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# **Religious Configuration of the “Other” in the Contemporary Balkan Societies (Cultural Mechanisms and Perspectives)**

The paper argues that the Balkans are not a single-type cultural-political and conflictogenic space where religions are the basic factor, but a heterogeneous zone made up of specific states, in each of which religion or religions have a specific positive cultural status and/or conflict potential (persistently or in certain period). The qualitative changes that have taken place in Christianity as a faith and an institution, both in the West and East (including the Balkans) during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have shown that Christianity has become more dependent on and responsive to the fundamental cultural specificity of each particular society in which it exists. The thesis is emphasized that in the conflictual configuration of “Other” in the Balkans (of ethnic, nationalist, cultural type) religion is not a pro-active factor but functions in interacting with a number of other factors (the Weberian idea of religious “strands”), coming to the fore in certain situations.

### *Key words:*

religion, ethnic,  
nationalism, other,  
Balkans

## **1. Methodological point**

The view that religion is of an ambivalent nature is shared by certain classic, modern, and post-modern thinkers, like F.Schleiermacher, I.Kant, the early Hegel, H.Bergson, S. Kierkegaard, P. Tillich, E. Fromm, etc. These authors have referred to two kinds of religion: traditional, authoritarian, communal on the one hand, and personal, spiritual, moral, on the other. The two types also have different bearers: the people, the group, the community for the first, and the deep religious people, religious virtuoso, the person with an “ear” for religion, for the latter.

Each type is related to a predominant type of experience and satisfies specific needs. The first type of religion, according to these authors, is connected with negative emotions and illusory means of overcoming them: the feeling of fear, de-

pendence, limitation, subordination, and submission. The second type is connected with positive emotions: love, freedom, faith in one's own force. The first type corresponds to bureaucratic ecclesiastic institutions, to a system of dogma, and ritualized collective action; the second, to ecstasy and spiritual enthusiasm, to vibrant and captivating prophetic speech. Some theologians (for ex. P. Tillich) also emphasize the ambivalent approach to religion: hence religion comports, along with the holy, also the demonic, it obeys the law of ambiguity.

The "demonic" aspect often is related to the aggressive sacralisation of community identity - community borderlines, history, language, culture - and the unique mission of the community. In this community mythology, based on the religious idea of what is "ours", the boundaries of "ours" are usually clearly defined, so that "ours" is perceived as superior and opposed to the others, to the alien.

Such a process can be observed all over the world, and within all the religions, including the histories of Balkan nations converted to Christianity. I should make a preliminary specification: the instrumental use of Christianity in its "physical condition" of a political religion and an ideal core of political mythology, is not based only on the ideological ambivalence of the ideas contained in this religion. The determining factor lies elsewhere: it consists in the various national and historical needs of states, empires, ethnic groups to sanctify, to find a transcendent foundation for offensive or defensive forms of furthering their separate interests in the struggle to impose or protect their "own" against the "alien". Our "own" may assume different forms according to the shape or pretensions of the alien: it could be perceived in terms of territory, material resources, or mythological symbolism, of the "true faith", or other attributes of collective identity.

Here the transcendent entity of which the individual becomes a part is not God but the group, and therefore religion becomes mostly a form of "belonging to a group" (a proof of this is the increasing level of declared religiousness/belonging when the defensive or conflictive situation appears).

This process is usually related to the invalidation of universally uniting religious-moral bonds and values and intensification of differences: power, property, doctrinal differences; to a shift of the center of weight from internal spiritual and moral values on to practical social action.

## **2. Ethnic-confessional configuration of "other": the "demonic" aspect of religion?**

Ethnocentrism, the fear and hatred of the Other, xenophobia, as features of collective and individual behaviour (Eller 1999, 9), usually become activated in situations marked by transformation, transition, in borderline situations, characterizing most of the Balkan countries by the last decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ivekovic 2002).

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specific states, in each of which religion or religions have a specific positive cultural status and/or conflict potential (persistently or in certain periods).

In some Balkan countries there is a strong and enduring historical tie of religion/confession to the ethnos, while in others this link is transitory and sporadic, and in still others it is currently being established, slowly and with difficulty. In the Balkan countries with a single religious confession the link religion-nation-ethnos is strongest (no matter what that single religion may be – Orthodox, Catholicism, Islam), while in bi- or poly-confessional countries it is weaker and such countries often look either to additional, non-religious grounds for justifying their mission as state and nation or to ethnic-religious “cleansing”.

We may conclude that, as far as the social and cultural status of the separate confessions of Christianity are concerned, all three divisions have been undergoing similar changes. The differences in dogma, traditions, in religious ethos lose significance when a given religion is reduced to the order of a cultural symbol of group affiliation. This process makes a high level of declared religiousness compatible with an individual and community behavior showing aggression, intolerance, hatred towards a different religious community. When reduced to an ethnic, political, or state emblem, religious affiliation to Judaism, Islam, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism have become and still are tools for the sacralization of military and political conflicts (Spickard 2010, 131).

The more strongly the ethnic-politic project of the predominant ethnos is connected with that group’s religious predominance, the more effective and excluding for minority religions is the interaction between religion and politics in those countries where religion has become interwoven with the nation-state,

In the countries where, for various reasons (mostly rooted in the distant or recent past of their traditional confessions) religion and the Church have failed to become a consolidating social force, they are not attracting strong public interest and trust. Such is the position in the post-communist Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary, and Bulgaria. (Bogomilova 2010).

In Bulgaria the line of cleavage in society since the start of reforms was not ethnic-based but political, hence religious differences (especially between Orthodoxy and Islam) never became a basis for mutual aggression and contention. The prevalence of political strife over religious-ethnic differences is evident in the political divisions within the Orthodox community itself: the formation and opposition between the two synods of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church reflected and resulted from the political-party division within society at large.

The distinct trend was available in the last 20 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly evident in the countries of former Yugoslavia, toward ethno-confessional synthesis. For instance, just before the war in former Yugoslavia, in the early 1990s, less than 50% of the Serbs indicated “personal religiousness”, while over 95% indicated Orthodox religious “affiliation”; In the late 1980s and early 1990s sociological surveys registered a growth of religiousness among all confessions and nationalities and ethnic-confessional synthesis trend. (Blagojevich 2003, 412; Blagojevich

2005, 243-244). The Center for Political Studies and Public Opinion registered a growth of religiousness in Serbia, not including Kosovo, of 7% (from 35% to 42%/) in the period 1990-1993 (Blagojevich 2003, 414). D. Djordjevic points out that the revival of nationalism during the 1980s in Serbia was a factor for the growing importance of the Serbian Orthodox Church and for the active use of the national-religious synthesis as a feature of divine election, superiority, and intolerance for aliens (Djordjevic 1998, 155). M. Blagojevic points out in support of this thesis that from 1975 to 1980, religiousness in Serbia, excepting Kosovo, was about 25 per cent, while from 1991 to 1993 it was about 42 per cent; and in the last years of the 1990s, about 93 per cent; in Croatia – 96.7% (Blagojevic 1996, 219; Blagojevich 2005, 244).

This linking of ethnic and confessional factors is particularly strong and with significant social consequences among the Macedonian ethnos (98.03% of which are Orthodox) and in the Albanian ethnic group, with its 97.36% of Muslims, as registered in a sociological survey in 1999 (Cacanoska 2002, 75).

Religious mobilization and opposition based on confessional differences is to a great degree a directed and manipulated process, the deeper roots of which are to be sought elsewhere. For instance the conflict between Bulgarians and Bulgarian Turks provoked by the Bulgarian Communist authorities in the 1980s had as a fundamental cause the low growth rates, the declining material standard, society's growing discontent with the government, which attempted to deflect this discontent in a different direction. The social-psychological discomfort produced by multiple factors is displayed in the form of religious mobilization and intolerance (Bauman 2003, 106, 129; Gellner 1999, 128). We usually see the religious factors being pushed to the fore, for they are easily controlled and manipulated (Gillis 1999, 44) and have deep roots in the psychology of communities, are connected with passions and aggression, and create enduring inclinations to separatism and rejection of others.

The causes for this close linkage between ethnic and religious affiliation in many of the Balkan countries, which began as early as the 1980s, are of various kinds, but they all represent a specific response to global changes:

- The economic and ideological erosion of the “socialist” bloc, which unlocked tensions that had been growing for years between the separate ethnic groups and cultures in the region;
- The historical archetypes encoded in the historical mythologies and cultural memory of the peoples here (Todorova 2010, 12). These archetypes have been formed since the time of Turkish domination in the Balkans, when Orthodoxy was permanently bound to the ethnic survival of the separate peoples as communities, while Islam became connected with the image of the conquering ethnos. These archetypes were consolidated and reproduced in the time of the formation of the Balkan nation-states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century;

- The purposeful efforts of the political elites and ecclesiastic circles (especially in the countries of former Yugoslavia), which employed religious-ethnic synthesis as an ideological foundation for the processes of new state-formation;
- The problems and fears of the masses of the population in connection with the economic changes and changes of values imposed by globalization;
- The perception of the difficulties and shocks accompanying global changes as a process of Westernization, of subordination, of loss of cultural identity.

I consider rather excessive the claim that the present-day “revival” of religion often generates or enhances social and political conflicts (Meyer 2002). First of all it is necessary to analyze the conditional nature of the term “revival of religion”. According to a number of contemporary philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, and other students of religion, this so-called “revival” is not really connected with the deep, specific nature of religion, its moral-metaphysical values and its universalistic perspective. The linking of religion to local communities and territories, to ethnic consciousness and historical memory reduces it to a “tribal” or “civic” religion (Guibernau 1996, 46 - 47), subordinates religion to the goals and interests of the respective local community. In religion-motivated conflict situations, opposing parties de-sacralize their Sacred Books as their acts contradict the books' moral content. Thus the religious universality is subordinated to partial group values, instead of transcending and enhancing these values.

One of religious essential functions in the process of its instrumentalisation is to provide the basis for the ontological status of the group, for its right on autonomous existence on the one hand, and, on the other hand, for its superiority, its authority over and above other communities of its kind. This usage of religion is particularly intensive when the group inhabits an environment with a different religious affiliation. When, due to whatever historical circumstances, this environment has been for a long time or has become hostile to the existence and preservation of the group, the religious differences of the conflicting parties become a durable element of their aggressive and defensive strategies. Thus Polish and Croatian Catholicism, Russian, Greek and Serbian Orthodoxy have had, in different historical periods, a strong nationalist potential.

The high level of religiousness in some Balkan countries seems to be due in a great degree (similarly to a number of other countries in a comparable situation) to the role of religions as a mostly ethnic and national emblem, as a religious-mythological matrix of nationalism, and in a lesser degree as an ethos and norms of behaviour (for instance: humility, love for one's neighbour, patience, rejection of violence and conflict, etc).

The discussion on this issue is not of purely abstract and theoretical interest; it has strong practical dimensions. The differentiation of these two types of “religion”, i.e. the authentic core of religion vs. its usages by the community, would deprive these usages of the power and support of sacral resources of religion. The two types of “religion” can clearly be distinguished by sociological studies that include such a distinction in their methodology: to measure the share of the so-called

“deeply religious” people, a category which researchers of religion usually define as marked by attachment to the fundamental set of moral-metaphysical values typical for a religion. The table indicating religiousness in Europe looks quite differently when built with regard to this category (European Values Study - 1999).

Such a differentiated picture, when brought to the knowledge of experts and the media, might be helpful for identifying the quantity and quality of the opposed “armies” of confessions (and probably lead to a reduced calculation of their numbers). Such an approach in analysis would reveal: A). That within a given ethnic group separate individuals and groups have different religious “profiles”; B). That within a single ethnos the different individuals and groups have different confessional profiles; C). That the ethno-confessional synthesis is intensified in situations of conflict with representatives of a different ethno-confessional complex: the conflict field itself creates and strengthens the bond between ethnos and confession, not the reverse; D). In other words, the increasingly strong link between ethnos and confession is a measure of the growing intensity of the set of conflict-producing factors.

These mechanisms and forms of instrumentalisation of religion usually stamp self-consciousness and behaviour of the group that applies them (ethnos, nation, other type of formation) with irrationality, Manichaeism dualism, i.e. thinking of the exclusive, non-consensus type, with a quest for hegemony or separated existence with respect to the other side, not for the exchange of compromises and rights

When the criterion of confession is used to define the ethnic origin, not only the non-Orthodox, but even non-religious individuals become foreigners, are excluded from the dominant ethnic entity.

Such situations are not an exclusive regional characteristic of Balkan societies, of the Balkan national character. They exist actually or potentially now among quite a few peoples, cultures, including highly developed ones in respect to economy and technology (Jozsa 2007; Dietz 2007).

## **Conclusion**

In the Balkan countries where Christianity did not arise by an autochthonous cultural process but was established and mediated by the state, the latter is a decisive factor, with its form, specific features, and state interests: it is not accidental that the strong tie between religion, nation, and state here is characteristic both for some “Orthodox” and for some “Catholic” countries. In our time a person’s or a community’s ethnic identity is not only a matter of historical facts (often hard to prove), but also a result of political myth-building, and the dangerous road of ethno-confessional synthesis and delimitation sooner or later leads to “cleansing” the opposing ethno-confessional community from a territory, a state, and from historical memory, as it often happens not only in the “Balkans”, but in the “hearth” of Europe too.

The search for the lost feeling of security, of status, of a positive self-assessment uses - among other resources – religiously motivated group mobilization and consolidation, often by drawing a borderline of hostility toward another community: the latter is loaded with entirely negative definitions, against which the symmetrical positive definitions of the ethnocentric group stand out all the sharper.

The differences in dogma, traditions, in religious ethos lose significance when a given religion is reduced to the order of a cultural symbol of group affiliation; this process makes a high level of declared religiousness compatible with an individual and community behavior showing aggression, intolerance, hatred towards a different religious community - the religious universality is subordinated to partial group values, instead of transcending and enhancing these values. The differentiation of these two types of “religion”, i.e. the authentic core of religion vs. its usages by the community, would deprive these usages of the power and support of sacral resources of religion: such a distinction should be brought to the knowledge of the faithful and of the political elites in the Balkans, and confessional leaders should likewise be reminded of it.

The “desacralization” of ethno-psychological stereotypes, built as they have been over centuries here, and revived and supported as they are by the media and through propaganda in last decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, is not an easy venture; it might even be a dangerous one for the people who undertake it, researchers, experts, or more rarely religious or political figures. But this work is also beneficial for the reconciliation of the contemporary Balkan societies.

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## Религијска припадност „Других“ у савременим друштвима Балкана (културни механизми и перспективе)

Подручје Балкана не припада једном типу културно-политичког и потенцијално конфликтног простора у коме су религије основни чинилац разлика, већ се пре може посматрати као хетерогена зона састављена од одређених држава, у којима религија или религије имају посебан позитиван културни статус и / или потенцијал да узрокују неслагања и сукобе (као сталан чинилац или у одређеном временском периоду). Квалитативне промене које су се десиле у хришћанству и припадајућим институцијама, како на Западу и тако и на Истоку (укључујући и Балкан), у другој половини 20. века су показале да је хришћанство постало умногоме зависно од основних културних карактеристика одређеног друштва. У оквиру различитости “Других” на Балкану, која често асоцира на конфликтне односе, а укључује етницитет, нацију и тип културе, религија није једини активан чинилац већ делује заједно са низом других чинилаца (Веберова идеја о повезаности религије са осталим чиниоцима), мада долази до изражаја у одређеним ситуацијама.

*Кључне речи:*

религија,  
етницитет,  
национализам,  
други, Балкан