Ina Merdjanova


The purpose of the book *Rediscovering the Umma. Muslims in the Balkans between Nationalism and Transnationalism* is to highlight the role of Islam in the region after 1989. The collapse of Communism triggered a process of transformation of the place of religion and its return to the public sphere. The end of the 20th century was also an uneasy period for Muslims in the Balkan countries, where the close relationship of national and religious identities had as a political consequence armed conflicts and wars. The Islamic communities in the Balkans have a long history of inter-religious and inter-cultural relations with religious “others,” the context being very different from that of most West European countries where Islam emerged as a minority religion only in the second half of the 20th century.

The author of the book Ina Merdjanova prefers to speak of Muslims rather than Islam and explores the transformations of the Muslim identities. She demonstrates that these identities are “multi-layered, dynamic and contextual” (p. xv). The author has used an interdisciplinary approach, combining data from many publications in the fields of anthropology, sociology of religion, and political science. However, the used and cited studies are almost exclusively in English, while many texts on the subject published in Balkan languages are not taken into account. Interviewed by the author and respectively cited are mainly activists and leaders of local Muslim communities, but the text lacks references to interviews with ordinary Muslims.

The first chapter “Islam and National Identities in the Balkans” discusses relations between Islam and nationalism. Ina Merdjanova shows that religion became a very important component in the construction of national identities. She pays attention to various conceptualisations of the Ottoman legacy and underlines that after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire Muslims had to live in national states, in which the national ideologies were often constructed in opposition to Islam. Due to historical circumstances, religion and ethnicity in the Balkans have always been closely intertwined. This was the reason for the mass migration of Balkan Muslims to Turkey in several waves. And for the Muslims left in the new Balkan states, Merdjanova points out an ongoing process of nationalisation of Islam.

The author offers a more detailed look at Muslims in Bulgaria, providing a discussion about the relationship between Islam and identities of Turkish and Bulgarian speaking Muslims. Merdjanova notes the importance of educational and cultural institutions as well as of the press for the formation of Turkish
identity. Attention is paid to state policy towards Muslim minorities and periods of oppression, especially during the Communist period. After the political change in 1989, Muslim communities in Bulgaria regained the right of free religious and ethno-cultural practices. Merdjanova describes the transformation process among Turks in Bulgaria in the 20th century as a “turn from religious community to an ethnic minority” (p. 11). She confirms the observations made also by other researchers about the more diverse processes among the Muslim Bulgarians (Pomaks). They have different self-identifications: Bulgarian, Turkish, and others identify themselves as a separate group altogether.

The author discusses the building of a Bosniak nation taking in account the role of religion as the most important marker of differentiation among Slavic-speaking Muslims, Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats in Bosnia. She describes how the Yugoslav Islamic Community has been reconstructed in the new post-Yugoslav states. Following X. Bougarel, Merdjanova notes that the re-Islamisation and pan-Islamism in Bosnia actually generated the process of “nationalisation” of Islam.

The next focus of the study is the relationship between Islam and Albanianism. The author shows how Albanian Muslim communities in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia develop different models of relationship between their religious and national identities. In Albania, language is the key marker of national identity. Merdjanova takes into account that, in the struggle for independence and after, Albanian political parties in Kosovo opposed the politicisation of Islam. She notes that the link between Islam and national identity among Albanians in Macedonia has been stronger than in Kosovo or in Albania. The reason for that, Merdjanova has found, is minority status of Albanians in Macedonia. The author concludes that since 1989 the relationship between Islam and national identities was reshaped within all Balkan Muslim communities.

The next chapter (Chapter 2) discusses Muslim transnationalism and the reclaiming of “Balkan Islam.” Merdjanova concentrates on the post-Communist interactions between Balkan Muslims and the Islamic world. She notes that Balkan Muslim immigrants to Western Europe, Balkan students in Islamic universities in the Muslim world, foreign Islamic aid, new technologies of communication and media have played the key roles in transmitting transnational Islamic discourses. Her conclusion is that the umma as a form of political identity in the Balkans had been “sporadic rather than systematic” (p. 58) and that for the vast majority of Balkan Muslims the attachment to their local Muslim community “overrode identifications with the global umma” (p. 58).

As Merdjanova notes, an important aspect of Muslim transnational interaction was in the period of the wars of Yugoslav secession. The author briefly