

Ethnic Cleansing as Religious Practice: Religion, Ethnicity, and Political Conflict in Bosnia During the War,
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Abstract

My essay will provide an example, using the now classic case of the Bosnian War, of how religious practice, particularly Christian practice, can adversely affect a political crisis, as well as open up opportunities for how religion can work to ease political conflict. Specifically, I examine four ways that ethnic cleansing was a religious practice during the Bosnian War (1992-1995). Through this examination, I show there was a moral logic and divine command ethic at work, where understandings of conversion—that is, the Christian practice of evangelism—were related conceptually and practically to ethnic cleansing, so that cleansing was at times a corollary practice of evangelism in that specific context. This can help us better understand the central, motivating role that religious imaginaries and practices had in the war. Even though scholars have conducted important and extensive analyses of the role of religion and genocide in Bosnia, we have yet to explicitly frame the conflict in this way.

One of the most devastating ways that religious practice and political contestation have intersected in the last quarter century has been through religio-ethnic conflict, particularly ethnic cleansing and genocide. The now tragically classic case for this is the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1992-1995, where more than 200,000 people were killed and more than a million dispersed by the political collapse and reconfiguration of the former Yugoslavia. Several scholars have already analyzed the role of religion, particularly Christianity, during that political conflict.¹ Yet even now, 20 years after the start of that war, we are still trying to understand the complex ways in which religious practice and discourse can negatively affect or be affected by political crises. The need for such understanding, of course, has only endured, as we continue to try and come to terms with the impact that the domains we call “religion” and “the political” have on each other. Given the present need, it remains important to reflect back and see what we can continue to learn from cases where religion had, overall, an adverse and deadly effect on political crisis, and where political crisis helped stoke religious practice and imagination toward violence.

To do this, I will examine four ways that ethnic cleansing was a religious practice during the Bosnian War. In particular, I will show how understandings of conversion—that is, the Christian practice of evangelism—intersected with cleansing practices. Although much has been written on this topic, the link between conversion narratives and ethnic cleansing has yet to be highlighted. Looking at ethnic cleansing as Christian practice is an admittedly analogical method, and so partakes of the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach. Nevertheless, this investigation will be helpful in a number of ways.

First, it will help us better understand how a key Christian practice and narrative—evangelism—could be coupled with another practice, ethnic cleansing, in the minds of some perpetrators. Second, this will better help us understand the ways that religiously motivated action affected a key political crisis at the turn of the millennium. It can also help deepen our analyses of religion, politics, and conflict by stressing not just theological doctrine and ethical principles but also ritual, practice, and ethics in action, and so demonstrate how theological imaginaries are enacted in public and how political action affects theology. Third, it will help broaden our understanding of “religious practice” itself to include practices that engage or help inform violent imaginaries in a tradition. This is important, as religious practice is a key frame for the study of religion, as it helps balance cultural biases that can stress the importance of belief and inner experience at the expense of outward and material religious forms.² Finally, it will also help us further appreciate the active moral logics that made certain religious practices fluid enough to be used in the service of atrocity and to help promote violent answers to complex political problems.

Terminology

Before continuing, we need to understand the terms that make up our analogy: ethnic cleansing as religious practice. This will help clarify our current project, and as any analogy is inherently comparative, it will help us better understand what exactly it is we are comparing.

Religious. When we speak of “religion’s” involvement in ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, we are really referring to two specific traditions: Roman Catholicism and Serb Orthodoxy, specifically, their hierarchies and practices as found in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia during the later half of the twentieth century, specifically during the 1990s. We must be careful, then, not to generalize any claims made here to a generic category of “religion,” as this can unwittingly support ideologies that pit a rational and Enlightened “secular” against a violent and regressive “religious.”³ Any mention of “religion” and “religious,” then, will refer to Catholicism and Orthodoxy as it was in Bosnia during the war. Furthermore, we will look at Serb Orthodox and Catholic imaginaries and practices of conversion toward Bosnian Muslims or Bosnians who were not avowedly Christian. Looking at possible conversion theologies and practices directed at other Christians is important, but we do not have the space here for such an additional complex inquiry.

Practice. Practice is action involving both symbolic and material resources, including but not limited to prayer, liturgy, devotion, pilgrimage, proselytization, contemplation, etc. Practice is differentiated from, yet intertwined with, discourse—that is, religious speech, theology (as dogmatics and not as the practice of creating theology), revelatory and scriptural content, and viewing theology or religion as a text to be interpreted. The use of practice focuses particularly on “embodied material action,” focusing our attention on how bodies are moved and are placed, as well as the central place of movement, location, and material objects to a specific religion.⁴

Ethnic Cleansing.⁵

Scholars have proposed different definitions for ethnic cleansing and genocide. Some argue that it can be helpful in creating a better typology for ethnic mass violence, and so be a conceptual aid to terms such as genocide. Those interested in justice and human rights issues, however, particularly when it comes to prosecution, often argue that by using ethnic cleansing, a legally imprecise term, we lessen the moral and legal power behind the term “genocide,” which is enshrined in international law.⁶

Understanding the importance of the term genocide, I opt to use the term “ethnic cleansing” for what it may tell us about the motives and worldview of the perpetrators.⁷ Whereas genocide is a term of the advocates, created by Raphael Lemkin to give a name for a crime he wanted punishable under international law, ethnic cleansing is a perpetrator’s term.⁸ This self-purported “cleansing” harkens to notions of purification and ritual cleansing, sumptuary laws, and religious bodily prohibitions in a way that genocide does not. It seems to embody, then, a theological ethic and worldview held by certain perpetrators and nationalists and which helped condition the war’s atrocities. As morally problematic as it is to use a perpetrator’s term, using ethnic cleansing may still be appropriate in that it may help foreground and reveal the operative theo-ethical assumptions and logics of at least some of those involved in the cleansing.

Religious Practice and the War in Bosnia

Before discussing the connection between evangelism and ethnic cleansing, we will look at three other sets of Catholic and Orthodox religious practices that helped create the material and symbolic conditions that enabled ethnic cleansing to take place. First, religion sacralized and ritually demarcated the geographies that were to be cleansed. As religious scholar Michael Sells notes, the relics—literally, the body—of Prince Lazar, who was a singularly important religious figure in the creation of Serb nationalism, were translated throughout Kosovo on the 600th anniversary of Lazar’s defeat at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. This ritual circumambulation of important Serb Orthodox relics through Kosovo, a highly contested territory, demonstrated it to be a land where the holiest Serb martyrs lived and died, a land integral to the modern identity of the Serbs as a people.⁹

Such practices, then, infused Kosovo’s landscape and its borders with great religious and national meaning. They also raised the stakes in the contest over Kosovo considerably, creating space wherein the perceived violation of the sacredness of that space and its borders would be interpreted in religious, perhaps even cosmic, terms. In this way, Kosovo invoked tropes of purity, violation, sacrifice, and divine retribution. This geography was so charged that the question over its future and whether it would remain a part of Serbia became a flashpoint that helped trigger the wars in Yugoslavia during the 1990s, including the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Throughout the crisis, Kosovo remained a potent symbolic issue for many Serb fighters and leaders, right up until the final battles of the Yugoslav conflict, which were fought,

not surprisingly, over the control of Kosovo in a post-Yugoslav era. This makes Kosovo and its sacralized boundaries the tragic bookends of the Yugoslav conflict.

Second, Christian practices sacralized one group at the expense of other, outside groups, which were demonized. Such practices accomplished this not only by demarcating the geographies to be cleansed; it marked and separated those bodies that were to be cleansed and those that were not. One example is the special sanctification of the Croats as a Catholic people through a Marian pilgrimage site in Hercegovina. In Medjugorje, where the Virgin Mary has purportedly been appearing for over thirty years to six local villagers, Mary's coming at the end of Marshall Broz Tito's rule over Yugoslavia signaled to some Croat nationalists that divine favor had been bestowed on the Croat nation. To some, her coming was a sign that past national sins—such as Croat acts of genocide during World War II—had been forgiven.¹⁰ In this context, the Virgin was, in fact, the Queen of Croatia and that nation's protector and advocate.¹¹ Eventually, Medjugorje was included in the breakaway statelet of Herceg-Bosna, which not only adopted Medjugorje as its unofficial, spiritual capital; the borders of Herceg-Bosna itself coincided with the boundaries of the century's old Franciscan province in Hercegovina.¹² This marked off Croats—defined specifically as Catholic during the war—as a sacred people, and so, more valued than non-Croats, who could now be targets of cleansing.¹³

As Medjugorje will be a new name to many readers, and since it is an example I will return to throughout this essay, it is important to pause and give some brief background information before proceeding. Medjugorje is a town in Hercegovina, the southern tail of Bosnia, not far from the border of Dalmatian Croatia. It is a hot, dry, rocky region, good for growing wine. Hercegovina had, for centuries, been a beachhead in the Vatican's struggle to spread Catholicism in Ottoman lands. This history resulted in a strong, Catholic presence in the region, one substantially tied to the Franciscan religious order, which for centuries was a key part of the Catholic evangelism of Hercegovina and Bosnia more generally. For most of the past century, Medjugorje had been a small village with a sizable Franciscan church, St. James, at the center of town. This changed, however, with the collapse of Yugoslavia and the end of the Cold War. Shortly after Marshall Tito died in 1980, the Virgin Mary, coming as the Queen of Peace, purportedly appeared to six young villagers on a hillside overlooking the town and the church. Very quickly, news of the visions spread, and Medjugorje became a local, then very soon, a global pilgrimage site, the millions of pilgrims and visitors it received transforming its local economy.

Thirty years later, with the child-seers grown and the visions still occurring, Medjugorje now represents the longest appearance of the Virgin in history. The pilgrimage center has grown so large that the number of annual pilgrims exceeds that of Fatima and rivals Lourdes. Thousands testify to spontaneous healings and visions. The center's influence is global, and Medjugorje groups have popped up in the United States and across the world. It has grown into an influential center of theology and practice for millions of Christians, and up until the war, both Orthodox and Muslim Yugoslavs came to Medjugorje to pray.¹⁴ Medjugorje also was a point of pride for Croat Catholics, as the Virgin Mary chose a town with a majority of Croats in which

to appear, out of all the world. Medjugorje's influence on theology, Roman Catholic practice and imagination, as well as regional politics, then, has been substantial

The timeline of Medjugorje's growth, however, intersects with that of the Bosnia War, as well as the other wars that led to Yugoslavia's dissolution. As we will see in this paper, this means Medjugorje had an ambivalent, though important role during the war. The Medjugorje movement¹⁵ and the visions of the Virgin Mary helped contribute to the formation of wealth that was used during the war, was a lightning rod for inter-Christian tensions, and became a symbol for religious-nationalism in the region. Yet, it also remained a place where people from around the world came for healing, hope and inspiration, creating a religious center whose meaning and legacy is much contested. In this way, such ambivalence makes Medjugorje a rich, although contested, focus for our discussion of religious practice, dialogue and politics.¹⁶

Returning to our list of religious practices that created to conditions for ethnic cleansing, the third is that religious practice and theology empowered those who did the cleansing with both spiritual and material resources. These included, first of all, the mobilization of the spiritual community and its religious resources. Soldiers were blessed and prayed for, before and during deployment, and liturgies and prayers were said. In addition to spiritual support, religious organizations provided material resources to military and paramilitary groups involved in cleansing. For example, Medjugorje Appeal, based out of Britain, raised approximately 20 million British pounds on behalf of a local orphanage in Medjugorje. This funding, however, went instead to the HVO, the main Croat paramilitary force in Bosnia, which carried out cleansing engagements in Bosnia and Herceg-Bosna. Medjugorje Appeal had direct connections to the pilgrimage site, beyond the orphanage, including two Franciscans who had been central to promoting the importance of the shrine globally, as well as Ivan Dragicevic, the eldest male among the seers at the heart of the Medjugorje movement.¹⁷

This overview of three key ways that Christian practice, both Catholic and Orthodox, aided ethnic cleansing—sacralizing the geography to be cleansed, sacralizing and demonizing groups, and providing spiritual and material resources to those involved in cleansing—is admittedly brief. I resist a more detailed account, because such work has already been done. Those works can be found in the bibliography at the end of this article. Instead, I will take the remaining space offered here to frame the activities included under ethnic cleansing - which included rape, murder, torture, forced migration, psychological manipulation, theft, and other forms of coercion by one's neighbors as well as paramilitary forces - as a religious practice, which, for all of the research done into the role of religion and genocide in Bosnia, has not yet been explicitly framed in this way.

Ethnic Cleansing as Religious Practice

To help show that ethnic cleansing was a religious practice to at least some perpetrators during the war, we will consider two relevant quotes. One is from a soldier and one from a political leader—one Croat and Catholic, one Bosnian-Serb and Orthodox, respectively. They

come from enemy political communities and from opposite ends of the political hierarchy of war, yet they still share a common, theologically and racially informed worldview. They hold in common an understanding of ethnic cleansing as a religious practice and as a means to key theological and political ends. I analyze only two quotes, and so, my explication here should not be taken as statistically relevant of broader trends. I present them, instead, as illustrative of certain religious, ethical logics operative during the war, even if everyone did not hold them at all times.

The first quote is from the Croat soldier (possibly a paramilitary HVO member) visiting the Medjugorje shrine:¹⁸

‘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.’¹⁹

This is a standard, conditional “if not, then” statement. That is, a request was made, and since that request could not be met, a further action was necessitated as a consequence. It sets up a rationale for the violence, and what makes the quote interesting are the stakes and persons involved in this rationale. The request, the “ask,” came from the Virgin Mary herself, but not to a universalized Mary. The ask came from the Croatian Mary, who appeared on Croat soil as a national patron and protector.²⁰ This particularity makes this specific request to a Croat soldier of greater weight, as if a divine request were not weighty enough.

Further, the content of the ask, the “what,” is conversion to Roman Catholicism. Conversion was a common motif of the seer’s reports at Medjugorje. Conversion can be directed inwardly toward the community of faith and understood as a call to return to the correct behavior and belief one promised through specific sacraments, including baptism, confirmation, and communion—sacraments that also mark one as belonging to the Catholic faith community.²¹ Here, however, conversion is a command directed outwardly at the non-faithful to reorient their lives, dispositions, and activities toward the Catholic tradition. This is conversion not understood as renewal of the already sacramentally confirmed but of conversion understood as evangelism, of those outside of the faith and its sacramental markers.

The Virgin’s message, as understood by the soldier, also provides an authoritative explanation for why Croat Catholics do not have peace. It is authoritative because the messages are nearly synonymous with divine revelation, and because the Virgin is referred to in Medjugorje as the “Queen of Peace.” Conversion was required “so that peace would come,” and yet the requisite change of heart by non-Catholics did not occur. The cause of the war, according to the soldier’s understanding, is rooted, then, in a failure to convert and a failure to accept conversion. And those non-Catholics who refused to convert not only frustrated certain Croat individuals; they also frustrated the Virgin, a beloved symbol and intercessor. This raised the stakes of conversion as well as the perceived offense at refusing conversion considerably.

At this point it is important to note that in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war, conversion would entail more than a change in religious belief. During the war, ethnicity and

religion were largely fused so that to become Catholic would be, quite practically, to become Croat, as well.²² The requested conversions, then, were not only religious but ethnic; they were political, representing a shift in identity and socio-political location and affiliation for the convert. In other words, the non-Catholics in question were also non-Croats and were being asked to change both faith and ethnic affiliation to create a religiously and ethnically homogeneous political community. One can argue that religion is always or largely political, but in this case, we can see a direct tie between ethnic and religious identity where religious conversion would have a direct effect on the political landscape of the former Yugoslavia. This raises the stakes yet again concerning the impact of the Virgin's message, or at least how it was perceived, making not just religious but ethnic diversity problematic theologically.

The consequences for such diversity become evident in the final line of the soldier's quote, which concludes the logic undergirding his statement. In the last line, there is an undercurrent of failure, yet the burden of failure, as is the direction of the ask, is directed outward against those same non-believers. The non-faithful have thwarted the Virgin's request. They are the target of the command, and they carry the burden of whether the command was successful or not. They also have to bear the consequences. And here we come to the end of the formula. Since conversion did not occur, there must be war, and in the context of the Bosnian War, this included rape, torture, genocide, and forced deportation.²³

This, of course, is not the only possible ethical formula in the Catholic imaginary. One could imagine an alternate scenario in which the soldier said, "The Virgin has asked for conversion, and since we have failed, we return to her and ask forgiveness." The consequences could have been turned inward instead of outward, focusing on the change that needed to occur among Catholics. Those faithful had available a rich tradition that includes practices of contrition, and by performing them, could have placed responsibility on themselves. But the logic of the soldier's statement is informed, instead, by an outward trajectory, projecting guilt and meaning on others, a hermeneutic that forbids our imagined alternative from the start.

This quote, then, embodies an ethic understood as a straightforward divine command. The divine has issued a command, and if it is not met, there are consequences. In the case of Croat ethno-nationalism, however, the command is more intimate than usual. It is not exegeted from a text but is understood to be given directly from a divine presence – the Virgin, who appears within the national, cultural space of Croatia. Or, at the very least, this is how the soldier viewed the message. It is a message understood to come from a divine authority existing among the Croat people during a major political crisis, and in this case, taken in and interpreted by a common soldier responding to that crisis on the ground. This gives the command not only a greater sense of urgency but also an immanence and intimacy that adds to the commands compelling, as well as national, character.²⁴

The second quote is from Radovan Karadzic, the first president of the Bosnian-Serb state of Republica Srpska. Karadzic was tried in the Hague, and in 2012, he was convicted of 10 war crimes counts, including one count of genocide that covered the massacred of nearly 10,000

men and boys in Srebrenica. In an interview given with a Serb Orthodox journal, Karadzic said:²⁵

‘It is clear that the path to salvation of Serbs of the Muslim faith is the return to Orthodoxy. I am saying this completely responsibly; I know that not everyone can do this and that it is not easy, but I know that it is the only way to overcome the dualism in their soul...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...’²⁶

The quote includes a problem statement, as did the soldier’s. There is something wrong with the “Serb people” that requires them to “recuperate.” Karadzic was trained as a doctor, so it should not surprise us to hear him diagnose the problem in terms of pathology.²⁷ The solution or cure is directed, once again, outwardly to non-believers, the “Serbs who are of the Islamic religion.” This refers to the racial, nationalist theory that Bosnian Muslims are not a separate ethnic group but Serbs who are descendants of those who converted to Islam during the Ottoman Empire. To Karadzic, Bosnian Muslims could never be true Muslims, because there is an integral connection between Serbianness, if you will, and Orthodoxy that will always run against attempts to be Muslim.²⁸ This is the “dualism of their soul” that he mentions. Karadzic describes what the Bosnian Muslims must do cryptically, using therapeutic terms (“healing”) yet augmented by religious language (“soul,” “wholeness of their being”). This is in line, however, with other quotes of Karadzic and other Serb intellectuals who saw Bosnian Muslims as wounded or inferior Serbs who must be restored or removed.²⁹

This quote also differs somewhat from that of the soldier’s. It is not directed toward a divine figure, such as the Virgin Mary. This, however, is not surprising, for as Michael Sells shows, the Virgin Mary was central figure to Croat religious, nationalist imaginary during the war but not to the Serbian imaginary. The Serb ethnonationalist narrative was oriented around a wrongful defeat of the original Serbian empire at the hands of the Ottomans. Instead of the centrality of the Virgin, Karadzic focuses on renewal and restoration, which is central for the Serb ethnonationalist imaginary, based as it is on a catastrophic loss of empire and sovereignty.³⁰

Even with this difference, however, Karadzic’s quote still reflects the moral logic embodied in the soldier’s quote previously, which sees religio-ethnic conversion as central to curing a social ill, which is also perceived as a spiritual ill. There remains an explicit call to change and conversion, which Karadzic also praises in other writings.³¹ Bosnian Muslims are singled out as those who need conversion, with the inference that to be Muslim is not to be whole. It is a call wrapped in conversion language, where the soul is healed, where an entire group is made whole, and where the person and world is rightly re-ordered, through a spiritually charged existential reorientation.

We could unpack more from both of these quotes, but our conversation thus far should suffice for us to understand the dynamic and ethic expressed by both Karadzic and the Croat

soldier. Both operate from an exclusivist, divine command theory of ethics oriented around a restrictive, transcendental nationalism. Even though Karadzic does not mention God or any religious figure, there is an expressly metaphysical, cosmological imperative for the Serb people—who, as we saw before, were sacralized by religious discourse and practice—to reorient themselves spiritually. And this command seems to necessitate two actions. The first action has a name: conversion, or more precisely, evangelism, which I define as the practice or set of practices of witnessing one’s faith before others and to nurture and encourage conversions in those others. This is a known and accepted practice in both Catholicism and Orthodoxy. The second action or practice, which is needed when evangelism fails, does not have a name in Christianity. The question then becomes, what is this practice that is necessitated when conversion fails and the divine command is thwarted?

Evangelism and Ethnic Cleansing

Conversion is not the end but the means—a means to a holy and homogeneous cultural and religious space. This possibility of failure requires a corollary to evangelism, a second, related practice that is explicit in the Croat’s quote and made explicit in Karadzic’s cleansing policies. Again, this second practice—the corollary—does not have a name in traditional theological categories. It only has a name that the perpetrators gave it: ethnic cleansing. If the non-acquiescence of non-believers thwarts the will of the Holy Virgin or thwarts the destiny of the sanctified Serb people, a second practice becomes necessary to cleanse the unconverted from the sacred geography that religion has already delineated. This second practice is made all the easier as the targeted groups have already been dehumanized and can be attacked with less moral risk to the perpetrators.³²

We can now articulate a more comprehensive range of religious practices associated with ethnic cleansing—four specifically—at work in the Bosnian War. There are practices used to delineate sacred space, which also becomes a geography to be cleansed. They include translation of relics, as well as other rituals and pilgrimages. Such translations and pilgrimages emphasize, and interpret, certain traumatic wrongs that have been done to the group, while de-emphasizing the historical wrongs that same group has committed against others. Such “chosen traumas” help justify the aggravating group’s status as special in the eyes of the divine.³³ Second, there are practices used to make a group sacred at the expense of other, dehumanized and demonized groups. They are not only demonized, but if we are to agree with Mark Juergensmeyer, they are, with the use of religious imagery, satanized, as well, and so, become an enemy on a cosmic level.³⁴ Such practices include pilgrimages, sermons and the collapse of religious symbols and imagery into state narratives and processes. Third, there are practices employed to support materially and spiritually those engaged in ethnic cleansing. These include economic and fundraising activities on behalf of religious causes (Medjugorje Appeal), as well as rituals, songs, devotions, prayers, wearing and carrying religious paraphernalia, and sacraments, all employed in support of combatants. Finally, there are conversion-cleansing practices, of evangelism and its potential corollary, cleansing. War, killing, deportation, torture, and rape are themselves,

then, religious practices with religiously defined and justified ends. They are committed to bring about divinely mandated changes in society and to secure holy spaces, bodies, culture, and history. Cleansing, we can now say, is a practice associated with religious expectations and justifications, religious material and resources, with theological goals.

Even so, it is important to stress that cleansing is not a corollary of evangelism in all places and times, nor even in most places and times. It is also important to note that ethnic cleansing also had other factors and causes associated with it, including revenge, economic factors, war profiteering, etc. This understanding of ethnic cleansing is also not a universal frame applicable to all other ethnic conflicts and genocides, such as that in Rwanda, which happened at the same time as that in Bosnia. And this analysis should not be taken to disparage the Christian practice of evangelism, which is varied and conditioned upon differed and changing social, political, historical, and economic factors. We can see, however, in the Bosnian case, the moral logic and structure that unites these two practices in a violent and morally and theologically problematic way.

Conclusion

By using the analogy of ethnic cleansing as religious practice, we can see a way that Christian theology, symbols, and practices were used to respond to a political crisis. This does not mean that every soldier or politician saw his or her work in terms of conversion, nor in terms of theology. Motivations during the war were diverse, multilayered, and dynamic. It also does not mean that every Christian in Bosnia participated in genocide, as there are many accounts of help being extended across confessional divisions. Ethnic cleansing as a religious duty—as a deontological, commanded practice—however, was operative during a political crisis experienced on local, national, and regional levels. And that crisis, of course, was the institutional collapse of the former Yugoslavia and the contestation over the future of its peoples, lands, resources, and institutions.

By calling it a practice, I intentionally imply that there is a possible continuity backward into prior cleansings, as well as into the future, where cleansing could repeat once more. Natalie Davis has already written on the rituals of violence during 16th-century France, cases that hint at violence as a social and religious practice across time, which later groups can draw from and participate in.³⁵ And Toal and Dahlman argue that ethnic cleansing is a term that originated as early as World War II during the Croat Ustasha genocide, a term that was reconfigured and redeployed in Bosnia during the 1990s, further demonstrating a continuity across time.³⁶

Nationalists and perpetrators also drew from other precedents and symbolic reservoirs in the Christian tradition. For example, Kosovo was viewed by many Serb ethnonationalists, as well as Serb Orthodox faithful, as the “Serb Jerusalem.” This metaphor goes farther than simply denoting that Kosovo was important spiritually. There was the belief that the Serbs were, like the Jews, God’s chosen people and were given a difficult history of persecution as a mark of their chosenness. Connecting Kosovo to Jerusalem links Kosovo to a history of persecution and

cleansing, but also to resources such as the Crusade model and the apocalyptic promise of return and the destruction of one's enemies. This is only one, but an important, example of ethnic cleansing as a practice that has continuity with previous violent religious practices and possibly as a resource and model for future, violent practice.³⁷

We can also begin to see how intimate and rational violence can be, or at least, how violence can be a part of theologically inspired logics. It can be bound up and expressed through important weekly and daily practices of devotion, purity and communality. This understanding directs us toward the need for religious actors with great agility, with both interpretive and ritual skill, to re-inform traditions in such a way that practices and discourses of purity and conversion, among others, do not lead, as the logic of the Croat soldier did, outward in the form of the destruction of others. Addressing such individuals is important since they can influence political and economic institutions during conflict.³⁸ This also creates a pedagogical imperative, a call for the fields of practical theology and religious practices to be attentive to acts of violence as theological practice so that they can better prepare such future religious leaders on the ways that one's tradition can abet political and ethnic violence.

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¹ Sells 1998; Perica 2002; Mojzes, et al 1998.

² Asad 1993; Tweed 2006; Vazquez 2011; Bounds 2012.

³ Cavanaugh 2009.

⁴ Lincoln 2006.

⁵ There are UN statements on ethnic cleansing, and they provide a good description for the activities implied when I use the term. For example, the UN General Assembly defined ethnic cleansing as “rendering an area wholly homogenous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups...by means of murder, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, extra-judicial executions, rape and sexual assault, confinement of civilians in ghetto areas, forcible removal, displacement and deportations of civilians, deliberate military attacks or threats of attacks on civilians and civilian areas, and wanton destruction of property.” See Power 2002.

⁶ Mann 2005; Ballinger 2009; Bell-Fialkoff 1996.

⁷ Exactly how the term came to be is not clear. Some argue that Serbian nationalists created it during the war (Power 2002, 249). Toal and Dahlman argue that it was created by Croat nationalists as a way to describe Serbian war aims. It may also have been a term used during the atrocities carried out by the pro-Nazi Ustasha regime in Croatia during World War II and reappropriated during the war in the 1990s (2011, 3).

⁸ Power 2002.

⁹ Sells 1998, 59.

¹⁰ Herrero 1999, 139.

¹¹ Perica 2002, 158.

¹² Ibid., 336.

¹³ Although widespread, religious and ethnic identities were not necessarily synonymous before the war. This changed as the fighting continued, creating an effective fusion of religious and ethnic identity that, if not universal, was a very powerful force. For more on the relationship between religious and ethnic identity in Yugoslavia and Bosnia, see Bringa 1995.

¹⁴ Sells 1998, 107.

¹⁵ Terms around Medjugorje can become confused, as Medjugorje refers to a town, a parish, a pilgrimage site, as well as a symbol both religious and political. We will use Juan Herrero’s term “Medjugorje movement” to refer to the tangible aspects of the this phenomenon (Herrero 1999, 139). For the purposes of this essay, then, “Medugorje 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 Medugorje cult. This is appropriate, as I appeal to Medjugorje not to study the visions or pilgrimage site in its own right but as an example that helps elucidate the connections between religious practice and ethnic cleansing.

¹⁶ For more information on Medjugorje and the Bosnia War, see Mart Bax’s important ethnography of Medjugorje, which he conducted both before and during the conflict (1995). Bax is especially helpful for his detailing of the mali rat, the ethnic cleansing and violent conflict that occurred within Medjugorje between the townspeople at the beginning of the larger war. Sells (1998) and Perica (2002) do fine work detailing the ways that Medjugorje contributed to the atrocities of the war, as well as its role in the ethnonationalist imaginaries operative during the war. I have also detailed and summarized findings on Medjugorje (2010), and others also deal with Medjugorje in chapter- or article-length pieces (Herrero 1999; Cohen 1998; Markle and McCrea 1994).

17 Perica 2002, 338-339; Herrero 1999, 162.

18 Cohen attributes this quote to a journalist reporting from Medjugorje during the war who published with the San Francisco Chronicle.

19 Cohen 1998, 65-6.

20 I take this distinction of universal and parochial understandings of Mary from Victor and Edith Turner in their study of Christian pilgrimage in Europe. Interestingly enough, Turner and Turner anticipated the dangers of a great symbol and personage, such as Mary, narrowed into a parochial setting. They wrote that “the danger is, of course, 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.” Such a move can create a more exclusivist hermeneutic where the power and protection of Mary, certainly a cosmic force, is limited to specific populations and persons and set up against others (Turner and Turner 1978: 171).

21 The following is an example of one of the Virgin’s messages that focused on conversion of the already faithful. It is a message given in July 1995, the same time as the Srebrenica massacre: July 25, 1995 "Dear children! Today I invite you to prayer because only in prayer can you understand my coming here. The Holy Spirit will enlighten you to understand that you must convert. Little children, I wish to make of you a most beautiful bouquet prepared for eternity but you do not accept the way of conversion, the way of salvation that I am offering you through these apparitions. Little children, pray, convert your hearts and come closer to me. May good overcome evil. I love you and bless you. Thank you for having responded to my call." To view the messages of the seers, go to www.medjugorje.org/olmpage.htm. Accessed July 15, 2012.

22 Bringa 1995, 10; Cohen 1998, 46.

23 Rieff 1995; Vulliamy 1994.

24 Of course, the statements of the Virgin are not given directly. They come to the seers and then, at least originally, were communicated to the faithful through the Franciscan priests at the Church of St. James, near where the apparitions began. The statements, then, even though they are from a divine source in real time, are still mediated. The quote is also an interpretation, not just of the Virgin’s sayings, the sermons and even the mood and discussions at or about Medjugorje. The soldier’s understanding is probably also influenced by discussions with family, friends, and even barracks discussions with fellow soldiers. This is important to remember, so that we maintain some room between the content of the Virgin’s messages and the hermeneutical and pastoral apparatuses of the pilgrimage center that grew up around it. In this way, we do not automatically take the interpretation as synonymous with the text. For the purposes of this paper, however, our interest is on the way that the soldier understood the Virgin’s presence and words and how this shows a connection between evangelism and ethnic cleansing. The general interpretation, then, is more relevant than an exegesis of the Virgin’s actual messages.

25 Mojzes quotes Karadzic only in part and does not provide the interview in full. The interview was entitled, “The Type of Leader We Need,” published in a “Montenegrin Serbian Orthodox” periodical, as Mojzes describes it, called *Svetigora*. It was republished in *Svet* with the title of, “Radovan Karadzic: What the Holy Ghost Whispers to Me,” on September 1, 1995, p. 8 (Cigar 2003, 324n38). In the same interview, Karadzic also said that this conversion, really a return in his mind, cannot be “coerced.” The results of his trial at the Hague, however, provide grounds for one to seriously doubt this sentiment.

26 Mojzes 1998, 88.

27 This could also reflect an aspect of Serbian ethnonationalism that insisted on the genetic and physiological inferiority of those who converted to Islam, as well as their descendants. Sells (1998) and the authors in Mojzes’s volume (1998) discuss this aspect of ethnonationalist ideology.

28 Cigar 2003, 324.

29 Cigar 2003; Sells 1998.

30 Sells 1998.

31 Karadzic, a published poet, has written a poem on the theme of conversion, a segment of which follows here: “Convert to my new faith crowd/ I offer you what no one has had before/ I offer you inclemency and wine/ The one who won't have bread will be fed by the light of my sun/ People nothing is forbidden in my faith/ There is loving and drinking/ And looking at the Sun for as long as you want/ And this godhead forbids you nothing/ Oh obey my call brethren people crowd.” The full poem can be found on:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/karadzic/radovan/poems.html>, accessed 4/22/11.

32 Staub 1989.

33 Volkan 1991.

34 Juergensmeyer 2000.

35 Davis 1973.

36 Toal and Dahlman 2011, 3. By “continuity” I do not imply an essentialism to practice, no do I mean practices that are the same across time, but instead, a legacy of violent practices and logics on which future generations can draw, even if they do so without being fully conscious of this appropriation.

37 Perica 2002, 8; Zivkovic 2011, 200.

38 Johnston and Sampson 1994; Gopin 2000.