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Review of Greble, E. (2021) Muslims and the making of modern Europe

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**Greble, Emily. *Muslims and the Making of Modern Europe*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 376.**

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This is a book about the lives of Muslims in what used to be Yugoslavia—in particular, what is today Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia—during the period from the Berlin Conference (1878) until the first founding years of Yugoslavia (1945–50). The author wants to demonstrate how nation-building has framed the fate of the Muslim communities in the Balkans. In doing so, her judgment is clear: Muslims in the Balkans have been subject to “a long history of European statesmen deciding their fate without their consent” (115).

This is a book rich in information but wanting in analysis. The author unpacks a treasure trove of daily life stories of Balkan Muslims and weaves them into a gripping narrative that gives in-depth insight in the developments in these regions. These chapters are a delight to read. But their conclusions and analyses raise several critical questions.

First, the author comes up with several conceptual premises that are not only questionable but also seem to confuse the author. For instance, the author correctly observes that the Berlin treaty “simultaneously laid the foundations for egalitarian citizenship and reified imperial systems of differentiated rights for confessional minorities.” But she then continues by stating that “legal differentiation of religious communities was anathema to the premises of egalitarian citizenship” (79). That may be anathema from the perspective of ethnic and religious homogeneous countries, as was the case with quite some European states at the time. But equality and differentiation are not mutually exclusive in minority thinking—it was not then, and it still is not now.

Similarly, the author repeatedly expresses her puzzlement about inconsistencies regarding certain rights that were given to Muslims. This surprise seems to stem from the author’s premise that the Congress of Berlin “introduced the idea that Muslims were people with rights” to create peace and stability in the region (29). This premise that political problems were solved with legal solutions is debatable. It seems more plausible that the European states were very concerned with the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and came up with a political solution that, in turn, had legal consequences. No wonder, then, that these legal consequences are full of contradictions.

Second, the aim of the book is to tell the story of nation-building through the experiences of Muslim people within the political and legal structures of their times. However, the author appears to not have a firm grasp of these structures. One of these is the Ottoman millet system. The author’s position is that European structures were imposed upon this Ottoman system in the Balkans and ultimately replaced it. That view does justice neither to the facts nor to the experiences and voices of the Muslims mentioned in the book. The state structures imposed on them were not novelties, as the author suggests, but derivatives of former Ottoman structures whereby the Ottoman system of confessional communalism was gradually merged with a system of civic individualism. This was not a typical European construct, as the author insists, because the Ottomans were also applying this very same transformation in their own empire (epitomized by the introduction of citizenship in 1856). But whatever changes were introduced, the Ottoman system did not disappear as its remnants are still visible in most Balkan countries today.

Another stumbling block is the notion of “Shari’a,” which plays a key role in the book but is not clarified anywhere. Here, also, the new Balkan states made use of the Ottoman system whereby religious communities maintain autonomy in matters of family law, religious property, and religious education. For all other matters, the Muslims were referred to state law. If this had been made clear from the beginning, the ominous use of the generic term “Shari’a” in this book would be less confusing. Also, a deeper insight in the mechanism of religious family law in Europe and the Middle East during

that time may have made the author less critical of certain practices. For instance, she condemns as “contrary to practices in other emerging liberal democracies” the fact that the adjudication of Islamic family and inheritance law by sharia state courts in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians was not optional but mandatory to Muslims (119). It is unclear which “emerging liberal democracies” are meant, but in countries like Greece and Spain at that time, Orthodox and Catholic law, respectively, were also mandatory in cases of family matters.

Third, while the core of the book is about the Muslims in the Balkans during the years between 1878 and 1950, the author sees this as a historical prelude to the situation of Muslims in Europe today. Unfortunately, she restricts the analysis of these next seventy-odd years to an eight-page conclusion in which Western and Southeastern Europe are juxtaposed in a manner that is quite contestable. Muslim migrant workers during the 1960s “were treated as inferior” in the “capitalist” societies of the West as opposed to “socialist” societies that “accepted and recognized” Muslims as part of European society (256–57). The author then jumps through time to the turn of the twenty-first century without paying attention to the fragmentation of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the genocidal horrors inflicted against Muslims during the ensuing civil wars, or to the effects of the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

The author seems to subscribe to the special status of “European Islam” in the Balkans as inherently secular and European. But she provides no explanation. Is it indeed a European example of an indigenous Islam with unique qualities? Or are the Balkans like so many other Muslim nations across the world who in the wake of 9/11 ardently presented themselves as examples of “true and peaceful” Islam?

Finally, is the history of Muslims in the Balkans indeed “a long history of European statesmen deciding their fate without their consent” (115)? This claim denies the agency of the Balkan Muslims as well as of the Balkan societies. The fate of the Balkans has been largely a product of the upheavals created by the people themselves. Nationalism resulting in ethnic and religious cleansing was not caused by European statesmen. The decisions made by European powers did, however, create new realities that were imposed upon the local people, affecting Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

Granted, the Muslims might have been dealt bad cards. But here, also, they proved to be very active in engaging with the new realities, as this book abundantly shows. The author, however, seems more concerned by their alleged lack of recognition, as she states with some drama in her conclusion: “across the globe, states prove unable to accept the existence and possibility of Muslim citizens” (261).

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Methodieva, Milena B. *Between Empire and Nation: Muslim Reform in the Balkans*

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. Pp. 331.

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Recent years have witnessed a growth of interest in the study of Muslim societies in southeastern Europe in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire’s nineteenth-century territorial losses. The emergence of new nation-states raised the issue of how local Muslim societies could be integrated into the new (predominantly Christian) state structures. Milena Methodieva addresses this question in the context of the Bulgarian state’s Muslim community in the post-1878 era. Her narrative links the transformation of Bulgaria’s Muslim community into a national minority with the emergence of a local Muslim reform movement. By focusing on the debates and activities of the latter, she reveals how the former