

Book Review: The Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity edited by Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy

*In the edited collection **The Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity**, editors **Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy** bring together essays that consider the choices, practices and public expressions of faith exercised by Muslims in the Balkans through a range of cross-country case studies. **Nikos Christofis** welcomes this book as a timely addition to the literature with its rich insights and innovative path-breaking analyses.*

***The Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity*. Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy (eds). Palgrave MacMillan. 2015.**

The Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity, edited by Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy, seeks ‘to delineate and distinguish between different levels of re-discovery and redefinition of faith after the collapse of communism’ (15). Contrary to mainstream research that tends to see religion in the Balkans as being solely linked with ethno-national identities, this collection challenges current ways of thinking about the issue by shifting ‘the focus to the reconfigurations of the organized religious field, alternative actors, and resulting practices of Islamic religiosity’ (243).

The book is divided into three parts. The first, ‘The Prevailing Public Discourse on Islam’, includes articles on Albania, Greece and Kosovo. Enis Sulstarova brings readers’ attention to discourses of the Albanian elite regarding the ‘return to Europe’: a political myth that has been constructed with the aim of replacing the failed socialist model of the past. Europe is thus presented as an ‘escape from the East’, an idea which, as the author argues, ‘referred not only very eloquently to the recent communist past, but also to the historic “backwardness”, “mentality and barbarism” that the region had inherited from a more distant past’ (23-24), a discourse resembling the westernising policy adopted by Turkey after its establishment.

Alexandros Sakellariou’s chapter focuses on the Orthodox Church of Greece and the Golden Dawn (neo-Nazi) Party as the two main Greek agents that have adopted and implemented hostile anti-Islamic attitudes. Sakellariou argues that there are differences between the two as only a limited number of Orthodox Church metropolitans have been involved in anti-Islamic discourse, and the church also refrains from violence. Contrastingly, the Golden Dawn Party adopts a ‘Huntington-ian’ approach, which draws upon biological factors while the Church asserts that Islam is inferior from a ‘theological’ point of view; as such, Golden Dawn claims to be justified in using violence. Jeton Mehmeti deals with the separation of church and state in Kosovo and argues that the case of Kosovo, if we consider the concept of religious reforms, presents a mixed situation. This is because on the one hand, the Orthodox Church has opposed the Kosovo government, while on the other hand, the Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK) and the Catholic Church have cooperated regularly with the state (76-77). Through the BIK, Muslims have been informed via messages issued by the state concerning tolerance and reconciliation with other groups.

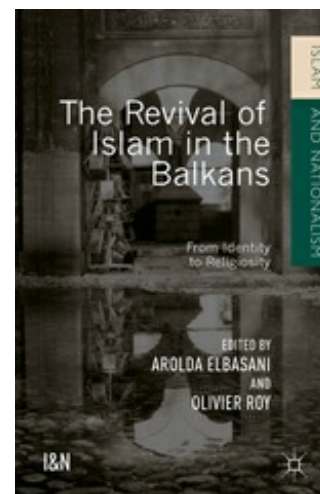




Image Credit: Gazi Husrev-bey Mosque, Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina (Anick-Marle)

The second part of the book, 'Muslims' Pursuit of Faith and Religiosity', presents engaging accounts about how local actors and communities experience, resist and reinvent religious 'everyday practices', and how these categorise Islam as 'good' and 'bad'. This section also takes up various ways of 'being Muslim', such as the chapter by Jelena Tošić, who considers the particular dynamics of the local urban diversity regime (83). Laura J. Olson's account focuses on the multiple voices of Bulgaria's unofficial Islamic leaders, and demonstrates how the leaders of Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks) 'develop and refine personal habits of belief and practice to actively renew and reconstruct their relationship with Islam' (122). This has led to a new set of faith practices, which have been dominated by personal choice and disengagement from traditional hierarchies through the growth of self-organised social networks. At the same time, Olson confirms that there are widespread Islamophobic tendencies among mainstream political and intellectual elites, as does Anna Zadrožna in the next chapter focusing on Macedonia. Zadrožna's chapter studies love relations among Macedonian-speaking Muslims and demonstrates the role of faith in such relationships, while exploring what kind of love relations are preferred with whom and to what end. The author also examines how stereotypes are used, reproduced and invented in order to maintain strong ethnic ties within the group.

In Chapter Eight, Ksenia Trofimova analyses the practice of pilgrimage in the form of the worship of saints and their shrines, which are defined as places able 'to absorb and reflect a multiplicity of religious discourses' (165). These practices of worshipping 'anonymous saints' (one of the mechanisms underlying the existence and modification of living traditions), as the author convincingly argues, are still an integral part of 'living' Muslim traditions in the Balkans (163-64). Furthermore, the author contends that the shrines are not used solely as a spiritual space, but rather as 'a kind of platform for the cultural development of cultural self-determination of believers in the given cultural space' (178).

The final part of the book, 'Religious Beliefs, Public Arguments and Legitimacy', explores how Muslims engage with public spaces and construct legitimising arguments (16), with the aim of justifying policies on crucial choices in the post-communist setting. The first chapter, penned by Behar Sadriu, focuses on how Islam is read and recast by important religious figures, such as Kosovo's imams, and how they have targeted 'women's rights' through the hijab controversy in Kosovo. Sadriu masterfully demonstrates the willingness of the imams of Kosovo to engage in debates using the current values and discourse of democratic rights that dominate in Europe and the European

Union. The case of the hijab, along with the Muslim Friday prayer, is also the focus of the next chapter as Julianne Funk seeks to ‘describe the dynamics of Bosnian Muslims’ “lived religion” today’ (205) in Bosnia-Herzegovina through the Friday prayer and the wearing of the hijab. Funk’s analysis shows that although the Friday prayer emphasises ‘the need to be present in the community in order to hear a variety of instructions, the hijab is more about an individual bodily practice that reflects the woman’s spiritual development’ (217).

The last chapter of the book, written by Cecilie Endresen, deals with Albania. The author adopts the analytical tools of one of the book’s editors, Roy, regarding accommodationism and neo-fundamentalism in order to explore Albania’s complex religious landscape. The author demonstrates – as Elbasani also summarises in the introduction – ‘that religious groups make use of local traditions, Islamic dogma as well as global patterns and ideas to position themselves on different issues facing their post-communist polities’ (17).

The Revival of Islam in the Balkans is a timely addition to the literature with its rich insights and innovative, path-breaking studies. Each chapter, including the introduction and conclusion penned by the editors, challenges mainstream scholarship and shifts the focus from a narrow-minded ethno-national approach to instead pay closer attention to local actors and agents who had largely gone ignored. Those actors and agents do – and likely will continue to – represent new Muslim communities that may play an active positive role in the future of the region. For these reasons, the book is a must-read, and the exceptional editorial work makes it even more appealing and easy to follow. There is no doubt that this book will be a useful reference work on Islam and Islamic practices in general, and on the Balkans in particular.

Nikos Christofis received his PhD from the Institute for Area Studies (LIAS), Leiden University, in 2015. His dissertation has the title, ‘From Socialism via Anti-Imperialism to Nationalism. EDA – TİP: Socialist Contest over Cyprus’. [Read more reviews by Nikos Christofis](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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