

# Perceptions of Islamization in the Serbian National Discourse

Bojan Aleksov

*Before the period of nationalism, religious identification constituted a basis for the division of South Slavic peoples and its confines established historic borders within which particular national consciousness developed. Though none of the confessional institutions of South Slavs was strictly national, they acquired such a character through the constant struggle of religious leaderships to differentiate their flock from that of the other faith. Secular intelligentsia and political elite as chief proponents of nationalism played a very particular role in such development, adopting and employing religion and religious heritage. Therefore, religious difference is not in itself the basis of antagonism among South Slav peoples, but rather the nature and aims of national ideologies formed as parts of political culture of these peoples and their elite. An important part of such ideologies of antagonisms among all Balkan peoples is the narrative of the phenomena of religious conversions that happened in the past. In the context of religious segregation and emphasized identification of ethnic and religious identity, religious conversions evoke distrust, hate and resistance. The paper discusses the formation of mythologized consciousness about causes, course and consequences of islamization, the most significant conversions in the Serbian history, with a special focus on the role of the Serbian historiography in the process.*

Change of religion is undoubtedly one of the most unsettling and destabilizing events in a society. It threatens the cohesion of a community and reactions to it are universally defensive, because it necessitates a change of balance between members of different faith communities. In the context of centuries-long religious segregation and firm identification between ethnic and religious identities – as has been the case in the Balkans – religious conversions have evoked a long history of distrust and intolerance that has been the topic of numerous studies. My focus here is on conscious efforts, undertaken mostly from the nineteenth century on, of adoption, employment, and deepening of inherited religious divisions through the representation of Islamization that happened in the past.

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Correspondence to: Borojan Aleksov, History department, Central European University, Nador u11, 1051 Budapest, Hungary. Email: HPHALB01@phd.ceu.hu

My principal source material in studying the genesis and the dynamic of the representation of Islamization and the factors and forces that shaped it has been the works of scholars, writers and historians whose position is well established in Serbian society. They were, or are, university professors, academicians, textbook authors, ministers and ambassadors – all of them the chief protagonists of cultural production and public opinion formation. This article also examines the recasting and the exploitation of certain aspects of these representations that took place in the years preceding and during the most recent wars in former Yugoslavia. The survival of the mythologized view of Islamization is striking, as it seems to defy the growing distance from the time of the events they refer to, the seemingly insignificant role of religion in modern society, and the fact that many of them had already been successfully demystified. And in Serbia, there have been studies that have provided alternative, non-nationalist modes of explanation. The last part of the article is dedicated to these examples of contesting the mythologized conversion paradigm. I start by elucidating the role religion had in the formation of the Serbian national consciousness, and showing that religious intolerance is one of its main features.

### **Religion and Nationalism**

In the course of the nineteenth century the entire region saw the birth of nationalism, which gradually became the primary, unifying and normative factor in the formation of the collective identity. In the process, nationalism took on numerous religious attributes while religion as such was relegated to a subordinate role. Scholars of nationalism have demonstrated that national consciousness is shaped through certain phases; national traditions are created and transformed through ample use of inherited religious content, values and symbols. Existing beliefs and knowledge took on new forms, and even more important, gained a new, comprehensive and teleological function in the formation of the national state. Although religion was repressed through modernization efforts, secularization and eventually the atheist campaigns of the twentieth century, the nationalism of the Serbs and their neighbours had by then already been built on the historical memory and models that stemmed from and exploited religious divisions and intolerance of the past.

One of the few historians who have seriously studied the religious factor in the rise of nationalism among South Slavs, Milorad Ekmečić, thinks that the churches were an exclusive basis for South Slav national movements. On the one hand, their national culture evolved within the framework of a single church or religion, while on the other hand, the churches during critical periods became beacons of social organization. They lost their religious character and refocused on ethical issues, culture and social organization. Although none of the denominational institutions among the South Slavs had been exclusively national, they increasingly acquired such a character during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, through the efforts of church leadership wishing to separate their followers from those of the other religions. In an atmosphere of ‘religious nationalism’, as Ekmečić calls it, people of the ‘other’ denominations were blamed for all troubles and frustrations. In the minds of

ordinary people, every neighbour who professed a different religion belonged to an 'enemy' civilization.

Confrontations between the various religions and denominations represented an insurmountable obstacle to the creation of a single Yugoslav nation on the dominant Herderian or Central European model (according to which the nation is a community of language). Instead, religion became the fault-line between nations. The 'religious' nationalisms that were engendered in this way constantly stoked the mythologization of the historical consciousness (as well as the provincialization of culture and extremist politics); religious nationalism, not religious intolerance, formed a basis for the military and political strategies at the time of momentous historical crises (Ekmečić 1989: 15).

In analysing the nationalism of the Yugoslav peoples, special note should be made of the role of the secular intelligentsia and the political elites and how they, as key protagonists of nationalism, have used religion and the religious legacy in the nation-building project. The blending of religion and nationalism over the past two centuries has strengthened both the religious and the secular elites. Another historian of the region, Ivo Banac, holds the thesis that the cause of the antagonism among the South Slav peoples is not religious differences or unequal economic development, but rather the different structures and objectives of their respective national ideologies and political cultures (Banac 1992: xi). Banac, too, acknowledges that national ideologies are to a large extent historically determined, and that they contain elements of historical determinism of cultural and religious differences. But, he posits, of and by themselves religious differences cannot explain the strong divisions among the Balkan peoples. The impact of nationalism and nationalists in exploiting these differences is crucial.

One aspect of nationalism used to build barriers and excite antagonism between modern nations is myth about religious conversions. I will illustrate this use in the Serbian case, with a special focus on the role, which mythologized historical narratives about Islamization have played in the process.

### **From Folk Epic to Scientific Fact**

Folk myths and folk tales offer rich material for the study of religious conversions as momentous events in the world at the time when religious identity was still of primary importance. Notwithstanding the importance of oral culture, however, I shall concentrate on those persons who have contributed to the creation of the Serbian national consciousness in writing. In this I follow Hobsbawm's observation that what makes up the main body of knowledge and ideology in a nation, state, or movement is not what is preserved in popular memory, but rather what is selected, written down, visualized, and made popular by those whose task is to do this (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1991: 13). In these works, as we shall see, popular myths and tales that depict the world in a stylized and schematized way were often taken for granted and elevated to the level of 'scientific' truth.

Until the late eighteenth century, cultural life in the Balkans was dominated by denominational communities. Conversions necessarily implied a change of cultural

identity. During the nineteenth century, the churches lost their position as the only popular institutions and as a result, their religious, educational and political mission was radicalized. They increasingly insisted on their exclusiveness and on deepening differences with other churches. Any outside meddling with denominational specificity was fiercely resisted.

The first written accounts on conversions to Islam among the South Slavs date from this time and were written by educated Serbs in Austria – that is, in a Muslim-free milieu. They had encountered Muslims when they travelled to Serbia, where they perceived Muslims within the context of the revived hatred towards Islam that prevailed in Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century, the era of Romanticism. The founder of the *Letopis Matice Srpske*, the first Serbian literary magazine, Georgije Magarašević, describes his visits to his fellow-nationals living across the Sava River in 1827 in the following way:

What a terrible thing merciless fate has done to our brothers! They are thoroughly transformed by their change of religion and law! They don't want to hear any talk about their Slavic origins, but instead persecute their brothers. They are like dry and fallen twigs from the Slavic tree. Their ancestors were forced into conversion under tyrannical regimes and by force of arms, while they now willingly embrace the new faith and extol it. By accepting the foreign law, they have renounced their ancestry and origin. Islamised Serbs, blinded by fanaticism, are much worse than the Turks. (Magarašević 1983: 262)

Writer Sima Milutinović's pioneering ventures and numerous historical and literary works written in the 1820s and 1830s had a tremendous impact on the views of an entire generation of Serbian writers and historians. He is the author of the legend of Deacon Avacum, a man who was offered all kinds of promises and subjected to various threats to convert to Islam. He rejected them all, even when faced with being impaled. After living and studying in Hungary and Germany, Milutinović came to Montenegro to be a teacher of the future bishop and celebrated poet Petar Petrović Njegoš. In Montenegro, Milutinović allegedly heard a folk song about the massacre of Muslims in a part of Montenegro and he built this story into his works which later influenced Njegoš's epic *Gorski vijenac* [The Mountain Wreath]. The poem, one of the most influential works in Serbian literature, created a national myth about the massacre of converts. Over time, the alleged but historically not recorded massacre of Islamized Serbs on Christmas Eve 1702, as described in *The Mountain Wreath*, became solidly embedded in popular memory, whose artistic power and lively spirit make both readers and scholars experience the depicted event as reality (Nikčević 1985: 8–10). Elimination of 'the treacherous converts' as described in the epic acquired in the national consciousness the significance of a ritual cleansing, a catharsis of the nation. The massacre is vested in a religious apotheosis, despite the fact that murder is contrary to the basic tenets of the Christian religion and that Njegoš's work is a mythological and poetic construction.

Njegoš wrote his epic at a time when the liberation of the Serbs from their conquerors was glorified in the national-romantic interpretation as the peak of their historical path. He set the eradication of the Islamized Serbs against the backdrop of an all-out struggle of the Serbian people for liberation. But through his poetic and

mythological approach Njegoš went beyond narrow national limits and transported the event to the domain of the universal themes of freedom, death, and resurrection. To put Njegoš's epic into context one needs to understand the development of the views on the Islamized population. The German historian Leopold von Ranke noticed the interesting fact that no folk songs depicted the massacre of the Belgrade Turks in 1807 after the liberation of the city in the First Serbian Uprising (Ranke 1973: 179). Ranke also records that after this brutal act, the Serbian leadership was divided; the older among them believed that the massacre was a sin. But the escalation of the Serbian rebels' fighting deepened the antagonism and led to the imposition of the principle that the Muslims had to be expelled. This principle lasted until the 1912–1913 Balkans Wars. The 1829–1830 Law of the Montenegrin Vasojević Tribe, in its Article 2, illustrates the popular attitude towards the Islamized population a few years before Njegoš's epic stating that converts should not be killed, but every group should re-convert its members into the ancestral faith, while any new convert should be considered a Turk (*Vasojevički* 1929). Njegoš too considered the converts Turks, not because he thought they were different but because of their political dissociation from the Serbian nation-in-the-making. As bishop, Njegoš kept in close touch with the Bosnian and Herzegovinian beys, provincial governors of the Islamized domestic population, and expected them to join in the liberation from the Ottoman occupiers. In his other works Njegoš is even more explicit about the national imperative, which he divorces from religion.

In Serbia and Montenegro Njegoš's epic has not yet been decanonized or deconstructed, only then can its literary value be preserved from political manipulation. In the schools, even during the communist period, Njegoš's work was never viewed from a historical distance. His poetry was taught as an ideal; no distinction was made between the universal validity of his artistic achievement and the historically changeable, conditional and political aspects of his epic.

Other Serbian romantic poets also contributed to the Serbian view of Turks as *Erbfeind*, and exacerbated popular resentment, according to one of their contemporaries (Kostić 1902: 441). Kostić says that these romantics transformed popular spite towards the Muslims into 'a principled hatred'. Among the literati, the most influential besides Njegoš in crystallizing views on Islamization was the Nobel-prize winning novelist Ivo Andrić. In his youth, Andrić believed that Njegoš genuinely expressed popular opinions and beliefs, and in his dissertation, Andrić accepted as truth Njegoš's vivid description of Islamization, as in the following verse of *The Mountain Wreath*: 'The lions [i.e. the brave who remained Christian] turned into tillers of soil/the cowardly and the covetous turned into Turks'.<sup>1</sup> Andrić could have adopted this view also from the Bosnian Franciscans, whom he frequently quoted and who since the nineteenth century had grown increasingly intolerant of the Bosnian Muslims, depicting them as greedy and venal. His views on Islamization stemmed also from a theory that suggested that Bosnian Muslims were descendant of the medieval Bogomils. This thesis originated in the efforts of Austro-Hungarian historians to legitimize the existence of a separate Bosnian nation. By splitting the population in this way they hoped to blunt the edge of Serbian and Croat aspirations to Bosnia and Herzegovina and make easier its occupation by the Hapsburg

monarchy after 1878 (Wenzel 1987: 29–54). Serbian and Croat historians in their turn accepted the thesis, not wanting to recognize that their fellow nationals had converted to Islam, or preferring to attribute the conversions to so-called Bosnian Bogomils, who, despite their Slavic descent, yielded to the new faith as incomplete and immature members of the community, church and nation.

In explaining Islamization in his doctoral dissertation, Andrić invoked folk narratives and stressed two factors: the blood tribute (*devshirme*), and greed – the wish to obtain or preserve property. Andrić's description of the blood tribute, which is fully developed in his literary work, made a tremendous impact on the popular consciousness, and was recently canonized, as it were, when it was used as a theme on a fresco painting in the Serbian Nova Gračanica monastery in Libertyville, Illinois, USA.

Andrić's doctoral dissertation is our first view of the key motifs of his later literary works (Konstantinović 1985). The cruelty and historical hatred of the converts towards their former fellow nationals are basic features of his unfinished novel 'Omer Paša Latas' and are encountered also in the novels *Travnička hronika*, *Na Drini ćuprija* and in the story 'Nemirna godina'. However, limiting Andrić's portrayal of Turks and Muslims to the characterizations found in his doctoral dissertation is one-dimensional. One strength of his art was to place his characters in many different metaphors – comical, tragic, ironic or grotesque (Koljević 1995: 206). Andrić's description of hatred and intolerance in Bosnia, which made him so famous, was always balanced by an emphasis on the common heritage of Bosnia's population with images of interwoven cultures and symbolic bridges.

School primers and other textbooks offer explicit examples of how the works of Njegoš and Andrić, along with the folk epic sources they built upon, have been exploited by the nationalist propaganda (Jelavich 1992). In the nineteenth century, Serbian primers served not only to spread literacy but also to inculcate knowledge and ideas about 'us' and 'others'. Their importance in the largely illiterate country is seen in the fact that ministers and even prime ministers counted among their authors. Written at a time when there was not much knowledge about the processes of conversion, the Bosnian Muslims, or the Croats, they present in simple nationalist rhetoric the Serbs who converted to Islam or Catholicism as victims of coercion. Folk epic and Njegoš's poem 'The Mountain Wreath' provided the ground for the views on Islamization they disseminated. More than a century later some of these stereotypes linger. Even the most recent history textbooks contain Andrić's depiction of the blood tribute to illustrate the section on Ottoman rule and Islamization.

Nineteenth-century Serbian textbooks, and the prevailing attitudes of the time, are distinguished from later textbooks and attitudes by the insistence on the *sameness* of the converts with national population in general. They emphasize common origins and a common past, customs and language to justify the need for a national expansionism, or, as it was called, 'the liberation of our brothers under the Turkish and Austro-Hungarian yoke'. Intellectual elites tried to instil a spirit of religious tolerance by proclaiming that 'a brother of any religion is still and always a dear brother'. These 'Yugoslav' thinkers among Serbs considered Catholics and Muslims as Serbs, but did not demand their return to their real roots, because, in their minds, Islamization and

Uniatism could be overcome by other factors, notably language, customs or awareness of common descent. However, the thesis of one Serbian people with three faiths, as exemplified by the expression 'Muslims of our Serbian blood', could not stop the process of differentiation among the South Slav nations, as this process did rest predominantly on a denominational base.

The first attempts to give a scholarly aura to commonly held views on conversions are those of Jovan Cvijić. Though a geographer by education his works included ethnographic observations of the Balkan people, which tremendously influenced the works of later historians and ethnologists. Cvijić was mostly interested in the impact of conversion on the formation of identity, and claimed that conversions intensified religious feelings and jealousy, sentiments which, Cvijić thought, had been waning throughout the nineteenth century because of the influence of education and the general progress of civilization (Cvijić 1922: 406). Cvijić believed that conversion increased aggressiveness in what he called the Dinaric type of man, prevalent among South Slavs. 'Former brothers were separated from each other still further by the wall of religious intolerance. Though without any scientific evidence, the thesis of the destructive conduct of converts, notably in the shape of feelings of shame, rooted in popular myth, and gained popularity through literature, science and historiography. According to Cvijić, intolerance, envy, and hatred develop spontaneously between isolated and closed groups, and these feelings are intensified among religious groups, for their isolation is elevated to the level of ideology. Members of these close-knit groups forge their links by embracing fundamental views on the human soul and its salvation. Exacerbated religious diversity is hence the most onerous legacy of the South Slav peoples, and dates back to Turkish, Venetian and Austrian rules. Cvijić also held the belief that in Bosnia Islamization was to a large extent forced, but he suggested that the force was not exerted by the Turks, but by the converts themselves, who due to their inherent zeal and guilt tried to convert their fellow nationals and next of kin. The most intense conflicts between Serbs and Muslims took place because the two groups had similar aspirations and the prevailing character trait of the need to dominate. Further, as new members of the Muslim fold, the converts had to prove their new identity by hating their co-nationals.

Cvijić and his disciples were the first to conduct field research and try to support their claims with material they collected. Their research, however, was undertaken in the typical manner of mapping the nation. They focused on Kosovo and Macedonia, the only areas where in the beginning of the twentieth century Serbian expansion was possible.<sup>2</sup> The Muslim population was very large in these areas, and their origin had to be explained in a way that justified Serbian claims to the land – hence the abundance in these works of mythologized interpretations on Islamization. The information used was for the most part collected from local Christians or from older Serbian and other Christian sources. The sources they relied on most were reports written by Russian consuls like Jastrebov and Hilferding, who also had had a predilection for Christian informants. As for the lack of Muslim informants, the historian Hadži Vasiljević explains that the Muslims 'are very suspicious and afraid to disclose any information

by accident. They are especially concerned not to say anything about their ancestors and their conversion' (Hadži Vasiljević 1995: 48).

Despite the one-sided nature of the information in these works, they include numerous quotations, and thus convey a scholarly impression. Providing many examples and especially figures, the authors attempt to tilt the scale of evidence enough to justify their preconceived judgment and persuade their readers. Folk sayings and songs and verses from Njegoš's epic are incorporated into the narrative as illustrations with no real differentiation between 'real' and 'imaginary' facts, like this sentence from Vasiljević's *Muslimani*: 'Everywhere in religiously mixed villages real Albanians and Turks laugh at converts because they still keep in their attics earthen pots, which their ancestors used to cook sauerkraut with lard' (Hadži Vasiljević 1995: 45).

Discursive strategies to delineate the national space depended on such notions as 'religious syncretism' and 'crypto-Christianity' to prove the Serbian origin and 'real nature' of the 'converts' to and members of other faiths. Shrines, festivals and practices that were common to all faiths were cited as crucial proof of the real religion of those observed. In fact most of these practices simply testified to the richness of popular culture in the premodern world. But instead of seeking to uncover the multiple identities of those who converted long ago, the scholars sought to determine how genuine the conversions were; then, believing that conversion is untenable and alien, reconvert them. With the preconceived notion that their ancestors could not possibly convert, abandoning the identity that was so dear to them, the Serbian scholars furnished numerous proofs that the conversions had been temporary, partial or tendentious. These works also frequently dated the 'conversions' to very recent times, just before the time of the observation, which implied the possibility of bringing the converts back into the fold. A careful researcher of this area, Milisav Lutovac, was told that in Vranište even at the beginning of this twentieth century there lived a woman, the wife of a certain Todor, whose sons provided her a special area in a corner of the house to practice her religious rites (Bogdanović 1986: 96–7).

The works of these historians and ethnographers, while scholarly obsolete and politically biased in their aim to justify Serbian expansionism, have nevertheless been revived almost a century later, and many of them went to a second edition in the 1990s. Serbian historians who praised them and advocated their reprinting in the 1990s treated them as if they were almost primary sources because of their archaic style and alleged proximity to events they described.

The generation of Cvijić's disciples in the interwar period introduced an entirely new study, *characterology*. In the context of this article, characterology is the analysis of new character traits shared by converts in addition to the ingrained notions of cowardliness and hatred of former co-nationals. One of Cvijić's disciples, Čedomil Mitrinović, produced a whole book on the analysis of the alleged new character of the converts to Islam (Mitrinović 1926). All the good traits he found were ascribed to the 'Serbian basis' of their character, whereas the negative ones were Non-Slavic, developed under the influence of Islam. These included vanity, wastefulness, lasciviousness, sensuality, rooted mysticism and fatalism. Mitrinović ascribes the demographic decline of Muslim converts to their inclination towards prostitution, alcohol and 'certain perversions',



among which he counted homosexuality as a specifically Ottoman import. This description is strikingly reminiscent of the models and images created much earlier in the West in the ideological construction which Said called *orientalism* (Said 1979).

The most prolific and original among the interwar characterologists was Vladimir Dvorniković. He claimed that Islamization nourished a psychology of accommodation (in order to preserve old privileges) and ‘a compromise-like biology of the mob’ (Dvorniković 1995: 58). Dvorniković interpreted Islamization in Bosnia as a consequence of church and feudal anarchy, and also of foreign, notably Hungarian pressure on Bosnian and Bogomil independence. In glorifying the Bosnian Bogomil Movement as an autochthonous Slav freedom and statehood-oriented movement, and an authentic religious expression, Dvorniković explained Islamization as popular defiance: ‘Bosnia has saved itself from Rome and Hungary! The Bosnian Marko has converted himself into a Turk out of sheer spite.’<sup>3</sup>

### **Never-ending Conversions**

The interwar Yugoslav State finally rallied all Serbs in one state headed by their monarch, but the need for an integrative and bonding nationalist ideology had not receded. For Serbs in Serbia this was the first experience of living in a multiethnic and multireligious country where they constituted less than a half of the total population. There was also the issue of binding the Serbian intelligentsia to the church. Since the end of the eighteenth century a significant segment of the intelligentsia had been militantly secular, and a conflict between the church and the intelligentsia was increasingly perceived as destructive both for the church and the nation. Under these circumstances, the myth of dissension through conversion gained increasing relevance and was used to illustrate both modern atheism and antinationalism, as in the following passage from a 1933 treatise:

Once upon a time our ‘noble’ elders converted into Islam, thus saving their bodies. Others saved their bodies and souls by remaining loyal to their religion, innocent and patient. A third group waged continuous wars in a bid to blend the nation and the faith. And when finally the third group liberated the others, there are still some ‘noble’ and ‘wise’ who eagerly embrace ‘Islam’: This ‘Islam’ is our intelligentsia’s atheism, its shame and treason of an age-old Orthodox faith. (Popović 1933: 4)

In interwar Serbian historiography a division arose between those who accepted ‘the Bogomil theory’ and those who maintained that the Bogomils were in fact Orthodox Serbs. The assumption that prevailed however, was that Orthodox Serbs had a continual, uninterrupted religious adherence to their church and could not have committed apostasy and that only Bogomils were Islamized. Belief in and advocacy of solid and unbreakable ties between Serbhood and Orthodoxy and their mutual common interests became particularly manifest as the interethnic and interreligious tensions in the country rose and the mythologized version of Islamization found new uses.

This attitude was revived half a century later, when the ethnic tensions of the 1980s threatened the existence of another Yugoslavia, this time in a socialist guise, and in this new incarnation it continues to hold sway. Thus, it is argued that in Bosnia ‘the

widespread Bogomil sect did not hold Christianity in high esteem', while in Kosovo only the Albanians, as fickle, professional warriors and inclined to dictatorship, converted to Islam – in contrast to the freedom-loving and individualistic Serbs' (Dragnich and Todorovich 1984: 48). Conversion is depicted as the main thrust of the Ottoman policy and the essence of the *millet* principle is disregarded. The Albanian presence in Kosovo is explained as a result of a migration of Islamized Albanians into the area at the end of the seventeenth century. At the same time, Serbs embraced Islam only through coercion and deception. The prominent historian Bataković writes:

Many Serbs accepted Islamisation as a necessary evil, waiting for the moment when they could revert to the faith of their ancestors, but most of them never lived to see that day ... Albanization began only when Islamised Serbs, devoid of national feelings, married girls from the ethnic Albanian tribal community. (Bataković 1992: 51)

According to the church historian Slijepčević this was the second Kosovo debacle, more tragic than the first one, for this time the political subjugation entailed spiritual estrangement (Slijepčević 1983: 139–40). Islamization is seen as both the cause of and a synonym for the Albanization of Kosovo and Metohija.

None of these works use Ottoman sources (because of the language barrier). More effort is invested in the refutation of the Bogomil theory and the myths of the origins of the present-day Bošnjaks than in any research aimed at explaining the delicacy of the numerous layers of the process of Islamization. The dominant characterization in Serbian historiography of the conduct of the Serbian clergy as 'patriotic' conflicts with the not-so-positive picture painted by foreign historians. In the same vein, forced 're-conversion' of Muslims from the nineteenth century on are wholly disregarded. Foreign interpretations, which perceive the process of Islamization in Bosnia and in the Balkans in a broader perspective, are disregarded. Comparison with other regions where substantial Islamization has occurred is lacking. Overlooking all these factors Serbian historiography still relies on mythologized notions of blood tribute (*devshirme*) and coercion as major tools of Islamization.

In the encyclopedic *Istorija srpskog naroda* [History of the Serbian People], compiled by Serbia's foremost historians, Radovan Samardžić dismisses even the possibility of voluntary conversion. Disregarding apparently voluntary cases of acceptance of Islam, Samardžić assesses all conversion as psychologically and physically coercive:

The fact that Islamisation was most thoroughly carried out among the Serbs is not negligible. All discussions about forced or non-forced conversion into Islam are futile, for any abandonment of one faith and acceptance of the other religion, both collectively and individually, cannot be imagined without an earlier pressure. Among the most onerous pressure is the promise of a better and safer existence, but also persuasion that the best religion is the one offered, for it has richer contents, causes less moral dilemmas, offers satisfaction every day and ensures a paradise. In the face of dissipation caused by invasions, Serbs embraced Islam in order to save their lives and property, but also because of the need to become equal with those who had all the rights, and to feel and show to the other world their enhanced importance. In Serbian territories fewer Turks settled than in other countries, but they insisted on the Islamisation of the local population. They were shrewd enough to realise that converts to Islam more skilfully than others could corrupt their

former fellow-nationals and cousins. In the Balkans and notably in the Near East, the historical layers were too deep. This meant that converts to Islam subconsciously hated those whom they had abandoned, and thus re-asserted themselves before the latter by sporadic venting of their anger. (Samardžić 1982: 14)

Though they rest on the thesis of the forced nature of conversions, no study explains what is meant by ‘coercion’ and what effect it may have after several generations (not to say centuries). There are no studies that deal comprehensively with the issue of the Turkish legacy in Serbia and the age-old interaction between the Islamized and other Muslim peoples, although we know that this enormous religious and cultural exchange contributed to the formation of a specific Muslim identity in the Balkans (Popović 1986).

In my reading, the persistence of two mythologized causes for conversion in Serbian historiography stems from a methodology which depicts all phenomena, including religious conversions, as linked to the national past. In a teleological way, within the context of the ongoing struggle for survival and resistance, occupation and religious conversion are collapsed into one act. The past is viewed in light of the division into occupiers and subjugated and the nation is seen as the principal protagonist of historical developments. History is viewed from the perspective of the Christian symbolism of suffering and sacrifice, and translated into a story of unique martyrdom, popular resistance, and the heroism of Serbian leaders. The American historians of Serbian origin Alex Dragnich and Slavko Todorovich assert that Balkan peoples throughout history learned their survival lesson well, and adapted to new circumstances in one of two ways: some chose a more difficult road, while others chose compromise in what they considered a temporary situation – an allusion to the Islamization of Albanians. The Serbs, the two authors maintain, belong to the first category, for ‘the Kosovo syndrome does not let them behave differently’ (Dragnich and Todorovich 1984: 53).

The recent synthetic overview of the nature and the consequences of religious conversions for Serbs by the anthropologist Bojan Jovanović shows that over more than a century only the emphasis has shifted – the standardized interpretations remain:

In accepting Islam for the sake of the preservation of the existing feudal privileges or the acquisition of new privileges, Serbs became intolerant and angry opponents of their former ethnic brothers. This new identity of converts who identified with the one of conquerors is responsible for the converts’ subconscious, internal conflict which manifests itself in their typical irrationality. As preservation of the ethnic identity was a precondition for the continuity of their culture, acceptance of another religion was a crucial step towards ethnical estrangement. (Jovanović 1992: 22)

Symptomatically, the Serbian historiographic production on the Islamization gained ground as an integral part of the nationalist campaign prior to the outbreak of the Second World War and on the eve of the recent wars. In the late 1930s, texts on Islamization dominated *Srpski glas* [Serbian Voice], the journal of the leading intellectuals, who gathered in the Serbian Cultural Club, and the prestigious *Srpski književni glasnik* [Serbian Literary Gazette]. In 1991, on the eve of the almost ten-year war that ravaged the former Yugoslavia, these texts were republished, as was Andrić’s doctoral thesis, revived as an ‘absolutely correct analysis’ (Jovičić 1991 and Jevtić 2000: 14). The

nationalist campaign not only intensified old prejudices and stereotypes about conversions, but also produced new ones. A veritable flood of press articles spreading hatred depicted Muslims as an imminent danger. The revived anti-Muslim position shares many of the notions of contemporary orientalism, such as an emphasis on the alleged foreign, Asian or African descent of the Bosnian Muslims, their alleged racial characteristics, and, notably, their oriental sensuality, weak character and fickleness. The dominant allusion is to a great threat posed, in the shape of Radical Islam, to European civilization as embodied by Serbs, and great emphasis is placed on connections between Bosnian Muslims and Libya and Iraq.

### **Dissonant Voices**

Despite the domination of mythologized production and reproduction of views of Islamization in the discourse of Serbian writers and historians there were dissonant voices that sometimes sounded in clear difference with the rest. Jovan Hadži Vasiljević, who was among the first Serbian historians to write about Islamization in the above described manner, also noted that the myth about forcible Islamization originated in the difficult conditions of life in the Turkish Empire at the end of the seventeenth century and after, including continuous Turkish wars with Christian states, Christian uprisings and migrations. He stressed that 'Our Church, our émigrés, writers, warriors, rebels, etc. created the widely spread conviction that the higher Turkish authorities exerted pressure on Christians to convert to Islam' (Hadži Vasiljević 1995: 54).

In the late nineteenth century, some writers, notably Stevan Sremac and Jelena Dimitrijević, depicted the East, and 'domestic' Muslims as its representatives, in a favourable light (Šop 1982). Other dissonant voices arose mostly from people of ideological, often socialist persuasions who held to class roots of social and historical processes and who optimistically thought, economic and social development will lessen the influence of religious denominations. One example is the left-wing sociologist and post-Second World War official Streten Vukosavljević who explained the emigration and territorial expansion of the Albanians as a consequence of their cattle-breeding economy and tribal community, and not as part of a deliberate strategy of conversion. Vukosavljević even gave an example of how the Islamization of the Slavic population in Sandžak functioned as a barrier to Albanization (Vukosavljević 1952). According to him, Islamization is a reflection of the tribal mentality of Dinaric people, and their bellicosity and obstinacy often result in fragmentation and confrontation. For that reason, Islamization is more common in mountainous areas than in the plains.

Still, very few works on Islamization were written at the time of communist Yugoslavia. Rather, the whole issue was avoided and little was done to change existing notions. For example Andrić's doctoral dissertation was prevented from being published, for, as communist ideologue Rodoljub Čolaković maintained, 'It is a hastily written thesis which superficially discusses very complex issues, Bogomils, Islamization of part of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, relations between religions, etc' (Popović 1996: 374). Eventually, the works in Serbian that contrasted the dominant paradigm were rare but important, most notably of Olga Zirojević, Milorad Ekmečić

and earlier some works of Vladimir Ćorović, which in an analytical way, without drawing parallels to current events, actually gave a complex view on Islamization, assessing the variety of economic, cultural, and status arguments.

## **Conclusion**

The dominant views on Islamization in the Serbian context encompass several clusters of myths, elucidated as playing important roles in defining a national discourse (Schöpfli 1997: 19–35). By de-emphasizing or explicitly denying any cultural or other common trait with a convert they give a perfect example of a *sui generis* myth. However, in a different interpretation of conversion, it is suggested that the act of conversion does not constitute a major change at all, and all those who converted are essentially Serbian, albeit with no say. Equally suitable is the *antemurale* myth, one of the most influential among Serbian myths, the one of redemption and suffering evident in the much-researched Kosovo myth. Islamization is evidence of the sorrowful history and also a justification for the special rights and mission of unconverted Serbs, and these rights have been invoked several times over the last two centuries. In brief, the Serbs have allegedly suffered for centuries from an aggressive conversion campaign; the world should recognize this and acknowledge their present moral and cultural superiority as well as their right to expansion. Finally, mythologized perceptions of the religious conversions are an important part of the myths of ethnogenesis and antiquity as well as myths of kinship and shared descent. Depending on the interpretation or the political project behind them, different views on religious conversion are called up to prove the right to a contested territory, as in the case of the Albanians, or to deny exclusive nationhood or rights to the Bošnjaks or the Croats for that matter – since they are nothing but converted Serbs.

When the view about other religionists as craven and treacherous converts gained ground, the converts were banished not only from the popular, but also from the wider human community, as established by universal ethical categories. Thus, the imperatives of nationalism have transformed the antagonism that existed in premodern times into antagonisms of nations that appropriate and reinterpret religious notions to the benefit of their own political projects. The nationalist discourse that dominates Serbian history writing has tended to deny the kind of historical change of which the Islamization is a perfect example, or they have insisted on the ultimate irrelevance of these changes. The typical antihistorical feature of the religious discourse was enriched with an empiricist ‘scientific’ search for ‘facts’ by historians and ethnologists. Insisting that they were detailing ‘hard facts’, these narratives were, in the manner of myths, arranged with the logic of the imaginary – namely ideological purposes and imperatives. Furthermore, the secular background of most writers prompted them to see Islamization exclusively as a change of identification without any regard for the subjective beliefs of the people themselves. In this way they reduced religion to a mode of social and political organization.

In the Serbian case, the dominant narrative about Islamization has acquired the significance of a paradigm, building a framework of reference that has been used for all kinds of dissension and opposition to the ‘national imperative’. It was also essential in the construction of stereotypes of the converts’ character, and these stereotypes were

later extended to include entire ‘converted’ nations. Stereotypes and myths about religious conversions were in the Serbian case crucial in constructing the image of neighbouring peoples as renegades, dissidents, and cowards, with all the detrimental consequences that followed.

### Acknowledgment

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### Notes

- [1] Andrić’s dissertation ‘Die Entwicklung des geistlichen Lebens im Bosnien unter der turkischen Herchaft’, defended at Graz University in 1924, was first published in Serbian in 1982 and in English in 1990.
- [2] The list of titles produced is extensive and includes works of Jovan Cvijić, Jovan Tomić, Jovan Hadži Vasiljević, Jefta Dedijer and others.
- [3] Marko here is synonym for a Christian (Dvorniković 1995: 58).

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