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MUSLIM IDENTITY IN THE BALKANS BEFORE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF NATION STATES

Florian Bieber

Introduction

In analyzing national and ethnic identities in the Balkans, one notices a “delay” in the development of the Muslim national identity. The Bosniaks¹ and Albanians, for example, developed a national consciousness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.² In contrast to the Southeastern European Christians, the Muslim inhabitants followed the official religion of the dominant political class of the Ottoman Empire—Islam—a faith that (theoretically, at least) privileged religious belief over ethnicity or nationalism. These two concepts, alien to Ottoman intellectual tradition, became fully understood by the Ottoman elite only in the early twentieth century. Although the Muslims under Ottoman rule often perceived themselves as different from their co-religionist rulers in Istanbul, as shall be demonstrated in this paper, they nevertheless shared the religion of the rulers of the Empire and practised a religion that suppressed the development of national identity far more explicitly than did Christianity. Thus, it was the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, and the consequent recognition that this state was ceasing to protect the interests and identity of the Muslim population in Southeastern Europe, which led to the development of ethnic and national identity among the Muslims.

While it is difficult to trace national and ethnic identities to the eighteenth century and earlier, it is essential to begin the analysis there in order to understand the national mythologies among the Balkan peoples that emerged in the nineteenth century. While the national ideologies of the Christian inhabitants tended to portray the Ottoman period as the “Turkish yoke,” national myths among the Muslims often glorify the Ottoman period and overestimate the degree of national or ethnic consciousness among the Muslims in the Ottoman Empire prior to the first uprisings in the early nineteenth century.³

This article shall first examine the role of Islam in the areas ruled by the Sublime Porte. Next, the paper will survey the Islamic communities. While there are numerous Islamic communities in the Balkans which merit attention, this study shall concentrate on the Muslims of Bosnia (and Sanjak) and the Albanian Muslims, who constitute the two most numerous Muslim groups in the Balkans.⁴ Finally, the article

will turn to the controversial issue of conversion which exists as a centerpiece of nationalist myths among the non-Muslim nations of Southeastern Europe. The question of conversion from Christianity to Islam not only affects the relationship between Christians and Muslims on the peninsula, but also contributes to the understanding of identity construction among Muslims in the Balkans.

In addressing the above, the article seeks to explore the prerequisites for the development of Muslim national identity in Southeastern Europe since the nineteenth century. Other contributing factors that will be further discussed include the ethnic origins of the Balkan Muslims, the influence of the dervishes and folk religion, and, perhaps most importantly, the decline of the Ottoman central government and the subsequent formation of local, semi-autonomous Muslim polities.

Muslims in the Ottoman Empire

Contrary to commonly held belief, Islam was present in Southeastern Europe well before the Ottoman Empire established itself in the region. Because of its proximity to the Middle East and, thus, to the origins of Islam, the Byzantine Empire and parts of the Balkans were exposed to Islam as early as in the tenth century. The early Balkan Muslims were generally members of Asiatic tribes which settled in different parts of the peninsula. A large community lived in the northern fringes of the Balkans, on the Pannonian plain and along its southern rim in the area of today's Vojvodina and Hungary, and also in northwestern Bosnia. The southern Balkans likewise experienced occasional encounters with Muslims. In the thirteenth century some 10,000–12,000 Muslim Turkmen settlers arrived in the Dobrudja.⁵ These Muslims, however, left few traces, and the majority eventually resettled in Anatolia.⁶

A continuous Muslim presence in Southeastern Europe began with the Ottoman conquest. Although the Ottoman state was a Muslim Empire, it was shaped by three traditions: the traditional Islamic conception of statehood, Byzantine elements, and the heritage of the Turkish origins of the Ottomans. The Islamic foundation of the Empire justified the strict division between Muslims and non-Muslims. The two recognized non-Muslim monotheistic religions, Christianity and Judaism, enjoyed official recognition and thus some sort of toleration by the Sublime Porte, but their followers were inferior in status to the Muslim subjects of the Empire. The societal pyramid of the Ottoman Empire was structured along two axes—horizontal and vertical. The vertical axis separated Muslims from the other monotheistic religions, while the horizontal one divided the society into different social classes. This structure was strictly hierarchical, headed by the Sultan with largely unchecked powers. Two main groups accounted for the rest of society. The first group was the state service, described by Peter Sugar as “professional Ottomans.” Its members either worked for the court as scribes and soldiers, or as representatives of the recognized religions. Each profession functioned according to its own hierarchy, but remained with little power in relation to the Sultan. They had, however, indirect

means of influencing the political development and, at times, even overthrew unpopular Sultans. The “professional Ottomans” were recruited from all three recognized religions.

The second group consisted of everyone else and was referred to as the *raya* or “flock.” It encompassed both Muslims and non-Muslims. The Christians and Jews enjoyed the protection of Islamic law as *zimmi*—members of other “religions of the book”—as long as they accepted the supremacy of Islam. Although the social hierarchy was shaped primarily by the functional role of its members, religions never ceased to play an important role. Certain confessions specialized in certain occupations, and not all professions were open to Muslims and *zimmi* alike. The *zimmi* had fewer rights than Muslims and were governed by different laws. For example, during most of Ottoman history, only Muslims served in the army, and non-Muslims were obliged to pay a poll tax.⁷ Only non-Muslims were subject to the *devshirme* (child levy), a compulsory separation of boys from their families, their conversion to Islam and recruitment into the Ottoman service, a practice that extended well into the seventeenth century.⁸

In the later centuries of Ottoman rule, Turkish tradesmen became increasingly sidelined by Albanian and Slav merchants. This development coincided with an overall reduction of the Turkish population in the Balkans. Peter Sugar has pointed out that the reasons for the decline are still open to speculation, but argues that the decline is most likely the consequence of plagues and wars in combination with a lower birth rate among the wealthy Muslims and decreasing immigration from Anatolia to Europe.⁹

Two groups of Muslims dominated life in the Southeast European cities and later in the countryside: the old landowners and officials on one side, and the Janissary corps on the other. The latter was the only Muslim population group that increased in number in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁰ Their influence ended only with the abolition of the Janissary corps in 1826. In the face of the increasingly independent Janissary corps and other challenges to the Ottoman central authorities, the corruption of the state and its inability to reform itself became increasingly visible and augmented tensions between Muslims and Christians. Christians moved in increasing numbers beyond the control of the state through *berats*, an arrangement that placed them under the protection of foreign consuls in accordance with the capitulations concluded with the Great Powers.¹¹

Islam and Identity in the Balkans

Although Islam was the state religion in the Ottoman Empire, the dynastic principle of the supremacy of the Ottoman family dominated all religious aspects of the Empire’s development, especially in its early phase. This articulated itself in tolerance towards the previous elite after the conquest, so long as they recognized the Ottoman authorities. The population was also allowed to continue practising its

religion. After the conquest, only one church—usually the main edifice—was confiscated and converted into a mosque in each town, while the others remained untouched.¹²

Albanians

Unlike most of the other inhabitants of the Balkans, the Albanians were divided into two separate religious communities by the 1054 schism between the Orthodox Church in Constantinople and the Catholic Church in Rome. The fierce resistance of the Albanian tribes united under the command of George Kastrioti, known as Skenderbeg, to resist the Ottoman armies in the mid fifteenth century, received substantial support from the Pope and the Western rulers who feared the expansion of the Ottomans. Nevertheless, from the end of the fifteenth century until the early twentieth century, Albania remained firmly under Ottoman control. During that period, no other ethnic group in the Balkans converted to Islam in such high numbers as did the Albanians, which resulted in the division of the Albanians into three religious communities.¹³

The conversion to Islam began slowly with the conquest of Albania by Mehmet II in 1463. By 1520, only 3% of the inhabitants of Albanian lands were Muslims; by 1690 the number had risen to 70%, approximately the same ratio as today. The conversions could be considered as part of a political process, reflecting the decision of the local nobility to convert, followed by their subjects.¹⁴ The conversion of the Albanians was not only a gradual process, but also one dependent on the location and, more importantly, on the original religion of the population. The first area to experience mass conversion was the predominantly Catholic north. According to reports by the Bishop of Bar (today in Montenegro), only 10% of the population in northern Albania was Muslim in 1610, while a few decades later the cities and the lowlands became predominantly Muslim. Inhabitants of predominantly Catholic central Albania also converted in great numbers, while the Orthodox south experienced far fewer instances of Islamization. The reasons for these differences are obvious: the Catholic Church did not enjoy the same degree of protection by the Ottoman Empire as the Orthodox Church and thus possessed only inadequate institutions and personnel to tend to the congregation, while the Orthodox Church had a superior infrastructure and could count on the support of Sublime Porte.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Ottoman conquest coincided with a crisis of the Christian churches in Southeastern Europe. In the interior, especially in the mountains, many Albanian shepherds remained loyal to their religion.¹⁶ According to Ramadan Marmullaku, the Ottomans organized an Islamization campaign in the seventeenth century to insure the loyalty of the Albanians. This Islamization was not achieved forcibly, although there were instances of violent conversion. It was rather the concrete economic incentives that caused the conversions, such as the promise of land and lower taxes.¹⁷

During this period the “head tax” taken from the Christian inhabitants also increased dramatically, providing additional incentives to convert.¹⁸

Islamic missionaries from Anatolia and other parts of the Ottoman Empire came to Albania to promote the conversion to Islam. Here the Islamic orders—such as the Saadi, the Rufi, the Helveti, the Mevlani, and, most of all, the Bektashi—proved to be successful.¹⁹ The Bektashi order contributed particularly to the development of Albanian identity by providing a local religious elite which promoted the cultural development of Albanians. According to the Bektashis, the order first arrived in Albania with the armies of Sultan Murad II in the early fifteenth century. The first historical records can be dated only to the seventeenth century. It is also difficult to estimate the numbers of the Albanians who adhered to the Bektashi order and their interpretation of Islam. According to some estimates, in the early twentieth century approximately 20% of the total Albanian population were members of the Bektashi order. The main strongholds of the order were the south, especially at the “monastery” in Kanina, close to the coastal towns of Vlora and Kruja. The Bektashi order eventually came to be closely identified with Albanians. In the eighteenth century, even in its Turkish center Hacı Bektash Köy, the majority of the Bektashi dervishes were of Albanian origin. Later, in the nineteenth century, many leading Albanian nationalists originated from the Bektashi order, which actively supported the national movement in Albania.²⁰ George Arnakis also ascribes the exceptional transreligious national identity of the Albanians partially to the role of the Bektashi order: “Bektashism, which had previously been instrumental in the spread of Islam, was now a valuable link between the three religious groups.”²¹ The heterodox Bektashi order, which resembled Shi’i Islam more than the predominant Sunni Islam of the Ottoman state, was successful largely because it readily adopted other religious traditions.²²

Conversion to Islam opened the possibility for a successful career in the Ottoman Empire for many Albanians.²³ More than any other group in the Balkans, Albanians integrated into the Ottoman hierarchy and achieved high positions in the Empire. From the beginning of Ottoman rule until the seventeenth century, 25 out of 92 grand viziers were of Albanian origin, which is more than those of Turkish origin. Some of the most outstanding military commanders likewise had Albanian roots.²⁴ These successes transformed the Albanians in the Ottoman Empire into loyal subjects whose future and identity were closely intertwined with the Empire.

Many of the Albanians converted in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, however, kept their Christian traditions and declared themselves as Muslim only to improve their social status (called crypt Catholics or *laramane*).²⁵ There is evidence of Ottoman tax collectors requesting the tax payment from Muslim Albanians, unconvinced of the sincerity of their conversion.²⁶ Frequent changes in religion had become commonplace in Albania before the Ottoman conquest, with the nobility adjusting its beliefs to secure the political and military support at hand. While conversion was frequently incomplete throughout the Ottoman lands, this fact applies

particularly well to Albania, where religious intermarriage was as commonplace as conversion to avoid taxation.²⁷ A strong tribal structure, especially in the north, frequently prevented the penetration of Islam beyond ritual observation throughout the Ottoman period.

Islam had a great impact on the development of Albanian culture. In the first centuries under Ottoman rule, Albanian cultural and literary production expressed itself exclusively in Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. Few religious texts, poems, and historical treatises were published in Albanian from the mid fifteenth century onwards. The Albanian language, written in the Arabic alphabet, became increasingly influenced by Turkish. For instance, the Albanian officer and poet Yahya Bey wrote in Ottoman Turkish in the mid sixteenth century, but his themes centered on Albania: he compared the Albanians with eagles and emphasized his Albanian origins.²⁸ A new wave of Albanian literature began with the writer Muçizade in 1724, soon followed by the important author Nezim Frakulla. In fact, very little is known today of the authors who used Albanian in the eighteenth century. Most were members of the Bektashi order and wrote on religious themes.²⁹

Most historians interpret the attempts by local rulers to establish autonomy or even independence of their territories from Ottoman rule during the late eighteenth century as forerunners of the Albanian national movement. These large Muslim landowners—*beys*—sought appointment to official positions in the Ottoman Empire, and with the help of private armies and sometimes small navies they expanded their spheres of influence at the expense of other *beys*. In effect they greatly reduced the influence of the Ottoman Empire in the southern Balkan peninsula. As their prime interest was the expansion of their personal sphere of influence, they cannot be characterized as having promoted a national agenda. Nevertheless, the autonomy from the Sublime Porte they established helped shape a separate identity among the Albanian Muslims which would lead to the League of Prizren nearly a century later.

The struggle between the *beys* resulted in two centers of power which dominated most of the Albanian-inhabited lands at the close of the eighteenth century, Janina and Shkodër. These two areas that managed to establish quasi-independence from the Ottoman Empire were lead by the Bushatlliu family in the north and the legendary Ali Pasha of Janina in the south. Ali Pasha's rule was symptomatic of the late Ottoman Empire in many ways. He occupied the town of Delvina as a local bandit leader, and was subsequently officially accepted as its governor. His support of the Ottomans in the war against Russia secured him the rule over territories reaching from present-day northern Greece to southern Albania, with the center in Janina. The absence of any national program is evident in his support for the Greek uprising in the 1820s. Ali Pasha could hardly be described an Albanian nationalist, but by attempting to establish a territory independent from the Ottoman Empire, he established the option for Albanian Muslims to seek a new territorial arrangement—outside the Ottoman Empire.³⁰ As a member of the Bektashi order, Ali Pasha enabled the undisturbed growth of the order, which peaked in influence under his rule. His

defeat and death in 1822 prompted a retaliation campaign by the Sublime Porte against the Bektashis. As a victim of Ottoman suppression, the Bektashi order became identified with an emerging Albanian identity, reinforcing its role as a facilitator of the national movement.³¹ The rule of Ali Pasha opened up large parts of Albania to the outside world and exposed it to European influences through diplomats, advisors, and soldiers stationed in Janina, thus enabling the spread of Western ideas, such as nationalism, among the Albanians. Ramadan Marmullaku has described the city as “the most advanced center in the Western Ottoman empire.”³²

The religious divisions among the Albanians forestalled a large national movement in the early nineteenth century, in contrast to the developments in neighbouring Greece and Serbia, but the strong links between tribes and families of different religions prevented the same level of identification with Islam as among other Muslims in the Balkans. Although a Muslim Albanian would have been considered a part of the Muslim community of believers, the *umma*, in the Ottoman Empire, the Muslim Albanians considered themselves separate from the other Muslims of the Empire. Despite the active participation of many Albanians in the administration, Albania remained peripheral to the Ottoman Empire, and Islam never succeeded in becoming as important for self-identification as in other parts of the Empire.³³

Bosniaks

At the time of the Ottoman conquest of Bosnia, the population was already segmented into several different religious groups, not unlike the situation in Albania. The inhabitants of Bosnia were divided by the schism between western and eastern Christianity, while the region was also home to the Bosnian Church. Past scholarship frequently confused the followers of the Bosnian Church (*Kr'stiani*, or Christians) with the Bogomils, active in Bulgaria. While both groups can be characterized as so-called heretical movements, which broke away from mainstream Christianity, the two are not identical. The Bosnian Church, next to Catholicism and Orthodoxy, was the most dominant religion in the Bosnian kingdom until the state's collapse before the Ottoman invasion in 1463. In some aspects, it resembled the subsequent Protestant reforms and also shared similarities with Islam beyond the five daily prayers. The mysticism of the Church, for example, bore a strong resemblance to the Sufi orders in Islam.³⁴

The demise of the heretical church in Bosnia, viewed in the context of the relatively large scale of conversions, has led to the perception that there exists a direct continuity between the *Kr'stiani* and the Muslims in Bosnia. Although the Bosnian church played an important role in facilitating the large-scale conversion of the Bosnian population to Islam, the relationship is not directly causal, as has been interpreted in the past, but rather correspondent. The Church was already relatively weak at the time of the Ottoman conquest and more than a century passed until the conversion in Bosnia began in earnest. Furthermore, the Muslim converts were

members not only of the Bosnian Church but of other confessional groups as well.³⁵ Indeed, “though frequently historians have used the Bosnian Church to explain the Islamization of Bosnia, it is more accurate to explain that phenomenon by the absence of strong Catholic, Orthodox, or even Bosnian Church organizations.”³⁶

As in Albania, the process of conversion to Islam in Bosnia was influenced by the activities of the Bektashi order. The Bektashi’s heterodox interpretation of Islam, which tolerated the consumption of alcohol, as well as marriage with non-Muslims, probably facilitated conversions to Islam.³⁷

In addition to conversion, migration also played an important role in the formation of Muslim Bosnia. The advances of the Habsburg Monarchy after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire at the gates of Vienna in 1683 displaced as many as 30,000 Muslims from Lika in Croatia into Bosnia. While a large number of these Muslims originated from Bosnia, having moved northwest with the Ottoman Empire centuries earlier, a substantial proportion was of Croatian origin.³⁸ Although the Habsburg armies fought their way all the way to Kosovo, the Ottomans eventually counter-attacked and managed to retain Bosnia. The Treaty of Karlowitz—signed between the two Empires in 1699—transformed Bosnia into a frontier province, continually exposed to incursions from neighbouring Habsburg territory. The eighteenth century likewise saw its share of internal uprisings. In 1748, for example, Muslim peasants protested against the new land-tenure system which reduced the majority of them to a status comparable to serfdom. Nevertheless, the Muslims opted not to join forces with invading Habsburg forces. In the end, they preferred working to improve their status within the Ottoman Empire to submitting to Habsburg rule, as the Monarchy had previously engaged in forcible conversions of Muslims to Catholicism.³⁹

As in Albania in the eighteenth century, Bosnia was increasingly governed by autonomy-minded local Muslim rulers. Since Bosnia was a frontier region, the main proponents of this local power were the *kapetanije*, who possessed wide-ranging powers as military governors of the frontier regions in the decaying Empire. The autonomy that was granted to Bosnia in the eighteenth century did not improve conditions in the region compared with the rest of the Empire with regard to economic decline and the increasingly unbearable living conditions for non-Muslim and Muslim peasants alike.⁴⁰ It did, however, pave the way for a strong regional identity, which did not express itself in demands for independence from the realm of the Ottoman Empire, but sought to limit the influence of the Sublime Porte. Before the nationalist movements from neighbouring Croatia and Serbia entered the political arena in Bosnia, the inhabitants considered themselves as Bosnians of different faiths rather than members of the Croatian or Serbian nation.⁴¹ Near the end of the period under consideration here, the Serbian writer and early national figure Dositej Obradović remarked, “A Turk of Bosnia and Herzegovina is called a Turk according to his religion, but as for race and language, of whatever sort were his remote ancestors, of the same sort will be his latest descendants: Bosnians and Hercegovinians, so long as God’s world endures. ... When the real Turks return to their own

vilayet, whence they came, the Bosnians will remain Bosnians.”⁴² Thus, the transformation of Bosnians of the three religious communities into different national communities took place only in the nineteenth century.

Bosnia became, after Istanbul and Edirne, the main center of Islam in the European part of the Ottoman Empire. The conversion of the Slav population in the province and the immigration of Muslims from the border regions with the decline of the Empire contributed to Bosnia’s central role. A lively cultural life existed in Bosnia, despite claims to the contrary.⁴³ For example Ivo Andrić characterized the literary productions of Bosnians in his 1924 dissertation as “meager in quantity as well as low in quality.”⁴⁴ His generally dismissive judgement of Islam has resounded in the writings of others on the cultural life of Bosniaks. Andrić concludes his treatise of the “development of spiritual life in Bosnia” with the assessment that “[I]n this area [literature] as well, the influence of Islam proved to be utterly restrictive and barren.”⁴⁵

Conversion to Islam

As the majority of the Muslims living in the Balkans today are descendants of converts, the issue of conversion to Islam in Southeastern Europe is of great importance. Conversion to Islam in the Ottoman Empire has been the source of numerous misconceptions and dangerous simplifications. In the nineteenth century, the emerging nation states used these stereotypes to justify their quest for independence, but in recent decades the conversions have come to be sometimes described as benign—in an attempt to promulgate a more positive interpretation of the Ottoman Empire. Ultimately, conversion to Islam is far too complex a phenomenon to be explained by one interpretation alone. Conversions occurred throughout the five centuries of Ottoman rule, but only small numbers of inhabitants changed their faith to Islam in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. In addition, the rates of conversion differed between urban Christians close to the Turkish heartland, for example, and Albanian shepherds in the mountains. It is interesting to note that Islam took hold particularly quickly in two areas under consideration which, in comparison with other regions in the Empire, experienced relatively weak control by the central authorities, because of their topography, distance from Istanbul, and strong local traditions. Albania and Bosnia both felt very little direct influence from the Sublime Porte by the seventeenth century, yet nevertheless both populations adopted Islam early on and developed a regional identity that differentiated them from the Muslims elsewhere in the Balkans as well as in the center of Ottoman power, Istanbul.

When addressing the subject of conversions, it is important to differentiate between three types found in the Balkans. The first type is usually characterized as “voluntary” conversion, which by far accounts for the greatest number joining the Muslim population of the Balkans.⁴⁶ The second group of converts consists of Christians who were forced to accept Islam as their new faith. Although these

constitute the exception, there is evidence of occasional forced conversions, such as in the Rhodope Mountains (today in Bulgaria) in the mid-seventeenth century.⁴⁷ The system of *devshirme* or child levy—the taking of male children from Christian families and educating them as Muslims—represents the third type. Although this levy was undoubtedly also forcible, it differs from the second group in its mechanisms and in the impact on identity, since the children growing up as Muslims through the *devshirme* system did not evolve into a separate group with a potential for developing a national identity.

Why conversion at all? Islam, like Christianity, has a strong proselytizing mission in its belief structure, thus the Ottoman dynasty's Islamic traditions dictated the active pursuit of conversion among its subjects. While the conversion of Muslims to other religions was forbidden, conversion to Islam was laudable. Conversion from one recognized religion to another was tolerated, as it had little effect on the functioning of the state. The Empire was caught in a dilemma, however, as higher taxes collected from the non-Muslim inhabitants greatly contributed to the functioning of the state: "Conversion was supposed to be the ultimate aim of a good Muslim State, yet mass conversion would have produced economic chaos and ruin."⁴⁸ The Ottoman Empire therefore never endeavored to convert their subjects with the same zeal as did some other Islamic empires.

The conversion to Islam was a gradual process, not a sudden mass movement. By 1520–1530 few conversions had taken place, and most of the 18.8% of the Muslims living in the European part of the Ottoman Empire were Turkish speakers who had moved to the major cities (i.e. Sarajevo, Skopje, Monastir) as members of the administration or army.⁴⁹ In addition to the reasons outlined above, the rising threat towards the Sublime Porte from Christian powers in central and eastern Europe increased the number of *nev müslim* (newly converted Muslims). Viewing the Balkan Christian population as a possible fifth column, the Ottoman state became increasingly intolerant, reducing the freedoms of the non-Muslim inhabitants and thereby creating additional incentives to convert.⁵⁰

Conversion to Islam for economic reasons has been interpreted in later times by nationalists from the non-Muslims nations in the Balkans as a betrayal of the converts' roots. Again, to quote Ivo Andrić, "In order to save his real estate he accepted the faith of his conquerors and at once set about nailing down that property with its associated rights and privileges all the more tightly and securely using the precepts and formulas of the new religion, the more the old one was denied."⁵¹ While the maintenance of previous economic advantages certainly offered itself as a strong argument for conversion among the Bosnian nobility, it is also necessary to bear in mind the economic hardships that often affected the non-Muslim population. It would be thus wrong to characterize the conversion for economic reasons as purely "voluntary." Occasionally converts were rewarded by the local authorities and received gifts and congratulations.⁵² Besides the exemption from the poll tax, other obvious reasons for conversion can be found in the exemption from the rather

stringent rules imposed on the Christian and Jews populations, such as sartorial regulations, the obligation to bow down in front of Muslims or to dismount a horse within view of a Muslim. Furthermore, the word of a Christian or a Jew was worth less in courts and other state institutions.

Unlike most other authors, Peter Sugar tried to identify reasons for conversion beyond the material advantages. He points to the capacity of Islam to accommodate traditional folk religions as an additional strong incentive. The most important link between Islam and the traditional beliefs among the inhabitants in the Balkans were the Islamic orders of the dervishes. The dervish orders were divided into different streams, most importantly the Mevlevi and the aforementioned Bektashi. The founders of these orders acquired similar status after their death as saints in Christianity.⁵³ Occasionally Christians and Muslims worshipped the same saints, albeit with different names, making the switch from one to another religion appear relatively insignificant.⁵⁴ It is also important to bear in mind that the Christian traditions adapted to the new environments and incorporated Islamic elements, further reducing the discrepancies between the practices of the two religions.⁵⁵

These and other similarities between folk Islam and folk Christianity can have great explanatory power. Sugar concludes his examination of this relationship by noting, “In Europe conversion was limited pretty much to certain elements who had really never understood or practised their faith correctly and for whom, therefore, apostasy was less a question of belief than of convenience.”⁵⁶ Whatever the details of the religious beliefs of the early Balkan Christian population, it can certainly be argued that the practice of Christianity, as well as of Islam, in large parts of Southeastern Europe had little to do with what church leaders in Rome or Istanbul had in mind. In addition, the church failed to provide many of its believers with the infrastructure necessary to retain its following, even under Islamic rule. Thus some of the conversions, such as those in Albania and Crete in the eighteenth centuries, can be attributed to a loss of faith coupled with a positive view of Islam.⁵⁷

One of the controversial issues regarding conversion is the *devshirme*, or child levy, a practice carried out by the Ottoman authorities from the time of the first conquests into the late seventeenth century. According to popular Balkan historiography and national mythology, the forcible recruitment of young boys into the Ottoman army and their conversion to Islam confirmed the image of the violent and alien nature of Islam and the Sublime Porte. Smail Balić points out that in reality only a relatively small number of families were affected. Furthermore, the levy was carried out only every four years and the first-born son was exempted. The purpose of the *devshirme* was not to convert the Balkan population—this tool would have been largely ineffective—but to increase the military might of the Ottoman Empire and to compensate for the exemption of non-Muslims from military service. The *devshirme* is thus to be regarded as a political and military tool and not as religious policy of the Ottoman Empire.⁵⁸

As the recruited boys often went on to a successful career in the Ottoman army and administration, their position could benefit their original community. Some Bosnian and Albanian Muslims voluntarily surrendered their sons for education and a military career within the framework of the *devshirme*.⁵⁹ On the other hand, Arnakis noted that the *devshirme* provided an incentive for families to convert to Islam in order to avoid the child levy.⁶⁰ A similar interpretation was proposed by Ivo Andrić four decades earlier. He described the *devshirme* as “another institution brought by the conqueror and imposed by force on the subjugated land, one of great importance for the Islamization and hence for Bosnia’s spiritual life: the Adžami-Oglan or boy tribute.”⁶¹ There certainly exists evidence that at times entire families converted in order to avoid the *devshirme*. However, the *devshirme* was not a major cause for large-scale conversions, as the mass conversions took place after the *devshirme* was in decline or even abolished.⁶² In other words, a large number of the Bosnian and Albanian families affected by the levy before the seventeenth century converted to Islam only much later. Contrary to the claims of Balkan national historiographies, the heritage of the *devshirme* affected nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Muslims and non-Muslims alike, as both communities had Christian ancestors, who were forced to pay the child levy.

The fact that many high-ranking Ottoman officials who began their career in the army due to the *devshirme* maintained contact with their family and their community indicates that the age of recruitment was not always below ten, contrary to popular belief.⁶³ These officials provided a much needed link between the Ottoman administration and its non-Muslim subjects through their knowledge of their mother tongue in addition to Ottoman Turkish. The most prominent case was that of Mehmed Sökölü and his brother Makarij Sokolović. Sökölü, an orthodox Slav originating from Bosnia, rose through the *devshirme* system to become Grand Vizier and subsequently reinstated the Serbian patriarchate of Ipek (Peć), which was headed by his brother.⁶⁴

The long-term effects of the large-scale Islamization are still open to controversy. George Arnakis presumes that “if the Greeks, Serbs, Croats, Rumanians, and Bulgarians had embraced the faith of Mohammed, they would have crossed the dividing line, and the Turkification would have followed their Islamization within a generation.”⁶⁵ Yet the inhabitants of the Balkans who did convert to Islam themselves refute this judgement. Although the elites that were drawn to Istanbul undoubtedly became “Turkified,” the local populations retained their historical identity, merely adding Turkish elements. In the end, there is little evidence to support the claim that Islamization such as it took place under Ottoman rule necessarily furthered the “Turkification” of the population.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the Muslims of the Balkans at the end of the eighteenth century were hardly a homogeneous group. Their identities were as diverse as the reasons for

their presence in the peninsula. Although at the time the Muslims in the area had not yet begun to develop a sense of national identity, the Muslim Albanians and Bosniaks were perceived, and saw themselves, not merely as Muslims but as separate communities, which had much in common with their neighbours.

Well into the nineteenth century most Muslims continued to view the Ottoman Empire as the state structure within which they wanted to live. The decline of the Empire, however, presented Muslims from Bihać to Crete with three options: one, they could withdraw further southeast to the shrinking borders of the Ottoman Empire (eventually to Anatolia); two, they could assimilate into the new Christian nation states by adopting Christianity; or, three, they could form their own nations, by establishing their own nation states. The last of these options is a continuing process that has still not been completed at the end of the twentieth century. Most Muslims of Southeastern Europe continue to live as minorities in Christian states or as citizens of fragile states with Muslim majorities.

The presence of the Muslims in these parts of Europe is a reminder that most Balkan nations and their respective historiographies have yet to come to terms with the Ottoman legacy. It is impossible to imagine Southeastern Europe without the Ottoman Empire and its heritage. As Maria Todorova aptly observed, "It is ... preposterous to look for an Ottoman legacy in the Balkans. The Balkans are the Ottoman legacy."⁶⁶

NOTES

1. "Bosniaks" here refers to the Slavic Muslim population of Bosnia and Sanjak.
2. In 1875 an estimated two-thirds of the 600,000 northern Albanians (Gegs) were Muslim, while three-quarters of the 800,000 southern Albanian Tosks followed Islam. Georges Castellan, *Histoire des Balkans* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), p. 358.
3. On this subject see Alexandre Popovic, "Représentation du Passé et Transmission de l'Identité Chez les Musulmans des Balkans," in *Culture Musulmanes Balkaniques* (Istanbul: Les Editions Isis, 1994), pp. 275–281; Castellan, *Histoire des Balkans*, pp. 219–212. Nationalist historiography has frequently misused the Ottoman period to justify persecution of Muslim inhabitants of the new nation states. Most recently this occurred in Serbia with several leading Orientalists helping to justify the war against the Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo; see H. T. Norris, *Islam in the Balkans: Religion and Society between Europe and the Arab World* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), pp. 295–298.
4. One can generally differentiate between the indigenous population, which converted to Islam under the Ottoman rule, and the Muslims who settled in the region during and after the conquest. The first group encompasses the Pomaks and Muslim Slavs in Macedonia and Albania, among several other, smaller groups. The two most important Muslim populations that settled in all Balkan countries were the Turks and the Muslim Roma. The Turkish population has been greatly reduced in number since the Balkan states achieved independence in the nineteenth century, many Turks being forced either to emigrate to the Turkish heartland or to assimilate. Today only Bulgaria, Greece, and Macedonia have sizeable Turkish minorities. The Roma continue to be present in all Balkan countries in large numbers and remain marginalized and discriminated against, irrespective of their religion.

5. Along the Black Sea coast in the area south of the Danube delta.
6. Smail Balić, "Der Islam und seine geschichtliche Bedeutung für Südosteuropa (mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Bosniens)," in Hans-Dieter Döpman, ed., *Religion und Gesellschaft in Südosteuropa* (Munich: Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft, 1997), pp. 71–72.
7. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe*, pp. 31–44, 271–273. The non-Muslims were organized in self-governing units, the *millets*, administered by the respective religious hierarchy. See Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nation and States. An Enquiry into the Origin of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (London: Methuen, 1977), pp. 143–146; and Georges Corm, *L'Europe et l'orient. De la balkanisation à la libanisation: histoire d'une modernité inaccomplie* (Paris: La Decouverte, 1991), pp. 28–36, 44–59.
8. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe*, pp. 55–56.
9. The latter were essential for the development of national movements in the Balkans in the nineteenth century. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe*, p. 218. See also Gilles Veinstein, "Les provinces balkaniques (1606–1774)," in Robert Mantran, ed., *Historie de L'Empire Ottoman* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), p. 321.
10. After the abolition of the child levy (*devshirme*), the Janissary corps of the Ottoman Empire became a hereditary occupation, greatly expanding in number and becoming increasingly a burden of the Sublime Porte rather than playing its original role of an important pillar of the Ottoman military system. The force was finally abolished in 1826.
11. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe*, pp. 227–230.
12. Repairs and expansions of churches and synagogues were generally banned, however, and could be carried out only with a special permit. Balić, "Der Islam und seine geschichtliche Bedeutung für Südosteuropa," pp. 77–78.
13. George G. Arnakis quotes the Greek historian of the country's revolution: "Blessed is the nation that professes one and the same faith." George G. Arnakis, "The Role of Religion in the Development of Balkan Nationalism," in Charles and Barbara Jelavich, eds, *The Balkans in Transition* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1974), p. 115.
14. Josef Bata, "Das Verhältnis von Christentum und Islam bei den Albanern in Geschichte und Gegenwart," in Hans-Dieter Döpman, ed., *Religion und Gesellschaft in Südosteuropa* (Munich: Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft, 1997), pp. 159–160.
15. Peter Bartl, *Albanien* (Regensburg and Munich: Verlag Friedrich Pustet & Südosteuropa Gesellschaft, 1995), pp. 51–52. As the center of the Catholic Church was beyond the reach of the Ottoman Empire and mostly hostile to the Empire, the Catholic Church was mostly viewed with suspicion. The Catholic Church was occasionally placed in the Armenian *millet* for administrative purposes and received some privileges through the capitulations signed by the declining Ottoman Empire with France; see Veinstein, "Les provinces balkaniques (1606–1774)," pp. 318–319.
16. Both the Orthodox and the Catholic Church suffered from a lack of priests. Most of the few priests were illiterate and often too old to perform the mass. Bartl, *Albanien*, p. 53; Wilma Löhner, "Religiöse Kultur in Albanien," in Hans-Dieter Döpman, ed., *Religion und Gesellschaft in Südosteuropa* (Munich: Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft, 1997), p. 168.
17. Ramadan Marmullaku, *Albania and the Albanians* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1975), p. 16.
18. Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans. Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 80–81.
19. Bata, "Das Verhältnis von Christentum und Islam bei den Albanern in Geschichte und Gegenwart," pp. 159–160.
20. Löhner, "Religiöse Kultur in Albanien," p. 169; Bartl, *Albanien*, pp. 54–55.
21. Arnakis, "The Role of Religion in the Development of Balkan Nationalism," p. 141.
22. Stanford J. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey, Vol. I, Empire of the*

- Gazis. The Rise and Decline of the Ottoman Empire, 1280–1808* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 154–155; Arnakis, “The Role of Religion in the Development of Balkan Nationalism,” pp. 124–126.
23. It is important to note that, unlike in Western European feudal society, even people of a modest background could rise high in the state apparatus. The only precondition for such mobility was Islamic faith.
 24. Marmullaku, *Albania and the Albanians*, p. 16.
 25. Löhner, “Religiöse Kultur in Albanien,” p. 168; Bata, “Das Verhältnis von Christentum und Islam bei den Albanern in Geschichte und Gegenwart,” p. 160.
 26. Norris, *Islam in the Balkans*, p. 48.
 27. Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians. A Modern History* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1995), pp. 16–17.
 28. Norris points out that the comparison of Albanians to eagles can be seen as a pun involving the similarity of the Albanian words for “Albania” (*Shqipëria*) and “eagle” (*shqipe*). It should also be borne in mind that the flag of Skenderbeg in the fifteenth century already carried a double-headed eagle as the symbol of Albanians. Norris, *Islam in the Balkans*, pp. 62–63.
 29. Bartl, *Albanien*, pp. 90–91. Writing in Albanian with the Latin alphabet began substantially earlier, with the first book published in 1555. These books were, however, mostly published in Italy. Marmullaku, *Albania and the Albanians*, p. 17.
 30. Bartl, *Albanien*, pp. 77–82.
 31. Norris, *Islam in the Balkans*, pp. 240–241.
 32. Marmullaku, *Albania and the Albanians*, p. 19. See also Norris, *Islam in the Balkans*, p. 237.
 33. See Vickers, *The Albanians*, p. 15.
 34. The best writings on the Bosnian Church can be found in John V. A. Fine, *The Bosnian Church. A New Interpretation: A Study of the Bosnian Church and Its Place in State and Society from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (Boulder and New York: Columbia University & East European Monographs, 1975).
 35. Ludwig Steinhoff, “Von der Konfession zur Nation: Die Muslime in Bosnien-Herzegowina,” in Hans-Dieter Döpman, ed., *Religion und Gesellschaft in Südosteuropa* (Munich: Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft, 1997), pp. 255–256. Both Croatian and Serbian nationalist historiography have claimed the Muslims to be converted Croats or Serbs. On this matter see Francine Friedman, *The Bosnian Muslims. Denial of a Nation* (Boulder: Westview, 1996), pp. 20–21. A prominent example is the Croatian President and historian Franjo Tuđman: “An objective examination of the numerical composition of the population of Bosnia and Hercegovina cannot ignore that the majority of the Moslems is in its ethnic character and speech incontrovertibly of Croatian origin.” Franjo Tuđman, *Nationalism in Contemporary Europe* (Boulder and New York: Columbia University & East European Monographs, 1981), pp. 113–114.
 36. Fine, *The Bosnian Church*, p. 387.
 37. Balić, “Der Islam und seine geschichtliche Bedeutung,” p. 74.
 38. Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia. A Short History* (London: New York University Press, 1994), pp. 83–84.
 39. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.
 40. See Mustafa Imamović, *Historija Bošnjaka* (Sarajevo: Preporod, 1997), pp. 290–304.
 41. John V. A. Fine, “The Historical Roots of Bosnia’s Unique Ethnic Identity,” paper presented at the conference “The Bosnia Paradigm” (Sarajevo, 18–21 November 1998).
 42. Obradović played a pivotal role in promoting enlightenment in Serbia. He conceived the South Slavs as one nation and promoted the Serbian language. He sought to reduce religious differences in order to promote the unity of the South Slavs. Cited in Arnakis, “The Role of Religion in the Development of Balkan Nationalism,” pp. 142–143.

43. See, for example, the extensive description of the cultural life in Ottoman Bosnia in Smail Balić, *Das Unbekannte Bosnien. Europas Brücke zur islamischen Welt* (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1992). For discussion on the Ottoman heritage see Edin Hajdarpašić, “Glorious Epochs, Ghastly Ages, and the Meanings of History: Views on Ottoman Bosnia,” unpublished essay (1999).
44. Ivo Andrić, *The Development of Spiritual Life in Bosnia under the Influence of Turkish Rule* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 67.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
46. The term “voluntary” is not to claim that the population decided to convert purely for their own advantage. The situation was frequently such that the population had only little reason to remain Christian, in the light of economic, social, and spiritual hardship. See Maria Todorova, “The Ottoman Legacy in the Balkans,” in L. Carl Brown, ed., *Imperial Legacy. The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 49–50.
47. Hans-Joachim Härtel, “Die muslimische Minorität in Bulgarien,” in Michael Weithmann, ed., *Der ruhelose Balkan* (Munich: DTV, 1993), p. 209.
48. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe*, p. 44.
49. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.
50. On the role of the Balkan Christian populations in the wars between European powers and the Ottoman Empire, see Veinstein, “Les provinces balkaniques (1606–1774),” pp. 315–321.
51. Andrić, *The Development of Spiritual Life in Bosnia*, p. 19.
52. Majer, “Gesellschaftliche und religiöse Auswirkungen der Osmanenzeit in Südosteuropa,” p. 119.
53. Balić, *Das Unbekannte Bosnien. Europas Brücke zur islamischen Welt*, p. 101.
54. Majer, “Gesellschaftliche und religiöse Auswirkungen der Osmanenzeit in Südosteuropa,” p. 128.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
56. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe*, p. 55.
57. Arnakis, “The Role of Religion in the Development of Balkan Nationalism,” p. 124.
58. Balić, “Der Islam und seine geschichtliche Bedeutung für Südosteuropa,” p. 73.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Arnakis, “The Role of Religion in the Development of Balkan Nationalism,” p. 121. Arnakis points to the lack of empirical evidence of a link between conversion and *devshirme*. He notes, however, that large-scale conversions took place in rural areas, since the urban commercial centers, where few conversions took place, were mostly exempted from the child levy. Large rural areas were also not affected and an explanation of the difference between urban and rural conversion would necessitate taking into account a multitude of factors, well beyond the *devshirme* (i.e. ethnic composition, penetration of Christian churches, role of folk churches).
61. Andrić, *The Development of Spiritual Life in Bosnia*, pp. 20–21.
62. Amra Mahmutagić, “Some Considerations on the Process of the Acceptance of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” paper presented at the conference “The Bosnia Paradigm” (Sarajevo, 18–21 November 1998).
63. Balić, “Der Islam und seine geschichtliche Bedeutung für Südosteuropa,” p. 73.
64. *Ibid.* George G. Arnakis on the other hand concludes that these cases of cross-religious cooperation of children divided through the *devshirme* are rare. The Sokolovići are for him the exception rather than the rule. Arnakis, “The Role of Religion in the Development of Balkan Nationalism,” p. 123.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
66. Todorova, “The Ottoman Legacy in the Balkans,” p. 46.