

The Development of Spiritual Life in Bosnia under the Influence of Turkish Rule

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Preface

The conquest of Constantinople, it has been said, “dealt a wound to European man.” Few countries could have taken that blow harder or felt it more deeply than Bosnia. In what follows a modest effort will be made to trace the evolution of Bosnia’s intellectual and spiritual life from the time of national independence to the final disappearance of Turkish power.

Individual segments along the line of development cannot all be traced with equal clarity and force. Even in Bosnia itself, sources for many events and many a stretch of time are lacking or else unreliable. Working outside the country, I have had to content myself with those at hand, or with such as I was able to procure while assembling this work.

My description aims at bringing into relief the conditions created by Turkish hegemony, those by which its impact may be recognized. Accordingly, my focus has been on the attendant circumstances by which spiritual life was channeled and guided, circumstances hitherto little studied and known, rather than on specific literary monuments bearing the imprint of that life.

In content and basic idea the present treatment is related to other works that I have composed in a different form and on a different occasion.

participated to the fullest in its spiritual life. (The fact that two of the last Bosnian kings openly leaned toward Catholicism, followed by a respectable number of the nobility, makes this the most likely possibility.) Or on the other hand, less plausible, a kind of minor scale Slavic Reformation in Bosnia's spiritual life would have been brought about by a victory of the Patarins.³

At the decisive moment this far-reaching process was abruptly broken by the sudden intrusion of a conquering people foreign in faith, spirit, and race. The confusion was compounded when the upper, better-off part of the population, in order to save its possessions, adopted the religion of these intruders. So it came about that down the middle of the South Slavic lands a line was etched, a line generally following the Danube, Sava, and Una rivers and the Dinaric Alps if we disregard strong fluctuations. This dividing wall split in two the Serbo-Croatian racial and linguistic complex and its shadow, where four centuries of ghastly history were played out, was to lie heavy on the landscape to either side into the far distant future.

Therein we see the whole meaning of Turkish rule and Turkish influence on Bosnia's spiritual life.

By right of geographic position Bosnia should have linked the lands along the Danube with the Adriatic Sea, two peripheries of the Serbo-Croatian element and two different zones of European culture. Having fallen to Islam, it was in no position to fulfill this, its natural role, and to take part in the cultural development of Christian Europe, to which ethnographically and geographically it belonged. What is more, thanks to the domestic Islamized element Bosnia even became a mighty bulwark against the Christian West. And in that unnatural posture it was to stay for the entire duration of Turkish rule.

Conversion by the Nobility

How the process of Islamization, so important for spiritual development, actually proceeded cannot be traced with certainty nor established in detail. As the more recent historians interpret it, the Turks, in the first decades of their rule, went to great pains to adapt themselves

to local cultural conditions, leaving assimilation to the workings of time.⁴ That is not hard to grasp. Such behavior, however, on the part of the Turks should not be ascribed to some preconceived plan nor understood as the outcome of a tolerance nowhere to be found in later days. The fact that during early Turkish times in Bosnia, and especially in Hercegovina, we still run across Christian landowners and administrative officials means no more than that conversion was still proceeding *slowly* and *gradually*. It must not be overlooked that all Bosnia became a battleground after the fall of the kingdom. In the neighborhood of Jajce, Hungarian armies were met in battle repeatedly for the next sixty years. Quite naturally it follows that the Turks could not act as absolute masters on this territory, insecure and disputed as it was. To some extent they had to make allowances for at least the more respected and prosperous elements in the population.

After the fall of Jajce in 1528, Islamization went ahead ruthlessly and quickly and was all over by the end of the sixteenth century. Truhelka's assertion that there are no examples or proof of enforced conversion is completely wrong.⁵ The whole situation created by the Turkish invasion, a complex of interrelated psychic and material facts, presented the Bosnian nobility and all the landowning class with the following dilemma: either keep land and power in their own hands and thereby gain access to all the dignities of the new empire, or lose everything and become landless *rayah* without rights.⁶ Whoever wished to retain his property for good along with the political ascendancy and privileges vested in it had finally to convert to Islam.⁷

Such a dilemma was tantamount to forced conversion. To get a clear grasp of this we have to keep in the forefront of our attention how tightly the Bosnian nobility clung to its land and property [*Grund und Boden*].⁸ In a country like Bosnia, where even at the best of times only a small percentage of the soil has been arable, land has been of particularly high value. This value was increased still more by the legal and social arrangements on which ownership was based. Landed property was received from the king as "noble inheritance" (*plemenita baština*) in exchange for extraordinary services and was to be held in undisputed possession. Such territorial holding was free of compulsory service and tax (*prosta od sveh robot i podanak*) and was granted "in perpetuity" to the one so favored "and to his heirs."⁹ Thus landed property became the main source of the family's personal honor and power.

Grave inscriptions dating from that time bear eloquent witness to a deep, elemental attachment to landed property.¹⁰ Formulaic inscriptions laying a curse upon anyone damaging a gravestone or attempting to move it are common. ("Here lie I on my *very own ground* who myself this stone have carved and written thereon. Cursed be he who lays hand to it.")¹¹ The most sacred and solemn formulas were used to fix ownership and safeguard real estate.¹²

Confronted therefore by the dilemma we have stated, the Bosnian nobleman, ever swayed by atavistic love for and attachment to his freehold, decided in favor of "the Kingdom of this world." In order to save his real estate he accepted the faith of his conquerors and at once set about nailing down that property with its associated rights and privileges all the more tightly and securely using the precepts and formulas of the new religion, the more the old one was denied.

The later history of Bosnia and Bosnian large landed property likewise offers evidence that we make no mistake in lending such weight to this aspect of the conversion: landed property continued henceforth to be the mainspring of all transactions among the Islamized Bosnian noblemen, whether they were enlarging their property or defending it. The nobleman's ideal continued to be personal property on which he could do as he pleased, exactly as it had been his ideal at the time of the kingdom. In any religious and political allegiance he saw only a means of holding onto property. Such property remained the principal aim of all his strivings and struggles.¹³

Even when Turkish rule was at its height, the Bosnian begs who were the mainstay of its power carefully preserved "their old deeds and privileges granted them by the Christian kings(!), so as to be able to produce them should a Christian ruler again reign in Bosnia."¹⁴ And when, in the nineteenth century, the sultans tried to introduce a few reforms that would have jeopardized their property and their power, these Bosnian begs rose up in arms and formally warred against the very sultans whose "pampered children" they were.¹⁵

In short, whether it was the Ottoman conception of the state or the Kingdom of Bosnia, whether it was Islam or the Patarins, each was seen only as a means of maintaining landed property and the power that came with it.

The following excerpt from a folk song of Mohammedan origin plainly indicates how conversion took its course:

Beg je Rada lijepo poturčio
 I sa lijepom Anom oženio,
 Darovo mu deset kuća kmeta,
 Ne zove se sada Radojica,
 Već se zove Pilipović Ibro.

(The beg did a pretty good job of making Rado a Turk
 And he *married him off* to pretty Anna too,
Gave him ten households of field hands,
 Now no longer is he called Radojica,
 Now they call him Ibro Pilipović.)¹⁶

Those few verses ring with the recurrent leitmotifs of conversion to Islam. But they also imply that the Islamized Bosnians, in some cases at least, stuck to their old Slavic names. The same understanding, only more radically expressed, of the motives and circumstances surrounding conversion is found in works reflecting the national spirit among the Christian part of the population. Njegoš, who can always be counted on for the truest expression of the people's mode of thinking and apprehending, portrays in his terse and plastic manner the process of conversion thus:¹⁷ "Postadoše lafi ratarima, / Isturči se plahi i lakomi." (The lions turned into tillers of the soil, / The cowardly and the covetous turned into Turks.)*

The Franciscan I. F. Jukić characterizes the Bosnian Muslims fully in the spirit of Christian popular perception: "They sprang from the bad Christians who turned Muslim because only thus could they protect their land. . . . The new faith secured to them their property and wealth, freed them of all taxes and assessments, and gave them *carte blanche* to indulge in any vice, any evil dealing, all for the sake of living as great lords without toil and effort."¹⁸

The Boy-Tribute

There was another institution brought by the conqueror and imposed by force on the subjugated land, one of great importance for Islamiza-

*By "lions" Njegoš meant the Christian fighters who remained loyal to the beliefs of their forefathers.—Author.

tion and hence for Bosnia's spiritual life: the Adžami-Oglan or boy-tribute [*devshirme*].

The well-known traveler Bartholomäus Georgiewitz described this special kind of tax. He based his account on personal experience, having spent a number of years as a prisoner in Turkey. He later depicted the life-style, customs, and habits of the Turks in numerous works, as well as the position of Christians under their rule as follows:¹⁹

Apart from the other *tax burdens* which the Christians had to bear under Turkish rule, from time to time their handsomest offspring were seized from them. Separating the children from their parents, the Turks would instruct them in the martial arts. These children, abducted by force, never returned to their parents. Alienated from the Christian religion, little by little they forgot faith, parents, brothers and sisters, and all their blood relatives, so that when they later encountered their parents they no longer even recognized them.

I can find no right words to picture the pain and sorrow, the weeping and wailing of these parents when their children were torn from their bosoms and out of their grasp by those fiends. To parents who had just barely begun to instruct their children in Christian teaching, the hardest thought was that the evildoers would soon succeed in seducing them away from the religion of their forebears and in turning them into dreadful enemies of the Christian religion and of Christian people.²⁰

Every five years special commissioners were sent out from Constantinople known as *telosnici*, from *telos*, the name of this tax. Spreading throughout the state, they traveled from place to place, village to village. Every head of a family had to declare accurately the number of his children and bring them before the commissioner. Concealment was severely punished. There was no rule stating that a given number of children was to be taken from each household; only the total was specified and it was left up to the commissioner to select those that were healthiest and best looking.²¹

Understandably, Christian parents resorted to every imaginable means of saving their children and keeping them by their side.

history.⁷⁷ In the course of time it swelled and grew apace as their power waned, spreading its damaging, demoralizing influence progressively over the whole country. Merely to encounter the authorities meant either humiliation or loss for any Christian. Consequently, from very early times people would avoid stopping off in the towns, seats of administration, just as they shrank from any contact generally with the state organs. Among the *rayah* distrust of the state, indifference to the public good, and doubt in the very possibility of justice on earth became deeply ingrained. In the struggle for existence they had to grasp at antidotes that answered to the medicines employed by their oppressors.⁷⁸ In this long drawn-out and unequal struggle the moral attributes of the *rayah* clarified, crystallized, and became fixed, changing for the worse. As a result of Turkish rule the following maxim arose: "Lying is the poor man's stock-in-trade" (*laž je fukarska sermija*).⁷⁹ They withdrew from the direct influence of Turkish rule behind the dam of religion, strict custom, and their own kind of life, hard and utterly unassuming. In one sense, then, the Turks had "only a superficial effect" on the *rayah*, but their indirect influence through law and administration was extremely powerful and equally negative, whether one speaks of its material or its spiritual impact.

All researchers into Bosnia and its past, be they Serbo-Croatian or foreign, have felt in a position to state in concert and more or less forcefully that the effect of Turkish rule was absolutely negative. One of the few who would hope to detect positive facts of some sort in the Turkish influence on Bosnia could digest them all into the following, single sentence: "The world of the Turks thus brought its blessings to the southern Slavs in two ways, first by forcing them into a desperate battle for existence and second by acquainting them with Arabic and Persian industry and craftsmanship."⁸⁰ The logical nonsense and psychological absurdity of the first part of this statement—to talk of enforced struggle as a positive service of the Turks—absolves us from any need to discuss it. The second part, after all that has been said, can be acceptable only to superficial observers and lovers of the picturesque and the strange.

The Turks could bring no cultural content or sense of higher historic mission, even to those South Slavs who accepted Islam; for their Christian subjects, their hegemony brutalized custom and meant a step to the rear in every respect.

Supplement The Hybrid Literature of the Bosnian Muslims as an Articulation of Islam's Effect on This Part of the Population

The part of Bosnia's population assimilating to Islam, which constituted a dominant warrior caste throughout Turkish rule, first directed its energies to conquest and then to the defense of property. This was a caste whose spiritual and intellectual life grew petrified in the twin molds of a foreign religion and an alien language.

Any literary activity pursued by individual Muslims from Bosnia took place by and large outside the country, in Constantinople, and in Turkish. (Or Arabic or Persian, as the case might be.) Turkish, to the majority of their cobelievers in Bosnia, was obscure at best or else totally unfamiliar. The writing of these expatriate Bosnian Muslims has no place in the present discussion, however meaningful or even meritorious it may have been. For it belonged to another culture entirely.¹

Yet there is one area of spiritual-intellectual pursuit, limited though it was, which we cannot simply pass over in silence and still make any claim to complete coverage. We refer to efforts by the Muslims of Bosnia to create an art poetry in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries that made use of Arabic script.

The first person to take note of the existence of this kind of poetry was the historian and Russian consul in Bosnia, Alexander Hilferding.² The first, however, to treat the phenomenon of a hybrid literature in Bosnia scientifically, collecting and publishing all known manuscripts with proper understanding, was a certain Otto Blau who lived in Sarajevo as Prussian consul for a number of years (1861–72).³ Not until 1912 did there appear a definitive critical edition of these Muslim poems.⁴

They are meager in quantity as well as low in quality: seventeen

poems by eleven poets. Nonetheless, they deserve some attention as an interesting phenomenon of hybrid literature and a concrete example of the influence of oriental culture on Slavs.

Bosnians of Islamic faith did indeed retain their mother tongue. But from sheer necessity they took over a certain number of Turkish and Arabic expressions in consequence of Islam's administrative and, still more, religious institutions. The majority of Turkicisms introduced into the Serbo-Croatian spoken by Muslims are terms referring to the moral and religious concepts of Islam.

The Koran, cornerstone of Islam, may not be translated. Nevertheless it must be read by all schoolchildren and learned by heart, even if not always understood. In this way the Bosnian Muslims, by virtue of their religious instruction, simultaneously became conversant with the Arabic alphabet. Turkish itself, on the contrary, remained alien and unknown to the majority, for all that a certain number of Turkish expressions penetrated the language of the Muslim population. (Instruction in the religious schools—the *Mektefs*—was strictly limited to the alphabet and memorizing the Koran.)

The clergy, if they were to have any sort of pedagogical effect on the broadest popular strata in the spirit of Islam, were driven to using Serbo-Croatian. On religious grounds, however, they employed the Arabic alphabet—religious grounds, that is, plus lack of instruction in their own language and its written characters. Thus came into being Bosnia's hybrid verse.

In content the poems are largely didactic and religious. Most are composed in the form of *kasida* and *ilahija*, two species much favored in Turkish poetry of this tendency. The stanza consists of four trochaic lines of seven syllables apiece (rarely, eight), of which the first three rhyme and the fourth represents a refrain line. Turkish expressions abound, of course. Serbo-Croatian, to the extent it comes into play at all, is deformed and squeezed into a foreign poetic mold. The rhyme is nearly always false and irregular, the tone throughout arid and usually shallow.

Such poems were learned by heart, essentially, and a few of them, as for instance the didactic poem "Avdija," achieved great popularity among the Muslim population. Copies still extant deviate considerably from each other in form and content. It could not have been

otherwise, considering that they were penned in an alphabet with no letter symbols for vowels. Thus the door was opened wide to mistakes in spelling and uncertainties in meaning.

In this area as well, the influence of Islam proved to be utterly restrictive and barren.