

## **DIALOGUES ABOVE THE BLACK HOLE**

»Merci pour avoir distribué notre presse; si tu ne l'as pas fait, merci de l'avoir lue; si tu ne l'as pas lue, merci pour ce que tu as dit; si tu t'es tu, merci pour ce que tu as pensé.«

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»Thank you for delivering our press; if you didn't deliver it, thank you for reading it; if you didn't read it, thank you for speaking; if you were quiet, thank you for everything you were thinking.«

This was the Christmas missive of Solidarity, which spread among the Polish people at the end of 1982, in the sad time after the declaration of the state of emergency and the suppression of Solidarity. I quote it in French because I didn't read it in the Yugoslav press – a press which has plenty to be ashamed of – but in the French magazine *Le point*. The reason for the quotation is not merely to repeat beautiful words, but to state the following. I have kept this paper for more than a quarter of a century. It has been waiting for its time to come. Together with many similar papers – papers with extraordinary contents, with poignant truths; small pieces of paper with sentences showing some audacity and brain. I'm sure many people know this kind of collector's passion.

However, let's return to the contents. The author from Solidarity was communicating to people: »I know it's hard, I understand why you're quiet. Only a few among us have the courage to tell the truth ... Fine, let it be so. Be quiet. What you are thinking will suffice ...«

Yes, we were often quiet. In fact, I could say that we Eastern Europeans (which of course includes Central Europeans) are excellent at being quiet. We

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know a lot about that, so I, as a person who has been an Eastern European for quite some time, can deal with the question of dialogue at the other end, at silence. By claiming we have difficulty holding dialogues because we prefer to be quiet, because we do not wish to speak, we cannot, we are not able to, we are not allowed to, we are afraid ... We even have difficulty with monologues, let alone dialogues. Why?

Mainly because we were raised and taught so. For Eastern Europeans, the reign of the Communist Party was a period when one party severely restricted all fundamental rights and freedoms. It was also the period of »scientific Marxism«, when only one point of view was acknowledged, which was owned by a group of well-organized people that had the capacity to prevent any other or different thought about anything at any time. In addition, they were convinced that only they knew what the people want, so they actively enlightened the »masses« and cultivated the »terrain«. To have been part of such a society meant – in terms of mutual dynamics and atmosphere – exactly the same as living in a violent, abuse-plagued family. The children in such a family are assigned subordinate places. They show their subordination by being quiet, humble, not mentioning particular things, not accusing anybody; the scope of their words is strictly limited.

Concealed things are very bad. They are avoided like big black holes, on tip-toe. Everyone pretends there's nothing there, that everything is all right ... Those who decide to break the silence and tell the truth have to have a lot of courage.

When the writer, Ervin Šinko (a Jew, Hungarian and a Yugoslav), was leaving Moscow in April 1937 (which he experienced as a successful escape – and it was in fact an escape from deadly danger), his friend pulled him aside just before he got on the train and said: »You won't discredit us out there, will you?« That was a silent threat that every abused child could recognize. The Communist regime in the Soviet Union (the first and only one until the post-war period) was also preserved by the total loyalty of its believers, who were silent as the grave about what was really happening.

The Turkish writer, Orhan Pamuk, spoke about the massacres after World War I for the Swiss newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger*: »Our relationship with the state can be compared to the relationship to your own family. You have to live with it. Both the state and the family silently confess that bad things have happened, but no one should know about them. But we have to speak about that! We slaughtered thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians. And no one talks about it. So I'll talk about it.« He thus committed the mentioned offence. He spoke about something that was not to be spoken about back home. If one speaks

about it »outside«, in more democratic societies, this is regarded as an »insult against the family«, the »betrayal of the mother country« or of »our thing«. This is, of course, a criminal offence. Pamuk experienced that himself (but the story has a happy ending, since the main hero was by then a famous person).

Bad things can happen in the grammatical present or past. To think about them, to put them into words, to compare different narrations and to create the culture of dialogue is, or at least some believe so, a necessary component of a healthy society. All Communist societies have troubles on their way to a healthy state – to be precise, those who behave as Orhan Pamuk are the ones who have troubles. This can be illustrated in countless ways. One example: while in the German-speaking world a proper literary genre is developing, where adults concern themselves with the life and work of their parents, mainly fathers, Slovenia respectfully keeps quiet about this subject. I'm talking about those books in German that are very autobiographical, that operate with material historical data and that intrepidly try to find out the truth – about one's own origin, family. These are authors such as Martin Pollack and Peter Petschauer (I mention them, because they are partly Slovenian), who decided to explore the life stories of their fathers. In Slovenia, it is much more common for the sons of »interesting« parents to take their fathers' and mothers' side; to defend them publicly if someone happens to mention something slightly critical about them; to walk around the black hole of their actions on tiptoe, as if nothing special had happened ...

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Of course, it is not just genocides or massacres that are hidden in a black hole.

In the light of the increasingly frequent questions related to Islam and to the integration of Muslims into western, democratic societies – for example questions regarding the freedom of speech, face saving, honour killings and the like – we are offered the challenge of comparison. Surprisingly similar rules govern the group dynamics, even though at first glance the Communist utopia (and its preservation, regardless of everything) does not have anything to do with the combativeness of Turks or the male dominance over women in Muslim cultures. This similarity is supported by interesting facts – for example that the social system in Iran is called Islamic socialism and that the state is governed by a senior council, which is strongly reminiscent of the old Soviet politburo.

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In Yugoslavia, which was a very diverse country (in terms of nations, religions and cultures), a lot should have been known about dialogue between

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different nations and religions, also between Christians and Muslims. After all, this country existed from 1918 to 1991, which (including the war interval) is almost three quarters of a century. The inherited diversity was evident at first sight, in people, customs, architecture ... People liked to talk about the special location, somewhere on the border between the East and the West. While the democracy of this country before the war can be disputed, it did enable people to practice different beliefs and rites. This changed radically after the war, when the Communist Party seized power.

Religion was viewed as something reactionary, as a remainder of the gloomy old days. These days will pass by, but there's no harm in accelerating the process a bit ... This took place in a combination of all possible procedures, from the termination of basic politeness to brutal persecution. The first example can be observed in the Yugoslav People's Army, where joint cauldrons were introduced, which meant common – mainly Serbian – meals with pork meat. Before the war, in the old Yugoslav army, Muslims had the right to special adapted food and customs related to religious holidays were taken into account for Christians. After the war, a refusal to eat pork was laughed at and this »sensitivity« was persecuted.

The time immediately after the war was also marked by the beginning of police and legal persecutions. In the old Yugoslavia, freedom of association existed; also Muslims had several unions, which they wanted to renew in the new state. This desire was quickly suppressed in a series of prosecutions that lasted several years and that especially affected students and intellectuals, the so-called »young Muslims«. The most famous case became that of Alija Izetbegović, who was sentenced to three years in prison in 1946; most got much lighter sentences, but some were even sentenced to death.

Much later, in 1983, Izetbegović was again imprisoned and prosecuted, together with twelve other persons (including one woman); they were no longer »young Muslims«, but »Islamic fundamentalists«. It was a typical staged political process that could be called Stalinist; but Yugoslavian communists were angry if their actions after 1948 were described as Stalinist and even very angry if Stalinist features were observed after 1980, at a time when society was supposedly liberalised and democratised. The distinguishable Stalinist features of these events were: brutality of searches of apartments and arrests, illegal confiscation of all possible things, mobbing of relatives and lawyers, torture and humiliation of arrested persons during the investigation, isolation, only a selected, reliable audience in the court rooms, nasty and immoral behaviour of the press, which constantly stirred up feelings against the accused and sup-

ported the authorities ... Everyone tried to prove that the accused were terrible terrorists, that they were »demons of the past in a terrorist coat«, as one newspaper headline put it.

Then there were sentences. They were drastic. Alija Izetbegović was sentenced to fourteen years in prison, one of the twelve persons even got one year more, others some years less. After several appeals and proceedings, the sentences were lowered, but they were still outrageous; at the final level of jurisdiction Alija Izetbegović was sentenced to nine years in prison.

What were they guilty of? They were charged under Article 133 of the Penal Code of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which criminalized so-called »hostile propaganda«, together with »counterrevolution threat to the social order«. This was the legal classification of their act of reflecting on Islam and its place in a modern society, on the relationship between religion and social life, and on the situation and perspectives of Muslims in Yugoslavia. In short, they took the liberty of reflecting on their own religion. The key piece of evidence was the *Islamic Declaration*, which was allegedly written by Izetbegović. Among the opinions on this declaration, I present one that came from Great Britain, but from a former Yugoslav, a Serb: »When I read the texts for which Alija Izetbegović was convicted I was amazed that he could be convicted of Islamic fundamentalism. I can say that they were a totally decent thing. There was no fundamentalism. He pictures Islam as some sort of middle way between the West and the East and this shouldn't have been taken tragically.«

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Something that should be natural in a democratic society – that could even be accepted as a welcome stimulation for the further Europeanization of the Muslim community – was considered to be extremely dangerous and was severely punished. As was whispered then – there was very little loud objection, almost none – these were the most severe sentences for Muslims in Europe (and maybe remained such until the occurrence of actual terrorism performed by fanatic Muslims in the 21<sup>st</sup> century).

The people who were convicted of being »Islamic fundamentalists« in the summer of 1983 were not the only victims of repression. During the build-up to the process and after the process many more people were controlled, interrogated, ill-treated, arrested and intimidated. At least one person died. Repression was not only limited to Bosnia and Herzegovina, at that time one of the republics of the federation called the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; »Muslim« enemies were sought all over the country; including Slovenia, the place of residence of more than ten thousand workers who had emigrated

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from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The police had to monitor all religious events, detect and record »religious activists«, gather information about their contacts with foreign countries, record all visits from foreign countries, monitor the circulation of religious literature and prevent any illegal activities. One of the main goals was to detect possible initiators of the building of a mosque.

The case of the book *Človek na razpotju* (*Man at the Crossroads*), written by Esad Čimić, published in 1975, shows a similar pattern of persecution. The book was banned in the same year. From what can be deduced from the official report, the author, a university professor of sociology, decided to deal with the question of whether members of different religions in Yugoslavia have a different relation to the social order, whether their activities are different and, if so, in what way and how it can be explained in the light of the characteristics of particular faiths. The author was a Bosnian, a citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina; he was a professor at the University of Sarajevo, which means that he was in the right position to study these interesting and important questions. In a different society, his theoretical views and empirical researches would soon have been translated, maybe he would have been asked to give lectures and offer advice – for example at symposiums on dialogue between cultures ... However, the Yugoslav authorities were of the opinion that Čimić, merely by presupposing that differences exist and by thinking about them, approached the unacceptable, insulted the honour and reputation of the nation, of Bosnia and Herzegovina, of socialism and of self-management. At least this was what the District State Prosecutor thought when he banned the book.

These few illustrations should suffice to present the position of religion in Socialist Yugoslavia. Religion was of course allowed, it was even guaranteed by the constitution but, at the same time, each citizen knew very well that this freedom, permission for religion, should not be taken too seriously. Everyone knew that freedom had its limits. If someone forgot or underestimated these limits, there was always public authority to remind him or her of them. A wide range of subjects, events and possibilities was like a black hole, which was known to all; a black hole that simultaneously exists and doesn't exist. Something that should be quietly avoided.

In the 1980s, people in Slovenia increasingly began to reflect on the fact that there were many immigrants among the population, immigrants who came from other republics of Yugoslavia and who were therefore marked by a different culture. However, explanations of these differences were always very cautious and never included religion, its meaning and consequences for its members. Even when the difference was indicated very drastically, for example

in the exclamation: »Only death can keep me in Slovenia!« – this was the title of a published study on the life of garbage collectors in Slovenia; all were seasonal workers from Bosnia – it could not be suspected that this had anything to do with the problems of Muslims in a Christian environment, what these problems could be, how they could be bridged, denied, suppressed or dealt with in some other way.

In 1986, the sociologist Silva Mežnarić published the book *Bosanci -- a kuda idu Slovenci nedeljom?* (*Bosnians – where do Slovenians go on Sundays?*). It was the result of fairly innovative research by means of interviews, which tried to make a connection with the immigrants and seasonal workers from Bosnia in their authentic environment. However, religion is not mentioned in the book, it is not even hinted that Bosnians are divided into Serbs, Croats and Muslims, what this means, if anything, and why. This issue was, apparently under pressure, omitted from interviews, from thought and words, as if it hadn't existed ... Until the very end, Yugoslavia was suppressed by the Marxist ideology, which prescribed a fixed view on the world, development and the future – as regards the reality: it will perish, if we pay it no heed long enough...

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By this I do not mean to say that nothing was done towards understanding and coexistence among different nationalities. Many efforts were very innovative and decidedly contributed to the integration of immigrants into Slovenian society; numerous activities led by staff of the Higher Education Institute for Social Work and by various »alternative groups« in the districts of Štepanjsko naselje and Fužine, may serve as an example. However, it was always clear that there was a boundary that should not be crossed, the boundary of religion – a tradition containing abstract and concrete components.

Many things began to be considered, introduced and developed only when democracy was established. Many initiatives came from unusual places. An idea thus came to Slovenia from Germany to study how immigrants from other countries, for example Muslims, are getting old, what are residences for the elderly like, do they meet the special needs of this part of the population, does this part of the population need religious care, how should this be implemented ... Germans turned to Slovenians (as shown in the book by Alenka Kobolt *Zdej smo od tu – a smo še čefurji?* (*Now we are from here – are we still Chavs?*)) on the presumption that here, where there are many Bosnian *gastarbeiter* (»guest workers«), the authorities know something about this, think about it, have experience ... what they didn't know was that Slovenians had only recently begun to think about the role of religion and religious care for their Christian fellow citizens, let alone Muslims; and that every step in this

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direction was accompanied by severe conflicts and accusations about the aggressiveness of the church. Slovenians managed, after great struggle, to gain the right to such innocent things as the celebration of Christmas (which was cancelled in 1952) as late as in 1989, and even this was accepted with a number of accusations of intolerance (!), aggressiveness and counter-revolution on the part of religious people and resisters of tradition.

If we look around the world we see some interesting phenomena. What kind of conclusions can we reach if we view the problem in the light of some of the most notorious affairs in recent years?

The affairs I have in mind are: Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses*; the Danish caricature depicting the prophet Mohammed as a terrorist with bombs; and finally, the affair of Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh, which can be described as the nature of Islam and the oppression of Muslim women.

What kinds of black holes are these? None of the cases has to do with the question of a dictatorial political system, genocide or a large number of dead people. They have to do with much more subtle things that are hard to measure and notice.

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In the case of Salman Rushdie the problem was the so-called blasphemy that the novel contained. Twenty years have passed since the scandal when a writer living in the West, in a democratic country, was threatened with *fatwa* by his fellow countrymen, fellow believers and their leaders; he was threatened with death because he committed a crime according to »domestic«, »internal« rules. Rushdie was immediately offered help by the entire political and intellectual circle. He was given a hiding place and armed protection, he received mass and almost unanimous intellectual support, real outpourings of sympathy, the number of his published books, translations and appearances grew immensely. What contributed to such a reaction was probably the fact that in the Western, European world, we view blasphemy as something very old-fashioned, an atavism even; another factor is that we're dealing with a novel, an opinion expressed in a literary manner. The consensus also prevailed in regard to the conviction (a false one, as we know today) that the real threat is far, far away.

The issue of the Danish caricature, which began in winter 2005/06, met a different response. Opinions were at all times divided between those who were in favour of publication and those who were against it; many were neutral, since the dilemma was difficult. It is true that the caricature was insulting for many Muslim believers, but people in the Western world have become accustomed to similar and much more severe insults, as satires and caricatures are a neces-

sary part of the freedom of expression, without which the democratic world could not be formed and preserved. Due to the outbursts of violence, threats and attempts at extortion, many people and also some governments pleaded for appeasement, conciliation and thus took a position against freedom of expression, when it »exaggerates« and becomes »impertinent«.

The case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali differs in many aspects. It is not so much about abstract, but rather purely physical things that are connected to human beings. It is about a person who strives to achieve concrete changes. A. Hirsi Ali's life story is astonishing: A Somali and a Muslim, who fled from her arranged marriage, thus fled from her family, who wanted to give her away. She sought asylum in The Netherlands, where she experienced her share of bitterness and also several benefits offered by the modern Europe. She flourished and developed into a brave, educated, articulate and active young woman. She was elected to the Dutch parliament; she became a politician whose goal was to take an active part in improving the situation of the most repressed people and she took a vehement stance against torture.

This would all probably have still been acceptable, if she wasn't a woman who stands up for women – and, of course, against everything that happens to them under Islam; against what men demand of women and what they cause them; what women allow and do to themselves and their children ... She was very clear in this matter including in relation to honour killings and to genital mutilation imposed on millions of girls. This is, of course, a very different thing than philosophical debates about blasphemous words. Instead of pondering, which is similar to guessing, how many angels can stand on the point of a needle, A. Hirsi Ali made the gory operations publically known. What is cut from the girls, how and where, how it hurts and what happens to it. Not only in Africa and Asia, but also in many countries in Europe, on modern kitchen tables and in bathrooms.

A. Hirsi Ali decided to lead a political life mainly because she wanted to do something against this, against physical mutilation and all other kinds of subordination of women. This almost inevitably meant rebellion against Islam. Many people became afraid of this terrible and dangerous black hole. They felt that this amazing woman expected too much from them. A. Hirsi Ali fled from one party to another. She gained collaborators and sympathizers among people who were regarded as »controversial« and »extreme«, right-wing and conservative ... Theo van Gogh was murdered because of the film he made in collaboration with her. She was threatened with death. She fled to the United States. Then she requested protection in France.

This is just an outline of a fascinating story that began in Mogadishu – a serious candidate for the most hopeless place in the world – and which is now unfolding between Europe and the United States, where Ayan Hirsi Ali is hiding, seeking shelter from fanatical killers. What interests me – a person with a long history of being Eastern European – most, are the boundaries of freedom of expression with which she was faced and where she faced them. It is difficult to avoid the impression that Ayaan Hirsi Ali ran into similar psychological obstacles as those Eastern European dissidents who came to the West from communist dictatorships and gained a lot, but also incurred deep resentment if they wanted to shed light on what really went on in their homelands. They were constantly reproached with exaggeration, failing to consider this and that ... it was said that workers needed dreams ... and objectively-speaking, such dreadful revelations only serve the opponent ... moreover, they're actually insulting to the victims ... besides, we're currently involved in extremely delicate negotiations ... and where is the evidence for such unprecedented accusations?! – Wouldn't it be better if these people showed some sense of reality instead of banging their heads against a brick wall? Wouldn't it be better if they kept their mouths shut?

I truly believe that a person such as Margarete Buber Neumann would get on very well with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, although the black holes that these two women tried to illuminate are very different. If France offers Ayaan Hirsi Ali a temporary place of residence, she will have ample opportunity to get acquainted with the agitation against Margarete Buber Neumann that happened half a century ago, when she decided to expose Stalinism. This old story also contains threats and mysterious murders – as a punishment for abandoning or changing religion, heresy... In both cases the pressure comes from two sides: on the one hand, there is the pressure of the family, who orders its members to be quiet and to conceal dirty family secrets. On the other, there is the pressure of the new, allegedly liberal environment, which tries hard to protect itself from hurtful truths, lest they disturb illusions and political calculations.

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