

ON THE PERIPHERY OF TWO WORLDS:
SOME ASPECTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY PERCEPTION
OF ISLAMIC TRADITION AMONG THE MUSLIMS IN THE BALKANS

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The last decade of the post-communist history of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe after the end of the cold war are accompanied by a specific process in which the growing importance of two factors in the life of the individual and the society is remarkable. The first one is religion and the second one is nationalism; however, as the case of Bosnia has already proved, they have frequently been interwoven. Certainly, the characteristic features of this return to religious roots differs according to the social and cultural background in any particular region and country in the post-communist world. In the Balkans, and particularly in Bulgaria, they are variable in keeping with regional peculiarities. Here, as Sabine Riedel pointed out, the discourse about Islam is frequently influenced by "The Clash of Civilizations" of Samuel Huntington, who argues that the contemporary conflicts are rooted not in the ideological and economic but in the cultural background (Riedel 1997:539).

Our analysis of the contemporary situation of Islam in the Balkans will be more comprehensive if we consider it in its relation to Islam in the central Islamic lands, because we face here the issue of the re-establishment of contact with the great centers of Muslim education and propaganda, which had been broken for half a century. Certainly, I could not pretend to present here a comprehensive study of the issue in the Balkan Peninsula as a whole, which explains why the contemporary situation in Bulgaria has been chosen as a representative case for some recent tendencies.

Contemporary Islam is a dynamic and diverse complex of doctrines and social practices. This process, in which Islam, or some of its dimensions, have been involved, has been defined in a variety of ways. It has been called "Islamic revivalism", "Islamic resurgence", or "Islamic fundamentalism". In a similar context, we also frequently meet the term "political Islam", occasionally associated with "militant Islam" and "radical Islam", though the last two, defined as "extremism" (Sivan 1997:3), are not our concern here. Thus has the image developed of an Islam which is expected to become the greatest danger to Europe after the fall of communism (Leveau 1997:3). Recently, the term "Islamism" has been adopted to refer to those who wish to see Islam play a greater role in society and politics (Heper 1997:33). That is why "Muslim" is not synonymous with "Islamist" in the sense that the former expresses a religious identity, while the latter implies a political consciousness and social action (Göle 1997:47). Generally speaking, since the 1970s the dominant theme of Islam has been its resurgence (Esposito 1998:158).

However, from its earliest history, Islam was closely related to the ideas of renewal (*tagdīd*) and reform (*islāh*), which we find in the Qur'ān (7:170, 11:117; 28:19) and the prophetic Sunna. *Tagdīd* is based on the following tradition (*hadīth*) of Muḥammad: "God will send to this *umma* [the Muslim community] at the head of each century those who will renew its faith for it" (Voll 1983:33).

The misunderstanding of the core of Islamic reformism and renewal frequently originates from this early perception of renewal in Islam. I am referring to the fact that although Muslim dogma prescribes the necessity of renewal (*tagdīd*), this *tagdīd* has been perceived as a restoration rather than an innovation of religious and social principles. Thus, in medieval Muslim awareness renewal meant a return to the roots and fundamentals of Islam. The fundamentals are, of course, the Qur'ān and the Sunna, but the ideal of early Muslims (*as-salaf as-sālihūn*) and their religious-political community (*umma*) are also important in this context. That is why it is crucial to study the neorevivalist notion of the Muslim community (*umma*) as a reinterpretation of the classical medieval *umma* doctrine. Moreover, it appears that the understanding of human rights by modern Muslims is also based on it.

The classical (medieval) *umma* doctrine can be defined as a metahistorical, multi-ethnic logocracy, where the latter refers to obedience to God's Word. If for Christians God's Word is the person of Jesus Christ, for Muslims it is incarnated in the Scripture (van Ess 1991:I, 34). The *umma* in its classical meaning is thus a theocratic social community which is obedient to ontological purposes. Still, in medieval Islam the ideal of this theocracy required political rule to be linked not to a king but to Allāh and his messenger Muḥammad (Wellhausen 1960:5-6). That is why "there could be no distinction here of Church and State. The *umma*, the "Community" partook of the nature of both and the purposes of one are the purposes of the other" (Levi 1979:275-276). This community, historically established by the prophet Muḥammad, has both historical and metahistorical purposes and is defined by the Qur'ān as "the community of the centre" by the following statement of God: "Thus we appointed you a midmost nation (*umma wasat*) that you might be witnesses to the people, and that the Messenger might be a witness to you"¹. The notion of the importance of the *umma* in the history of mankind has been elaborated by the religious scholars (*ulamā*).

Furthermore, as Ira Lapidus argues, the Middle Eastern Islamic heritage provides two basic paradigms of society in history. The first one is the society integrated in its various dimensions – political, social, and moral – under the aegis of Islam. It was historically implemented during the life of Muḥammad and the 'Pious Caliphs' (*ar-Rāṣidūn*) who ruled the *umma* in the first three decades of Islamic history (632-660) until the first civil war (*fitna*) and the dynastic consolidation of the Caliphate. This

¹ The Qur'ān, 2:143. The translation used throughout is that of Arberry (1983).

historical period constitutes the normative revivalist ideal of society, which has inspired ever-renewed movements to restore the wholeness of the *umma*. The second paradigm is the imperial Islamic society, built on the manifold structures of previous Middle Eastern societies. By the eleventh century, Middle Eastern states and religious communities were highly differentiated and the state and religion were practically separated (Lapidus 1992:14-16).

However, the idea of Islam as a religious belief that covers all aspects of life and denies the theoretical separation between religion and politics is formulated in the prescription according to which "Islam is religion and state" (*al-Islām dīn wa-dawla*). That is why, theoretically, in medieval Islam political life could not exist separately from the *ṣarī'a*. The system of the caliphate (*ḫilāfa*), to which the greater part of the Islamic world's social history during the Middle Ages is linked, should be a practical implementation of the theoretical ideal of the inseparability of religion and politics. Historical practice, however, often comes into conflict with that ideal system, as predicted by the *ṣarī'a*, which enabled the recent rise of a differentiated nonreligious concept of political authority.

Although this secularist perspective was developed in the 19th and 20th century by the modernists, the majority of Islamic reformers in modern times have accepted the revivalist ideal of the early *umma* because of its unifying character. Neorevivalism emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and was most remarkably represented by the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Iḥwān al-Muslimūn*) of Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906-1949) in Egypt and the Islamic Society (*Ġamā'at-i-Islāmī*) of Abū l-'Alā' al-Mawdūdī (1903-1979) in the Indian subcontinent. Both of them combined religion with a social activism in order to solve the problems of the Islamic community (*umma*) which they considered to be at a critical crossroads. That is why Ḥasan al-Bannā, his later influential ideologue Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1962), and al-Mawdūdī reinterpreted classical Islamic historical paradigms to respond to the sociohistorical demands of the twentieth century. They regarded Islam as an all-embracing ideology (Esposito 1998:151).

Sayyid Quṭb stated that "Islam needed a revival"² in order to save the contemporary society from the new "ignorance" (*ḡābiliyya*) in which it had fallen again. And according to al-Mawdūdī, "the *ṣarī'a* is a complete scheme of life and an all embracing social order" (al-Mawdūdī 1977:5).

As John Esposito pointed out (1998:165), analysis shows that in spite of the diversity of interpretations, there is a common ideological framework of Islamic revivalism which includes the following set of ideas:

- Islam is a totalistic and comprehensive "way of life". Religion is an integral part of politics, law, and society. Here the following statement of the late Ayatollah Ḥomeynī is representative: "Islam is politics, or it is nothing."

² As quoted by Ignatenko (1988:134).

- The secularism and “materialism” of Western societies are condemned while modernization as such is not.
- Islamic law must replace the Western inspired civil codes.

This call for re-Islamization requires organizations of trained and educated Muslims who should struggle against corruption and social injustice.

In our case, it would be very interesting to compare this revivalist paradigm from the central Islamic lands with the situation in Bulgaria in order to trace its influence on Bulgarian Muslims. In the last years, substantial research on the religious situation in Bulgaria has been carried out by a variety of scholars. Their efforts were largely united by the valuable activity of the *International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations* which contributed to the increase of historical, ethnological and sociological knowledge of the Muslims in Bulgaria and their relationship with the Christian majority. This is why I try only to assess the current development of the situation of the Muslims in Bulgaria from the viewpoint of the neorevivalist perception of the classical *umma* doctrine. In post-communist Europe, the situation of the Muslim community has changed. In Bulgaria, though some differences between Christians and Muslims in the perception of human rights remain, a dynamic and comprehensive progress in observing the Muslims' human rights is obvious. On the other hand, the democratization of society and state allowed the Bulgarian Muslims to establish direct and free contacts with Muslims from Europe, Turkey, Iran, and the central Arabic-speaking lands of Islam.

That is why we do find some evidence of the efforts of the “small” Bulgarian *umma* to return to the greater Islamic community. This tendency has been manifested in some data according to which a variety of Muslim emissaries came to Bulgaria in the last few years. If we trust the information on such emissaries, there are representatives here from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Furthermore, one reads in the press of the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood (Dimitrova 303-305) and some sects like the Ahmadiyya which has troubled the main office of the Mufti in Bulgaria³. In this context, a significant example is the activity of the newspaper “Myusyulmani” which is generally deeply interested in the affairs of the “greater” *umma*.

One finds in this newspaper a calendar for 1995 in which some dates, apparently accepted as memorable for Muslims, are given with the respective dates in the Christian and Muslim eras. Example of such memorable events are: (3.1) the foundation of the Movement for Rights and Liberties; (7.1) the end of the forcible change of the names of Turks in Bulgaria; (13.1) the foundation of the Ottoman empire (1299); (5.4) the death of Gāzī ‘Uṣmān Pasha (1900) etc. Most of the events are taken from Ottoman history and, though the national holiday of Bulgaria is mentioned (3.3), we also find some of the most tragic events of Bulgarian national history: the battle of

³ Cf. “Opasnostta Ahmadiyya”, v. *Myusyulmani*, 2/1999.

Nikopol (1396); the fall of Tarnovo (1389), as well as the victory at Kosovo (1463) <1389>⁴. This calendar is an evidence of an attempt for the restoration of the broken relations of Bulgarian Muslims to the greater Islamic community. As we saw, the Ottoman Empire has been chosen to be a specific center for "our" *umma*.

In order to test the level of religiosity and affiliation of the future Muslim "clerical" elite to the *umma* in 1999, I made a sociological investigation in the recently established Islamic High Institute in Sofia. I suggest that it is important to survey the views of young Muslims who study at this Institute with the intention of receiving later a job as *huggās* or *muftīs*. Of course, the female students are supposed to work later as teachers of Islamic religion in the schools that have recently been allowed to operate by the Bulgarian state. My research was stimulated by an analysis of the census data from 1992 made by Petar-Emil Mitev. Apparently, the census made in 1992 was in itself evidence of the heightened level of formal religious affiliation, shown in the censuses of the population in 1926, 1934 and 1946. In these censuses, 84 to 86% of the population were Christians, mainly Orthodox while 14 to 15% were Muslims. In 1992 these data show 86,6% Christians, of whom 80% are Orthodox, and 13,1% Muslims, who are either *Sunnī* or *Šī'ī*. Here we see an interesting phenomenon defined by the author of the survey as a "new type of religiosity". Every fifth Bulgarian Christian identifies himself with "Christian culture as a whole". As far as Muslims are concerned, the tendency is even more strongly emphasized: only 17% of the Turks and 13% of the Pomaks identify themselves as *Sunnī*. 2% of the Turks and 1% of the Pomaks are *Šī'ī*. However, 68% of the Turks and 52% of the Pomaks identify themselves with "Islamic culture as a whole".

We face the question, then, whether this affiliation with "Islamic culture as a whole" is in fact "a new type of religiosity" or just an expression of the efforts of the "small" Bulgarian *umma* to be part of the "big" *umma* and the greater Muslim world. Here the issue appears of what Bulgarian Muslims mean when the expression "Islamic culture as a whole" is used – whether the classical achievements of Arab-Islamic civilization, deprived of political relevance, or just the religious-political community of Islam (the *umma*). Such an aspect is very important because it shows the rate of the integration of Muslims into Bulgarian society. For this time, we only introduce the issue without being comprehensive. The increasing importance of education in the life of Bulgarian Muslims (for example, many children study the Qur'an in certain villages) is exemplified by the foundation of the Islamic High Institute in Sofia. It was there that I tried, by means of sociological inquiry, to observe how the future "clerical" elite of Bulgarian Muslims imagine some of the basic and most representative formulations of Islamic doctrine. For the purpose of our investigation, 25 students

⁴ See Peev 1997:195.

of the Islamic High Institute participated in the inquiry. They were 16 men and 9 women from the first, second and third grade.

They all identify themselves as Sunnī (of whom 16 are Turks and 3 Pomaks, while 6 did not disclose their ethnic affiliation). For 96% of those asked the role of religion in their lives is significant. 52% of the sample respond that they belong to the whole Muslim community (*umma*) and 44% – to “Islamic Culture as a whole”. That is why it is interesting to hear their own definitions of the *umma*, presented as answers to the question “What does the Islamic community (*umma*) mean to you?”. The responses can be divided into three types:

1. The first one can be formulated briefly as: “absolutely everything.”
2. In the second, the *umma* is defined as “the followers of Islam”. The following concrete responses are given as examples of this category:
 - “The cultural, spiritual, moral, social and economic connection of all Muslims without ethnic, national and racial divides.”
 - “A community of people who believe in Allāh and monotheism, and stick to the Qur’ān, the Sunna and the five pillars of Islam.”
 - “Brotherhood, unity among people in the name of Allāh; people following the path of Allāh.”
 - “All people who believe that Allāh is One and Muḥammad is his messenger and follow the Sunna.”

There are also definitions of the kind:

- “The nicest and most preferred, the most modern.”
3. The third type is: “Self-identification by showing religious tolerance”. Here the following responses are given:
 - “Devotion to the Qur’ān and the Sunna without intervening in someone else’s [spiritual] life. [Islam] must not be imposed on anyone by force.”
 - “The Islamic community aims to create connections with other communities and religions in order to develop cultural and socio-political relations”.

According to two thirds of those asked, the affiliation of a Muslim to a certain legal-theological school (*madhab*) or an Islamic sect is of great importance for his cultural and social life. The majority (88%) prefer the classical Qur’ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*) to its allegoric interpretation (*ta’wīl*). Most of them believe that the fate of man and community are guided by the interference of Allāh – either on a permanent or an occasional basis.

To the question “which is the greatest sin”, the majority answers that it is idolatry (*shirk*), i.e. associating other creatures with Allāh, as well as disbelief (*kufir*). 92% consider that religion must cover all spheres of the society nowadays (that is why 72% think that it is not necessary to divide power into secular and spiritual, while 24% consider this division an important factor).

Two thirds of those asked think that Islam must not be reformed because everything is defined clearly by the Qur’ān and the Sunna, and it must be followed with-

out any invention. One third think that Islam needs to be reformed by interpreting these two fundamental sources having in mind the contemporary reality, because historic development leads to the reinterpretation of religious fundamentals.

As far as the constitution of society is concerned, closest to their ideal of a state with an overwhelmingly Muslim population is, according to 44% or 12 persons of those asked, Turkey. Another four persons mentioned Saudi Arabia, two Egypt, one person each opting for Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, Chechnya, Indonesia and Bulgaria. Three think that no country is close to their ideal. The following answer is interesting: "There is no such a country; though I wish that all people become Muslims and save themselves, I would not live in the countries founded by them".

To the question who is the most liked Muslim statesman and politician of the 20th century, 16 persons did not respond, four (3 women and a man) mentioned the deceased king of Jordan Husayn (though Jordan was nowhere indicated as an ideal of social system). Two of them mentioned N. Erbakan, and one did Sultan Abdul Hamid, Johar Dudaev and Saddām Husayn, respectively. Therefore we have received a variety of opinions.

There was a special question: "Are the human and civil rights of Muslims in Bulgaria observed by the state". Only 12% responded negatively. It is worth mentioning that more than half (52%) think that those rights are fully observed, while 24% responded "to a certain extent" or "regarding the government in Sofia - yes, but not in some regions".

Only one person of those asked thinks that the relations between Christians and Muslims are not of particular importance, while 12 of them consider these relations very useful in the educational and cultural sense; and nine, in the socio-economical and political sense.

Considering that only one of the students was married, we may find interesting the answers to the question: "Would you marry a person different from your own confession?" The answers are respectively: "no (76%, or 19 persons), "yes" (16%, or 4 persons, and one of them gives a specific answer - "yes, a Christian woman"). Another (woman) said, "I do not know"; and one person did not respond to that question.

If we summarize the data and the responses in our inquiry, we shall not be able to give a definite answer about the influence of neorevivalism on the Muslims in Bulgaria. Until now, they have not been united by a comprehensive ideology. We face a variety of influences and forms of re-Islamization, which has gained momentum after the end of the Cold War. However, Muslims in Bulgaria are unified by a common tendency of the gradual returning of the "Bulgarian" *umma* to the values and virtues spread by the greater *umma* in the central Islamic lands. It is natural that this ideal in Bulgaria focuses on the Ottoman past and the Turkish world embodied today by Turkey. Thus, religious identity is frequently "absorbed" by an ethnic one, and Islam is mixed up with nationalism in a complex way.

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