European Identities in the Context of Orientalism and Cultural Ambiguities

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Abstract

Jovan Cvijić's 1918 "Ethnographic map of the Balkan Peninsula" categorizes certain ethnic groups in terms of religious identity. For adherents of Islam, the term "Moslemized" is used – with the exception of Turks and Tatars, who are described as "Moslem." The former label indicates a state of passiveness, suggesting that the European Muslims are influenced by external factors that are inherently non-European and Islamic, as opposed to Turks and Tatars, who are the Oriental 'Other' and thus non-European. This idea is related to the concept of 'nesting Orientalism'. While not being limited to Albanian, Bosnian and other predominantly Muslim ethnicities, the negative perspectives regarding Islam have played a role in the construction of "Muslimized," rather than "Muslim" identities. It is also important to consider the ethno-religious tensions which have shaped the Balkan Peninsula, and the catastrophic events which have still yet to be fully resolved.

Keywords: *Islam*, *Europe*, *Orientalism, Balkans, Muslims*

1. Balkan Perceptions and Orientalism

The conceptualized distinction between the East and West has allowed Orientalist scholars to view the former as being "eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself" (Said 301). Edward Said specifically refers to this distinction between East and West and its relation to Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction" (2). While Said primarily focuses on the geographical spaces outside of Europe, Orientalism has also flourished within Europe. Specifically, in Southeastern Europe, where indigenous European Muslims exist and where Balkanism has "evolved to a great extent independently from orientalism and, in certain aspects, against or despite it" (Todorova 20). According to Todorova, Balkanism differs from Orientalism in the sense that Orientalism is "a discourse about an imputed opposition," while Balkanism is "a discourse about an imputed ambiguity" (17). This ambiguity is visible in the "axes of European symbolic geography" (Bakic-Hayden & Hayden 4) which have developed as an understanding of post-war Europe in terms of North-South, in which the North represents economic prosperity. Bakic-Hayden and Hayden also indicate that the preceding symbolic geography was a contrast between Northern and Southern Europe, which also positioned the former as being "industrious" and "rational," as opposed to the "undisciplined" and "passionate" South (4). What these distinctions signify is the fact that not only do Orientalist and Balkanist discourses impact the perspective on European Muslims, but they also play a role in the construction of a Muslim identity which defines European Muslims as *Muslimized* rather than Muslim. This contrasts with what is deemed as the "true" Muslim, based on cultural and geographical understandings of where Islam *should* exist.

The East-West distinction has appeared in different forms dating back to Ancient Greece, where the Orient was used "to depict the antagonism between civilized and barbarians, although their main dichotomy ran between the cultured South and the barbarous North" (Todorova 11). During Roman times, "Rome introduced the East-West division into administration and considered Orient the dioceses of Egypt and Anatolia" and similar divisions continued in the Middle Ages, both within Christianity and between Christianity and Islam (11). Todorova states that "the dichotomy East-West had clearly defined spatial dimensions: it juxtaposed societies that coexisted but were opposed for political, religious, or cultural reasons" (11). The power dynamics in the transferral of knowledge also relates to how Orientalized populations and their societies are understood and represented. Said argues that "Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture" (12). The underlying consequences of this statement depend on what Said describes as "political" or "true" knowledge (10), both of which are distinguished by the understanding that the latter is "fundamentally non-political" (10). The separation between knowledge and the political context within which it was produced fails to take into account that Orientalism is "rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" (Said 12). Said is well-aware that there is an imbalance in the power dynamics between the 'West' and its Orientalized subjects, which prevents the latter from obtaining and producing sources of knowledge (204-205). This relationship between power and knowledge is important in understanding that "The Orient was manufactured by the West through the tropes of knowledge and power as the ultimate *Other* of the Occident" (Burney 24).

The concept of 'nesting Orientalisms' is defined by Milica Bakic-Hayden as a "pattern of reproduction of the original dichotomy upon which Orientalism is premised" (qtd. in Cufurovic 47). This dichotomy presents itself in the Orientalization of ethnic Balkan groups: "For example, in the former Yugoslavia, the Croats have taken to Orientalising the Serbs for its history with the Ottomans and being Orthodox (as opposed to Catholic), while the Serbs, in turn, have Orientalised the Bosnians for being Muslims (Bosniaks), and further, the Bosnians have differentiated themselves from the 'ultimate Orientals, non-Europeans' – that is, those in the Middle East, and, to some extent, Asia." (Cufurovic 8). The direct implications of Orientalizing Muslims in particular relates to the notion that Europe is a Christian entity, which disregards the significant figures in European history, such as Freud and Lenin, who are not even "nominally Christian but unabashedly European" (Akturk 10). The idea of Europe as purely a Christian civilization neglects the historically Muslim civilizations within Europe, such as Al-Andalus and the lesser-known Sicily. Arguably an even less considered aspect is the conversions within these societies.

What the Muslim populations of the Iberian Peninsula and Sicily remind us about modern-day Muslims in Europe is the danger of viewing civilizations in abstract terms, much like the characterization of the Orient at the hands of European scholars, which Said refers to when he describes the failure of Orientalism "in having to take up a position of irreducible opposition to a region of the world it considered alien to its own, Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience" (Said 328). This failure also

presents itself in Southeastern Europe, where the experiences and identities of local Muslims are perceived in the context of "nesting orientalisms."

1.1 The Imperialism Narrative

The spiritual and communal facets of Islam are often disregarded to the point that Islam is not a religion, but an ideology at the hands of Orientalist narratives. One of the most significant ideas which contribute to this understanding is what I will refer to as the Imperialism Narrative, which portrays the widespread influence of Islam among vastly different cultures and ethnicities as the result of militant persuasion and forced conversion. Not only does this conclusion diminish the efforts of the early Muslims who traveled wide to spread the word of Islam, but it also compels the question of why this is assumed to be true. The spread of Christianity in Europe is arguably not as scrutinized in the same ways that spread of Islam has been, not to mention the idea that some European populations may have forcibly been converted to Christianity. Yet, this possibility does not seem to take away from contemporary traditions and understandings of European cultures and their basis on Christian customs. Furthermore, the inherent value of individuals' beliefs is not questioned for many of these Christians. It is assumed that the French Catholic, despite their ancestral background, *is* a Catholic nonetheless. The prevalence of Christianity does not lead to the question of forced conversion in the way that Islam is depicted. Even in the case of a predominantly Muslim, non-Arab ethnic group, the definitive identity tends to be "Muslimized" rather than "Muslim."

In the case of Islam, "Historians have widely discredited the narrative that the prevalence of Islam in the world today can be explained as a result of forced conversions" (Munir). British Orientalist De Lacy O'Leary states that "History makes it clear… that the legend of fanatical

Muslims sweeping through the world and forcing Islam at the point of the sword upon conquered races, is one of the most fantastically absurd myths that historians have ever repeated" (8). The factors which have influenced the vast reach of Islam include the willingness of its believers to travel far and wide to spread its message, which began in the early days of Islam. Other factors which led many people to adopt Islam include trade, intermarriage, and migration (Munir). Munir states that "perhaps the most remarkable example of the universality of Islam is its ability to absorb even the Mongols after they caused unprecedented destruction in large parts of the Muslim domain." Scholar A.J. Arberry mentions a less tangible, albeit very significant factor in the spread of Islam. According to Arberry, "When all military, political and economic factors have been exhausted… the religious impulse must still be recognized as the most vital and enduring" (*Aspects of Islamic Civilization* 12). Arberry continues to state that "The sublime rhetoric of the Koran, 'that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy'— this, and the urgency of the simple message it carried, holds the key to the mystery of one of the greatest cataclysms in the history of religion" (12). It is also important to consider the external influences on the discourse around conversion to Islam, since "the topic of the history of conversion to Islam is often colored by political and ideological stances because conversion is so closely linked to identity" (Hermansen 5). The biases which relate to Islam and Muslim identity play a role in the development of the historical understanding.

2. Muslims of Europe

2.1. "Orientalized" Culture

The perception of Islam as intrinsically foreign to Western Europe is influenced by the culturally defined version of Islam. In other words, Islam as a religion is confined within a narrow understanding of its cultural boundaries or even the cultures of the Middle East. This goes against the maxim in Islamic law, which states that "cultural usage shall have the weight of law" (Abd-Allah 13). Islamic law "focused on what we may call culture's most tangible and important components: custom (*al-'urf*) and usage (*al-'āda*), which all legal schools recognized as essential to the proper application of the law, although differing on definitions and their measure of authority" (Abd-Allah 5-6). Historically, this understanding has allowed local cultures of non-Arab Muslims to function in accordance with Islam's universality. Nonetheless, the impact of modern political frameworks has developed an understanding of Muslims as possessing an irreconcilably distinct culture, while failing to take into account the premise of cultural usage in Islamic thought. It is therefore important to understand the varieties of cultures and practices within the Islamic world.

Perhaps one of the most prominent instances of "othering" Muslims is the tendency to equate Middle Eastern customs with "Islamic" customs, despite the actual demographics of the Muslim world. Contrast between what is perceived as 'Islamic' and the actual experiences of Muslims can be understood by looking at Southeastern Europe, where "scholars often attribute secular and moderate practices to 'Balkan Islam', which may interchangeably pass for Albanian, Bosnian or Bulgarian Islam" (Rexhepi 2221). This notion of categorizing Islam does not take into account that "Muslim practices are not usually defined by geographical boundaries, but

rather by theological constellations" as well the "transregional religious networks" which connect believers (2221). Rexhepi also considers the question of who benefits from such distinctions, which, in the context of cultural disparities, eliminates a certain "type" of Islam.

2.2. Representation in Maps

In 1918, the American Geographical Society of New York published two different maps of the Balkan Peninsula, both of which give us an understanding of the perceptions of that region. "Ethnographic map of the Balkan Peninsula" (see figure 1) features the different ethnicities in the region along with their religious background. The noticeable aspect of the religious descriptions is the term "Moslemized," which stands in contrast to "Catholic" or "Greek Orthodox." The only other use of this suffix is an ethnic distinction, "Albanize." The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines this suffix in various ways, including; "cause to be or conform to or resemble," "caused to be formed into," "become: become like" and "adopt or spread the manner of activity or the teaching of". These meanings associated with the suffix "-ize" imply that the various ethnicities which identify themselves as Muslim are influenced by external forces, and therefore are not in the same category as Turks and Tatars, who are separated into "Moslem" and "Greek-Orthodox." The map also does not separate Albanians according to religion. Although according to the 1927 census, Albania was 67.5 percent Muslim, 22.3 percent Christian Orthodox, and 10 percent Christian Catholic (Töpfer 94). It should be mentioned that other ethnicities including Italians, Magyars, and Germans are also not categorized in terms of religion.

"Zones of civilization of the Balkan Peninsula" (see figure 2) presents a more ambiguous take on borders. While "Ethnographic map of the Balkan Peninsula" illustrates the relationships

between ethnic and religious identity in the Balkans, “Zones of civilization” focuses on the supposed boundaries of civilizations. Both maps present a distinct perception of Balkan identities and cultural affiliations which is arguably based on Cvijic ́'s own perspective. “Zones of civilization” categorizes areas within the region, such as “patriarchal régime” and “old Balkan [modified Byzantine] civilization”. The historical accuracy of these classifications is arguably less important, in this context, than the perspective with which one can understand how civilization ‘boundaries’ are constructed. It is also important to note that Jovan Cvijić, who is one of the contributors in both these maps, has become “embedded in the context of scientific nation building and ethnic geopolitics in pre- and post-war Europe” (Mattes 56). Cvijić was “one of most powerful scientific consultants engaged with the demarcation of South-Eastern Europe’s state borders at the Paris Peace Conference” (56). Furthermore, Cvijić was influenced by the idea that Western Europe represented “civilization and science,” and Central Europe, based mostly on the Austro-Hungarian Empire, embodied tyranny (Mattes 64). Figure 2 represents “Cvijić’s interpretation of the effects that certain foreign civilizational factors had on the formation of social relations of the nations of the Balkan Peninsula at the time” (Terzić 72). It is also important to mention Cvijic 's view of the Balkans, which he describes as being situated between the Middle East and Europe (73). As for the “Turco-Oriental influences,” Terzić claims that they “became strongest among the Turkish population and Moslemized inhabitants” (75). The ambiguity of the term “Turco-Oriental” is arguably less noticeable than the description “Moslemized,” which serves to illustrate the passive identity which these groups are given. “Zones of civilization” exhibits the “symbolic geography” which Bakic-Hayden and Hayden refer to as leaving “little doubt that the Balkans, either Byzantine or Ottoman, represented a cultural and religious ‘Other’ to Europe ‘proper’” (3).

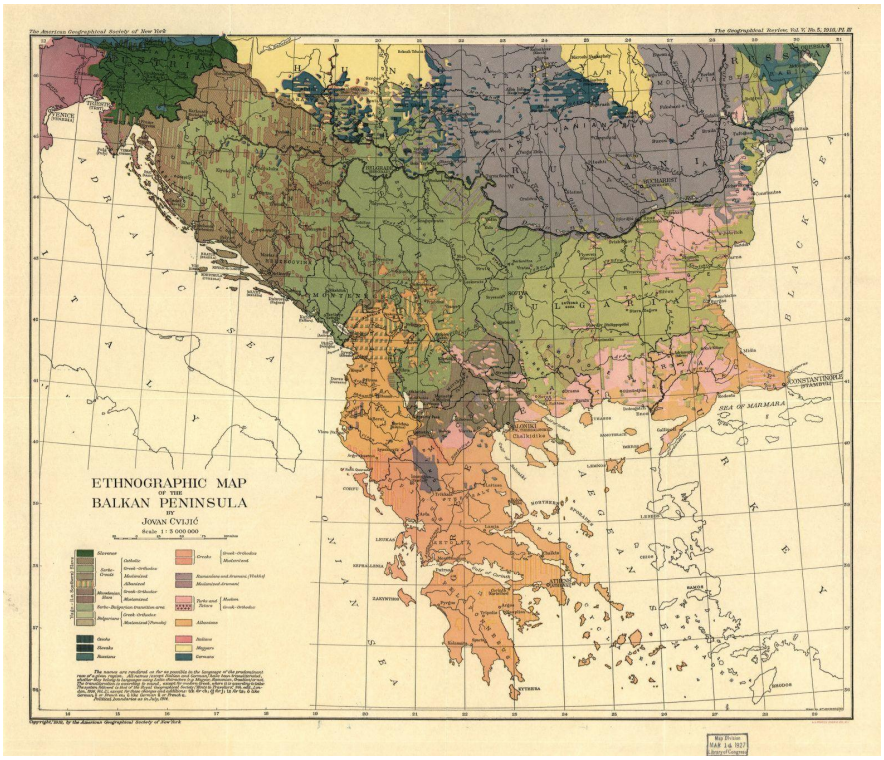

Figure 1. “Ethnographic map of the Balkan Peninsula,” Jovan Cvijić.

Figure 2. “Zones of Civilization of the Balkan Peninsula,” Jovan Cvijić.

3. Encounters and Crisis

The impact of immigration on Western European cultural domains has formed a cultural backlash which presents Islam and Muslims as possibly irreconcible with the 'West.' Anya Topolski considers the lack of a Muslim presence in Western Europe until recently, apart from Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula (and in this case, Sicily as well). In the framework of how Islam is represented as being foreign to Europe, this is an important factor in understanding how 'Western' perceptions of Eastern Europe are constructed. In addition, the role that religion has played in Europe's "minority management system" is "by no means new but has its roots in the politico-theological framework of intercession instituted by the Catholic Church" (Topolski 2180). Topolski draws parallels between the treatment of Jews in earlier periods and the treatment of Muslims in Europe. Topolski describes the intercessions also known as *shtadlanut* in Yiddish, which was "imposed upon Jewish communities in Europe in order to govern them since the Middle Ages (taking different forms over time)" (2181). Topolski explains the distinction between "good" and "bad" Jews before the Holocaust, in which "the 'good' assimilated, rich and educated Western Jews saw themselves as disconnected from the fate of the 'uncivilized irrational and poor' East European Jews" (2189). Similarly, the distinction between "good" and "bad" Muslims is made which becomes prominent in the "pitting 'European' and 'secular' Muslims against the migrant and Middle Eastern Other", respectively (Rexhepi 2218).

The discourse about Muslims in Europe is usually centered around immigrants or those of foreign descent: "While we try to invent a new 'type' of Muslim that we call the 'Euro Muslims' and try to construct what fits them as being Muslims in Europe, we are ignoring the more than 600 years of experience of Islam in Europe" (Shipoli). Shipoli continues to state,

"While we consider Greece as the cradle of Europe and Europe and European civilization, we ignore the Muslims in Greece as even a part of European Muslims." This distinction also contributes to the understanding that Muslims are a minority, due to their 'foreignness' in Western Europe. This understanding forsakes the complexities in which the European states outside of Western Europe operate, both in terms of ethnic devotion and in religious fervor.

4. Religion and Identity in Post-Communist Balkans

It is important to consider the state narratives of the former Yugoslavia countries, which propel political and social change in the region. Jelena Subotić describes the development of the state narrative, "over time and with infinite iteration by political leaders, elite intellectuals…" which "fixes the meaning of the past and limits the opportunity for further political contestation" (308). The narrative thus becomes "hegemonic" to the point that it is the definitive belief (309). Subotić describes Croatia's state narrative as a formation of three different ideas, which distinguish Croatia among other Balkan states. The post-communist efforts to "de-Balkanize" Croatia were based on the belief that "the further away Croatia is from the Balkans, the closer it will be to Europe" and that "Europe was everything the Balkans were not" (322). This idea is similar to the "axes of European symbolic geography" which situates Catholic-majority countries like Slovenia and Croatia as more European than their Orthodox and Muslim counterparts (Bakic-Hayden & Hayden 4). Serbia's state narrative relies on a "victimization narrative" – which has its historical roots in the Serbian martyrdom – constructed on the premise that Serbia is a "victimized nation, of people struggling, in vain, for national survival, or engaged in an honorable, but futile struggle to defend themselves against one of the myriad and always more powerful enemies" (309). This narrative is important in understanding the tragedy which took

place in the aftermath of Bosnia's independence vote. The Srebrenica Genocide "did not occur as a random act of violence," and "the symbolic purpose of the killing was to avenge the Serbs for the defeat they suffered at Muslim hands centuries ago" (Subotić 315). Despite the political irrelevance of this historical event, it "became over time a constitutive part of the Serbian narrative that cast their nation as the victim of a great international wrong" (315). The violence which ensued Bosnia's vote for independence included forcing "Bosniaks, or Bosnian Muslims, from their homes and into detention camps" (Shapiro). Gadzo states that "Islamophobic rhetoric at the political level… played a significant role in the massacre of thousands of Bosniaks."

According to Gadzo, the current atmosphere in Bosnia also shows signs of anti-Islamic rhetoric, which political figures like Milorad Dodik, who has "consistently claimed that Bosniaks are planning to create an Islamic state," and "has accused Bosniak politicians of planning to give 150,000 Muslim migrants citizenship, thereby changing the country's ethnic composition." Dodik's statements "coincide with secession attempts," since Dodik "regularly advocates for the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina to break away and eventually join Serbia" (Gadzo). The hateful rhetoric has caused safety concerns for some Bosnians.

Conclusion

The perception of Muslims in Europe in the context of immigration and ethnic conflicts is influenced by the historical basis of a European identity, which, although far from monolithic, constitutes a predominantly Christian one. Despite the secular values that are accepted by many in the continent, the cultural and historical influence of Christianity is arguably significant. The distinctions within Eastern Europe still "privilege the predominantly Catholic, formerly Habsburg territories of Slovenia and Croatia over the predominantly Orthodox or Muslim, formerly Ottoman territories" (Bakic-Hayden & Hayden 5). In addition, the "minority management system" which has been used to govern Jews, and to categorize them into "good" and "bad" Jews (Topolski), had a geographical basis that separated Western European Jews from those of Eastern Europe. The construction of Muslim identities in Europe has been shaped by the influx of refugees, which also separates the European Muslims from the latter, attributing a "type" of Islam to them (Rexhepi). Despite the theological influence on regional Islamic practices, and "transregional religious networks" (Rexhepi) this idea descripts Muslims as the "Other." It is also important to consider the importance of religion in the Balkans, where "Kosovo, Macedonia and Romania emerge as the most self-consciously religious societies in the region, and in Europe" (Tanner). The relationship between religious and ethnic identity in the region is important to consider in the context of the rise of anti-Islamic rhetoric against Bosnia's Muslims. The depiction of European Muslims in Cvijić's maps as "Moslemized," suggests that these groups have been influenced by outsiders, and are thus foreignized. Even outside of the Balkan Peninsula, "Western far-right groups and individuals idolise wartime Bosnian Serb military commanders, often hailing figures such as Radovan Karadzic, a convicted war criminal" (Gadzo).

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