For most of Western history, Istanbul has tried to lay claim to the place where the near east meets west geographically and socially for the first time into a beautiful melting pot. However, the real melting pot of those two areas and consequently of many monotheistic religions is Sarajevo—one of the few major European cities in which one can find a mosque, cathedral, orthodox church and synagogue all in the same neighborhood. Founded in 1461, the city and present-day country of Bosnia-Herzegovina have seen wars and conquest from a variety of Europe’s historical great powers—The Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Austria-Hungary to name a few. The result is an eclectic group of religions from the Abrahamic family tree and their practice, coexisting in a unique, rarely-found peaceful way.

Since its inception, diversity has been a hallmark of Sarajevo, which has historically recognized four key groups: Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims, and Jews. Prior to that, the region was one of the few places in Europe to experience diverse communities and peoples—ethically and religiously—living amongst each other. The Ottomans, who founded the city, envisioned it as a Muslim city—despite leaving open spaces for worship for other religions; they found due to “religious heterodoxy and syncretism” many South Slavs were receptive to Islam. According to census data from the time, about 20 years after the founding of Sarajevo 73% of the population was Christian and 23% Muslim. Fifty years later, 97% of the city was Muslim. And while Muslims unquestionably held the bulk of the power during the Ottoman years, People of the Book (Muslim slang for Jews and Christians) were welcomed, allowed to worship freely, and slowly found themselves in positions of marginal but important power. Sarajevo thus became a melting pot for monotheistic religions at a time when most of Europe concerned itself with fighting over various denominations of Christianity and found the thoughts of any other type of religion abhorrent.

Jews first came to Sarajevo in large numbers with the culmination of the Spanish Reconquista. Sephardic Jews found themselves in the midst of religious zeal in Spain and at the mercy of the Inquisition and other

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4 cf.: religious wars in Europe, Luther’s Reformation, the Spanish Inquisition, etc.
6 The Muslim Conquest of Spain occurred in the 8th century CE, culminating in a defeat at the Battle of Tours, stopping Muslim advances in to Europe. However, Muslim rulers controlled all or parts of Spain until 1492. The conquest occurred at
institutions in the country excited to prove their Christianization, turned on the Jews once the Muslims were ejected. As a result, Sephardic Jews left Iberia, were not welcome on the Italian Peninsula, and found themselves looking for homes in the Balkans. Because of both Islam’s tolerance for People of the Book and the Ottoman Empire’s policy of social and political tolerance towards Jews and Christians, Sarajevo became a hotbed for Sephardic Jews. Their success caused a number of Ashkenazic Jews to leave Belgrade and move to Sarajevo where they then mixed with Sephardic Jews and created their own rich community. While they had their own “segment” of the city, paid slightly higher taxes and different have equal legal standing in court as Muslims, there were no Anti-Jewish pogroms recorded in Sarajevo, unlike the rest of Europe. Jews were neither openly discriminated against nor even classified and marginalized as such until the Hapsburg’s took control in 19th century.8

Looking at European history from a broad lens, the Balkan Peninsula was a breeding ground for early Christian thought prior to disagreements that arose between the two sects.9 This spread started as early as Paul’s travels—some of which occurred in the region—and continued through the founding of the early church and fall of the Western Empire until the region came under Byzantine and Ottoman control. After the split began and was officially confirmed, the Balkans became the meeting point between Orthodox and Catholic Christianity. And while Bosnia was not formally a state until around 1180, other hegemonic states in the region had clear religious alignment, with modern Serbia and Greece being the hotbed of the regional Orthodox movement, while modern Slovenia and Croatia remained firmly Catholic. After achieving some degree of autonomy from the regional overlord du jour, Hungary, Bosnia slowly gained more and more freedoms until the Ottoman invasion of the region. During this time, most of the region remained a mix of the two branches of Christianity, despite direct promotion of Catholicism from Hungarian influences, and at no recorded time did practicing one branch of Christianity compared to the other preclude access to any instruments of the culture and state of Bosnia.11 This was a practice that continued for all People of the Book, to a certain extent, once the Ottoman conquest and official founding of Sarajevo occurred.

7 Throughout the vast majority of European history, violence directed against Jews has been a cornerstone of most states. While the time, degree of violence, and place have varied, all “Christian” European countries that allowed Jews into their borders at sometime deprived them of civil rights and expelled, usually violently.
9 Over the course of several hundred years, Christianity in the former Western Roman Empire and Christianity in the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantine Empire) had a series of disagreements—which many outsiders would label as over small parts of the faith e.g. the filioque—which eventually led to their formal split in 1054 in what was known as the Great Schism. Christendom split almost exactly down imperial lines with those in the former Western Roman Empire identifying as Catholic and those in the Eastern Roman Empire as Orthodox or Eastern Orthodox.
10 The second bit of the New Testament is known as the Pauline Epistles, and contains 13 letters attributed to Paul of Tarsus, the person most responsible for spreading Christianity to the Gentiles (non-Jews). Paul’s travels and letters date from between 40-60 CE and represent the earliest canonical sources on Christianity.
As the Ottoman Empire began its long steady period of decline, so did the city of Sarajevo, and it is at this point that urban flames of religious intolerance began to be stoked in the city. Under the Ottomans, Islam had been the preferred religion, but Christians and Jews were still welcomed, given legal status (albeit less than Muslims), and came to do indispensable jobs within the inner-workings of Sarajevo; and any notions to the contrary are 19th century nationalist fictions. And nationalism became a fundamental European concept during the latter half of the 19th century, right at the time the Hapsburgs (Austria-Hungarian Empire) took control of Sarajevo. The end result was mostly detrimental to the policy of tolerance that flourished under the Ottomans. Beginning with the Eastern Crisis in 1875, emboldened Christian peasants rose up against perceived abuses by their Muslim landlords; fomenting with ideas of nationalism and Social Darwinism, other Slavic forces, like Russia and Montenegro, joined with their Orthodox “brothers” to deal a crushing military blow to any remaining Ottoman forces and firmly establish Austrian dominance of the city. By the late 19th century, Muslims had begun to lose control of the important civil service and guild areas—Churches began to rise above Mosques, a constant reminder of their lower status in the new Sarajevo hierarchy. As Sarajevo’s Muslims lost influence they began to organize as a cohesive unit centered around religion, not class or social status. Unlike areas in Western Europe, where this development occurred much earlier, this was the first coalescence of nationalism amongst the Bosniaks and eventually resulted in forming the People’s Assembly. They also began to complain loudly to Vienna that their privileges were taken, and one of the Hapsburg’s only choices was to grant the region more autonomy. This, and common hatred of the Hapsburgs for colonial abuses and quelling rebellions violently, led to some unification around a common enemy. But, on the whole, the events of 19th century largely killed tolerance. And when more autonomy did occur, for the most part it was too little too late as many of the wounds that had opened continued to fester through the Cold War and beyond.

The first half of the 20th century was marred by abuses of racism, antisemitism, and Nazism, not just in the Balkans but throughout Europe. Not only did elements of Croatian society side and cooperate with the Nazis causing increased sectional divides, but the nationalist issues from the 19th century also led to more prejudice and make it easier for “undesirables” to be rounded up and eliminated—something that even Sarajevo’s history of tolerance could not stem. After the war, Partisan leader and communist Josip Broz Tito took control of the country. Under Tito, as a communist, religion was supposed to be repressed, and Tito’s first attempt during the Yugoslav bishops conference was met with terrible public relations as he imprisoned a bishop and was excommunicated by the Catholic Church. However, Tito eventually had to back down and that coupled with his famous split from Josef Stalin led a Yugoslavia with more liberal personal freedoms that most other Eastern Bloc states, including religion. Also, under Tito’s government “Muslim,” and consequently “Bosniak,” became a nationality more than a religion. This shift allowed people to practice their faith more freely but also crossed religion into the unfriendly lines of nationalism from earlier.

After Tito’s death in 1980, an ensuing power struggle eventually emboldened former Serbian communist turned nationalist Slobodan Milošević. Along with other ethnic Serbs throughout the region, he fanned the flames of nationalism and rekindled the idea of “Greater Serbia” as instrumental and hegemonic in the region. The result let to a nationalist reactions from other regional ethnic groups and eventually the onset of war, most notably the siege of Sarajevo. Society began to break down on quasi nationalist-

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12 Defined as the promotion of the interests of the particular nation usually at the expense of others, especially with the aim of gaining and maintaining the nation’s sovereignty over its homeland and demonstrating the importance of said nation to human history, nationalism, particularly radical, obsessive nationalism became of defining political idea of the 19th and early 20th century. In general, when writing history, nationalists will minimize their country’s wrongs, highlight the inequities and wrongs of other countries, particularly those committed against their own nation, and be unwilling to critique the nation of certain groups of people within them (Smith, Anthony. Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History. 2010. pp. 9, 25-30).

14 Biondich. pp. 5-6
15 Donia. p. 25, 31, & 41.
16 see the Ustaše for more information.
17 Communists are generally opposed to involvement of religion in the state referencing Marx’s metaphor “the opiate of the masses.”
18 see Aloysius Stepinac for more information.
religious lines: C, S, or M (Croat (i.e. Catholic), Serb (Orthodox), or Muslim, generally a Bosniak) with former friendships and families falling apart based around people in those groups. In an act eerily similar to World War II and as a result of the nationalist feelings of the 19th and 20th century, many of the city’s Jews were marginalized, excluded from the groups listed above, and eventually found themselves forced to flee with memories of the Holocaust still raw less than 50 years before. That memory was evoked further when ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks sanctioned by Radovan Karadžić began in the late spring and early summer of 1992. Sometimes this ethnic cleansing took the form of organized looting and stealing and deportation of the Bosniaks; other times, like at Srebrenica, resulted in the death of several thousand in one given massacre. The sectarian differences became strong enough that at one point Bosniak leaders suggested inviting the Mujahideen from the recent Afghan wars against the Soviet to come aid their Muslim “brothers.” Regardless, the end result was people—this time liberal Muslims—being placed in camps to work and starve in an attempted genocide, fewer than 50 years after the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The war in Bosnia ended after 3½ years in the winter of 1995 with the Dayton Accords, but the siege of Sarajevo did not fully lifted until February of 1996 with over 100,000 Bosniaks dead. The accords gerrymandered the country(s) along nationalist and consequently religious lines. Eventually the majority of the lead perpetrators of the genocide were tried and received some version of justice at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, which began investigations in 1993 and wrapped up operations in December of 2017. Freedom of religion was guaranteed in the Bosnia-Herzegovina state constitution, and today a little over 50% of Bosnians and about 60% of Sarajevans identify as Muslim, but very few consider religion important in their daily lives.

Discussion questions:
1. Outline evidence and examples of how the religion in Sarajevo became tied to its culture, growing and changing with the city.
2. Explain the social situation involving People of the Book in Sarajevo for most of the Ottoman Empire using the frameworks provided by Galtung.
3. Examine the historical and cultural reasons—be sure to consider situatedness—so many faiths existed for so long without conflict. Compare this to the situation in other parts of Europe and the near east.
4. Explain how the Austro-Hungarian Empire exacerbate religious tensions in the region. Consider why nationalism between ethnic groups conquered several hundred years of religious peace.
5. Considering the methods of analysis we’ve discussed, examine why almost no countries acknowledge the plight of and consequently help the Bosniaks during the Yugoslav Wars.
6. Discuss how the war could impact religion in Sarajevo in both a positive and negative way.

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25 Muslims partisans who fought a “holy” war against the USSR in the late 70s and early 1980s. While most were moderate to conservative Muslims, a small segment became right wing radicals, i.e. the Taliban and others.
27 Ibid. pp. 79-88.