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Islam in Bulgaria: a Historical Reappraisal

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An estimated one million Muslims live in Bulgaria, roughly 10 per cent of the country's population.[1] The rest of the Bulgarian people belong mainly to the Christian Orthodox tradition. Situated in a predominantly Christian social environment, Muslims in this country do not constitute a homogeneous minority. The most numerous Muslim group are the Bulgarian Turks, the others being the Pomaks (Muslims with Bulgarian identity), Gypsies and Tatars (Muslims whose historical origins can be traced back to the Volga region in Russia). The Muslim populations are unevenly distributed over the territory of the country; there are two regions of concentration situated in north-eastern and in southern Bulgaria.

The vast majority of the Bulgarian Muslims are Sunnis of the Hanafite rite. However, heterodox Muslim communities have persisted here for a long time, the most enduring one being the Qizilbash.[2] The faith of the Qizilbash is rather syncretic, comprising elements of Islam, Zoroastrianism and Christianity and marked by sometimes far-reaching disregard of Muslim ritual and worship. Considered to be sectarian, they exist in esoteric communities practising extreme endogamy and their devotional life is kept secret from strangers.[3]

Islam spread in the Bulgarian lands during the period of Ottoman domination (1396–1878). The Ottoman Empire existed for nearly half a millennium as one of the most enduring polyethnic and multireligious societies in human history. Therefore it is quite often described, and rightly so, as a 'classic example of the plural society'[4] which did allow diverse groups of people to live together with a reasonable amount of social peace and order. However, 'the myth of an interfaith, interracial utopia in which Muslims, Christians, and Jews worked together in equality and harmony in a golden age of free intellectual endeavor'[5] has very little justification indeed. For many of the conquered Christian peoples in the Balkans the Ottoman domination caused a discontinuity in the course of their previous cultural and historical development. Islam was therefore widely regarded by the local population as the invaders' religion and hence an instrument of subjugation. This predetermined an attitude towards the Muslim faith as alien, hostile and militant, an attitude which is deep-seated in the historical memory of Bulgarian Christians. However, there were several patterns of dissemination of Islam, only one of them being forcible conversion, which seems to be the main cause of historical resentment.

Doubtless the first such pattern was the colonisation of Bulgarian territories through the transfer of Muslim populations (Turks and Tatars) from Asia Minor to the Balkan provinces of the Empire. There is not sufficient evidence to endorse the view that this transfer of population took place on a massive scale. There are other factors to be taken into account in the origins of the Muslim populations of the Balkans. Important among these is voluntary conversion to Islam, based on free will and

motivated by religious affinities as well as by a system of economic and social bonuses. At the time of the Ottoman expansion Christianity in the Balkans was in a state of crisis, 'precipitated by religious, national and social conflicts. Islam seemed to offer a constructive alternative to chaos and misery; hence many Christians adopted it voluntarily'.[6] The neophytes were taxed at a much lower rate and received a money grant, enough to give them a better start in life. In a theocratic state like the Ottoman Empire one's chances for social advancement were considerably better within the framework of the dominant official ideological credo, i.e. Islam.[7]

The compulsory forms of imposing Islam were the hardest for the population. They also resulted in the assimilation of large numbers of Bulgarian Christians. Regardless of the principles of normative Islam, which allows no constraint in religion, mass conversion to Islam was carried out in whole regions (the Rhodope mountains in southern Bulgaria and the Razgrad district in the north-eastern part of the country, for example) by brutal means and atrocities. Christians were compelled to adopt the new faith under threat of death. These mass conversions became more frequent after the second half of the eighteenth century when the weakness of the central power and the growing insecurity of the Empire were manifested in an obvious way. Another effective mechanism of enforced Islamisation and assimilation was the slavery institution, which flourished all over the Empire. This is clearly at variance with the provisions of Islamic law for the *dhimma* populations, for normative Islam did not permit the taking of slaves from conquered peoples once war was over and they were at peace. A third compulsory way of spreading Islam was the *devshirme* system, a periodic levy of male children from the peasantry of the Empire, imposed mainly on Slavs and Albanians, occasionally on Armenians, and rarely on Greeks and Jews. The recruited boys were trained as Ottoman soldiers or bureaucrats. Taken away at a very early age from their natural social milieu, these offspring were totally deprived of their background and identity. The *devshirme* does not have a precedent in previous Islamic history and seems to have been an Ottoman invention for staffing the state. Although some Christians perceived this as a vehicle for upward social mobility, for most of the families this levy was a heavy loss to bear and was highly detested.

Such coercive methods of conversion to Islam and resistance to them are quite vividly portrayed in Bulgarian folklore. They seem to have become an indispensable part of the cultural selfconsciousness of the Bulgarian people. Furthermore, the collective historical memory of the Bulgarians focuses on the forceful means of spreading Islam and almost completely overlooks the fact of voluntary conversions. These potential historical resentments can easily be inflamed. Nevertheless, during periods of relative stability and prosperity antagonism has been covert and almost absent. On a local scale the relations between the Muslim and the Christian communities have normally been characterised by peaceful social interaction, based on mutual respect and neighbourly assistance.

The notion that Muslims and Christians have a common fate to share in these lands can be traced back to the beginnings of the spread of Islam in the Balkans. Many instances exemplify this phenomenon, but one of the brightest is the life and teaching of Sheikh Bedreddin Simawi (1364–1420),[8] the pioneer of interfaith tolerance in the Balkans. Sheikh Bedreddin had a high standing in the Ottoman hierarchy and ranked high among the distinguished intellectuals of his time. His outlook was a combination of social utopia and the general concept of religious tolerance. The core of his theory is the idea of the oneness of human society and the equality of all people, regardless of their ethnic and confessional identity. He exhorted the Muslim population to overcome its differences with the Christians and to link its endeavours with theirs.

Sheikh Bedreddin's teaching gained widespread support, stirring tumult and unrest among the peasant population, which soon developed into a mutiny. Under the leadership of the Sheikh himself, Muslims and Christians joined the ranks of the rebels in a common struggle against the power of the Sultan, which oppressed them all. Long after the crushing of the uprising and Sheikh Bedreddin's martyr death, his teaching, known as Simawism, still caused repercussions among the non-orthodox Muslims in north-eastern Bulgaria (Dobrudzha, Deliorman).

The spread of Islam in the Balkan provinces of the Empire was facilitated by some specific religious features pertaining to both the Muslim and the Christian faith.[9] They made possible the adaptation of Islam to local spiritual stereotypes, as well as its survival in these territories in coexistence with Christianity. In this respect the historical interaction between the two great religions in the Balkans differs considerably from the process which led to the Reconquista in south-west Europe. The official faith, be it Muslim or Christian, was professed by the higher classes of the medieval society, by the administrators and the clergy. The spiritual life of the common people on the everyday level was a complex mixture of the dogmas of the prevailing religion with pagan rituals and beliefs. Popular Islam and popular Christianity seemed neither contradictory nor antagonistic to the extent that their official versions did.

Although mainstream Islam in the Ottoman Empire was Sunni, Sufi Islam and the Dervish orders played a very influential role in the conversion of the Balkan Christians to the Muslim faith. The approach of the Muslim sects to religious life was emotional rather than dogmatic and their mystic rituals excited the interest of the lower strata of society. The well-known practices of the Dervish orders in worshipping saints and shrines drew Muslims and Christians closer together. They often shared the performance of offering an oblation to a common saint.[10] There are traces on Bulgarian territory of shared sites of worship between Muslims and Christians, one of the most intriguing being the Demir Baba *tekke* in north-eastern Bulgaria.[11] On the other hand, it can be assumed that heterodox tendencies in Christianity had also paved the way for the spread of Islam in the Bulgarian lands. The Bogomil heresy, which sprang to life in tenth-century Bulgaria in an open conflict with the Christian Orthodox Church,[12] no doubt reduced its influence and facilitated its decline on the eve of the Ottoman conquest. Although by the time immediately preceding the Ottoman invasion Bogomilism was already banished from Bulgarian lands and was playing a much more significant role in Bosnia where it became a state religion,[13] its impact on mass religious consciousness in Bulgaria is beyond any doubt: spiritually it alienated numerous strata of the local society from the official Orthodox tradition. It should also be taken into consideration that there were some Christians (especially among the townsfolk) who were disappointed by the overt corruption of the Orthodox clergy. The church's outrageous practice of simony made Islam seem more attractive with regard to decency and morality.

The intermingling of the two religious traditions resulted in a number of symbiotic practices and phenomena. There has never been a distinct delimitation between the everyday rites and rituals performed by the Christian and the Muslim communities. On the contrary, religious compromise is widespread. Sometimes Muslim families secretly baptise their ill children hoping to restore their health, or dye eggs at Easter, paying tribute to an ancient tradition which has never been obliterated. Exchange of sacral food on religious holidays is practised on a large scale. Islam did not produce a particularly distinctive style of architecture, either for religious buildings or for private homes. It should be taken into account that polygamy was very rare in Bulgaria and women in general have played a much more active role in social life than might be expected.

Bulgarian history during the period of the Ottoman domination is inseparable from the ideas of national liberation and restoration of the sovereign Bulgarian state. The historic confrontation with the Ottoman Empire was partially transferred to the Muslim faith as well. The confrontational tendency was intensified by another factor, namely the confusion of ethnic and religious identity. The Ottoman authorities did not regard the adoption of Islam as meaning that the convert had passed over to another nationality. This fact is confirmed by abundant historical evidence. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the Bulgarian Christians, being a Muslim automatically meant being a Turk, that is, one of the oppressors. Thus confessional identity in the Balkans was burdened with ethnic determination, which no religion originally aimed at. The situation resulted indirectly from the impact of social and political factors on confessional issues. This disadvantageous historical heritage still reflects on present-day Muslim—Christian relations in Bulgaria.

The struggle of the Christian population of the country to reestablish an independent Bulgarian Orthodox Church was in the mainstream of the national renaissance and the national liberation movement. It culminated in the creation of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870. This fact had a great impact on the formation of the concept of the Bulgarian nation as one belonging to the Christian Orthodox tradition, implicitly estranging the Muslims and the small communities of Bulgarian Catholics and Protestants from it as aliens. The formation of a sovereign Bulgarian state after 1878 followed the European model of nation-states and in a way sanctioned this concept.

The evolution and metamorphosis of the Muslim minorities in the country henceforth are closely interwound with the rapidly changing historical context and the aspirations and the objectives of Bulgarian nationalism, as well as with the policy of the successive Bulgarian governments towards Islam.[14] However, an approach to this issue should start from several general premises.

First, the demographic composition of these minorities has been extremely dynamic, for several reasons. After 1878 the frontiers of the Bulgarian state were subjected to a number of changes reflecting the turbulent history of the region and in each case the gain or loss of territories was compounded by change in the numbers of the Muslim populations.[15] Besides, the response of the Muslims to the challenges of Bulgarian nationalism has taken the shape of consecutive recurring waves of emigration to Turkey, caused either by the action of the civil authorities or by moral compulsion.

Second, Islam and Christianity have never been on equal footing in the sovereign Bulgarian state. The Christian Orthodox Church enjoyed the rights of an official state church in the Kingdom of Bulgaria and all other faiths were, in legal terms, second-ranking. After the communist takeover and the separation of church and state, religious practice was strongly discouraged in general athough the consitutions of 1947 and 1971 guaranteed freedom of conscience. However, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was tolerated more than other faiths, as one of the symbols of national integrity. After the restoration of the Patriarchate in 1953 it lent a certain prestige to the secular authorities and facilitated some of their contacts in the international arena. Even after the collapse of communism the new democratically adopted consitution of Bulgaria emphasises the traditional role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

Third, throughout the last century successive Bulgarian governments followed an extremely inconsistent policy towards the Muslims, which perpetuated the existing differences and complicated Muslim–Christian relations. Periods of tolerance and equal cultural and social opportunities, which have not remained unnoticed by

observers and researchers,[16] have been interspersed by violations of the individual and group rights of the Muslims, brought to an extreme by the overt assimilationist attempts of the communist regime.

Active ideological attacks against Islam started in the late 1950s. The Communist Party's campaign against all forms of Islamic religious expression among Turks, Pomaks and Gypsies was built up upon the following rationale: (a) Islam was an alien religion forced on Bulgarians against their will; (b) Islam had played a reactionary role in Bulgarian history; (c) Islam had been used by foreign reactionary elements (i.e. Turkey) to promote bourgeois nationalism and religious fanaticism in Bulgaria; (d) Islam was an obstacle to the integration of Turks and other Muslims into Bulgarian society.[17] The most sensitive aspect of the anti-Islamic programme was the forcing of Muslims to abandon their Islamic names of Arabic origin and adopt Bulgarian names with Slavic etymology, which had dramatic implications in the 1980s.

After the collapse of communism in Bulgaria the social atmosphere, characterised by general loss of value orientation and profound identity crisis, is quite favourable for renewed religious propaganda. Islam is no longer on the defensive; it plays an active social role in these times of distress and need. Furthermore, nowadays the Muslims are consolidated by a political party (the Movement for Rights and Freedoms), with 10 per cent of the seats in Parliament. They have a legitimate right to public space in a country of traditional encounter between the cross and the crescent and are determined to defend it.

Notes and References

[1] The exact figure is unknown because after 1956 the official Bulgarian government censuses ceased to list Muslim numbers separately. In his survey of Islam in the Balkans, Wayne S. Vucinich gives the following numbers: 700,000 Turks, 180,000 Pomaks, 120,000 Gypsies, 5,000 Tatars. (See A. J. Arberry (ed.), *Religion in the Middle East*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1969), p. 236). A Helsinki Watch Report, *Destroying Ethnic Identity: the Turks of Bulgaria 1878–1985* (New York, June 1986) offers the 'reliable estimate' of 900,000 ethnic Turks. Bilal Simsir's work *The Turks of Bulgaria 1878–1985* (K. Rustem and Brother, London, 1988) estimates one million Turks and a total Muslim population of 1.5 million.

[2] Samuel M. Zwemer, 'Islam in southeastern Europe', *The Moslem World*, Vol. 17, 1927, p. 339; Frederick De Jong, 'Notes on Islamic mystical brotherhoods in northeast Bulgaria', *Der Islam: Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients*, Band 63, Heft 2, pp. 303–8; R. J. Crampton, 'The Turks in Bulgaria 1878–1944', *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1989, p. 43; Petya Nitzova, 'Qizilbash', in I. Harris, S. Mews, P. Morris and J. Shepherd (eds), *Contemporary Religions: a World Guide* (Longman Current Affairs, London, 1992), pp. 284–5.

[3] Emilia Obretenova, *Alianstvoto v Bulgaria. Ideologiya, kult, organizatsiya* (*The Aliani in Bulgaria. Ideology, Spirituality, Organisation*), PhD thesis, Sofia, 1989.

[4] Benjamin Brande and Bernard Lewis, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: the Functioning of a Plural Society* (Holmes and Meier Publishers, New York and London, 1982), Vol. 1, p. 1.

[5] *ibid.*, p. 2.

[6] Vucinich, 'Islam in the Balkans', in Arberry (ed.), *Religion in the Middle East* . . . , p. 236.

[7] The factors which favoured conversion to Islam are well highlighted and analysed by Speros Vryonis, 'Religious changes and patterns in the Balkans, 14th–16th centuries', in H. Birnbaum and S. Vryonis (eds), *Aspects of the Balkans* (Mouton, Paris, 1972), pp. 167–8.

[8] Shukri Tahirov, *Edinenieto* (*The Unification*) (Izdatelstvo na Otechestveniya front, Sofia, 1981), pp. 69–80.

[9] Antonina Zheliazkova, *Razprostranenieto na isliama v zapadnobalkanskite zemi pod*

osmanska vlast XV–XVIII vek (*The Spread of Islam in the West Balkan Lands under Ottoman Domination between the Fifteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*) (Izdatelstvo na Bulgarskata Akademia na Naukite, Sofia, 1990), pp. 141–50.

[10] Abundant evidence for this is revealed in F. W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1929), two volumes.

[11] Ivanichka Georgieva (ed.), *Bulgarskite Aliani* (*The Bulgarian Aliani*) (Universitetsko Izdatelstvo Sv. Kliment Okhridski, Sofia, 1991), pp. 9–33.

[12] Matthew Spinka, *A History of Christianity in the Balkans: a Study in the Spread of Byzantine Culture among the Slavs* (The American Society of Church History, Chicago, 1933), pp. 61–7.

[13] Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee: a Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982), pp. 63–115.

[14] Alexandre Popovic, 'Problèmes d'approche de l'islam Bulgare (1878–1978)', *Proceedings of the Ninth Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants* (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1981), p. 244.

[15] For instance, after Bulgaria's annexation of the southern Dobrudzha region from Romania in 1940, approximately 150,000 additional Turks were added to Bulgaria's Turkish Muslim population.

[16] Max Hoppe, 'Islam in Bulgaria', *The Moslem World*, Vol. 14, 1924, pp. 159–62; Ivan Ganchev, 'The Bible and Islam in Bulgaria', *The Moslem World*, Vol. 17, 1927, pp. 391–3; G. H. Bosquet, 'Islam in the Balkans', *The Moslem World*, Vol. 27, 1937, pp. 67–9.

[17] Cited by Thomas F. Michel, 'The Turkish minority in Bulgaria', *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1990, pp. 271–2.