

The Balkans

RAYMOND DETREZ

In the Balkans, religion seems to have played a much more important role in the process of nation building than language. Speakers of Serbo-Croat fell apart in three national communities on the basis of religion. Thus emerged the Bosniak nation, which identifies itself with Islam and clearly distinguishes itself from the Catholic Croats and the Orthodox Serbs. The establishment of the national states in the Balkans was accompanied, from the beginning of the 19th century, by attempts to restore the pre-Ottoman Christian states. The population was ethnically homogenized by expelling ethnic and religious minorities or by forcibly assimilating them. In particular the Muslims in the Balkans, and especially the Muslim Turks, fell victim to this policy.

It is generally assumed that in the Balkans, religion – including Islam – rather than language, plays a decisive role in the process of nation building. The former Yugoslavia is a case in point. In the central part of the eastern Balkans, where the former Yugoslavia was situated, a South Slavic language is spoken which used to be called Serbo-Croat or Croato-Serb until recent times. In the 19th century, the very similar dialects of Serbo-Croat were standardized into one single literary language, intended to demonstrate the ‘oneness’ of the Yugoslav or South Slavic nation *vis-à-vis* its many enemies (Germans, Hungarians, Turks).

In the same period, however, within the community of speakers of Serbo-Croat, national identities began developing on the basis of religion; or rather, national communities emerged, coinciding greatly with religious communities. Catholics speaking Serbo-Croat, living in the Habsburg Empire, identified themselves as Croats, whereas the Orthodox speakers of Serbo-Croat, living scattered over the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empires and in their own principality of Serbia, considered themselves Serbs. The development of a Bosnian national consciousness among the Muslim speakers of Serbo-Croat was slightly retarded, due to the Serbs’ and Croats’ attempts to incorporate them at least conceptually in their own respective national communities as Serb or Croat Muslims, and to the fact that belonging to the Muslim community traditionally was far more important to the Bosnians than belonging to one or another national community. The Yugoslav nationalists, endeavouring to create a single Yugoslav nation, tended to minimize the religious differences among Bosnians, Croats and Serbs, as they thwarted the process of South Slavic unification.

In the 20th century, however, especially after the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929), as a result of the Serbs monopolizing political and military power in the new state, Croats started distancing themselves from the idea of a single, South Slavic nation and state and developed a national identity of their own, emphasizing the particularities of the Croat language and the Catholic faith as distinctive features of the Croat nation *vis-à-vis* the Serbs. After an abortive and rather compromising attempt to establish an independent Croat state under Nazi protection during the Second World War, Croatia was re-integrated into Yugoslavia, which had become a communist federal state in 1944. The Croats finally achieved their aim in 1991, when the Republic of Croatia was internationally recognized.

Bosnian nationhood

In post-war Yugoslavia, the formation of a Bosnian national consciousness was finally completed. The official recognition of Bosn-

ian nationhood in 1969 – under the clumsy denomination ‘Muslims in the ethnic sense of the word’ – resulted mainly from the need for a national community whose representatives would balance Croat separatism and Serb hegemonism at the level of the federal government and of the government of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This does not mean, however, that the Bosnian nation was an artificial creation. The Bosnians constituted already then a very distinct national community, defining itself through Islam, just as Croats and Serbs defined themselves through Catholicism and Orthodoxy respectively. In fact, the very insistence of Croats and Serbs on religious affiliation as a basic component of national identity had largely contributed to preventing the Bosniaks from considering themselves Muslim Serbs or Croats, as both Serbs and Croats indefatigably attempted to make the Bosnians believe. How could a Muslim be a Serb, if being Orthodox is fundamental to being Serb? Besides, just as Croats think of their nation as a part of West European civilization and Serbs have the sense of belonging to Slavic Orthodox Eastern Europe, the Bosnians consider their nation a full member of the large family of Islamic peoples with their own age-old and rich cultural traditions, which are an integral part of the Bosnian national identity.

To be sure, in the Balkans, religion in general has little to do with devoutness. Forty years of communist rule dramatically reduced church and mosque attendance. The religious revival of the last decade is mainly the result of the people’s desire to express their belonging to an ethnic or national community. As religion is the basic component of national identity, church and mosque attendance appears to be a demonstration of national awareness. Of course, the clergy (be it Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim) has seized the opportunity to strengthen its position in society and to acquire a more or less official ‘national’ status. This may – and often does – threaten the secular character of the state granted by the Constitution. It has, however, less to do with religious fanaticism than with nationalist fanaticism. This goes for Bosnians, Croats and Serbs alike.

National and religious identity

The identification of national and religious identity (in the sense of belonging to a religious community) is the least articulated with the Bosnians. The same phenomenon can be observed with the other Muslim communities in the Balkans. The Pomaks (Bulgarian Muslims) in the Rhodope mountains in Southern Bulgaria, in spite of their being linguistically related to the Bulgarians, seem to associate more with the Turkish minority in Bulgaria than with the majority of Orthodox Bulgarians. Here, religion is apparently a stronger uniting factor than language. In Greece too, the Pomak minority is steadily absorbed by the Greek Turks, notwithstanding the attempts of the Greek authorities to impose upon them a Pomak consciousness, separate from the Turkish (and Bulgarian).

The identification of national and religious identity is the strongest with the Orthodox nations in the Balkans – Bulgarians, Greeks, Macedonians, and Serbs. This is the result of the Byzantine legacy of ‘national’ churches. Nation, state, religious community and ecclesiastical organization are supposed to be congruent. The Bulgarian Constitution states that Orthodox Christianity is the traditional religion of the Bulgarian people; the Greek Constitution is promulgated in the name of the Holy Trinity. Consequently, non-orthodox minorities – Muslim Pomaks and Turks, but also Catholics and Protestants – are considered, sometimes quite explicitly, as ‘defective’ Bulgarians, Greeks or, for that matter, Macedonians and Serbs, and as a threat to national unity and solidarity.

The identification of national and religious community has determined the attitude of the Orthodox peoples in the Balkans towards Islam in yet another way. In the 19th century, urged by nationalism, the Balkan peoples began their struggle for national independence against the Ottoman domination, established at the end of the 14th and during the 15th century. Independence was perceived by the leaders of the respective independence movements as the restoration of the former mediaeval, pre-Ottoman states. Since the mediaeval Balkan states repeatedly went through periods of imperial growth and feudal disintegration, the borders were not very well defined. As a rule, every national community aimed at the re-establishment of its respective mediaeval state at its maximum size – which resulted in legion territorial overlappings and border conflicts. In addition to the former size, the Balkan peoples also wanted to restore the ethnic composition of the population of their former states. As religion was one of the main distinctive features of national identity, the former religious community was to be restored as well. In contrast to historical evidence, the population of the Balkan mediaeval states was perceived by the 19th-century Balkan nationalists as ethnically and religiously homogeneous.

Thus, in order to re-establish the mediaeval situation, ethnic and religious minorities that came into being after the Ottoman conquest had to be eliminated. In some instances, the identity of these minorities was ‘reconstructed’ in such a way that they could be incorporated in and consequently assimilated by the majority. The Greeks labelled their Slavic co-religionists (about 150,000 people) in Greek Macedonia as ‘Slavophone Greeks’ and have been treating them as ethnic Greeks ever since. The Turks in Greece too are officially called ‘Greek Muslims’. Calling them Turks is punishable. An attempt to ‘reconstruct’ the Bosnians as Islamicized Serbs or Croats failed. For the time being, Bulgarians have been more successful in preventing the Pomaks from developing a separate Pomak national consciousness – though they have been helping them by explicitly identifying Bulgarianhood and orthodoxy.

The main victims of the Balkan Christians’ endeavours to restore their mediaeval states are those communities that differ both ethnically and religiously from the ma-

jority: the Turks and the Kosovars, being neither Slavs, Greeks, nor Orthodox Christians. As Islam was introduced in the Balkans mainly as a result of the Ottoman conquest, there was no place for Albanian and Turkish Muslims in the restored Christian Balkan states. As the double barrier of ethnic and religious ‘otherness’ made it impossible to reconstruct their national identity in a way to make them – albeit conceptually – disappear into the majority, more radical ways to eliminate them had to be resorted to. All independence wars in the Balkans (the Serb Uprisings in 1804-30, the Greek War of Independence in 1821-30, and the Russian-Ottoman War in 1877-8) were accompanied by massacring and expelling not only the Ottoman officials and military, but also the Muslim Turkish population. During the First Balkan War in 1912, not only Turks but also Albanians fell victim. The ethnic cleansing of Bosnians in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo is a resumption of this ‘method’ of nation building in the late 20th century.

Having lost most of its non-Turkish and non-Muslim populations, the late Ottoman Empire and the subsequent Turkish Republic resorted to similar practices in order to ultimately create a homogeneous Turkish state. The treatment of the Armenians, Greeks and Kurds in Anatolia are the most notorious of these measures. However, the identification of nationhood and religious affiliation is less apparent in the official Turkish (Kemalist) interpretation of national identity than it is in the Christian Balkan countries. ♦

Raymond Detrez is professor of Southeast European History at the University of Ghent, Belgium.
E-mail: Raymond.Detrez@rug.ac.be