance to communist rule and which had nurtured Croatian national consciousness,” and so was also core to what it meant to be Croat (Ramet 1992: 121). The image of Mary became a parochial patroness of Croatia, making even quotidian aspects of Croat culture of divine import (Vrcan: 116). Mary became part of a comprehensive Croat myth where nationalists linked her to the birth of Croatia as a Catholic nation and making her the mother of the nation and all Croats. This, of course, meant that Croatia and Croats were consequently extraordinary, distinct, sacred (Perica: 168).

[37] And Medjugorje became an important locus for this project synthesizing Croat culture, politics, and Catholic tradition. During the war, the “most senior” Croat politicians backed the Medjugorje movement, both its legitimacy and expansion. The pilgrimage center and a number of its Franciscans in turn supported these nationalist politicians (Sells: 107; Herrero: 154). The use of Marian symbolism, then, by both secular and Catholic leaders, theologians, and ideologues assisted in the synthesis of Croat identity with Catholic identity.

[38] Such national sanctification raises the stakes dramatically during a conflict. In a nation where political, cultural, and religious borders were synonymous, the perceived blurring or violation of any of these borders will easily be seen, through a nationalist’s eyes, as a crisis on

---

<sup>9</sup> *Gospa* is the Croat name for “Mary” (literally, “lady,” and is similar to the French, *notre dame*).

all levels, as well as a violation of divine will (Douglas: 115, 163, 54; Smith: 70, 105). Specifically, such a violation occurs when a group believes that non-members, exclusively defined, inappropriately enter into their space and, so, enter profanely (Douglas: 124). In this way, members perceive that violence is somehow done to the community's integrity and extraordinary status through the blurring of boundaries (Lifton: 150). For example, Croat nationalists came to believe that the Serb nation would "serbianize" them, that is, erase their Croat identity (Mojzes 1998b: 71). Any Serb within the Croat community became part of the larger, irredentist threat of the Serbian culture entering in and eliminating Croat uniqueness (Velikonja: 38).

[39] Although I speak here in abstract terms, the violation can be experienced quite viscerally and personally. As Mary Douglas pointed out, people can come to embody their culture so that they themselves become, in effect, border markers of that culture (116). The Croat people, then, are sacred because they both embody and delimit the sacred space of Croatia as idea, polity, geography, and culture (Smith: 104). In this case, the violation of culture becomes a personal, bodily violation as well, making this violence effective on the communal *and* personal levels.

### Restoring Equilibrium: A Violent Path to Peace

[40] It is important at this point to understand the dynamic that the word "violence" implies. The words "violate" and "violence" originate from the Latin *vis*, meaning "vital force." The root of these words suggest that violence and violating acts are the source of both harm and the power, the "vital force," to redress and correct such harm. As Robert J. Lifton surmises, "In the case of violence, the sense of being threatened or *violated* is such that one feels impelled to act in kind toward the source of the threat" (150). The boundary violations, then, can be restored by the same violent force that caused the violation in the first place. As the violation is perceived as visceral, so then is the response.

[41] Bringing this understanding to the essay at hand, cultural boundaries were restored and the violation resolved when each ethnic group resumed its proper place within their own cultural boundaries. During the Bosnian War, this was done largely in one of two ways. The first was conversion, the transformation of the other into one's own group. Conversion as a means of staving off disaster was already a known theological concept available to Roman Catholics. One of the primary messages of the Virgin Mary of Medjugorje is conversion, including conversion as a substitute for violence: "Tell all my sons and daughters, tell the world as soon as possible that I desire their conversion . . . I will ask my Son not to punish the world but that the world be saved . . . When God comes He will not be joking" (Perry and Echevarria: 304). Conversion would restore the rift between the rival sides by eliminating confessional difference and so also curtail future prospects of righteous violence.

[42] Conversion in the applied context of the Bosnian War, however, meant more than a switch of confession. In that polemically charged and divisive time, religious conversion necessitated a concurrent nation-apostasy, if you will. Since religious and ethnic identity were nearly synonymous during the war, a person in the former Yugoslavia who converted confessionally was also perceived as having simultaneously and automatically converted ethnically. In other words, to convert to Catholicism in Bosnia around the time of the war was to become a Croat (Perica: 25). This situation, then, greatly increased the significance of

conversion, raising issues of national loyalty and treason during a war fought between differing ethnic groups.

[43] The centrality of conversion can be seen in the Marian messages recorded at the pilgrimage center. Their analysis shows that the seers spoke often of the emphasis Mary placed on conversion but never of the atrocities committed in Mary's name by their co-religionists. In the seers' monthly messages from Mary, there was no mention of the genocide occurring during the Bosnian War nor any comments or condemnation of the violence occurring on the other side of the hills around the shrine. War was mentioned only once during Mary's monthly messages, on April 25, 1992, a rather early date in the conflict: "Only by prayer and fasting can war be stopped." The war, however, was decried not to save human beings and the environment from the ravages and unnecessary sufferings of war, but to preserve spiritual conversion: "Therefore, my dear little children, pray and by your life witness that you are mine and that you belong to me, because Satan wishes in these turbulent days to seduce as many souls as possible" (published on the Medjugorje website at <http://www.medjugorje.hr>). During 1993, in the heat of the violence between Bosnian-Muslims and Bosnian-Croats, and as the Croatian concentration camps reached their peak, the Marian messages did not mention the genocidal acts being committed by Mary's followers, Catholic Croats, let alone a call for Croats to stop such atrocities. This left more room for a violent hermeneutic to take hold that took Marian theology at Medjugorje as a legitimating force of atrocities carried out by Croats and as a rallying cry toward violence.

[44] The other means of restoring boundary integrity was the use of forced deportation and associated violence. As Srdjan Vrcan states, "The nationalist imperative is 'bound to involve population exchanges or expulsions, more or less forcible assimilation, and sometimes liquidation, in order to attain that close relation between state and culture which is the essence of nationalism'" (116). If ethnic and religious diversity, and the cultural sharing this could provide, could not be resolved through assimilation, then nationalism demanded that non-Croats be purged from the boundaries of the nation. What could not be converted would be removed or eliminated. A Croat soldier visiting Medjugorje during the war articulated this reasoning, as well as the violent hermeneutic Croat nationalists used to interpret Marian theology and symbolism: "We have not done what the Virgin Mary asked . . . She asked for conversion (to Catholicism) so that peace would come. We haven't converted the non-believers and so we have war" (Cohen: 65-66). This meant the forced removal and even massacre of individuals or whole communities. Such acts would then begin to resolve the original violation and would, according to this logic, affirm the integrity of the borders through bloodshed and absence (Campbell: 34).

[45] These removals and massacres were referred to as ethnic cleansing, a term coined during the war, and involved the removal of not just individuals but all institutional and cultural traces of their history in an area. As stated before, both Croatia and Herceg-Bosna deported thousands of Muslims in Croatia, destroyed mosques and cultural markers, and even cleared out all Muslims serving in the Croatian armed forces and paramilitary forces. Medjugorje and the surrounding areas were also the scenes of forced removal and cleansing. Before the Bosnian War began, citizens of Medjugorje, independent of the HVO, waged a successful campaign, which Mart Bax called the "small war," to eliminate families of Serb ancestry from the town (Bax 2000: 331). This included the destruction of purportedly Serb graves in an

effort to erase any trace of the families' existence in Medjugorje. During the war, ethnic cleansing carried out by the HVO in the surrounding area were planned and carried out from Medjugorje, the HVO's garrison base in the region (Vulliamy: 260). The HVO also warned that anyone found harboring Muslims in Medjugorje would have their homes destroyed (Sells: 107). In the end, Croat nationalists forcibly removed or killed tens of thousands of Muslims during the ethnic cleansing process throughout this region and eliminated much of the evidence that their Muslim and Serb neighbors had ever existed.

[46] Although the Bosnian War is often referred to as genocide, the warring parties often, though certainly not always, forced residents out of their homes and communities without killing them outright. The goal was not so much to annihilate Muslims as it was to remove the Muslim presence and any evidence of their having existed in Croat space at all. Indeed, why deport Muslim men through official channels if the end goal was extermination? The object, instead, was to purge certain areas claimed by Croat nationalists of offending and threatening diversity, both individuals and their historical traces. Massacres and murder were employed mostly tactically and as a means to a further end.

[47] This by no means infers that violence was not employed. Forced deportation by definition includes the use of violent means, such as massacre, rape, psychological and physical torture, bodily mutilation, and individual murder. On the macro-plane of wartime strategy, however, Croat soldiers and militia members committed these acts as a means to sever their victims's connections with their communities and homes (Allen). That is why "cleanse," a term so often used in ethnic conflict as a way of escaping culpability by minimizing the crime, is somewhat appropriate here, as the aim was not elimination of individuals but the purgation of cultural space. The war's goal was to transform the social and cultural fabric of the region by ripping it apart, which I argue is the very definition of ethnic cleansing (Markle and McCrea: 206). The connections and ways of life in a society or community that have carried on for centuries – not unchanging but constantly renegotiated – cannot be undone quickly without great violence. It takes mutilation, killing, and rape to even attempt to destroy such fundamental connections and relations. Ethnic cleansing is not primarily an act meant to annihilate individual human beings as it is an annihilation of relationships and culture. Many individuals would survive, but their communities were left in tatters, and few would ever want to return, thus fulfilling the nationalist vision.<sup>10</sup>

[48] The goal of this purgation was to restore perceived sacred, cosmic, and so – in ethno-nationalist eyes – natural equilibrium. In this way it also takes on religious tones, as Croat nationalists were not just cleansing but purifying a sacred area made profane by diversity. They wanted Croat culture and religion, defined by nationalist ideology, to have a dominant and even monopolizing position within certain borders, and they, of course, decided on those boundaries. The restoration of cosmic balance and order was synonymous to the restoration and homogenization of Croat culture:

---

<sup>10</sup> It may, indeed, be that nationalists in the region, left to their own devices, would have continued beyond their claimed boundaries and started a conquest to spread their culture and religion to other peoples. History certainly abounds in such examples. The wars fought in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, however, were brought to a close by institutions of the international community.

With this war God also returned to his people, in its heart and home . . . returned to the entire mass media, political, social, and state life of Croatia, from where he was driven out forty-five years earlier. The Cross stands next to the Croatian flag . . . this was truly again a real war for the “honored cross and golden liberty,” for the return of Christ and liberty to Croatia (Mojzes 1995: 130).

[49] This worldview sees peace as a world of ethnically and religiously homogeneous polities, and in the case of Croatia, an integral polity filled only with Croats, an identity defined largely through Catholic imagery and Marian symbolism. This idea had roots going back at least two hundred years to the beginnings of Croat nationalism. As Ivo Banac relates:

The romantic nationalism of the early nineteenth century . . . viewed the world of nations as a beautiful garden. Like the flowers planted by the Creator, each nation-person had its characteristics. But the fragrance of a rose could not – and therefore ought not – be artificially bred into the autumnal chrysanthemum. Each nation-flower had its separate place in the divine plan (27-28).

Any violation of these borders disturbed a peace guaranteed by the highest conceivable authority – God and his Mother – and so action, even violent action, taken to restore this peace was divinely mandated. Such methods left little room for compromise and scant space for innocence.

### Conclusions

[50] Upon closer inspection of the constituents of Mary’s peace, we have been able to analyze the dynamic behind the apparent ambivalence of Marian symbolism at Medjugorje. The Marian peace preached by certain Croat nationalists and religious extremists was an exclusivist one and demanded the elimination or assimilation of other cultures and religions within Croat-claimed borders. Since most individuals would not convert and assimilate to this ideal of what it was to be Croat, and since the borders of Croat culture were sanctified by the highest power, violent means of expulsion, mutilation, and murder were considered appropriate and *necessary*, according to this logic, to restore equilibrium and inaugurate Mary’s peace. Such an ideology is also an ethno-nationalist *theology*, where political, cultural, and ethnic borders are sanctified and take on religious significance, and where to be Croat was to be holy. In this way ethnic cleansing during the war took on religious tones, as extremists were not just cleansing but purifying a sacred area made profane by diversity. This touches on sacred ambivalence in its original sense.

[51] It would be simple to categorize this ambivalence as just another manifestation of the contradiction prevalent in dominant symbols throughout the world. One can see from this study, however, that there were observable mechanisms that comprised this ambivalence and that were manipulated by human hands. In this vision of Marian symbolism, violence and peace were not just associated; they were in a relationship where peace required violence and violence ended in peace. Marian symbolism acted as a point of communication between apparently contradictory notions, where these notions affected each other, revealing a dynamic in that dominant symbol (see Turner and Turner: 245-46). In a way, we could say

that Marian symbolism was not just ambivalent but plural, not only containing the potential for diverse interpretations but having those interpretations affect each other within the rich, generative context of a symbolic system.

[52] Mary's peace represents many different things to many different people. The simplicity of her messages, which are praised by theologian and pilgrim alike for their accessibility, also provide room for radical, even violent, interpretations and the legitimation of violent acts. One example is the ethno-nationalist theology presented in this paper, which interprets peace as exclusivist equilibrium. Peoples were segregated in the name of this equilibrium, and their communities ripped and torn asunder. Peace becomes the reification of ideal and idealized borders, where racist and exclusive boundaries are reaffirmed.

[53] This sketch of a Croat ethno-nationalist ideal of Mary during the Bosnian War was surely not the only one, and cannot be ascribed to all Croat nationalists, let alone every Croat. I have described the basic outline of a hermeneutic, which seems to have been active during the conflict and which places Mary at the center of Croat identity. This essay is an attempt to better understand such a hermeneutic, and hopefully, to understand why the symbolism and cultus of a sacred figure could mobilize both joy and violence at the same time. That such ideologies were held by Muslim or Serb nationalists is also possible, though not within the scope of this essay. Radovan Karadzic, Bosnian-Serb president of the breakaway Republika Srpska, believed that Muslims were merely Serbs who had converted to Islam and that conflict would be mitigated if they returned to their religious roots: "Therefore I think that the Serb people will recuperate entirely and wholly only when the majority or all of them . . . including Serbs who are of the Islamic religion, experience healing of their soul and enter into the wholeness of their being" (Mojzes 1998b: 88).

[54] In the end, such idealized equilibriums are not stable, and it would seem that the old adage that violence begets further violence holds in nationalist hermeneutics of violence. In Bax's research of the "small war," he noted that the main target of local Croat attacks, the Ostojici family, were, in fact, a Catholic family but with distant Serbian Orthodox roots. They had, apparently, converted generations ago from Orthodox to Catholic Christianity. Under the pressure of war and economic crisis, however, other Croats began to identify Catholic families with perceived Serbian roots as wolves in sheep's clothing and so targeted them as originators of the crisis. This is reminiscent of *conversos* persecuted during Medieval Spain's *Reconquista* – that is, descendants of those who had converted from Islam and Judaism to Roman Catholicism, and whose religious, and so national, fidelity was at times held to be suspect due to their family's past. Communities have deep memories but also selective ones, and they can have a deep need for scapegoats during crises, so much so that conversion as a means to peace can be, ultimately, only the foundation of more violence to come. It seems likely, then, that violence and violent expurgation are the ultimate direction to which such violent hermeneutics point.

## Bibliography

Allen, Beverly

1996      *Rape Warfare: The Hidden Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia*.  
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Appleby, R. Scott

- 2000 *Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Banac, Ivo

- 1984 *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, and Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Bax, Mart

- 1995 *Medjugorje: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Rural Bosnia*. Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij.
- 2000 "Planned Policy or Primitive Balkanism? A Local Contribution to the Ethnography of the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina." *Ethnos*. 65, 3: 317-40.

Campbell, David

- 1999 "Violence, Justice, and Identity in the Bosnian Conflict." Pp. 2-38 in *Sovereignty and Subjectivity*. Edited by J Edkins, N. Persram and V. Pin-Fat. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

Cheston, Sharon E., editor

- 1994 *Mary the Mother of All: Protestant Perspectives and Experiences of Medjugorje*. Chicago: Loyol University.

Cohen, Leonard J.

- 1998 "Bosnia's 'Tribal Gods': The Role of Religion in Nationalist Politics." Pp. 43-73 in *Religion and the War in Bosnia*. Edited by P Mojzes. Atlanta: Scholar's.

Denitch, Bogdan

- 1996 *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.

Douglas, Mary

- 2000 *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Routledge.

Gaspari, Antonio

- 2002 "Deception or Miracle?" *Bosnia Daily*. 275.

Girard, René

- 1977 *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Herrero, Juan A.

- 1999 "Medjugorje: Ecclesiastical Conflict, Theological Controversy, Ethnic Division." *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*. Edited by J. M. Greer and D. O. Moberg. 10: 137-71.

Lifton, Robert Jay

- 1996 *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life*. Washington: American Psychiatric Press.

Markle, Gerald E., and Frances B. McCrea

- 1994 "Medjugorje and the Crisis of Yugoslavia." *Politics and Religion in Central and Eastern Europe: Traditions and Transitions*. Edited by William H. Swatos, Jr. London: Praeger.

Mojzes, Paul

- 1995 *Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans*. New York: Continuum.
- 1998a "The Camouflaged Role of Religion in the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina." Pp. 74-98 in *Religion and the War in Bosnia*. Edited by P Mojzes. Atlanta: Scholar's.
- 1998b "The Grievances of Bosnian Religious Groups." *Church and Society*. 88: 69-73.

Perry, Nicholas, and Loreto Echeverria

- 1998 *Under the Heel of Mary*. New York: Routledge.

Perica, Vjekoslav

- 2002 *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ramet, Sabrina Petra

- 1992 *Balkan Babel: Politics, Culture, and Religion in Yugoslavia*. San Francisco: Westview.
- 1995 *Social Currents in Eastern Europe: The Sources and Consequences of the Great Transformation*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Rieff, David

- 1995 *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Sells, Michael A.

- 1998 *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Silber, Laura, and Allan Little

- 1996 *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*. New York: TV Books.

Smith, Jonathan Z.

1987 *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Turner, Victor, and Edith L. B. Turner

1978 *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Velikonja, Mitja

1998 "Liberation Mythology: The Role of Mythology in Fanning War in the Balkans." Pp. 20-42 in *Religion and the War in Bosnia*. Edited by P Mojzes. Atlanta: Scholar's.

Vrcan, Srdjan

1998 "The Religious Factor and the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina." Pp. 108-131 in *Religion and the War in Bosnia*. Edited by P Mojzes. Atlanta: Scholar's.

Vulliamy, Ed

1994 *Seasons in Hell: Understanding Bosnia's War*. New York: Simon and Schuster.