

**Arolda Elbasani & Olivier Roy (2015),
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to Religiosity*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan**

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The Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity is a volume of eleven essays meticulously edited by Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy. This book ambitiously aims to reconceptualize the study of Islam by disentangling it from its often-conflated relationship with ethno-national identities. Contrary to the common perception that the two are inextricably linked or identical, the book argues that while they intersect, they are not synonymous. It showcases the distinct ways in which the experiences, practices, and expressions of Islam of individual believers complement rather than compete with their ethno-national identities. Through a cross-country analysis of post-communist Balkan countries, covering both majority and minority Muslim populations, the book critically examines the role of Islam in contemporary Balkan societies. It challenges prevailing assumptions that view religion as a clear demarcation of national and ethnic boundaries. Through its various chapters, the book illustrates that religion can be an accommodating and integral part of one's identity rather than a divisive element. It shifts the focus from state-imposed religious frameworks to the individual responses of believers navigating post-communist challenges, highlighting how they rediscover and practice their faith within newly formed national religious spaces.

Focusing on the case studies of Albania, Greece, and Kosovo, Part I explores Islam in the Balkans from a top-down approach and notes that Islam is usually perceived as a disputed faith, which must be

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supervised by the state and conjecturally reformed to correspond to the ethno-religious constitution of diverse nation-states. In a study of the discourse of Orientalism in Albania, Enis Sulstarova demonstrates that, in Albania, the discourse on Islam is shaped by a desire to align with European identity, often at the expense of the country's Ottoman and Islamic heritage, leading to a complex relationship between modernity (EU-ization), religion, and national identity. For Sularova, the myth of "the return to Europe" must be deconstructed to embrace the multiculturalism of Europe and to overcome prejudice and historical animosities (39). Along similar lines, Alexandros Sakellariou assesses how anti-Islamic sentiment in Greece is fueled by historical memories of Ottoman rule and contemporary fears exacerbated by economic crises, resulting in a public discourse that often portrays Islam as a threat to national and cultural identity. He explores the distinct manners in which the Orthodox Church and the Populist Party Golden Dawn foster a national panic against Islam. Sakellariou argues that both actors, in their own way, attempt to protect the country's "core" national identity, which draws upon Orthodox Christianity, from the Islamic "other." (15). Jeton Mehmeti provides a fresh perspective on the political 'neutralization' of Islam during the establishment of the new Kosovar state (16). He explores the status of religious communities in a secular nation and the international community's goal of building a multi-ethnic society alongside the domestic elites' aim to dissociate Kosovo from an Islamic identity. The chapters of Part I elucidate the decisive role of elites and the intelligentsia in shaping the public and political discourse on Islam, influencing its perception and acceptability within the national identity. They collectively underpin the crucial role discourse plays in framing Islam as problematic, threatening, or fundamentally different. A pervasive discourse of "otherness" positions the nation-states (Albania, Greece, and Kosovo) and Islam at opposite ends of the spectrum, portraying Islam as incompatible with core ethnic-national identities.

Part II of the book shifts the focus from a top-down interpretation of religion to a bottom-up approach, emphasizing individual agency in how Muslims pursue faith and religiosity across diverse socio-cultural

landscapes. The five case studies in this section focus on Shkodra, Albania; Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina; rural Bulgaria; North Macedonia; and Serbia and Montenegro. Jelena Tošić examines the historical dedication to calmness and respect for religious differences of Muslims in Shkodra, Albania, where adherence to Islam is considered a personal matter. Hence, this relationship is not governed by any particular religious thread. Shkodra Muslims tend to be tolerant of differing ways of being a Muslim, and they pride themselves in continuing the historical tradition of accommodating diversity. Also, studying Islam in an urban context, Andreja Mesarič draws upon the clothing of religious Muslim women in Sarajevo to study the engagement of Muslim believers with the prevailing religious and political discourse on the broader national level and with their own emerging and personal faith. Bosnian Islam is a local Islam, and dress practices are one of the ways in which individuals, regardless of how they interpret Islam, go about their daily lives as Muslims. In a study drawing upon an ethnography conducted among Muslims in rural Bulgaria, Laura J. Olson looks specifically at the case of rural Bulgaria to explore the ways in which individuals adhering to two distinct religious movements, one traditional and the other drawing upon Salafism, define their relationship to Islam through personal choice, thereby remaining independent of the position of official authorities. Drawing upon extensive field research among Macedonian-speaking Muslims in North Macedonia, Anna Zadrožna focuses on issues of love preferences and marriage within an ethno-religious context, demonstrating that marriage maintains group boundaries through ways of perceiving, experiencing, and embodying love. In a case study of Serbia and North Macedonia, Ksenia Trofimova explores the veneration of saints practiced by Roma Muslim communities, which demonstrates an interplay between Sufism and other strands of Islam. People of other confessions also visit the pilgrimage sites involved in this veneration. According to Trofimova, the cult of these saints is still in the formative stage, and it is open to outside influences, which are transforming the confessional discourse of diverse Islamic movements. The five chapters of Part II effectively tap into the localized

and lived practices of Islam, providing examples of how identity is constructed, expressed, and negotiated. To understand religious expressions and community experiences, it is essential to observe and learn from the daily practices of individuals—how they choose to believe, practice, and embody their religion through symbolic representations, such as clothing, prayers, and public displays of faith and belonging. Taken together, these chapters depict the distinctiveness of Islam and “Balkan Muslims” and the variations among Balkan countries in their traditional, country-specific representations and expressions of Islam, both as a personal belief and as a collective identity.

Part III captures the resilience and adaptability of Islamic practices in the Balkans, showing how they evolve within the framework of modern secular states without losing their core essence. It examines the actions and interactions of believers, religious leaders, and communities, revealing how Balkan Muslims engage with public spaces and formulate arguments to justify their stances on critical issues in their post-communist societies, such as women's rights, religious pluralism and EU membership (16). The case studies that comprise the section focus on Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Albania. In a study focusing on the role of religious leaders in Kosovo, Behar Sadriu showcases how Imams contest public bans on the hijab by framing it as a moral imperative, a human right, a religious duty, and part of Albanian cultural heritage. Through this example, Behar shows how they skillfully employ international legal standards and democratic language to oppose hijab-injunctions in public schools. Shifting the focus to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Julianne Funk demonstrates how Muslim believers integrate their personal faith with public life through religious practices like Friday prayer and wearing the hijab. These practices accentuate the concurrence between private devotion and public religious expression, something that reflects the unique socio-political context of post-war Bosnia, where religious identity has become a crucial element of national identity. Finally, Cecilie Endresen contrasts the coexistence of accommodationist and neo-fundamentalist Islamic discourses in Albania. The accommodationist

approach emphasizes the integration of Islam with Albanian cultural and historical traditions, while neo-fundamentalist perspectives advocate for a purist, globalized form of Islam that transcends local cultural specifics. Moreover, '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).

In the conclusion of *The Revival of Islam in the Balkans*, Olivier Roy critically addresses the tendency of mainstream research to view religion in the Balkans as intrinsically linked to ethno-national identities. This perspective often overlooks how local actors perceive and manage the fusion of religion and culture within the broad communal categories imposed upon them.

Roy highlights that local Islam frequently contrasts with global Islam and pan-Islamic trends, acknowledging the unique ways in which Balkan countries approach religion. It is clearly implied in the essays that comprise this collection that this distinctiveness is not inherently negative and should not be compared unfavorably with Eastern practices of Islam. Instead, it should be recognized and appreciated for its specific customs, practices, and currents that reflect the local context. This is supported by Roy's own argument when he stresses that the overarching theme across the chapters in this volume is the increasing personalization, mobility, and weak institutionalization of Islamic beliefs and practices among believers. As Roy notes, a significant takeaway from the volume is a "de-ethnicized" analysis to understand how Balkan Muslims have adapted to changes, demonstrated resilience, and redefined their religious practices (250). Roy further argues that rather than promoting a 'liberal' religion, fostering tolerant believers is paramount, as they shape the customs, practices, and manifestations of religion (251).

The three parts of the collection take readers from discourses at the state level regarding official views and policies towards Islam in the Balkans, through the community level, where a personalized interpretation of the religion exists independent of official stances, and finally to the practices whereby the Islamic communities of the Bal-

kans negotiate their legitimacy with the modern and secular states, all the while respecting their Muslim beliefs. The essays cross-reference each other in a symbiotic fashion, and the book reads as if it were the product of collaboration among the diverse authors and not so much as an edited collection. The uniqueness of this well-researched and provocative volume lies in its reframing of the hackneyed discourse on religion and ethno-national identity and its demonstration that the two are not mutually exclusive but can coexist and complement each other. Islam in the Balkans is a dynamic phenomenon, deeply interwoven with local identities yet distinct in its expressions and practices. As such, it is essential to appreciate the richness and diversity of such practices and their role in shaping individual and collective identities.