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ISLAM: A NEW RELIGION IN A TRADITIONALLY CATHOLIC SLOVENIA

by **Drago Ocvirk**

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An Entirely New Situation

Slovenia is a new state in postcommunist Europe. Before Yugoslavia broke apart Slovenia was a part of it. Slovenia had been economically the most developed and the richest republic of all six Yugoslav republics. Because of this there were always a large number immigrant workers from the southern parts of Yugoslavia. This economic emigration was not stable because the workers used to return to their own native republic when they had saved enough money to create a satisfying situation in their native republic.

Although these people came from different parts of the former Yugoslavia--they were Croats, Serbs, Macedonians, Muslims (from Bosnia-Herzegovina recognized as national entity regardless religion) and Albanians--all these people speak the same language i.e. Serb-Croat except for the Albanians from Kosovo, who speak Albanian. From this point of view they lived and worked in the society that speaks another language, namely Slovene. Culturally and historically Slovenia was for them a strange country. For this reason mainly, they wanted to return as soon as possible to their own countries.

There was an other important difference related to very different religious background (Croats are Catholics, Serbs and Macedonians Orthodox, Muslims from Bosnia and Albanians from Kosovo are Muslims). It is true that most have not practiced their religion, which functioned mostly as one of important elements of cultural and national identity. Since, with the exception of the Albanians, these people regarded their religious denomination as the most important characteristic of differentiation from each other, without really knowing much about their religion or practicing it. The atheistic Communist regime vigorously encouraged the loss of their religious belief and practice.

The Muslim Community

Nevertheless, the Muslim community was registered with the Slovene state in former Yugoslavia for the first time of 1967. Prior to that they obtained their first house of prayer on 1981; they had been meeting in the lobby of Catholic Theological School in Ljubljana. Until the end of the former Yugoslavia the Muslims did not intend to stay in Slovenia, so they were dependent upon their Islamic authorities in Sarajevo (Bosnia). Only after Yugoslavia's breakdown and the war in Bosnia have they formed their province in Slovenia under authority of the *mufti*.

This community in Slovenia is subdivided in thirteen smaller communities with seven houses for prayer, meeting, and administration. What is important to underline is the fact that this Muslim community comprises only the Bosnian's Muslims who speak Serbo-Croat whereas Albanian Muslims from Kosovo do not participate in it.

In Slovenia there are about 120,000 Muslims (regarded as nationality rather than religion) from Bosnia. Only 30,000 of them are Slovenian citizens and will remain in Slovenia. Others are refugees who want to return in Bosnia once the war ends. Only 5,000 to 6,000 of these Muslims also practice Islam as religion. The others are entirely indifferent to Islam. They regard it only as an historical and cultural remnant.

The organized Muslim community is for the moment very unstable because its members do not know what their future will be. Most of them would like to return to their native country, i.e. Bosnia-Herzegovina, as soon as possible. In this provisional situation the authorities of Islamic community have for the time being three priorities.

First, they want to gather a larger number of people who feel either nationally or religiously or both as Muslims. Thereby, they try to organize a greater sense of solidarity not only among themselves in Slovenia but also with their compatriots and coreligionists in war-torn Bosnia.

Secondly, they try to preserve their national sentiments and characteristics. For this reason they would like to conserve their own Serbo-croat language in the Slovene-speaking society. This will be rather difficult because the younger generation of Muslims are gradually being assimilated.

The third purpose of Muslim religious authorities is to conserve their religious community and to attract their Muslim compatriots to their original religious faith. These efforts also meet many obstacles in the very secular and liberal Slovenian society.

The Possibility for Inter-Religious Dialogue

Until now there has not been any significant attempt to establish a dialogue between the Muslim and Catholic communities. Nevertheless, both have had to cope with a secularized

society where a large number of people are entirely indifferent to religious faith and belief. Muslims and Catholics could therefore offer together some common spiritual values and open new horizons of sensitivity and solidarity to their neighbors.

A common dialogue with (post)communist and (post)modern society also could preserve Islamic and Catholic communities from fundamentalist tendencies. In fact, one may already notice these tendencies among the faithful Muslims especially because of the Western incapacity to impose the respect of human rights in the Bosnian conflict. They believe that the West has abandoned them and tolerates ethnic cleansing carried out by Serb extremists.

Likewise, an Islamic-Catholic dialogue in Slovenia may permit the participants to discover respect for spiritual treasures and build a peaceful, democratic and pluralistic society in Slovenia.