



INTRODUCTION: IDENTITY, CONFESSIONALISM, AND NATIONALISM

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There have been significant populations of Muslims in the Balkans since at least the fifteenth century. In some towns or regions they constituted the majority of the population until recently. Yet, in the peninsula as a whole, they were, and have remained, in the minority. It is this minority with which this special issue of *Nationalities Papers* is concerned. Up until quite recently these populations have been the objects of curiosity, persecution, assimilation, and on occasion scholarly investigation. Since the 1980s an impressive literature on the Muslim minority populations of the Balkans emerged.¹ The books and articles published during this period have explored subjects as diverse as the legal and political positions of the minorities, demographic changes, and identity. It is this last subject on which this special issue will concentrate. Furthermore, the focus of the articles in this volume is specifically (though not exclusively) on minority populations in the Balkans. In other words, the essays will examine the Turkish population of Bulgaria or Greece but not of the Republic of Turkey (part of which, it will be remembered, has remained in the Balkans). The reason for this focus is that the Balkan Muslim minorities have faced very different pressures and choices than the Muslims who have lived in a state with a Muslim majority. It is those choices with which this issue is concerned.

Before beginning any investigation into a subject such as national identity it is worthwhile to examine some basic terms. The differences between terms such as “ethnic group,” “nationality,” and “nation” are sometimes quite vague. While most students of the subject agree that both ethnic identity and national identity are highly subjective and somewhat related phenomena, the concepts differ insofar as they imply or lead to different levels of group action.² One general distinction that is often made is that an ethnic group is less mobilized for political action than a nationality or a nation. In other words, a group having an ethnic consciousness or identity will not demand self-determination (political autonomy or independence) whereas a nationality or nation might. In the articles that follow, the authors have developed their own frameworks for using these terms.

Another term that needs at least a cursory look is “Muslim.” Indeed, an important part of any discussion of Muslim minorities in the Balkans is the use of the term “Muslim” itself. The meaning and significance of this term has varied over time. In particular, it has been used as either a national or a religious identification, or both.

For example, in post-1971 Yugoslavia, “Muslim” was recognized as a national identification while it was also possible to identify one’s religion as “Muslim” and one’s nationality as something else, Albanian for example. On the other hand, as Justin McCarthy (among other contributors to this volume) points out, during the Ottoman period population data were processed almost exclusively on the basis of religion. Thus, Ottoman census figures tell us nothing (or at any rate very little) about the “national” makeup of the Muslim populations, only their religions. In the Ottoman case, therefore, the most significant principle for the division of the population was not ethnic or national identity, but religion. The attitude of non-Muslim Balkan peoples was similar. In most of the Balkans, Muslims were “Turks” regardless of their ethno-linguistic background. This attitude changed significantly, but not completely, over time.³

The status of the Muslim minority communities and the sorts of identities they espoused have varied greatly over the past five centuries. During the Ottoman period the Balkan Muslims enjoyed the legal and social privileges of belonging to the ruling confessional community. Their fates were generally much worse under the Balkan national governments that emerged during the first half of the nineteenth century. After the end of World War I and the final triumph of the Balkan national states, the Muslim population of the Balkans was reduced to a fraction of its former size.

Beginning with the growth of nationalism during the late eighteenth century, the Balkan Christian nationalists were faced with the problem of the Muslim populations in their midst. In particular, these nationalists had to determine how these populations (sometimes quite substantial) fitted into their plans for the construction of a nation state. In some cases (perhaps most of the time), the nationalists regarded the Muslims as foreigners who had to be expelled. In other instances, the Muslims were regarded as renegade members of the dominant national group who needed to be brought back into the fold. In very few cases were the Muslims simply left alone, and in even fewer were they regarded as a distinct ethnic or national group. The growth of nationalism and the establishment of the Balkan nation states likewise put the Balkan Muslims in a difficult position. Some identified with the Ottoman Empire, others with the ruling national group. Still others engaged in building distinct national identities for themselves.

Central to the process of the development of national identities among the Balkan Muslims has been the influence of Islam. The ways in which the different groups have used Islam as part of their national self-identification are varied. Some of these communities have developed a national identity based on their religion (the Bosnian Muslims) while others have a national identity that supersedes their religious one (the Albanians). Still others have a national identity that is closely tied to (but not necessarily coterminous with) a religious one (the Turks).

As the contributors to this volume make clear, the importance of Islam in the process of national identity formation is of fundamental importance but its exact role has been complex, indeed almost contradictory. Islam’s complex role in identity

formation is certainly not limited to Muslims in the Balkans. Scholars writing on the development of Turkish and Arab national consciousness have pointed to Islam as an important badge of identity (especially among the Turks) but at the same time as a retardant to the development of national self-consciousness.⁴ This is due to the great stress Islamic thought has laid on the idea of community, specifically the “community of believers” (*umma*). In theory at least, a Muslim’s primary source of identity was the *umma*. Of course, the actual strength of this Islamic identity has varied greatly over time and place. While Muslims from different parts of the world have been conscious of their unique features, the sense of belonging to a world community seems to have been very real. This sense of belonging must have been especially important in the Ottoman Empire. Muslims followed different laws and had different rights and responsibilities from non-Muslims. This different legal status, theoretically, transcended differences in language or geographic origin.

On the other hand, Muslims in the Ottoman Empire shared numerous cultural traits with their non-Muslim neighbors. On the most basic level, Muslims often spoke languages similar to those of their Christian neighbors. This was especially true in the Balkans, where many Muslims spoke Slavic languages. Nor was Islam necessarily as strong an agent of separation as might be supposed. The dervish orders, active especially among the Balkan Muslims, were powerful engines of syncretism. Local customs pre-dating the Ottoman conquest were thus maintained in both Christian and Muslim folk religions. In other words, the role of Islam in the personal identities of the Muslim population was certainly important. But, as the contributors to this issue show, its importance varied significantly over time and among different groups. Indeed, different populations of Muslims, while recognizing certain shared characteristics stemming from Islam, also had numerous traits that separated them.

Another important distinction among the different Balkan Muslim minorities is their geographic type. Most of these minority groups fall into one of three types.⁵ First are the border minorities. These are minority populations who live in a border region with a state that contains a majority of their co-nationals. Few of the Balkan Muslim minorities fall into such a category. The most important are the Albanian minorities in Montenegro and Macedonia and the Albanians of Kosovo, who live on or near the border with the Republic of Albania.

The second type of minority population is the “island” group. Island populations, as the name implies, are compact groups of a single nationality completely surrounded by members of another national group. An important example of such a phenomenon is the Turkish population of Western (Greek) Thrace. This population forms the overwhelming majority in the region although it is insignificant in country-wide numbers and is completely surrounded by other national groups (mostly Greeks and Bulgarians).

The third category is the “mixed” population. This is the most common status of Muslim minorities in the Balkans. The Muslim population is rarely found concentrated in neat and tidy regions but tends to be dispersed throughout a wide area,

intermixed with non-Muslims. This is largely due to the Ottoman style of confessional organization (the so-called *millet* system) but is also the result of the socioeconomic tendency of Muslims to live in towns. Thus, Balkan towns were (until the eighteenth century) usually Muslim and Jewish islands surrounded by a Christian countryside.

Another important component of the Muslim minority experience in the Balkans, in this volume raised especially by Hugh Poulton, has been the phenomenon of assimilation. Assimilation has taken two general forms. The first is the assimilation of a particular Muslim population into a majority non-Christian one. One of the best example of this development would be the Pomaks in Bulgaria, many of whom have been assimilated into the Bulgarian Christian majority. A less common kind of assimilation has occurred within Muslim populations when a smaller Muslim group is assimilated into a larger one. Thus, in parts of Macedonia or Bosnia some Turks and Muslim Roma have been assimilated into the local Muslim community (in these cases, Albanians or Muslim Slavs, respectively).

The essays in this special issue address five different national minorities: Albanians (in Kosovo and Macedonia), the Muslim Slavs of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Sandžak of Novi Pazar, Muslim Gypsies (Roma), Pomaks (in Bulgaria), and Turks (in Bulgaria, Greece, and Macedonia). For each of these groups the authors outline the ways in which these minority populations have formed their identities. In particular, the essays address the relationship between these groups and Islam and the extent to which each of their identities has been defined by Islam.

The first part of the volume outlines a broad historical narrative of the Balkan Muslim population. The piece by Florian Bieber provides an overview of the context in which the Muslims operated before the nineteenth century. Justin McCarthy reviews the experiences of the Muslim populations as the Balkan national states were being established, and Hugh Poulton surveys their experiences in the independent Balkan nation states.

The second part examines the Balkan Muslim minorities in detail. Aydin Babuna's essay concentrates on the Albanians of Kosovo and Macedonia. David Crowe addresses the complicated issue of the national identity of the Muslim Gypsies. Ali Eminov writes on the Turkish and Tatar populations. Francine Friedman examines the Muslim Slavs of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Sandžak. Finally, Mary Neuburger concentrates on the Bulgarian-speaking Pomaks.

Finally, a brief note on spelling and place names is in order. Most terms connected to the Balkans have several different renderings. Thus, the area called the "Sandžak of Novi Pazar," is also known as the "Sandjak/Sanjak of Yeni Pazar." Likewise, certain terms, especially those of Arabic origin, have several different accepted spellings, depending upon the transliteration system being used. Thus, the word for the "protected persons" living under Muslim rule can be spelled "dhimmi" or "zimmi." In all cases the individual contributors have been free to use their own choice of spellings.

The development of national identities by the Muslim populations of the Balkans is still going on. Indeed, as a result of recent events in southeastern Europe some of the observations made in these essays might already be obsolete by the time this volume appears in print. Nevertheless, the editors hope that this collection of essays will help to illuminate an important subject.

Editing this special issue has been an interesting and challenging task and I would not have been able to complete the project without the help of many people. I need especially to acknowledge Prof. Henry R. Huttenbach, Editor Emeritus of *Nationalities Papers*, for providing me with the initial opportunity for working on this project, as well as his successor, Prof. Nancy M. Wingfield, for her tireless support and assistance. Other people who helped with their suggestions and comments were the late Prof. Peter F. Sugar and Prof. Sabrina P. Ramet, both of the University of Washington, and Prof. Nick Miller of Boise State University. Finally, my wife, Tami Coleman, has been a tremendous source of inspiration and encouragement through the course of this project.

NOTES

1. See for example, H. T. Norris, *Islam in the Balkans: Religion and Society between Europe and the Arab World* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); Hugh Poulton, *The Balkans: Minorities and States in Conflict* (London: MRG, 1993); Hugh Poulton and S. Taji-Farouki (eds), *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State* (London: Hurst, 1997).
2. There is an immense literature on ethnic and national identities. On the differences between them see especially Paul R. Brass, "Ethnic Groups and Nationalities," in Peter F. Sugar (ed.), *Ethnic Diversity and Conflict in Eastern Europe* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 1980).
3. Interestingly, Greece uses a similar sort of calculus for its citizens. It does not recognize any ethnic minorities, only religious ones.
4. See, for example, Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 239, 276–281; Kemal Karpat, *An Inquiry into the Social Foundations of Nationalism in the Ottoman State: From Social Estates to Classes, From Millets to Nations* (Princeton: Center of International Studies, 1973), pp. 97–116; David Kushner, *The Rise of Turkish Nationalism, 1876–1908*.
5. This taxonomy of minorities is based on Charles Z. Jokay, "Nationality/Ethnic Settlement Patterns and Political Behavior in East Central Europe," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 380–381, 1996.