OTTOMAN MILLET, RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM, AND CIVIL SOCIETY: FOCUS ON KOSOVO[1]

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Civil Society

In the lands of Southeastern Europe, establishing civil societies has been an extraordinary challenge. The wars that raged or started there at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the ongoing tensions and strife that kept resentment bubbling through much of the century, to the conflicts that closed it in the former Yugoslavia, have shown how far the ideal of civil society has been from the situation attained on the ground. All this invites scholarly examination, as a contribution toward pursuing and achieving civil society in the region.

In this regard, while some scholars are drawn to the conflicts themselves, my interest is in investigating the deeper historical backgrounds which have shaped the attitudes and orientations of peoples in the region. If we hope to assist the establishment of civil societies in Southeastern Europe, one of the things we must do is attempt to get inside those attitudes and orientations, to enable us to understand the outlooks of the peoples in the region which influence how they view and end up relating to their neighbors. However, doing even that for the whole of Southeastern Europe would be a massive undertaking, far beyond what I might hope to achieve.

My special interest is more modest, if still daunting – namely, in the challenges facing the establishment of civil society in two neighboring regions, Kosovo and Macedonia. In them both, the population is predominantly comprised of Albanians and Slavs, peoples of two significantly different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. In both lands, the Albanian and Slavic residents have encountered and lived next to each other for centuries. Even so, in the face of common overarching experience lasting many generations in the two territories, significant differences manifest themselves in the relationships between the Slavs and Albanians in Kosovo, on the one hand, and in Macedonia, on the other. What I hope to

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do is explore the similarities and the differences in those relationships through investigating historical influences that have shaped Southeastern Europe, and, in both regions, the way each of the two peoples has viewed its history and status, and how each has seen the other. The reason this is intriguing to me is that, while both regions have known sharp tensions, civil society is finding its difficult way in Macedonia,[2] while in Kosovo it remains an elusive dream. My investigations to this point have focused on Kosovo; this paper reports on what I have found so far in that regard.

Ottoman Millet

A few months after his May 29, 1453, conquest of Constantinople, Sultan Mehmet II ("the Conqueror") made a fateful decision regarding the organization of his expanding empire. That decision significantly shaped how the Ottoman Turkish government would relate to its subjects for the next four and one-half centuries, down to the revolution of the Young Turks in 1908. Through the ebb and flow of Ottoman rule – from its high point of efficiency and comparative beneficence toward its subjects in Mehmet II's time to the mid-seventeenth century, through the decreasingly capable and increasingly corrupt rule that marked the empire from then on through the nineteenth century – this 1454 decision of Mehmet the Conqueror remained a constant. It shaped not only the way the Ottoman rulers viewed their subjects, but also how those subjects viewed themselves and their neighbors. Its legacy is still with us in Southeastern Europe to the present day, for it molded perceptions in ways that have persisted through history – and which have made establishing civil societies in the region a considerable challenge.

Mehmet II's decision was to structure the organization of the empire in "millets." In contemporary Turkish usage, "millet" means "nation"[3]; however, in the fifteenth century, and down through the generations to near the end of the Ottoman Empire, the term did not connote a "nation" in the sense in which we commonly use that term in the present day. In

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[2]While much remains to be done, promising beginnings can be noted: see the presentation by Paul Mojzes, "From Crisis to Post-Crisis in Macedonia," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 22, No. 4 (2002):47-52, which summarizes the events leading up to and the outcomes of the interreligious conference, "Confidence Building between the Churches and Religious Communities in Macedonia through Dialogue," held May 10-14, 2002. One of the results of that conference was the establishment of a Council for Interreligious Cooperation; see follow-up reports on the progress of this council at www.caree.info/news/index.shtml, especially "Return to Macedonia" (October 11-17, 2004) and "Report on Visit to Macedonia" (October 8-13, 2005).

[3]Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *A History of the Balkans 1804-1945* (New York: Longman, 1999), 6.

this usage, "millet" focused, not on nation, but on *religion*.[4] The "millet" system organized the Ottoman Empire according to religious adherence, rather than by geographical location, economic status, or ethnic background.

Already by the fifteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had become a state which included a wide array of peoples who adhered to various religions. Not all religions received the approved status accorded to the recognized millets in Ottoman governance, though: such tolerance was accorded only to Judaism and Christianity, the "religions of the book" – a Muslim designation for the monotheist religions that had preceded and culminated (according to Muslim teaching) in Islam. In due course, millets were established for Orthodox Christianity, Armenian Christianity (for non-Chalcedonian churches), and Judaism. Members of these millets enjoyed protected, but nonetheless second-class, status in the Ottoman Empire. First-class status was enjoyed only by Muslims.

The first millet established was that of Orthodox Christianity. Since the overwhelming preponderance of the Ottomans' subjects in Southeastern Europe were adherents of Orthodox Christianity,[5] this offered Ottoman oversight to a considerable portion of the empire at the time. The oversight thus afforded was genuinely shaped by the religious heritage of the respective millet communities. While Ottoman law stipulated taxes and required, in cases involving disputes including Muslims, that trials be conducted in Ottoman courts and in accordance with Islamic *sharia* law, in other matters the accepted practices of the millet obtained. Thus, Orthodox Christians were governed according to Orthodox Christian standards and laws (for family matters [including marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.], for legal cases short of murder, and a wide variety of other concerns). All this was overseen by the patriarch in Constantinople (now renamed Istanbul) – who, of course, relied on a number of appointed Orthodox Christian officials and representatives to administer the millet. For it all, though, the patriarch was responsible to the sultan for the conduct of the people of his millet and for their manifestation of loyalty to or rebellion against the Ottoman state.[6]

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[4]Miranda Vickers notes, "Religion not nationality was the fundamental factor in the Ottoman concept of governance" (*Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1998], 19).

[5]Mark Mazower points out, "According to the tax registers of 1520-1530, more than 80 percent of the inhabitants of the Balkans were Christians" (*The Balkans: A Short History* [New York: The Modern Library, 2000], 24-25); he indicates that this percentage remained constant (cf. his comments at 47).

[6]Cf. the treatments of "millet" in Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1977), 112-113; in Peter F. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe under Ottoman Rule, 1354-1804*, A History of East Central Europe, vol. 5 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977), 5-6, 45-47, 273-274; and in Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*

It is understandable that Mehmet the Conqueror chose this path. In Islamic political thought as it had developed to that point, the main issue was religion: Muslim teaching organized the world and understood it according to religion. In their specific approach, Muslims were Allah's servants in spreading the rule of Islam throughout the world. This stance only rarely led to pressures on subject peoples to convert to Islam; it was adequate that Muslims ruled over the conquered territories. By Ottoman practice, only Muslims could serve in the sultan's court or expect to rise in the structures of government. As well, Muslims were spared the additional taxes levied on non-Muslims throughout the Ottoman domain: those taxes supported the military which defended and expanded the rule of Islam, a military composed almost exclusively – apart from some mercenary troops or "vassal" forces – of Muslims. While Ottoman society knew no "noble" or "aristocratic" class, there was no question that Muslims as a whole – whatever their economic status – received preferential treatment in Ottoman governance.

While this fit with Islamic political attitudes of the time, the millet system had one major drawback significant for our considerations: it precluded the development of an integrated society within the empire.[7] Each millet looked to its own affairs, unaware of and unaffected by those of the other millets. While the adherents of the millets had to reckon with Muslim oversight, the structure did not encourage them to identify with their Ottoman rulers, and they could not aspire to the first-class status open only to Muslims. Differentiation, rather than integration, was ineluctably built into the millet system. This was not soil in which the seed of civil society could take root.

Even so, the millet system meshed with the prior experience and orientations of the peoples of Southeastern Europe.[8] With the exception of the Slovenes, the Croats and the residents of Bosnia, the Slavic peoples of the region all had converted to Orthodox Christianity in earlier centuries. Not only had both of the major Slavic nations that arose in the region, the Bulgars and the Serbs, embraced Orthodox Christianity; both had also sought and attained autocephalous status for the church in their respective nations.[9] This status

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1:49-50.

[7]Sugar notes, "The *millet* system is invariably cited [by scholars] as the greatest stumbling block to the creation of an integrated society," and he goes on to assess this as "the fundamental weakness of the Ottoman state" (231).

[8]During the 1860s and 1870s, Ottoman rulers revised the millet system somewhat, but without changing the basic purpose and orientation: cf. the discussion in Pavlowitch, 101.

[9]While initially denied to Khan Boris I of Bulgaria in 865, under his son, Khan Symeon, this privilege was secured in 926. (This status was revoked when Emperor Basil II brought an end to the first Bulgarian Empire in 1014. The return of that status remained a fond hope of Bulgarian leaders, however; in 1870, the Ottoman Empire renewed

allowed the church in each nation to govern itself. In this way, Orthodoxy in Southeastern Europe had become closely tied to nation. With the liturgies of Orthodox worship performed in Slavonic, which was then a close approximation to the language spoken by the Slavic peoples of the region, with the consciousness of national self-governance in ecclesiastical affairs, and with the close association of church and state in the leadership of their respective realms, the Slavic peoples' notions of church and nation were intricately intertwined, before contact with the Ottomans.

Moreover, the close tie between Orthodoxy and nation was driven home by Orthodox church buildings themselves. The typical pattern, especially among the Nemanjić rulers of the Serbian state, was for kings to see to the building of churches and monasteries; indeed, the vast majority of Orthodox church buildings from the Nemanjić period were erected under the sponsorship of the Serbian kings. The iconography within the churches conspired to drive this point home, as well: icons of the Savior and the Theotokos met with those of the saints from the history of the church, including those who had come from that particular people group. More specifically, the churches almost always included icons depicting the donation of the church by the respective ruler who had commissioned it. In this way, the people worshiping within these edifices came to associate the Savior, the saints of church history, the worthies of their people, and the kings who had ruled this people in an undifferentiated coalition of faith.[10] While we cannot claim that the Orthodox peoples of Southeastern Europe already had a national consciousness in the later romantic sense that emerged only in the nineteenth century, it is surely legitimate to recognize that what we have just described paved the way for it in Southeastern Europe.[11] That is to say, the peoples of Southeastern Europe, both in the time of their nations' independence and of their subsequent subjugation under the Ottomans, sensed an intimate connection between their situation as a people of a particular background, on the one hand, and as Orthodox Christians, on the

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the autocephalous privileges of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.) Among the Serbs, the negotiations of St Sava resulted in the grant of autocephaly by Byzantine civil and ecclesiastical authorities in 1219.

[10]Cf. Tim Judah's observation about this: "Their images [those of the Nemanjić rulers] were painted on to the walls of Serbian churches and monasteries. So, for hundreds of years, the Serbian peasant went to church and in his mind the very idea of Christianity, resurrection and 'Serbdom' blended together" (*Kosovo: War and Revenge*, 2d ed. [New Haven, Connecticut: Yale Nota Bene, 2002], 3.

[11]While we must be careful not to import notions or understandings of nationalism, which only developed subsequently in the nineteenth century, into earlier periods, concern regarding that anachronism should not lead to the unreflective assumption that the peoples of earlier centuries can have had no awareness of themselves as a people associated with their respective leaders and their churches.

other.[12] Because of this, the millet approach adopted within the Ottoman Empire was not an imposition of something alien; rather, it squared with their prior experience and heritage.

Even so, the millet structure drove home the disparity between the privileges and status of Muslims and of Orthodox Christians. Heavier taxes, the dreaded *devşirme* (the "child tax"), and restrictions of various sorts (from the colors that could be worn, through the kinds of facial hair allowed to be sported by clerics, to opportunities for schooling and socio-economic advancement), conspired to spawn resentment of Muslims. The fact that cities became, in due course, overwhelmingly Muslim in constituency,[13] while much of the rural outlands remained Orthodox Christian, exacerbated the common urban/rural tensions with a religio-political one.

Consequently, it is scarcely surprising that adherents of the Orthodox Christian millet came to resent the inhabitants of Southeastern Europe who converted to Islam, and who thus came to enjoy the privileges and benefits accorded to Muslims. The Ottoman Empire did not manifest partiality toward Muslims of Turkish heritage, over and above those of other backgrounds: Muslim privileges extended to all those who embraced Islam.[14] As noted above, the Ottomans did not engage in proselytism, seeking to enfold their subjects into the Islamic faith; indeed, given the privileges that went with being a Muslim, the Ottomans carefully scrutinized the motives and purposes of those who wanted to convert to Islam. Even so, such conversions took place: sometimes a few families in one place or most of a village in another, but occasionally large groups in a region or from a particular background converted *en masse*.

One of the reactions to such conversion, especially germane to the concerns of this paper, is the way Orthodox Christians came to speak of these converts to Islam. For the Orthodox Christians, these converts became "Turks."[15] The people who used this epithet did not intend thereby that some ethnic or genetic changes were entailed in such conversion, of course; indeed, the ones using the epithet may have known or been related to the converts.

[12]In commenting on the significance of the Orthodox millet, Barbara Jelavich points out that it "kept the Christian community almost unchanged in an ideological sense until the age of the national movements" (1:52), and Sugar observes that through the millet system "the church became a symbol of independence, if not of nationhood" (278).

[13]This was especially clear in Kosovo: Malcolm comments, "The growth of Islam in Kosovo, during the early Ottoman period, was an almost exclusively urban phenomenon" (105).

[14]Owing to the conversion forced upon the children taken in the *devşirme*, as well as conversions by some among the subject peoples of the Ottoman Empire, Noel Malcolm notes, "the Ottoman ruling class became an ethnic mélange of its subject peoples" (*Kosovo: A Short History* [London: Macmillan, 1998], 96); cf. also the comments at Pavlowitch, 8-9.

[15]Dennis P. Hupchick, *Culture and History in Eastern Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 149.

However, by converting to another faith, those others had, indeed, become "other": they had crossed over to the other side – the side of the rulers, the privileged, the oppressors. Henceforth, they were no longer Slavs or Vlachs or Albanians: they were Turks. All Muslims were "Turks," in this estimation: whatever their ethnic background or prior heritage, they were classed – not only by the Ottoman rulers, but by their neighbors, as well – as Muslims. They were on the side of the oppressors, no matter their actual socio-economic status or privilege. With the coming of romantic nationalism to Southeastern Europe in the nineteenth century, this would have fateful consequences.

What we have considered so far suffices to describe the basic pattern in most of Southeastern Europe. None of this is to deny that friendly, cooperative relationships existed between Muslims and Orthodox Christians, nor that they could live through generations without particular tension because of their contrasting allegiances and consequent privileges.[16] However long or widely such coexistence endured, though, the future for most of Southeastern Europe did not lie in this direction. Tension and conflict lay ahead, especially in Kosovo.

Indeed, Kosovo was demarked for this in three significant ways. First of all, it had been the scene of the Battle of Kosovo-Polje in 1389. That battle may have ended in an exhausted draw, but its outcome led inexorably to the demise of the Serbian Empire.[17] Via the folk songs and epic poetry which pointed sorrowfully back to that battle, Serbs learned to view Kosovo as an especially holy place, the site of their forebears' martyrdom for the sake of Christianity against the forces of Islam. Priestly exhortation had kept the Serbs aware that their Turkish rulers had usurped Serb territory – or, more significantly, that the forces of Antichrist now ruled, illegitimately, over lands originally dedicated to and still claimed by Christ.[18] This sense of loss, of having been usurped, of suffering oppression under resented overlords of another faith, weighed heavily upon Orthodox Christians. The millet system of the Ottoman Empire assured an ongoing awareness of religious difference as at the root of all other tensions; nowhere was this pressure as intense as it was in Kosovo.[19]

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[16]Cf. the discussion of this in Malcolm, 129-130; it also finds abundant and repeated expression in the account of Rebecca West's travels in the region: see her *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey through Yugoslavia* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982 [reprint of 1940/1941 ed.]).

[17]Cf. the insightful discussion in Malcolm, 75-76.

[18]B. Jelavich, 1:52.

[19]While the notion of age-old hatreds bubbling up perpetually in the Balkans is a modern western misreading of the history of the region, the notion came closest to fulfillment in Kosovo.

In the second place, Kosovo was home to a large number of both Serbs and Albanians.[20] Unlike the Bulgarians and the Serbs, the Albanians had not commonly embraced a single religion prior to the Ottoman entrance into Southeastern Europe. Some Albanians had turned to Catholicism; others had embraced Orthodoxy.[21] However, with the coming of the Ottomans, in relatively short order an overwhelming number of Albanians in Kosovo converted to Islam: upwards of 70% of Albanians became Muslim. This afforded them privilege and status: a significant number of the Ottoman Empire's grand viziers and generals, plus a host of lesser officials, were Kosovar Albanians[22]; furthermore, Kosovars enjoyed educational and economic opportunities which their Serb compatriots could not hope to attain.[23] The Kosovar Albanian conversion to Islam thus brought them in due course the intense resentment of their Serb neighbors who had remained Orthodox Christians.[24] As well, given that large-scale conversion, Serbs in Kosovo readily lumped the Kosovar Albanians who maintained their Catholic or Orthodox commitments with those who had converted to Islam: they were all Albanians, and the Albanians were all Turks, the local embodiments of the repressive forces of Antichrist.

Thirdly, over the course of Ottoman rule, Kosovo came to be viewed, both in the region itself and throughout the empire, as quintessentially Ottoman.[25] Evidences of Muslim privilege, manifestations of Ottoman dominance, and marks of the second-class status of the members of the Orthodox Christian millet thus abounded in Kosovo; sensitivities were, consequently, heightened there – especially for those who saw themselves repressed, the Serbs. Since Albanians played important roles throughout the empire, and especially in

[20]Note that we don't need to go into the controverted question here of precisely who was dominant in population and when.

[21]According to Vickers, "During the fifteenth century the great majority of Albanians were still Christians, and Serbs and Albanians lived together in considerable harmony" (19).

[22]Charles and Barbara Jelavich point out, "In the empire at least thirty of the grand vezirs had come from these Muslim Albanians. Some of the finest and bravest Ottoman soldiers were born in this region" (*The Establishment of the Balkan National states, 1804-1920*, A History of East Central Europe, vol. 8 [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977], 223); cf. also the treatment in B. Jelavich, 1:81.

[23]Cf. the discussion at Vickers, 26.

[24]On the Albanians' conversion to Islam and the privileges that went with it for them, Alexander N. Dragnich and Slavko Todorovich comment, "All of this played a role in defining the new stratification of the society under Ottoman rule, as well as the power balance among national groups. Undoubtedly, the balance was shifting, and as far as the Albanians and Serbs were concerned, it was shifting drastically in favor of the Albanians, *to the detriment of good relations between them*" (*The Saga of Kosovo: Focus on Serbian-Albanian Relations* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1984], 48 [emphasis added]); cf. also their observation, "The phenomenon of Islamization, and all that it meant in terms of personal welfare and social advancement, still remained the main cause of the estrangement" (52).

[25]Noel Malcolm comments, "It [Kosovo] was one of the most characteristic parts of the Ottoman Empire in Europe.... Kosovo is, in many ways, Ottoman territory *par excellence*" (xxxv).

Kosovo, this issued into keen resentment by the Orthodox Christians who believed they were oppressed in this thoroughly Ottoman area by their Kosovar Albanian rulers.[26] It is true that Albanians also eventually became embittered by the corrupt governance which marked the last two centuries of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, the inhabitants of Southeastern Europe, Muslims and Christians alike, found abundant reason to resent Ottoman rule and seek to break free from it; both succeeded.[27] Given, though, the common viewpoint that Kosovo was so thoroughly Ottoman, it is scarcely surprising that hostility toward Ottoman rule became particularly sharp there. With the collective dismissal (noted above) of all Albanians as Muslims, and all Muslims as Turks, it is also not to be wondered at that Christian/Muslim – that is to say, Serb/Albanian – tensions became especially heated in Kosovo.

Religious Nationalism

The entrance of romantic nationalism into Southeastern Europe aroused hopes for political independence among the various subject peoples of the Ottoman Empire; Bulgars, Romanians, Greeks, Serbs, and Albanians all were affected. In the western European realm in which it originated, romantic nationalism had no particular religious interest; rather, it focused on what united a people – language, history, culture, and geography. While religion might otherwise have been seen as a significant contributor to such unities, the disunities introduced into Western Europe during the religious wars of the seventeenth century, followed by the dismissive attitude toward the influence of religion in the later stages of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, insured that religion played no particular role in romantic nationalism in Western Europe. This perspective influenced the intelligentsia who sought to foment nationalism in Southeastern Europe.

These purveyors of nationalistic ideas in the region did not think in terms of religious unity, but of cultural communities[28]: shared culture shaped nation, in their view. Religion played no particular role in the thought of these spokesmen, unlike the peoples they sought to influence. Successful in fomenting nationalistic longings, the intelligentsia were nevertheless

[26]"There is no doubt that the Albanians' continued presence at the seat of power gave them an upper hand, which was the beginning of a tragic divisiveness, of separate roads for them and for the Serbs. The former became the rulers and the latter the ruled" (Dragnich and Todorovich, 50).

[27]Albanian resentment of Ottoman misrule led to the establishment of the League of Prizren in 1878, and in 1912 an Albanian revolution broke the Ottoman hold on the region (and opened the door to the Balkan Wars); in the nineteenth century, the Serbs had managed to break free from Ottoman overlordship and establish an independent nation-state.

[28]Mazower, 73.

unable to dictate the way that nationalism was appropriated by their eager listeners. The peoples of the region all processed notions of what they shared in terms of the commonality most familiar to them – their religion. The only shared culture most of the peoples of the region recognized was the faith and practice they shared in their Orthodox church, which in the millet structure had continued throughout the centuries of Ottoman rule. The millet system of Ottoman governance had thus helped to assure that the most readily recognizable unifying factor for a burgeoning nationalist movement in the region would be religion. Whatever the nationalist intelligentsia thought, the peasants who empowered the uprisings which actually led to the establishment of new nation-states remained firmly committed to their church.[29] In Southeastern Europe, nationalism took on unmistakably religious overtones. This was true for all the major peoples of the region except one: it obtained for the Bulgars, Romanians, Greeks, and Serbs – but not for the Albanians.

This was the pattern, though, for all the Orthodox Christian peoples of Southeastern Europe. While the millet structure had continued to shape their understandings of community, recent developments had conspired to restrict that community within the limits of a particular people. The non-Greeks were exasperated with a corrupt patriarchate which imposed Greek language and Hellenic prelates on the Slavic peoples. They resented the favoritism shown to Phanariot Greeks in appointments to positions of responsibility within the millet, and they chafed at the rapaciousness of Phanariot mismanagement. By the time romantic nationalist ideas entered Southeastern Europe, the Slavic and Romanian peoples had discarded loyalty to the Orthodox patriarch in Istanbul. They still found their commonality within the Orthodox Christian millet, but that commonality was now on a reduced scale: for each of these peoples, that millet had been reduced to the Orthodox church among their own people.

In this regard, though, the Albanians were a case apart. The nationalism that developed among them was not – indeed, it could not have been – religious in focus. Given the large preponderance of Muslims among the Albanians and the consequent privilege they thus enjoyed, most Albanians had continued to identify with the Ottoman Empire longer than did the Christian peoples of the region; only with the increasing fear of Albanians being swallowed up by the Christian nations which intended to be established out of the dying

[29]Mazower, 76; cf. also the comments by Milica Bakić-Hayden, "National Memory as Narrative Memory: The Case of Kosovo," 25-40, in Maria Todorova, ed., *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 33.

Ottoman Empire did the Albanians begin to develop a nationalistic movement.[30] In it, religion could play no motive role, for the Albanians were not united in religious commitment: they were spread among a large Muslim majority and the nonetheless significant Orthodox and Catholic communities. This religious disunity precluded the development of religious nationalism among them; indeed, religion played virtually no role in the mobilization of Albanian nationalism.[31] An Albanian poet recognized the anomalous character of Albanian nationalism in the region when he said, "the religion of Albanians is Albanianism."[32]

Apart from the Albanians, though, the Southeastern European nationalist movements which helped bring an end to the Ottoman Empire were all manifestations of religious nationalism. As in the initial structuring of the Ottoman Empire through Mehmet II"s decision, so also as "the sick man of Europe" faced its demise, religion played a predominant role. Whatever else one might point to as a unifying factor for the respective Southeastern European peoples – language, culture, history, geography, or any combination of these – the unquestioned common ground for each of them was religion. While religion thus was set to continue as a major political factor in the period after the Ottoman Empire, as it had (under different circumstances and with different limitations) during that empire, the significance of religion itself changed in a key regard: it became a tag of national identity.[33] Nationalism in the region became religious nationalism. In fuller development, religion was co-opted for nationalistic purposes and usurped for political ends.[34]

All this was unquestionably the case with Serbia. The Serbs achieved independence from the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century. Their self-awareness as a people had been shaped by the epic songs about Kosovo sung over the centuries, and their success in breaking the grip of the Ottoman overlords cemented their sense of themselves as a people.

[30]Cf. the discussion of this in C. and B. Jelavich, 223-224.

[31]According to Malcolm, "The Albanians of Kosovo ... are in many ways a politically mobilized people, but religion has played almost no role at all in that mobilization...." (xxviii); later, he contrasts the patterns manifest in this regard in Bosnia and in Kosovo: "Although Islam, in a non-fundamentalist form, did play a part in the political awakening of the Bosnian Muslims, its political role in Kosovo was so slight as to be quite invisible" (351).

[32]The statement was made by a Catholic Albanian, Pashko Vasa (quotation as cited in Judah, 12).

[33]Mazower, 76.

[34]Dubravka Stojanović expressed the transformation well when she wrote, "It is all about the absorption of nationalism in the language of religion, about making political speech sacred, about the replacement of Christianity with the religion of the nation. Nation becomes the parameter of all values..." ("Construction of Historical Consciousness: The Case of Serbian History Textbooks," 327-338 in Todorova, 335.)

Even so, the dominant factor in the establishment of Serb identity proved to be the Serbian Orthodox Church.[35]

Looking across the border of Serbia toward Kosovo, though, proved painful for Serbs. The presence of hundreds of ancient churches in Kosovo, the historic homeland of the Serbian Empire in the glory days of the Nemanjić rulers, insured a special interest in that territory. The fact that it had become quintessentially Ottoman, dominated by others who had allegedly turned to Islam for privilege and who had made common cause with the oppressors, steeled nationalistic resolve to retake the land of their forebears.

Serbian nationalism – a religious nationalism – repudiated the status quo and was determined to right the wrongs inflicted long ago upon Christendom by liberating Kosovo and establishing Serbian rule over it. The stage was set for armed conflict – a conflict that marked too much of the relationship between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians during the twentieth century. Before that took place, though, the Serbs' religious nationalism added still another combustible ingredient to the explosive mixture.

What transpired in Kosovo in that regard revealed a surprising side of religious nationalism as it had developed in the region. As we have noted, although overwhelmingly Muslim, Kosovar Albanians were not united in religion, as were the Serbs in their commitment to Orthodox Christianity. Even so, as we have also seen, all converts to Islam – whether Slav or Albanian or Vlach in heritage – had long been viewed by the Orthodox Christians of Southeastern Europe as Turks. The vast majority of Kosovar Albanians had embraced Islam, and so were considered Turks; and the rest of the Albanians – even those who were Catholic or Orthodox – had come to be tarred by the Serbs with the same brush as those who had turned to Islam.

For the conflict-filled future, the issue was not whether Kosovar Albanians saw themselves as united in religion. The significant point for that future was that the Serbs saw them so. In the religious nationalism that shaped Serbian attitudes, the Kosovar Albanians were all "Muslims" and "Turks." They were "the Other." Religious nationalism was not only a self-chosen marker; it could also demarcate the other, even against the protests of that other.

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[35]Malcolm points out, "Another key factor [was] needed to determine Serbian-ness: and that factor, historically the most powerful one in building a Serb identity, [was] the Serbian Orthodox Church.... Its key role in Serbian cultural life [has] been continuous. When modern concepts of nationhood began to be propagated in the nineteenth century, membership of this Church supplied a ready-made category of Serbian-ness" (12).

With Kosovo as a quintessential Ottoman region, and with religious differences finding outlet in nationalistic claims, Kosovo became the place where long-standing resentment toward the oppressing Turks found its harshest expression. This proved to be the case in the Balkan Wars of the early twentieth century, the tensions in the first Yugoslavia, World War II, the Communist period under Marshal Tito, and in the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. Serb nationalism cancelled out the inconvenient elements of Orthodox Christian teaching prohibiting violence toward others, while nonetheless using religion as one of its main unifying components.

However difficult for western scholars to appreciate, it nonetheless remains true that, whatever people in the region may actually believe or practice of their religion, in Southeastern Europe religion shapes nationalism, to the present day. Because of the unusual way it does so, civil society has proven difficult to achieve – especially in Kosovo.