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Review Article

The dangerous politics of identity

Albert Doja

Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo*, London: Hurst, 2000, xv + 238 pp., ISBN 0231120990.

Ethnographic studies of religion, stuck somewhere between ethnocentrism and literalism, especially in the case of Islam, have brought little distinctive anthropological analysis to bear successfully on the practical realities and political ideologies of religions. In addition, the popular assertion that certain ethnic groups that have had conflicts over centuries will continue to fight with one another is but an idea fuelled by numerous media reports and scholarly publications stressing the historical nature of conflict, much in the same way as the idea that Islam and modernity are somehow adversarial.

Frustratingly, during times of uncertainty, such essentialist explanations of difference continue to hold significant weight. As long as 'history' will function as a screen, behind which the interests of political or religious leaders are hidden, ethnic or cultural conflict will continue to appear intractable. Furthermore, there are the modern views of the nation state and all of its institutionalized mythologies, which over the last hundred years have confused, erased, desecrated and demolished our understanding of the local definitions and categories of group identity articulated in everyday life. Yet, it is only by exploring how group political identities are constructed, by disentangling the relationships between anxiety, threats and group identity responses, that the paths for conflict amelioration can be elucidated.

Ger Duijzings's book tries to raise the standard of scholarship and addresses some

of the issues outlined above. The introduction clearly shows a critical reading of the events and tensions that plagued Kosovo over the last hundred years. Of great interest are the details that Duijzings brings to his study of various seemingly marginal groups in Kosovo; these details shed light on important facts of identity strategies of interethnic and interdenominational relations. Duijzings reveals the paucity of Western understanding of Kosovo, which has often been presented as an area steeped in historical conflict. This conflict is generally cast as two-sided (Serb versus Albanian or Orthodox versus Muslim), with two antagonistic groups clashing and centuries-old hatreds being unleashed. The prevailing notion that 'Serbs' and 'Albanians' are distinct and largely antagonistic groups is not only a simplified version of historical and political facts, but also a nationalist distortion and represents the outcome of agitation rather than a description of root causes of the conflict.

Duijzings argues that Kosovo is not a simple case of irreconcilably distinct communities where religion is alleged to play a central role, but an example of complex, historically informed interchange between loosely defined 'communities' on the basis of loosely specified notions of religious, linguistic and/ or ethnic identity. While it has become commonplace to treat Albanian and Muslim cultural identity as interchangeable, suggesting cultural homogeneity, Duijzings documents the different facets of both Muslim and Albanian identity.

By deconstructing these 'communities', he confronts the essentialist claim that Serbs and Albanians are locked in conflict due to an irreconcilable hostility between Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Actually, in the Balkans there are considerable cultural criss-crossings between Islam and Christianity; in fact, Duijzings makes it clear that the groups of the region are not historically predisposed towards conflict. Quite the contrary, the various religious and ethnic groups reflect continuous interaction with one another. It was only after the first Balkan War, in 1912, that relations between Albanians and Serbs really turned sour, much of this because the Serbian side proceeded with threats of forced assimilation, dominance and oppression. Duijzings's argument seems to be that there is after all a great deal more in common between Serbs and Albanians than one might suppose, and that the radicalization of Kosovo was not inevitable.

Duijzings persuasively argues that "the formation and transformation of ethnic and religious identities is determined by wider political developments" (p. 22). Identities are political constructs in which state and religious regimes play crucial roles in their formation. Instead of regarding religion and politics as separate domains, Duijzings sees them as intimately connected formations of power. In peripheral societies like Kosovo where the official authority was often only partial, political and religious elites found particularly fertile ground for manipulating ethnic identities. In this aptly defined 'frontier society', where ethnic and religious identifications are flexible, he illustrates how group boundaries are more fluid and less institutionalized. Even though local, regional and religious identities remain very significant, the dichotomy between city and country is notable and ethnic identifications are linked to religious identity. In addition, state violence is not unrelated to processes of identity construction.

Although this is now part of history, as the processes of 'ethnic unmixing' and creation of stable one-dimensional identities through violence have eliminated much of

the fluidity and interrelatedness of Kosovo society, this case is especially instructive. Duijzings asserts that "Kosovo's problems are not ethnic in origin but have been ethnicized by political and religious leaders who want easy political gain" (p. 204). If we continue to understand the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia as exclusively ethnic, we will remain largely blind to the underlying political motivations and goals set by the parties that have the most to gain from conflict. Political and religious elites attempting to hold or seize power and prestige can misdirect attention from their efforts by hiding behind the veil of mass ethnic strife.

The point is not that Duijzings is mounting a counterintuitive argument, but rather that he shows, especially in his introduction to the book, that the banal generalizations which have been endemic and so widespread in the West about the enduring character of the enmity between Serbs and Albanians (as between Christians and Muslims in the Balkans) have no basis in fact and that reality is considerably more complex. The assertions that Kosovo's population has a long history of sharing cultural traits, which includes language, religious rites and spatial identifications will go a long way in dispelling what most authors of the Balkans like to assert at best as mysteries and at worst as crude fixations. Duijzings tries to make room for a more complex understanding of regional identities, beyond the over-simplifications that often become the interpretative lens for studying the Yugoslav wars. As reviewers have noticed,¹ the very fact that Duijzings so intently tries to demonstrate cross-cultural contact taking place in a number of localities is indicative of how much these fixations dominate the literature. It is time to toss these misconstructions in the theoretical and empirical garbage bin of nonsense. Unfortunately, it is only now that ethnographers and social scientists have started to produce articulate challenges to these hazardous and dangerous myths.

Though religion constitutes just one factor among many that contribute to the development of a sense of belonging to a larger group,

most identity scholars consider it an identity marker that divides one group from another. The practice of religions, like any cultural marker, is a ritual linked to the historical contingencies of a particular moment. Religious practices in the Balkans have shifted over time, altering the definitions of group identity. Duijzings's (2000: 106–31) work is particularly useful in deconstructing the notion of a monolithic Islamic identity in the region. By tracing the internal divisions between the Albanian dervish orders and the Bosnian *ulemas* (the officially sanctioned Islamic Association) in the former Yugoslavia, he shows that what specialists of the literature call 'Balkan Islam' (Popovic 1986, Bougarel and Clayer 2001) is instead manifested in a complicated variety of expressions that give rise to a number of identities. Duijzings reminds us that for Albanians "religion is almost irrelevant in official political life" (2000: 159); that Albanian nationalism is not clothed in religious terms; and that Kosovo's Muslims were never supported by Muslims from elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia or in the Balkans. This challenges the notion that knowing an individual's religious identity would facilitate placing that person within a given ethnic identification or conflict.

Duijzings draws attention to the political realities exacerbating the differences between religious groups in former Yugoslavia. First and foremost, he documents a split among Muslims in Kosovo, that is, between those who turn towards Sarajevo as the center for religious guidance, and those who do not. The former are often referred to as 'Muslim Slavs' associated with Bosnian Muslims to the north; they speak Serbian as their mother tongue and do not consider themselves to be ethnically Albanian. There is a second split among Muslims along the confessional Sunni/Shiite divide. Yet, Sunni Islam is associated with the Muslim Slavs of Sarajevo. The Islamic Association wielded all the political power from Sarajevo, while the dervish orders were largely based in underdeveloped rural areas that had fared badly at the end of the Balkan wars and conclusion of each world war. Not surprisingly, Kosovo sheiks conducted open polemics in the 1970s

and resisted efforts by Sarajevo Islamic authorities to weaken the dervish orders in Kosovo. These polemics only subsided when federal state authorities intervened in 1979. The fact that Bosnian Muslims generally preferred to marry Bosnian Croats or Serbs instead of Albanian Muslims is symptomatic of the same state of affairs.

If some specialists in the area consider the opposition between Albanian popular Sufism in Kosovo and a Slavic orthodox Sunni Islam in Bosnia as a 'distorted caricature' (Clayer), the contradictions are indeed deeply rooted, going far beyond specialist conceptions caught in a mixture of literalism and a dreadful staccatoizing which means absolutely nothing. These contradictions have rather a political, social and moral significance, which are better expressed in ethnic or religious discourses. As Bosnian Muslims held privileged positions regarding Islamic matters under the Yugoslav system, the proliferation of Sufism in Kosovo can be interpreted as an attempt by Albanian Muslims to reassert their autonomy in the religious sphere. In discourses related to Muslim religious revival, be it confraternal or otherwise, one recurrently finds nationalist motives, which better illustrate the necessity of considering such a powerful mobilizing force in the role that religious leaders claim they play in this field.

Yet, in the last two chapters, Duijzings attempts a comparative textual analysis of what he asserts are Albanian and Serbian examples of how religious symbolisms infiltrate 'national' imaginations. He argues that Albanian nationalists at one time might have attempted to infuse their cause with religious elements largely drawn from Bektashism. In particular, from elements drawn from a long epic poem in twenty-five cantos entitled *Qerbelaja* (first published in 1898), which retells the saga of Shiism by the well-known nineteenth-century Albanian poet Naim Frashëri.

Naim Frashëri was one of the most eminent thinkers and leading figures of Albanian Bektashism, Albanian romanticism and Albanian national movement. His Bektashi epic has to be judged in the context of another

monumental epic, the *History of Skanderbeg*, in which Frashëri narrates the exploits, successes and failures of the Albanian national hero against the Ottoman invaders, and which is held to be his most famous and greatest poetic aspiration. Even though both were published the same year and were written in the same style, one grounded on Muslim mythology and Eastern mysticism, the other on Classic mythology and Christian symbolism, it is only the latter epic that became the poem of Albanian national pride. The martyrs of Karbala, quite contrary to historical evidence and Eastern tradition, owe much to the heroism of the romantic era, including Frashëri's own poetic portray of Skanderbeg (Norris 1993: 182).

In the formulation and argumentation of nationalist ideology, Frashëri made use of both religious and realist, pantheist and gnostic conceptions, coming from both Eastern and Western traditions. Among other things, he openly suggested and theorized the reconciliation of religion with the idea of the nation. However, it is an exaggeration to argue, as Duijzings (p. 167) does, that Naim Frashëri attempt has been to bridge the religious divide of Albanians by proposing Bektashism as the national religion of Albanians. This view seems to stem from an uncritical reliance on eclectic compilations of literary histories (e.g. Mann 1955, Elsie 1995) found throughout Duijzings's book. The Bektashis, in spite of their concentration in Albania, were a small minority quite marginalized within Albanian society, especially before the spread of national movement. Naim Frashëri was certainly not blind to this fact. The relationship of religion and national ideas in Frashëri's conceptions has been very often uncritically investigated by scholars camped on both sides of either religious (Qazimi 1996) or nationalist (Xholi 1998) lines. There is reason to believe, however, that Naim Frashëri intended not so much to provide Albanians with a unique religion, but rather make nationalist ideas successfully acceptable to Albanians of whatever religious affiliation.

The problem, however, is not so much whether this has been, as Duijzings argues, a

failed attempt to bridge the religious divide between Albanians by promoting a secular national cause that incorporates some heterodox Bektashi elements within it. Taking Naim Frashëri's epic reproduction of the Battle of Karbala and situating it on comparative grounds with such a state- and church-produced body of literature that re-creates and embellishes the Kosovo Battle mythology in Serbia, as Duijzings (pp. 157–202) does, is in itself a problematic issue in methodological and analytical terms. Duijzings finds both have much in common: each have been portrayed through epic song and folk verse, both record a lost battle where righteous forces were overcome by evil ones, and the main hero was sacrificed, leading to the necessity for followers to accept suffering as a step to redemption and a revolt against tyranny. Overall, Duijzings believes both lent similar weight to the growth of Albanian and Serbian nationalisms respectively during the nineteenth century.

Still, as some reviewers note, excepting the partly religious nature of both myths, they cannot be compared, either in terms of content or their elaboration and diffusion. Duijzings recognizes the lack of a deeply rooted cultural tradition for the failure of Naim Frashëri's epic to become a political symbol in Albanian nationalism. In contrast, what has made the Kosovo Battle myth so extremely powerful is its making rooted in folklorism and the church culture of Serbian nationalism. Duijzings has correctly understood it this way as suggested in his chapter on the Serbian folk-epic of Kosovo (pp. 176–202). Although the Kosovo myth was created in Serbia and never resonated in Kosovo itself, throughout the twentieth century it provided for Serbs a set of roles with which to sort out into proper categories ambiguous or overlapping identities in Kosovo. The Serbian Kosovo myth and epic poetry grew out of elaboration of oral and church traditions; their religious content was closely tied to the culture harbored by the Orthodox Church, a powerful institution always influential in Serbian nationalist ideology. Actually, even after the downfall of communism

and federalism in Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church revitalized nationalism by carrying Lazar's bones around Serbia for re-consecration. Relations between church and state were enormously strengthened. Even the military murderers were transformed into heroes through epic songs, a process aptly labeled as 'gusle laundering' (p. 199), while Serb paramilitary leaders were compared to Milosh Obilic, the main hero of the Kosovo Battle.

Moreover, not only is the tendency to equate Serbian and Albanian nationalisms unjustified, it is also actually a dangerous ambush in which Serbian nationalist agitators are still trying to entrap public and scholarly opinions. The political instrumentality of the Serbian myths of the Battle of Kosovo is not exactly commensurable with Naim Frashëri's Qerbelaja, but rather with other types of political folklorism and pseudo-culturalist projects, serving either chauvinistically or ideologically charged nationalisms. Examples of this sort could be found, for instance, in the communist propaganda of Eastern and Central Europe when cultural and folkloric traditions have been instrumental for justifying and magnifying the 'authentic' foundations of the political and ideological regime, as I have shown elsewhere for the case of communist Albania (Doja 1998). Other anthropologists have suggested a similar argument (e.g. Gossiaux 1995). Another parallel with the Serbian Kosovo mythologies can be found in Hitler's propaganda campaign of 1930s and early 1940s when German *Volkskunde* traditions have been instrumental in promoting the sinisterly reputed Nazi ideology. But to compare Frashëri's national ideology to Serbian nationalism, as Duijzings does, is like comparing Herder's romanticism to Hitler's national socialism!

On the other hand, while the Battle of Kosovo was instrumental for Serbian nationalism as the mythologizing and embellishment of a local, historical and factual reality, Naim Frashëri uses the drama of Karbala as a local and historical metaphor of a mythic and ethical world view. In this sense, the relational parallel between Albanian and

Serbian national ideology, if any, seems to be in difference instead of similarity. There are two different, opposed conceptualizations that give way, after instrumental transformations, to a number of single utterances, which share some similar details in style and content but are irrelevant for any relational comparison. When you compare such single utterances then, you do not compare them on a superficial, linear one-to-one basis, but only with respect to their relative setting in the whole field of constructed nationalisms, and their relative difference or similarity with all other relevant actual occurrences within the same field. Both types of transformations are variants of the same pattern, but there are differences in the form and content of their conceptualization of prerequisites and outcomes. What is lacking here is the analytical and anthropological insight to understand that the poetic and intellectual speculations of Naim Frashëri, retelling the saga of Shiism as the religion of victims of persecution, are relevant because they have been instrumental in shaping theological ideas with gnostic, dualist and pantheist conceptions that would have reasonably made it possible for the Bektashi religion to have entangled with Albanian national ideology.

Nevertheless, Duijzings's book is most welcome, especially its introduction, even though it seems not sufficiently grounded in the empirical work related to the chapters that follow. As some reviewers have remarked, while some chapters go back twelve years, the introduction was the last and most polished thing that Duijzings wrote for this collection. Though the introduction can initially excite the reader, the rest of the book can disappoint since the sophistication and intellectual maturity exhibited in the introduction is clearly lacking in much that follows. In fact, the initial excitement may encourage the reader to neglect the rich material that could have been present. The underlying problem with the entire collection is its problematic methodology, which often seems to favor a reliance on a flawed body of secondary literature rather than a combination of extensive fieldwork and a critical reading

of sources. This is regretful as in the introduction Duijzings goes to great lengths to articulate a dynamic in the region that is completely at odds with what much of the literature of the past promotes.

Perhaps this is due to the fact that this is not a book in the classical sense; as Duijzings states in the preface, “this book is not the one I initially intended to write” (p. ix). In the early 1990s his research project considered what seemed to be a stable community, Letnica, a Catholic, ethnic-Croat enclave in Kosovo near Macedonia. The discussion about Letnica, however, is restricted to just the first chapter of his book (pp. 37–64). His ambitious project probably suffered from the accelerated events in Kosovo during the Milosevic era, when nearly the entire Croat population of Letnica became refugees in Croatia. Thus, as it has been suggested, the uneven quality of presentation and argument among the case studies discussed in the book may be largely due to the fact that Duijzings was only able to do extensive fieldwork in just this one case. Certainly, the unfortunate realities of the 1990s linked to the nature of identity politics might have changed dramatically the project of many anthropologists, though not necessarily for all of them.

Sifting through a body of secondary sources Duijzings forcibly tries to fit the material into what he correctly knows about the nature of identity. Unfortunately, his over-reliance on the work of both respected Balkan commentators such as Hasluck (1929) and Malcolm (1998) is unhealthy. Both produced some of the best professional secondary resources you could hope to use for Kosovo. However, to assume authority while making unsubstantiated statements is a dangerous trap that Duijzings might have clearly understood. They cannot provide us the analytical foundation for what has been, ultimately in their case, an attempt to historicize a phenomenon that today is rather difficult to monitor anthropologically. In addition, while some reviewers have noted that his analysis seems to be problematic as far it is based not on field observations, but on an old secondary literature which does not give sufficient

details and makes the comparison difficult (Clayer), others point that it is remarkable how many authoritative sources are totally ignored in parts of Duijzings’s book (Norris).

However, Duijzings’s scholarship runs especially into trouble when he relies heavily on local publications, from newspapers to post-1986 Serbian ‘social science’, which makes the reading of his case studies terribly frustrating, as he uses too often these politically charged and blatant propaganda sources to substantiate realities that are central to his argument. This is especially evident in his brief discussion of ‘the making of Egyptians’ in Kosovo and Macedonia (pp. 132–56). Even though some reviewers believe that “this short chapter alone conveys and explains the transience and political function of identity in the Balkans better than most of the voluminous tomes on the subject” (Bellamy), others aptly point out that Duijzings relies excessively on the nationalist discourse by journalists and scholars, which “reflects a dangerous process of legitimizing ‘points of view’ when they are in fact scandalously false and contrived” (Blumi). More importantly, some classic and very dangerous nationalist mythologies (especially those that are all too often referenced with no qualification in Duijzings’s book, such as the Serbian fascist propaganda about Albanian efforts to force assimilation) promulgate accusations that have never been substantiated with documentary evidence and fly in the face of history. As with much of this type of literature, these assertions are typically made by people whose authority stems from their political allegiance to nationalist projects. Duijzings himself is far too careful to outwardly subscribe to the premise of theories of this kind. Nevertheless, by incorporating this material so heavily into the content, the impact on his analysis is blurred and confused. The danger of adopting this flawed literature while attempting to contribute to the study of shifting identity is that it implicitly accepts the foundation – if not the content – of highly distorted suppositions.

In that context, instead of subscribing to charges of Albanian ‘hegemony’ and ‘genocide’ (!)

there are far more productive and helpful ways of exploring individual motivations and cultural consequences of adopting one particular identity or another. A related problem, I suspect, might be this regrettable tendency of British and American publishers to tolerate a good deal of literature written by authors who are not fluent in the necessary languages, but who nonetheless seem to think that by dressing their stuff up as 'political science' they will somehow attain greater wisdom. Duijzings knows Serbo-Croat (he teaches Serbo-Croat Studies in London), but probably not Albanian as he himself suggests while acknowledging the translation of some original texts by one of his Albanian students (p. 173). Certainly, you can negotiate your own way through Kosovo speaking Serbo-Croat, but if you also lack extensive fieldwork, this becomes a considerable shortcoming as anyone listening to an Albanian *muhabet* in Kosovo's cafés will have a better chance of knowing what is truly going on.

What is clear, however, is that Duijzings is at his best when he does not depend on secondary literature but is informed by his own fieldwork and an intimate knowledge of the situation on the ground. A focus on marginal activities at the grassroots level helps Duijzings make important observations about the nature of identity and the role of religion in conflict and cohesion in Kosovo. By considering examples of identity development in Kosovo that most Western scholars overlook, several of the studies – in one way or another – demonstrate the incomplete nature of identity conversion.

For instance, he examines ethnically mixed pilgrimages and ambiguous sanctuaries as a laboratory of identity, where you can see both fission and fusion at work. In such religious events Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims come together at each other's sanctuaries and shrines, and rituals are shared and group identities are blurred. While showing that Catholic and Muslim Albanians have enjoyed largely unproblematic relations, he describes the history of crypto-Catholicism in Kosovo and explains how it united Albanians, making Islam and Christianity both part of their common identity. He can also

talk knowledgeably about Albanian dervishes, the revival of popular Sufism and the Bektashis. The latter, a religious brotherhood that is dominant in Albania, is also present in Kosovo and Western Macedonia.

Finally, all of these cases together with its introduction make of this book an original contribution to the literature on identity politics in the Balkans, making it possible to elucidate contemporary problems of nationalism. Rather than casting ethnic conflict as a retreat to 'ancient hatreds', this book views these violent moments as social rupture, thus providing insight into the motivations and political formations that rush into the vacuums accompanying social dislocations. Ideas about ethnic separation were transmitted by religious/political elites and reproduced in the form of group identity formation. The divides between Serb and Albanian as between Christian and Muslim were contingent upon the immediate nature of social threats and the political-social dislocations that accompanied them.

Note

1. Duijzings's book is reviewed in an impressive number of scholarly and other journals, including: *Southeast European Politics*, 1(2), 2000: pp. 126–30 (Isa Blumi); *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 42(4), 2000: pp. 591–2 (Lohr E. Miller); *Islamochristiana* 26, 2000: pp. 273–4 (Maurice Borrmans); *Religion, State & Society*, 29(1), 2001: pp. 67–8 (Sabrina P. Ramet); *International Affairs*, 77(1), 2001, 197 (Alex J. Bellamy); *The Review of International Affairs*, 1(1), 2001: pp. 103–5 (Norman Stone); *Journal of Southern Europe & the Balkans*, 3(2), 2001, 206–7 (Julia Mitric); *Balkanologie*, 5(1–2), 2001: pp. 304–8 (Nathalie Clayer); *Slavic Review*, 60(3), 2001: pp. 634–5 (Julie Mertus); *Slavonic & East European Review*, 79(4), 2001: pp. 791–2 (Antonia Young); *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24(5), 2001: pp. 874–5 (Hugh Poulton); *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 25(2), 2002: pp. 349–50 (Vjeron Pavlakovic); *Nations and Nationalism*, 8(1), 2002: pp. 128–29 (Stefan Ihrig); *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 13(2), 2002: pp. 225–27 (Harry T. Norris); *International Politics*, 39(2), 2002: pp. 235–38 (Jeffrey S. Murer).

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