

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS OF OTHERNESS

(CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES)

MODULE 5. Islam, The Balkans, Identity

Most philosophers until recently have addressed the problem of alterity in a Hegelian framework. In Hegel's thought, the Geist, the universal spirit gradually apprehends (Aufhebung, conquest) both itself and reality in the course of gaining insight into itself and the world. This results in a system of increasing expansion and incorporation, where all otherness is assimilated or at least harmonized in terms of an expanding identity. Contrast, plurality and difference, in the Hegelian framework, are moments in a movement towards reconciliation, unity and harmony. There is a dialectical relationship between „self” and „other”, in which the expanding self accommodates, domesticates, as it were, „the other” (Corbey, Leersern 1991).

During the past three decades, the inventedness of cultures and traditions, particularly in relation to nationalist and ethnic politics, has become the focus of attention of scholars from the social sciences and the humanities. A whole genre has appeared under the rubric „invented traditions.” It was a justified assault on the tendency to employ reifying conceptions of nation, ethnic group, culture, tradition, etc. As a result, cultures and social groups – taken at any level of analysis (local, regional, national, transnational) – are now conceptualized in terms of ongoing processes of „construction” and negotiation. Unfortunately, reification has reentered through the back-door, and while notions like „nation” and „tradition” are duly deconstructed, they fall comfortably back into an essentialist mode by landing on newly accepted notions like „identity.” (Handler 1994: 27).

One can distinguish between two types of discourse that deal with alterity. One is intellectual, i.e. how scholars from different disciplines, writers, journalists represent „the other”. It operates with a multiplicity of goals in view but the stated one is knowledge. The other one is instrumental: how education represents otherness in order to achieve a certain socialization of the population. There is general agreement that it is knowledge about one's (national or ethnic) neighbor that can overcome the dire consequences of ignorant stereotypes, and lead to mutual understanding, and that education, especially history education, is the best

means of achieving this. No doubt, one of the most important and, at the same time, most difficult problems to deal with in the Balkans is the profound mutual ignorance about each other coupled with passionate negative mutual stereotypes (on the level of nations, separate ethnic groups, state officials, intellectuals, business elites, etc.). There should be also no doubt that this is the greatest challenge, and should be the primary focus of efforts to transform the region. Not that regional cooperation in the Balkans is something entirely new; there has been an honorable, though largely unsuccessful in the long term, historical tradition, both in the nineteenth and in the twentieth centuries, attempting to counter the reverse powerful legacy of uncompromising rivalry and suspicious hostility. There have always been far-sighted intellectual, political and business leaders in the Balkans who have promoted mutual understanding and cooperation, but they have not been allowed to reach a critical mass. Unfortunately for the region, the opposite kind of leaders has more often dictated the day, and has manipulated a population which has not been afflicted with the disease of „ancient hatreds" despite the habitually offered diagnosis of western political/journalistic medicine (Todorova 2018).

Even when depicting the strange, „the other", we do it on our terms, with the known categories and methods of expression at our disposal. „The other" is apprehended, added to an expanding self, domesticated, as it were, but not on its own terms. It is not understood for what it is, therefore it is not understood at all; there is an unsurmountable cognitive block, even as there is a harmonizing tolerance at work. History – at the center of legitimizing and reproducing political and social relations in the Balkan region – has to be approached in a new way. The only way to overcome the predicament of the region that has been said to produce more history than it can consume, is to intimately know it. One should, however, put to rest the excessive hopes and expectations on negotiating difference, the attempt to approach an universal or, at least, widely accepted truth (Todorova 2018).

Against the Hegelian dialectic of apprehension (conquest), a host of philosophers dealing with difference and division postulate the basic irreducibility of the „other" to the „self" (Bataille, Sartre, Lyotard, Lévinas, and above all Foucault). To them, instead of gradual inclusion, there is a forceful mechanism of exclusion and exorcism of what is constructed as „other" and this process altogether constitutes an act of identity formation. Thus, for example, the historical exclusion of unreason and madness is part of the self-definition of the rational humanistic ideal, which thereby suppresses and denies part of the human personality (Corbey, Leersern 1991).

The unsatisfactory state of mutual relations in the Balkans is not occurring in a bubble. What has been aptly named the process of „nesting orientalisms" in the Balkans, the disgusting habit of portraying one's neighbor as more „oriental" than oneself, floats in a medium of a broader attitude, that called „balkanism". The explicit humiliation produced by this discourse and felt most acutely by intellectuals, further aggravates the demoralized atmosphere in the region by giving weight to two opposing trends: on the one hand, a feeling of abdication and complete alienation from its problems; on the other hand, the further exacerbation of traditionalist isolationism and the cultivation of a persecution syndrome. One has to be extremely subtle and delicate for fear that the promotion of the idea of Southeast European cooperation under the slogan that the Balkans should finally take their fate into their own hands will not be seen as an attempt to impose orderly behavior in the ghetto. Paul Valéry had commented that historical identity is crucified between the delirium of grandeur and the delusion of persecution. When we stricture the Balkans for their delusion of persecution, let us not forget that their affliction is only one part of an inseparable European dyad. It exists next to but also because of the delirium of grandeur of Europe's better half. Balkanism is a discourse about an imputed ambiguity. The in-betweenness of the Balkans, their transitional character, could have made them simply an incomplete other, instead, they are constructed as an incomplete self. The reasons for this are two: religion and race (Todorova 2009).

As in the case of the Orient, the Balkans have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the „European" and the „West" has been constructed. With the reemergence of East and orientalism as independent semantic values, the Balkans are left in Europe's thrall, anti-civilization, *alter ego*, the dark side within. At the same time there is the phenomenon of globalization, the emergence of a critical mass of cultural hybrids, of people who can read what is written about them, about the groups to which they belong, or about their societies. These people, as a rule intellectuals from the targeted societies, can respond to what is written or said, because they are able to participate in the dominant discourse, and by virtue of that they are in a position to influence and sometimes even transform the discourse. A new dialogical principle in the representation of the other is created which imposes also a new scholarly ethic (Todorova 2018).

Nor is the rhetoric of otherness reproduced only with negative images. While, as a whole, the attention toward the Balkan region seems to have been motivated by the fear of contagion and the accompanying quarantine policies, as well as by the whole negative

spectrum from devastating but at least passive derision to high-minded but activist punitive impulses, there have been also efforts to mark out the Southeast European (or Balkan) region as an object of genuine concern and compassion. But marking out is not an innocent act. Complex notions (like region, nation, race, gender, etc.) are socially constructed systems of marked and unmarked categories, to borrow some intricate terminology from linguistics (Todorova 2018).

We may resign ourselves to the fact that otherness is a categorical fact of life; it will not go away whatever our efforts. We may also share the skepticism that „the other" cannot become known on its own terms. But the whole process of acquaintance, of an effort on the part of the subject to know the object, transforms the subject itself. And while this view, is a negation of the Hegelian possibility of harmonization through unification, it nonetheless gives a dignified possibility: dealing with a relationship on the basis of respect for the separateness between the Other and oneself, and a willingness to let the Other change one (Corbey, Leersern1991).

During the period of Ottoman rule, a numerous Muslim population settled in the Bulgarian lands. The settlers included military contingents, administrative and religious officials, nomadic pastoral tribes, etc. The new migrants settled in cities and villages. Because of this migration, the Muslim population on the Balkan peninsula, including the Bulgarian lands, grew and in places become the majority. The spread of Islam in the Balkans led to changes mostly in the religious structure of the population rather than the ethnic. The statistical data, though limited, leave no doubt that the Muslim population was constantly growing in absolute numbers and in relative proportion. Various explanations have been offered for this growth. A considerable number of scholars from Bulgaria and other Balkan countries ascribed this trend – and some still do – to forced conversion to Islam. This was the official and dominant hypothesis at the time of the so-called Revival Process, when the policy of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) required that historians emphasize, by all means, the coercive nature of the imposition of Islam. The shortage of source materials facilitated the assertion of this hypothesis. By contrast, the lack of first-hand testimony regarding mass-scale forced conversion pursued through a purposeful, specially prepared campaign, has led a number of authors to the conclusion that the spread of Islam may have partially occurred on a voluntary basis, and repeatedly over long periods of history. The Ottoman registers indicate that adherents of heretical religious movements were the first local residents to convert to Islam. The new religion also spread successfully among those who continued to be under the influence of paganism (Yalamov 2002). This view became dominant in the last decade of the

20th century. Based on new source materials, certain Bulgarian and foreign scholars have argued that Islam was embraced by the local population for a variety of reasons, including by personal choice of individuals, whole families, and groups of people in a village or town. The question as to the motives, however, remains disputed. More than a few historians attribute the change of religion only to the economic interests of individuals or entire social strata: specifically, the new converts could expect to share the privileged status enjoyed by Muslims in Ottoman society. Other researchers believe it would be mistaken to overemphasize the economic factors. "... The economic argument regarding conversion to Islam must be accepted with great reservation /.../ In any case, other factors were also involved. In the same context, we should not forget that, in the course of their crushing victories over the Christian armies of Europe, and especially after the fall of the then powerful Hungarian kingdom in 1526, the prestige of the Ottoman Empire grew very highly. Many must have thought that God was showing His favour towards Islam, and so it would be better to go over to the side of the more powerful. Moreover, in the 16th century, Islam was 'fashionable'" (Kiel 1998: 76).

Until the end of the 1980s, the "correct" theory prevailed among scholars, according to which Islamization in the Rhodope mountain region had been either imposed by force or came as the result of colonization directed by the Sultans (who brought over shepherds from Turkey, known as Yuruks, as well as slaves), as well as the emigration of Christian population. Although colonization was one method used by the Ottoman authorities to change the ethnic structure of the Balkans, the latest studies of sources show this factor was on too small a scale to be the chief cause of Islamization of the Balkans. Moreover, as Maria Todorova has pointed out, the settlement of population coming from Anatolia occurred chiefly between the 14th and 16th century, while the number of Muslims continued to grow after that time (Todorova 1987).

The trend of adopting Islam by the local Rhodopes population, and its causes, are a difficult object of study; much remains unclear about it. According to Antonina Zhelyazkova, it began with individual cases of conversion as early as the 16th century, gradually grew during the whole of the 17th, becoming especially strong in the second half of that century, and continued into the 18th century. At present, scholars acknowledge that in some cases, conversions to Islam were voluntary, being motivated by economic and social considerations: Muslims were exempt from tax burdens; moreover, conversion opened the way to social prosperity (Zhelyazkova 1990). Consequently, it would be more correct to refer to indirect coercion through economic pressure. Some forms of this pressure included: the slave trade in war captives, the forced recruitment of certain subordinate groups into the Ottoman Army, the well-known tithe, and the so-called *devshirme* (the practice of taking boys from the families

of Christian residents of the Balkan provinces, for service in the so-called Janissary infantry units). But even these elements of Ottoman policy were not unequivocally perceived as negative by the population. Some families willingly gave their children to serve in the army, seeing in this an opportunity for rising in the social hierarchy.

Economic incentives played an important role. During the *first period*, they were an influential factor mostly for the local upper class. Quite a few Bulgarian boyars converted to Islam, in order to preserve possession of their estates, and seeped into the ruling class of the Ottoman Empire. Among them was Alexander Shishman, son of the last Bulgarian tsar, Ivan Shishman. Under the name Suleiman Pasha, Alexander was appointed vali (governor) of the Aydin Province. According to an unwritten rule, many offices and lucrative posts in the state hierarchy were assigned to aristocrats who had converted to Islam. During the 638 years of Ottoman rule, there were, in all, 215 grand viziers (a position that corresponded to that of prime minister). Of these, only 78 were Turks; the other 137 were Christians who had converted to Islam (Yalamov 2002).

During the *second period*, however, a growing number of subjects converted for social-economic reasons. There was inequality among Muslims. The participation of non-Muslims in government was strongly restricted. Christians paid jizya, the annual per capita tax, and during a certain period, the devshirme (blood tax) as well. Conversion to Islam not only exempted people from additional taxes but also opened access to higher social ranks and a better economic status. The desire for a better life motivated quite a few local Christians to convert. Ottoman defterleri (registers) dating from 1679-1680 indicate that in the Odrin region alone, in just one year, 379 people converted to Islam. In many of the formal applications, passing over to Islam was grounded on the desire for appointments to official positions or recruitment in the Ottoman army (Yalamov 2002). Many such individual applications are preserved in the Ottoman archive collection of the Bulgarian National Library Saints Cyril and Methodius. For its part, the central government indirectly encouraged this trend, but in the period between the 14th and 17th century, it did not pursue a targeted policy of Islamization, because it was not in its economic interest to impose the religion on a mass scale.

Here are some examples of the social-economic motivation underlying the voluntary conversion to Islam in the 17th – 19th century (*Ottoman Sources...* 1990):

In a number of “applications”, the applicants request to be assigned some official state position, or to be included in a military unit as a reward for having entered the “true faith”. Neither the form nor the contents of these documents permit us to think they were written personally by the converts. Such applications were written by experienced scribes and

schooled clerks from the chancelleries of the capital city, by the vizier divans or at least by the *cadi* offices. In the functional aspect, these documents are not exactly applications but rather serve as a start of a finance-related correspondence for justifying expenditures from the state treasury. They represent forms written according to certain rules, upon which the grand vizier and *bash-defterdar* (head-treasurer) had to pass a resolution in order to legalize the expenditure of state money.

Statement on acceptance into Islam on behalf of a boy from Yambol

Your Majesty, happy and magnanimous, my Sultan. May health be with you!

I am a Bulgarian boy from Yambol. My two brothers converted to Islam. I came before your fortunate person so that you may likewise award me, Your slave, with the honour of adopting Islam. Be so kind as to grant me clothes. The order is that of my Sultan.

Your servant, the new Muslim.

New entries and resolutions on the document

1. *[Resolution of the grand vizier]*: True! Clothes should be given to a young boy, a new Muslim, as is the custom. This is an order!...

9 jemazi-yul evvel 1097 (3. IV. 1686)

Statement on acceptance into Islam on behalf of a boy from the Kaza of Ruse

Your Majesty, happy and blessed, my Sultan. May health be with you!

I, Your slave, am a poor man from the Kaza of Ruschuk. In my native place, the desire was born in me to become a Muslim, and that is why I came to You. My request is to be granted the honour to adopt Islam in the presence of You, the Sultan. Grant that a set of clothes be allotted to me, as well as a bit of livelihood. I beg for your decision. The order belongs to Your Majesty, my brilliant Sultan.

Your slave, Abdullah.

Additional entries and resolutions on the document

1. *[Resolution of the grand vizier]*: True! The cost of the clothes is to be given to a boy awarded the honour of embracing Islam. Order!

16 muharrem 1124 (24. II. 1712) г.

2. *[Resolution of the bash defterdar]*: The receivable bill is to be issued!

3. *[Note from the Chief Accountancy]*: The receivable bill was issued on 16 muharrem 1124 (24. II. 1712).

Protocol from the session of the majlis of Vratsa, concerning the entry into Islam of a Bulgarian girl from the village of Tlachane

Tsena, daughter of Kara Tsono, a resident of the village of Tlachane, kaza of Ivrazhda, voluntarily declared that she adopts Islam of her own will in order to marry at her own desire Suleiman, son of Mehme, from the same village. Questioned by the majlis in the presence of the notables, she confirmed that she would marry the above-mentioned, that she would obey him and, adopting the true faith, [henceforth] would be called Hatidje.

On this occasion, we prepared and dared to bring to your knowledge a modest protocol. To be decided.

5 djemazi-yul evvel [12]70 [3. VII. 1854].

Protocol from the session of the majlis of Vratsa, concerning the entry into Islam of a Bulgarian girl from the village of Malo Peshtene, kaza of Vratsa

The twenty-year old Maria, daughter of Yole, resident of the village of Malo Peshtene, kaza of Ivrazhda, came to our humble majlis and stated that, glory be to Allah, she would take the righteous divine path. She was conferred the honour of the true faith, and adopting the name of Ayshe, was married to Podara Ibrahim, of the same village, who verbally expressed his consent [*for this*].

In composing this humble protocol, we dare to announce the event, as required by the high command on these matters. To be decided!

27 djemzi-yul evvel 1270 [25. XII. 1854] г.

Protocol on the adoption of Islam by girls from the village of Ostrets, Lovech district, and from Troyan

The 19-year old daughter of Denko, from the village of Ustorech, kaza of Lofcha, and the 20-year old daughter of Velichko, from the village of Toriyan in the same district, declared their desire to adopt Islam according to the Muslim rite. In fulfillment of the necessary formalities, the two girls were sent, together with their parents, to the district administration of Lovech. After questioning was conducted, it was established that the adoption of Islam occurred without the exercise of coercion. Despite the advice of the parents and the representatives of the metropolitan bishop that the two girls should not adopt Islam, the act of adoption of Islam was performed and the daughter of Denko received the Muslim name Hatidje, while Velichko's girl, Fatma.

14 djemazi-yul ahar [16. VII. 1876] г.

Letter to the district administration of Tarnovo concerning the adoption of Islam by an under-age girl from Sevlievo

To the district administration of Tarnova

The girl Kira, resident of the kaza of Servi, wished to become a Muslim and for that reason, a letter was sent here, №797 of 5 safer (12)92 (28. III. 1876).

Since it became clear that she is still a child that has not reached mature age, the Administrative Council of the willayah announces and reminds that it is natural that such persons not adopt Islam. It is brought to your attention that [the girl] needs to be returned and to adopt the religion she desires when she has attained maturity. This time, due to the indicated reasons, she was sent back.

[Note]: Written on 2 shaban 1293 [23. VIII. 1876]

Instruction on cessation of infringement upon the property, life and honour of Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire

Your Excellency! It is known that, in order to set European public opinion in opposition to Islam, our enemies are daily, everywhere presenting to the world groundless, meaningless, and false communications about what Muslims have done, or will do, to Christians, and spread these throughout Europe in the newspapers. It is needless to explain how much the scoundrels who are not ashamed to say such pure lies would exaggerate the smallest dispute or brawl between Muslims and Christians, and if, by mishap, a Christian be killed in such a brawl, they would even provoke an international trial through exaggerations and fabricated stories. Since the times are complicated, and the conditions not particularly favourable, the situation of our state is difficult and hard, which is why it is necessary to seek new approaches. Thus, it is very important and necessary precisely at this moment, more than ever, that the Muslim population, and especially the Circassians, keep still. Ignorant Muslim youths and Circassians in towns and villages, who are unaware of their own situation or that of the state, should not perpetrate arbitrary violence against the Christian population, not infringe upon the property, life and honour of Christians! Muslims and Christians must live in mutual understanding!

Foremost, the current situation should be very clearly explained to the district governors of the kazas, who in turn should explain to those who understand the situation of Islam and the reasonable notables in cities and villages, and through them, to the ignorant and thoughtless Muslims. The high-ranking persons must personally make the round of the kazas! Let them clarify with the most forceful words to the district governors, to the enlightened notables in the

kazas, the police chiefs, that, at present, any small incident would draw upon the state and the Muslim nation the burden of great justifications and excuses. *[Let them be advised]* to refrain from such things. The district governors should also make a round of Muslim villages in order to convince with the same forceful words the notables of the villages, so that, with their collaboration, some evil-doers in the villages would not remain without supervision. The responsible and high-ranking persons are informed of the need that all this be done and the present order is delivered to them. It is the order of His Majesty.

On 10 sheffal 1293 *[16. X. 1876]*

Undated, report on adoption of Islam by an indebted Bulgarian family

Magnanimous, grand, powerful and great benefactor, my wise master! Long live Your happy imperial highness!

Having first of all prayed to God, now I make bold to care about my well-being in addressing this plea to You. My husband – Your humble servant – some time ago joined the ranks of those who confess the true faith. That is why I too – Your humble slave – with God’s blessings want to achieve the same. I came, guided by the wish to become a Muslim, to pray You to explain the true faith to me as well. May I be illumined by the light that will cover me: may I stand in the ranks of those who have the privilege of the illumined; may I joint the submissive servants of the faith, granted with the honour of Islam, so that I too may benefit by it.

My great and brave master, I, Your humble slave, am very poor and have no home. In addition to that, Your humble slave, my husband, as he receives no resources from anywhere, by God’s will has fallen in debt in the amount of 5-6 grosh. We seek a solution everywhere, but we will not be able to pay the debt soon and my husband will be imprisoned. No matter how urgent it is, neither I, Your humble slave, nor my husband, Your humble slave, will be able to pay our debt in any way. We are helpless and have not the slightest possibility of escaping from this situation, and may God forbid *[that worst things await us]*. This is why we seek compassion, and likewise shelter and protection, from God.

Mercy, all-merciful lord, mercy, gracious lords! I submit this plea for justice as an expression of our selfless devotion to the young, very attractive and life-loving prince, for the sake of his happiness. Our distressful situation must be resolved mercifully. For your saddened and desperate humble servants, there is no other recourse but Your favour. We offer our respects and wishes for happiness and merriment in Your fortunate days. We leave the issuing of the high order to Your decision,

Your humble slave, Dimie.

V. Dechov, author of a monograph on the history of Chepelare, has a different view on the question. According to him:

- The Islamization of the population of the Central Rhodope region began with the conquest of the Rhodopes and ended in the late 18th century.
- Even when the campaign of forced Islamization and the large-scale killing was stopped, none of those converted to Islam were allowed to return to Christianity.
- Those Christians who had avoided the forced conversion were forbidden to live with their Islamized families and neighbours and were ordered to migrate elsewhere.
- Many Christians converted to Islam from fear of their Muslim neighbours. It was under pressure from their neighbours that the residents of the village of Bogutevo converted to Islam.
- Many families were Islamized by Janissaries, i.e., by their own children, who had been recruited at a young age in the Janissary units.
- The Yuruks had sheltered Christians attempting to escape Islamization (Dechov 1987: 61-62).

Acts of violence did of course take place during certain periods, but not on as massive a scale as claimed by our 19th century historians. The specific local conditions, the desire of the oppressed population to survive by adapting to the new rule, the desire of people to switch to a different social and economic category, the efforts of the Balkan aristocracy to preserve its privileges and property, were all preconditions for the native residents' turning to the dominant religion (Zhelyazkova 1990). Violent administrative measures were applied on concrete occasions: suppression of revolts of the Christian population, in time of war, and especially during clashes between the Ottoman and Russian empires.

Conclusion: Various and complex causes determined the spread of Islam in the Balkans and the Bulgarian lands; the factors included colonization, resettlement, conversions to Islam, internal migration. Very probably, during the first period, the military successes of the Ottoman Empire struck respect in the local population. During the second period, economic incentives were foremost. Islamization did not in all cases lead to adoption of a Turkic identity. But it did create certain preconditions conducive to Turkization. The new converts to Islam lost the marks of their former ethnicity and, after a few generations, might merge completely with the Turks providing they lived in a Turkish linguistic and cultural environment. The history of the dissemination of Islam in the Bulgarian lands, and more generally in the Balkans, confirms this claim. The Ottoman government was interested not so

much in ethnic as in religious assimilation. Islam, as many other religions, is not the faith of a single nation and thus is open to all ethnic groups. The Ummah is a space of total identity not confined to a specific territory, language, ethnic group or nationality (Bosakov 2015).

To be continued...

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