

Islam in the Balkans: Globalization, Europeanization, Localization

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Dervishes and Islam in Bosnia

By Ines Aščerić-Todd

Leiden: Brill, 2015, 198 pages, \$145, ISBN: 9789004288447

The Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity

Edited by Olivier Roy and Arolda Elbasani

New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015, 257 pages, \$110, ISBN: 9781137517838

Rediscovering the Umma: Muslims in the Balkans between Nationalism and Transnationalism

By Ina Merdjanova

New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 216 pages, \$85, ISBN 9780199964031

Yearbook of Muslims in Europe (Volume 6)

Edited by Jørgen Nielsen, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić and Egdūnas Račius

Leiden: Brill, 2014, 648 pages, \$285, ISBN: 9789004277540

The study of European Islam is now experiencing an unprecedented revival. While most of its attention is dedicated to Islam as a minority in 'Christian' Europe, countries such as Bosnia and Albania have not lost their importance in Westerner's eyes, much of it due to the region's political upheavals, fueled by the ever-lurking danger of terrorism, both in the Balkans and by people of the Balkans abroad. Three of the four

books reviewed here discuss South-eastern Europe, and the fourth one is a collection of papers covering the entire spectrum of European Islam.

In *Dervishes and Islam in Bosnia*, Ines Aščerić-Todd returns to post-medieval Bosnia to trace the impact of Sufism in the Islamization (a term she rightfully prefers over 'conversion to Islam') of the region. Even though the role of the warrior-dervishes

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Insight Turkey
Vol. 20 / No. 3 /
2018, pp. 283-289

in the Islamization or Ottomanization of these provinces is a relatively well-researched phenomenon, this book presents a nuanced argument that successfully challenges the traditional explanations hitherto posed. In her introduction, the author outlines the extant historiographical approaches to the role of dervishes in the Ottoman expansion, and to Bosnia's conversion to Islam, showing how their insufficient explanations demand a thorough investigation of the role of the dervish *tekke* in filling the functions that the weak religious institutions failed to fulfill (partly due to their flight to Austria). In eleven chapters, Aščerić-Todd carefully analyzes myriad primary sources (written mainly in Turkish and Arabic) and secondary sources (in both local and European languages).

The picture she paints is very complex. More than just warriors or missionaries, the dervishes, Aščerić-Todd argues, were also craftsmen whose lodges were centers of urbanity. Their projects were sometimes independent of the state and at other times backed, if not initiated, by officials who were dervishes themselves or who served as patrons to the lodges. This led, first of all, to the creation of urban settlements (in addition to the conversion of medieval settlements into cities) based on the lodges, with Sarajevo being the best example. But it was not only about founding towns: Aščerić-Todd ascribes the development of the *esnafs*, which she translates as trade-guilds, to the dervishes. In this part of her study, she relies on the *Fütüvvetnâme* (known in Arabic

as *Kitāb al-Futuwwa*). These were Islamic codes of behavior –some might say of chivalry in order to extend the equivalency to the medieval West–grounded in Sufi teachings. The basic rules of the guilds were based on the *akhi* corporations (dervish orders and brotherhoods), and membership in a guild was closely linked to membership in such a corporation. These *esnafs* filled more than just economic functions in Bosnian society: they were “a social framework within which [its members] lived their life” and provided “a rich social calendar for the entire population” (p. 181). Using Ottoman records such as *defterers*, the author shows that conversion to Islam was usually linked to the opening of a lodge, the creation of an *esnaf*, or to joining one. Thus, this important book both contributes to our understanding of how Bosnia became Muslim, and how the institutions of early Ottoman Bosnia were created.

This institutional treatment is rather rare in the study of (Eastern) European Islam. Indeed, *The Revival of Islam in the Balkans*, edited by Olivier Roy, a political scientist working on ‘global(ized)’ Islam, and Arolda Elbasani, a political scientist specializing in democratization in Eastern Europe, focuses on discourses, beliefs, and practices. What the eleven essays in this volume have in common is a focus on “the reconfigurations of the organized religious field, alternative actors, and resulting practices of Islamic religiosity,” as opposed to a focus on “ethno-national identities and macro-polarization of religion,” espe-

cially following the collapse of communism (p. 243). Indeed, religion in the Balkans has been linked for long to ethnicity and nationality. While works (usually by anthropologists) such as Tone Bringa's *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way* have already proven that looking at the religious diversity in the region is productive, the chapters put forth in this compact volume are still important and much needed.¹

The book's first theme is the public discourse on Islam, with case studies drawn from Albania (by Enis Sulstarova), Greece (by Alexandros Sakellariou), and Kosovo (by Jeton Mehmeti). Sulstarova examines the way in which Albanian elites have employed civilizational discourses to assert Albania's place in Europe after years of an Ottoman and then socialist past. Europe, in the elites' understanding, is an 'escape from the East.' Thus, intellectuals are at times suspicious of "the revival of public practices and symbols of Islam" (p. 24), which are symbols of an Islamic present reality rather than a relic of the past. Indeed, their linear conception of time (moving from Ottoman to Communist to EU accession) seems to be threatened by 'a corrupt political elite inclined toward Oriental despotism.' Sakellariou's paper compares the Orthodox Church of Greece with the Golden Dawn Party, culminating in a rather banal conclusion, namely that while the latter "is wholly and aggressively against Islam, only limited sections of the metropolitans of the Orthodox Church are actively involved in anti-Islamic discourses" (p. 44). The more interesting con-

clusion is that the Church's image of Islam is motivated by Islam's "theological inferiority," while the "Golden Dawn suggests some kind of biological inferiority as well," but both resort to ("Huntingtonian") civilizational discourses (p. 57). Mehmeti's look at Kosovo shows that while the Orthodox Church, the only religious community whose activities are well-defined under the law, is opposing the government, some Islamic institutions do cooperate, thus creating a channel for Muslims to receive communication from the government regarding the desired "promotion of tolerance and reconciliation with other groups" (p. 78).

The second theme addressed in this book, which is also its second part, is titled "Muslims' Pursuit of Faith and Religiosity" but actually serves as a challenge to any notion of 'globalized' Islam. Or, to put it more softly, it aims to show how a grassroots approach to understanding local Islam reveals a plethora of localized and diverse practices, beliefs, and discourses. Each case study illuminates a larger debate regarding the society it discusses. Jelena Tošić, using Shkodër in Albania as her scene, shows a dichotomy between 'foreign' (Arab) Islam and 'local' Islam, characterized by 'urbanity' and 'calmness,' which often translates into reluctance to what they consider to be overrepresentation of religion in public. Focusing on the veiling of women in Bosnia, Andreja Mesarič reveals nuances about veiling that relate it to debates of foreignness and even terrorism. Laura J. Olson's study of "unofficial Islamic

leaders” in Bulgaria seeks to establish that “contemporary Bulgarian Islamic piety” cannot be ascribed to “passive constituents ‘brainwashed’ by rich Saudi charities,” but instead emphasizes “choice” as a guide to “Muslim believers’ actions” (p. 138). Thus, instead of a superimposed Islam, she finds that Pomaks “develop and refine personal habits of belief and practice to actively renew and reconstruct their relationship with Islam” (p. 122).

Only two papers truly transcend the nation state. Anna Zadrozna’s attempt to understand what Macedonian-speaking Muslims mean when they say ‘we’ or ‘ours’ is one of the most interesting contributions to this volume. She shows multiple circles of belonging, ranging from ‘ours,’ which refers to “one’s kin, close acquaintances, or inhabitants of the same village,” to ‘just like ours’ (*isti kako nami*) which can refer to “Muslims who live in the villages nearby, to particular ethnic groups, evolving to all Muslims from Macedonia” (p. 157) or even the Balkans. She shows that the key to inclusion is an imagined sense of “have a similar culture” (*ima ista kultura*), which above all refers to “family models and gender roles,” and that religion is an important, but not the most important, factor (p. 157). In the last paper of this part of the book, Ksenia Trofimova examines “the practice of worshipping ‘anonymous saints’” as a “model for the examination of... possible mechanisms of the existence and modification of living traditions in a multicultural and poly-ethnic environment.” She shows “the localization of tradition,” but one

that “do[es] not serve directly for the development of the ethnic rhetoric” (p. 178). Instead, the outcomes of this process, the shrines, “seem to express the confessional identity of the community, its integration into the religious life of the macro society, as well as demonstrating historical and cultural continuity” (p. 179).

The third, and last, part of the volume focuses on institutional, or rather institutionalized, Islam. Behar Sadriu studies Kosovar imams to show how veiling was chosen to address issues of ‘women’s rights,’ while using discourses of democracy and civil rights. Julianne Funk moves to Bosnia-Herzegovina but focuses on the hijab (and the Muslim Friday prayer) and shows that both publicly-performed actions have communal and personal elements. The Friday prayer “emphasizes the need to be present in the community in order to hear a variety of instructions,” religious and otherwise, while “the hijab is more about an individual, bodily practice that reflects the woman’s spiritual development” (p. 218). Returning to Albania, Cecilie Endresen seeks to describe the view of Islam as laid down by three religious organizations, showing an interactional approach rather than confrontational one to the various elements of identity: religion, nation, ethnicity, etc.

In the concluding chapter, Olivier Roy returns to the premise that “mainstream research sees religion in the Balkans as intrinsically linked with ethno-national identities” (p. 242). While he is correct in saying

that, this point was typically challenged by anthropologists, it is difficult to see what kind of insights this volume contributes to the study of Islam. It seems that the narrow scope of each study makes it look like uncovering another layer (and often a layer already uncovered before, even if in a different environment) rather than unraveling a whole phenomenon. Indeed, studies that show that there is diversity or that it is not all black and white are cliché at best. The most innovative papers seem out of context in this volume, as is the case with Zadrožna's excellent study on Macedonia. While each paper is a worthy contribution to its field of study, I was left wondering who is supposed to be convinced in the overall thesis of the volume. Scholars are likely already convinced, and for the general audience a collection of unrelated papers can hardly be imagined as satisfactory.

A recent book, this time a monograph, that illustrates many of the points raised in the edited volume reviewed above is *Rediscovering the Umma* by Ina Merdjanova. While the individual papers in Roy and Elbasani's volume rarely go beyond a single nation state, Merdjanova's starting point is the shared Ottoman experience of the Balkan states. Far from adopting a monolithic, one-size-fits-all historical narrative, she shows the different historical paths undertaken by the Muslims of the region in the Age of Nationalism. She shows how, for example, in Bulgaria, in Macedonia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, attempts to link Islam and

the nation affected both, and led to a national perception of Islam as much as to an Islamic perception of the nation. In a simple yet compelling narrative, the author aptly argues for the diversity of the Muslim experience, informed by common Ottoman origins under the *millet* system but independent and not yielding to any perception of monolithicity. In her second chapter, she analyzes transnational links between Balkan and other Islamic communities, seeking to understand the place of Balkan Muslims within the *umma*. She finds that Turkey as a patron state seems more legitimate due to a sense of common culture, while other states (especially Arab ones) and outside forces which seek to radicalize Muslims in the region often fail to gain currency and, if anything, alienate the public from sympathizing the clergy.

In her third chapter, Merdjanova chooses to focus on gender due to the traditional influence exerted by religions on "gender regimes" (p. 82), in order to contribute to the rising scholarship on Islam and gender, and because of the prominence of women and gender as issues of public debate. Socialism, as is now common knowledge, improved the rights and opportunities given to women, while the post-socialist transitions reinforced traditional gender norms (but this is true in some Christian communities as well). It is this framework that gave birth to the contemporary discourse on veiling, which represents not only a religious but also a national matter. But post-socialism does not entail repression. "In the last decades," she

notes, “Muslim women [in the Balkans] have increasingly acquired a voice” (p. 83).

The fourth and last chapter adds yet another useful dimension to our attempt to locate Balkan Islam, as it deals with another perplexing term: European Islam. Unlike the common discourse of non-integration (or at least failure of integration), Balkan Muslims are well-integrated within their larger societies. While European Islam as a concept emerged in the 1950s, following a wave of decolonization, and then again in the 1970s with the influx of the *Gastarbeiter*, Muslims in the Balkan peninsula had been quarreling with European Modernity for over a hundred years. Merdjanova claims, then, that the West can learn from the Balkans some methods of integrating Muslims and Islam in secular and non-Muslim state systems. While admitting that the regional experience is unique and without engendering a view that endorses conflating Western and Eastern European Islams, she still sees the discourse of values and democracy in the Balkans as a step towards a ‘European’ Islam.

As expected, the *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe* (Volume 6) is a standard reference work. Its chapters have a uniform structure, and it covers all of Europe from Albania and Armenia, through Latvia and Liechtenstein, all the way to Ukraine and the United Kingdom. Covering 2013, it is generally well-made. The chapters are uneven in length (as expected) but also in quality. The rigid choice of catego-

ries allows a comparative view, but such a comparative view is not necessarily encouraged by the editors. It gives the reader a synchronic view with minimal historical references but with explicit references to significant events that happened during 2013. While the standard length for a chapter seems to be around 18 pages, some of the chapters are regrettably short (among these one may name Croatia, whose entry is only 9 pages long).

Surveying these four books together raise one common, paradigmatic question in the study of Islam in the Balkans: that of its place within Islam. This question is related to another potentially derivative question: what is Islam’s role in its surrounding societies and states? Is it ‘total’ in its scope, serving as a set of moral laws, or only a frame of identification, of belonging? Delving into the medieval period, Ines Aščerić-Todd has shown that religion is not only a matter of the spirit, but also a social and bureaucratic institution that proved crucial for state building. While this is hardly any news for medievalists, it is a crucial qualification to our understanding of Sufis in this period. What both Ina Merdjanova and the contributors in *The Revival in Islam in the Balkans* show is that the overarching assumption that the Balkans are a greenhouse for Islamic radicalism, that is to say terrorism, waiting to infiltrate Europe, is at best exaggerated, and that Islam is more local than transnational/global/globalized (a characteristic that, as Aščerić-Todd points out in the medieval context,

can also apply to the lodges that came to convert them). Their explorations in multiple, divergent aspects of Muslim existence in Southeastern Europe seems to revert to this contemporary debate, which seems often to limit their scope of interest and circumscribe it to this rather dull, policy-driven paradigm instead of focusing on the various beliefs, practices, and theoretical approaches in the context of their own role, function, and impact. Thus, having proved their point regarding Islam in the Balkan as a religion and culture grounded in the lo-

cal environment but present in global and transnational contexts (with various nuances), an answer that might surprise outsiders since it looks so obvious, is that now is the time to work outside this paradigm. ■

Endnote

1. See Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), especially chapter 6. Other useful works are Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2001) and the much older *Some Tribal Origins, Laws and Customs of the Balkans* by Mary Edith Durham, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928).