

Religious ethnicity; a recipe for confused perplexity.

Here is a look at a few of the symptoms of a seeming malady that inflicts humanity.

I found this on a <http://wordpress.com> post

The author is Alida Liberman. I do not know where she is from nor does it matter. The important thing to realize is, she is a World Citizen!

Last Wednesday I attended the symposium about *Bosnia: Reflections on Religion, Nation, and State*. I was a panelist for the discussion called *Bosnia: Children of War, Children of Peace* about volunteer trips I've been on to Bosnia, and in the course of my panel and the panel previous an issue came up that I thought very interesting and very relevant to our community.

During the Bosnian war, people were broadly characterized into one of three ethnic groups: Serb, Croat, and Muslim (the latter of which are now referred to as Bosniak). The primary distinction between these groups was and is religion: Serbs are Eastern Orthodox Christians, Croats are Roman Catholic Christians, and Bosniaks are Muslim. During the war, the Western media characterized the conflict as a religious struggle between separate and distinct groups of Muslims and Christians. The reality was much more complex, especially in urban areas such as Sarajevo that had a very high rate of intermarriage among the different groups.

During the war, people in the region felt pressured to fit into one of these three ethnic/religious categories. For example, one speaker was a woman named Natasa who was a high schooler in Croatia when the war broke out. Her father is Serb and her mother Croat, and she was given a hard time at school because of it. She said that even the people who were 100% Croat felt pressured to show that they were "really" Croat . . . wear a crucifix or other identifying religious jewelry, hang a flag outside, etc. . . it wasn't enough to simply be from Croatia, you had to show that you really were a "true" Croatian.

Most problematic, though, is the role that religion came to play in identity formation. Religion became intimately tied to nationality in a way that just was not true. Natasa, for example, was raised by atheist parents and had never been to a church, yet being identified as half-Croat/half-Serb meant she was identified as a Christian. Many people in Bosnia were atheist or agnostic, or casual, largely secular or cultural adherents of their respective religions (particularly because the country was under Communist rule that repressed religious expression for so long.)

Yet religion became the divisive factor, for Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks are ethnically and genetically from the same stock and entirely unidentifiable from each other in terms of appearance or any outward characteristic. As Yugoslavians, they shared a common language, culture, cuisine, and national identity — it was religion that was used to separate people.

Conflating a belief-set and system of thought with an ethnic identity and then using that belief-set to justify war and genocide strikes me as very odd and deeply problematic. To borrow an example from Bill Tribe, author of the video documentary *Urbicide* about the siege of Sarajevo, it would be as if you were born to Catholic parents but were never confirmed and did not believe in God, then I came along and said “you ARE a Christian whether you like it or not, and I will persecute you because of it.”

This reminds me of a related issue I’ve often thought about. Why is it that even in this country, certain religions serve as ethnic identifiers and others don’t? My father’s grandparents were Jews living in Russia and my mother’s grandparents were Lutherans living in Norway. Yet when people ask me what my ethnic background is, I tell them I am “half Norwegian and half Russian Jewish.” I rarely say “half Russian Jewish and half Norwegian Lutheran.” I’m a baptized, active, church-going Lutheran, yet I frequently tell people I am “half-Jewish.” (I jokingly refer to myself as a “Jewtheran.”)

Furthermore, I have many friends who do not believe in God. Those with Christian parents say they were “raised Roman Catholic (for ex.) but are now agnostic/atheist,” but those with Jewish parents refer to themselves as Jewish regardless of their actual belief. Why does it seem to make sense for someone to say “I’m Jewish and an atheist” but not to say “I’m Christian and an atheist?”

Why is that? Any thoughts? Is it because the Jewish people were for so long been an oppressed or nation-less people, that their religion truly has come to serve as an ethnic and cultural identity? Why is Christianity seen as a world-view and Judaism as an ethnicity? Is it because (in general) it is easier to convert to Christianity (particularly Protestantism) than it is to convert to Judaism? Is it because the Jewish people all trace themselves to a common ancestor in Abraham, then through him to Jacob and his 12 sons (the 12 tribes of Israel)? This latter suggestion is especially interesting, as Christians and Muslims trace themselves back to Abraham as well.

Finally, do you think it is dangerous or problematic to conflate belief and ethnicity in any instance? For example, it seems odd that atheist “Muslims” or “Catholics” were persecuted during the Bosnian war, and I’m sure that many of the “Jews” murdered during the Holocaust did not believe in God. Are we justified in categorizing people in this way, or should ascriptions of religion be strictly limited to the beliefs people actually hold?

I’m interested to know what you all think about this!

– Alida Liberman

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