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Samuel M. Behloul

Religion, (Trans-)Nationalism and the Dynamics of (De-)Diasporisation of Migrant Communities

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The objective of this article is to address two aspects that I think have to be taken into consideration when it comes to analyse the identity building processes of migrant communities, especially with regard to the dynamics of the relationship between the religious and national identification: a) the socio-political situation in the country of origin and b) the public perception of the migrant community in its respective country of residence.

Both aspects, as I will argue, can decisively affect the ethno-religious self-perception of a migrant community and the weighting between ethno-cultural heritage and religious tradition relating to it. The analysis is based on the comparison of two Muslim migrant communities from former Yugoslavia to Switzerland, Albanians (from Kosovo and Macedonia) and Bosniacks.

This paper thus is divided into two sections. In the first part I will address the question of how the socio-political developments in Former Yugoslavia have had impact on the self-perception of the respective migrant communities from this region in Switzerland. The second part of the paper will focus on the question if and how a specific public perception of these migrants in the Swiss residence society is influencing their relationships towards the own religious-cultural heritage in terms of the identity building processes.

The starting point of the article is based on the assumption that religions, alongside their potential to use national symbols and historical myths of origin to strengthen the ethno-nationalist facts, also can provide important resources of universal values as norms of daily conduct.

The intensity of the academic study of the issue of nationalism in general and of the relationship of nationalism and religion in particular has always been related to the concrete political developments and events, whether in the former European colonies, at the European periphery, or in other developed industrial nations (Smith 1976). Developments of this kind not only gave rise to increased study of the topic of nationalism but also determined its direction (Deutsch 1953; Bendix 1964). In the past two decades, the interest in researching the connection between religion and nationalism has increased. It was the collapse of the Soviet Union and then above all the warlike breakdown of the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia, which led to the perhaps most intensive interest yet from both researchers and politicians in the relationship of religion and nationalism in the area of former Yugoslavia. Most studies on the relationship between religious and ethnic affiliation in former

Yugoslavia accurately portray the complex historical, socio-political, and socio-cultural background of the relationship between religion/denomination and ethnic nationalism in the Balkans and they cover the discursive structures marked by this relationship with all their consequences in history and the recent past (Perica 2002, 2008; Buchenau 2004; Jakelic 2010). However, there is hardly comprehensive comparative analysis of the migrant communities from this region that not only looks at the role religion is playing as a source of *freezing* the ethno-nationalist *facts* in the diaspora but also pays more attention to religion as an universal and supranational source of meaning and values under the terms of migration.[1]

From guest workers to Diaspora-Communities

The term *diaspora* (from Greek *diaspeirein* = scatter), which has now become firmly established in modern migration research, has broadened both contextually and semantically during the history of its use. Originally used as a descriptive category for Jews who lived, generally unwillingly, outside Palestine (Krings 2003: 139), the concept was later also used as a description for Christian (Greek and Armenian) communities outside their real and intended home countries (Safran 1991: 83f; Tölölyan 1996: 12f). The concept of diaspora experienced a further contextual extension beyond the Judeo-Christian context in the 1960s in the framework of African Studies, with reference to the traumatic experiences of black people (foreign domination, slavery, dispersal, longing for the homeland) from sub-Saharan Africa during the colonial slave trade (Shepperson 1966; Drake 1993). As the concept of diaspora became successively established as a descriptive and analytical category in cultural and social science research on migration from the 1980s onwards, *Diaspora* is now no longer used with an exclusively negative connotation (connotated to forced migration), but is conceptually extended to the totality of processes and motives for migration and deterritorialisation. As such, the concept describes "processes of institutionalisation and community building; identity formation and retention; forms of religious traditionalisation, adaptation and innovation in the new context" (Baumann 2009: 349).

When the Albanian and Bosniack migrant communities to be compared here are referred to as diasporas, this is based on the insight that diasporas are not objective facts but should rather be considered as situational fields of discourse. In other words, migrant communities can suddenly be addressed

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[1]   In the post-socialist era studies focus more on the question of the position of religion and religious institutions under the conditions of socio-political transition in the successor states to former Yugoslavia. Topics such as the influence of religion/church on politics, on private and public life, value development and ethical questions received particular attention in this context (Zrinščak 2001, 2006; Abazovic 2007; Döpmann 1997).

as *diasporas* as a result of changing socio-political conditions in their countries of origin and as such develop a diaspora consciousness and practice. Adamson also refers to the process nature of diasporas when he notes that "diasporas are best viewed as the products or outcomes of transnational mobilisation activities by political entrepreneurs engaged in strategic social identity construction" (Adamson 2012: 2).

In this respect, the socio-political upheavals in former Yugoslavia since the late 1980s and their impact on the different migrant communities from this area are quite revealing.

When the situation of socialist-period Yugoslav migrants is referred to as *diaspora*, the term is strictly a self-description. It signals not only their geographical distance, from home, but often also their ideological alienation from the home country. It is in this context illuminating to note, for example, conscious attempts by different ethnic groups in Former Yugoslavia to compare their own *diasporic* fate with the fate of the paradigmatic Jewish diaspora. Serbian semantics, for example, posits a "Serbian Jerusalem" and a "Holy Diaspora" (Perica 2008: 12), and refers to Kosovo as "the Serbian Zion" (Perica 2002: 7f). Among Croatian migrants as well, especially in the US, the concept of diaspora appeared in the 1980s as a self-description intended to overcome social and ideological differences (Ragazzi 2009: 157). It was not until the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia from the 1990s onwards that the new political leaders of the succeeding countries, especially Croatia, deliberately used the diaspora concept not only to homogenize their respective ethnic migrant communities ideologically but also to mobilize them for the national political agendas of the home countries (Ragazzi 2009; Winland 2007). Even the Croats who made up one of the three ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina were then described by political leaders in Croatia as *diaspora* people, deserving the support of the Croatian motherland (Perica 2008: 12). This pattern of strategic *diasporisation* was also followed by Serbia in the post-Milošević era.[2] For the Albanians in Kosovo the situation was even more pronounced since their government was driven into exile after the Serbian government dissolved its assembly and asserted direct control over Kosovo's institutions in 1990. This had far-reaching implications for the Albanian mi-

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2　The current Serbian Ministry for the Diaspora and Religion (founded in 2008), for instance, identifies not only the Serbs living in the West and overseas as 'diaspora', but also Serbs living in the newly established national states on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. The Ministry understands the Serbian disapora to include all "citizens of the Republic of Serbia, who are living permanently abroad, as well as adherents to the Serbian entity, even if they are not Serbian nationals, and also nationals who have no Serbian passport but consider Serbia to be their motherland, http://www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php/konzularni-poslovi/dijaspora/dijaspora-opste?lang=lat [accessed 20 July 2014].

nority in Macedonia and for Albanian diaspora-building in 'Western' countries. An increased consciousness of the diaspora phenomenon in the former Yugoslavia from the 1990s onwards is also demonstrated by the foundation, in 1995, of the Office for the Bosnian Diaspora at *Rijaset*, the highest religious agency of the Bosnian Muslims in Sarajevo. Even these few examples show that migrations across borders are not the only *diasporas*. The creation and maintenance of a diaspora consciousness by a migrant community may involve more complex socio-political processes, in which different leaders equipped with varying powers of discourse and definition play part.

Religion in Diaspora

In cultural and social-science research on diaspora religion, the role of religion is viewed as not only a symbolic resource, offering guidance and giving meaning and stability to the lives of migrants, both inwardly and outwardly, articulating their cultural distinctiveness and identity (Baumann 2000; Baumann/Behloul 2005; Sökefeld 2008; Lauser/Weißköppel 2008). Particular emphasis is also put on the fact that the religiosity experienced by a diaspora community has a trans-state and transnational dimension[3] in addition to its local significance. For the dynamic and complex relationships of religious and ethno-national identity-building processes the following two points are of central significance: (a) What kind of ethno-specific religious continuity can a diaspora community achieve through different modes of reference back to the country of origin (Cohen 1997: 189)? (b) What breaches and changes may ultimately alter the relationship between religion and nationality? The latter question arises because in their respective countries of residence, immigrants are to encounter not only other religions, but also other expressions that differ from the ideas and practices with which they are familiar. The universal claims of world religions are thus experienced by diaspora members in more concrete forms, and this makes possible new alliances across ethnic and national loyalties (e.g., the concept of *umma* in Islam or *ecumenism* in Christianity). It may also give rise to scepticism about the wisdom of the in-

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3   It is important in the context of the South-Eastern Europe migrants to differentiate between *transnational* and *trans-state* relations. The concept of transnationalism derives from an Anglo-American understanding of the nation-state. In this particular 'Western' notion, *nation* and *state* as well as *nationality* and *citizenship* are generally used as synonyms. In South-Eastern Europe migrants by contrast imagine their nation as cut across the boundaries of state and citizenship; e.g., to consider oneself Albanian in Switzerland is to understand oneself as belonging to the Albanian ethno-cultural nation, which encompasses persons with different citizenships living in different states that might be far away from the imagined ethnic territory. In contrast, *transnational* relations take place when religious belonging transgresses the boundaries of ethno-national adherence.

tertwining of religion and nation, which is usually taken for granted within their own community (Cohen 1997: 189).

To better understand the trans-state aspects of religio-cultural lives of Bosnian and Albanian Muslims in Switzerland let us first take a short look at the ways they are organising themselves as migrant communities and religious minorities in the Swiss context.

The 1992 war in Bosnia Herzegovina made Islam an important identity marker especially among Bosniacks. A few years later, similar developments were observable among Albanians, as the Kosovo war 1999 had a decisive effect on the religious and cultural life of Albanian people (some 80% Muslims).

Unlike the other working migrants against an Islamic background in Switzerland, the Albanians and Bosniacs originated from a country (Former Yugoslavia) which differed in two respects from countries, such as Turkey. Firstly, the socialist Yugoslav regime understood itself from the ideological orientation towards seeing itself as an atheist state. Secondly, in respect to religion and culture socialist Yugoslavia was not left with the marks of a majority Islamic orientated society as for instance in Turkey. Albanians and Bosniacks had not been conservative believers, but also not practising Muslims up to the split-up of the multi-national state of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s. This fact is manifesting itself also in the process of the emergence of religious and cultural organisational structures in the Swiss diaspora.

Up to the end of the 1980s, Albanians and Bosniacks in Switzerland did not have any ethno-cultural or religious infrastructure of their own. They hardly articulated themselves in public sphere as Muslims up to the end of 1980s and were, therefore, hardly noticed as Muslims by the Swiss majority society. The process of an identity-giving orientation to the roots of the religion of Islam – especially by the Bosniacks – corresponded to the break out of the war in Bosnia Herzegovina (1992). For the Muslim population, who were hit by the war and persecution, the Islam became an important identity marker, with regard to religion and ethnics. Although the foundation of the first Bosniack Mosque association in Switzerland took still place before the warlike decay process in former Yugoslavia, the war, however, has to be considered as the real catalysator of the foundation activities in Switzerland.

That is to say that the presence of refugees of war had an effect – also in respect to quality – on the religious and cultural life of the Bosniacks in Switzerland. They were fortunate circumstances for the refugees of war, to meet fellow countrymen in Switzerland, who had already been established in the Swiss majority society – either being on the labour market, or within the family or with respect to a religious-cultural infrastructure of their own. No Swiss institutions would have been at that time in a position to care for or have such sensitivity in respect of these consequences of the war and the persecution of traumatized refugees, especially as it happened in the few Bosni-

ack mosque associations in those days. It was not just a case of catering for the materialistic needs of the refugees it was far more decisive to give them moral and the spiritual support.

A few years later, practically the same phenomenon has been observed with regard to the Albanians in Switzerland. The presence of refugees due to the Kosovo-War in 1999 has had a decisive effect on the religious and cultural life of Albanian Muslims in Switzerland.

As a consequence of a strong and sudden presence of refugees of war an intense build-up of the religious-cultural infrastructure among Albanians and Bosniacks took place. In 1993, for example, there were five Bosniak Mosque Associations in Switzerland, however, from 1993 onward, the foundation of 17 associations took place all over Switzerland.

With a statistically fixed figure of more than 30'000 people (GRIS 2005) the Bosnian Muslims in Switzerland today are organised in 'Islamska Zajednika Bosnjaka Svicarske' (Islamic Community of Bosniaks in Switzerland) – thus being the official title of the umbrella organisation. They have at their disposal over 19 registered Mosque associations.

With the estimated number of more than 150'000 people (GRIS 2005) the Albanian speaking Muslims in Switzerland have currently more den 50 Mosque associations and are since 2004 officially organised in their umbrella organisation "Albanisch Islamischer Verein" (Albanian Islamic Association).

From guest workers to Muslims: Religion as an exclusive explanatory model

After having presented the first aspect of the dynamics of the relationship between the religious and national identification under the terms of migration, namely the impact of the socio-political development in the country of origin on a respective migrant community in the country of residence, let us now take a look at the second factor in the identity building processes among migrants: the public perception of the migrant community in its respective country of residence.

The events of 9/11 have given new relevance to the question of belonging to a religious community in the context of West-European debates on migration and integration. Special attention is paid to the migrants with an Islamic background. In contrast to other non-Christian and non-European immigrant groups in Switzerland (f.i. Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs), Muslim immigrants are far more decisively reduced to the phenomenon of a foreign, i.e. non-European religion in both perception and discourse. The anomaly of this challenge can possibly be clarified by the evidence that Muslim diaspora communities are often confronted with the implicit or explicit demand to make a clear commitment to the normative-legal framework of the majority society and to distance themselves from all forms of religiously legitimized

violence (cf. Behloul 2012; 2013). Thus, the basic pattern of Western European perception and thematization of Islam can be seen to be made up of the juxtaposition of two either non-simultaneous or systematically incompatible normative blocks: Islam vs. the West or Islam vs. Modernity (Behloul et al. 2013).

Correspondingly, the so-called Islam issue is approached within the context of topics relating to society as a whole: from upbringing, to integration and identity, as well as to security. In the time following 9/11, the tendency to over emphasize the role of religion when categorizing immigrants and their descendants from Muslim-majority countries experienced a downright caesura-like thrust of explicitness. Individuals and groups once regarded as 'foreigners' and 'guest workers', such as Turks, Yugoslavs or Arabs, rapidly advanced to the collective status of ‚Muslims' and 'religion' became an exclusive explanatory model for the negative and positive behaviour of both individuals and groups.

The public interest in religion and in its possible role as a factor in the process of (des-)integration of migrants was not subject to such a discursive intensity in Switzerland before 9/11 as in the period following this event, neither in terms of political debate nor in the media.[4]

Balancing between religious and ethnic identity. Albanian and Bosnian Muslims by comparison

How do Bosnian and Albanian Muslims in Switzerland position themselves to the public thematization and problematization of Islam, and, in particular, which effect has it on their *diasporic* identities in terms of balancing between ethno-cultural heritage and religious tradition?

Considering the fact that these two communities represent the Muslim migrants who come from European areas, an especially interesting issue is how these groups in particular react to the Western European perception, mentioned above, of Islam as a non-European religion.

The comparative field research that I conducted in the framework of a Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF)-funded research project[5] between 2008 and 2010 in comparative perspectives among Bosniak and Albanian communities reveals, on the one hand, a virtually unnoticed intra-Muslim tension within public Islamic debates with respect to the positioning between the role of religious affiliation that is often overemphasized in these

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4 According to the results of a media analysis done by Schranz and Imhof the discussion of Islam and Muslims in the Swiss media until 9/11 was in fact primarily an issue of the so-called quality press, with a temperate focus on the socio-political contexts of the Arab-Islamic world (Schranz and Imhof 2003).

5 For more details see www.nfp58.ch/d_projekte_muslime.cfm?projekt=53 [accessed 10 August 2014].

debates and, on the other hand, the actually present and ethno-specific cultural heritage of each community and its exposure to this heritage. Although, like the Bosniacks, the Albanian-speaking Muslims in Switzerland also come from the former Yugoslavia they follow a public relations strategy similar to those of Muslim groups from outside Europe. The public relations strategies of these Muslims, whether at the supranational level or the level of their own ethnic community, are generally characterized by a tendency towards the 'de-ethnification' of Islam. That is to say, a conscious differentiation is made between 'true Islam' on the one hand and tradition/mentality/ethnicity/customs/mores on the other. Among the religiously organized Albanians in Switzerland there can thus be observed the tendency to transcend the generally negative image of Albanians through religion. That is, in place of the negative connotations of origin-related perceptions (*Albanians*) is set religious affiliation (*true/authentic* Islam). Addressing, for example, problems with Albanian youth, forced marriages and blood feuds, Albanian imams refer to the enlightening and integration-promoting potential of a *properly* understood and practiced Islam. In this respect it is important to point out, that, generally speaking, Albanian nation-building differs substantially from Bosnian cases, in that religion among Albanians has always been subordinate to language and ethnicity as a determinant of group belonging. The disregard for religious identity in national discourses is related to the confessional tripartition of the Albanians into Catholics, Orthodox, and Muslims as well as to the Muslim dominance among them. Despite the fact that the Albanians in Macedonia and Kosovo are mainly Sunni Muslims and that Islam is an important identity marker that distinguishes them from their Orthodox Slav neighbours, Islamic religious references have been absent from the discourse and the political actions of the Albanian nationalist movement (cf. Pichler 2010).

Apart from this discursive positioning, various signs of Islamic revitalization can be discerned now in the Albanian-inhabited areas in Macedonia and in Kosovo. The most obvious are the numerous newly built mosques and the Muslim habits that dominate everyday life – fasting during the month of Ramadan, performance of the pilgrimage, dress codes (particularly for women), gender segregation at weddings, etc. This new religiosity is particularly widespread among Albanians from Western Macedonia, an area that was until recently marked by a lack of higher educational institutions, conservative social structures and a comparatively late intrusion of nationalist ideology. Considering the fact, that this area is strongly affected by migration to Switzerland it is not by chance that the tendency of a *de-culturalisation* of islam is particularly widespread among Macedonian Albanians in Switzerland.

Among the Bosniaks, however, the tendency is to strongly emphasize their own cultural heritage as a guarantee against a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.

While a negative image of Islam and blanket distrust of Muslims dominates the public debates on Islam in Switzerland, Muslims from Bosnia-Herzegovina, as Europeans and in terms of their religious practice and integration, are not considered in the context of these debates to be problematic. Moreover, in both the scientific and the political discourse the exemplary character of the Bosnian model of Islam for the future of European Islam is increasingly being brought into the debate, with regard to their organizational structures, to their historically conditioned experience of life under the conditions of religious and cultural diversity, and to their secular social order. The essential feature of the positioning of Bosnian Muslims in the current debate on Islam is, thus, their emphasis on their own European origins and the specifically Bosnian i.e. European nature of their Islam.6 It is therefore not surprising that Bosnian Muslims in Switzerland are frequently using the term diaspora (i.e. Bosnian diaspora) while the same term as a category of self-description is hardly used among Albanians. Parallel to this the Albanian mosque leaders are distinguishing themselves, besides their usual contacts to the country of origin, especially through their transnational activities, i.e. close contacts with other Muslim migrants from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In case of Bosniack mosque leaders the main emphasis is on transstate activities, i.e. close connection to Bosnia and Herzegowina.

Conclusion

Drawing upon the comparison between Albanian und Bosnian Muslim migrants in Switzerland we have seen that socio-cultural and political conditions in both the country of origin and in the country of residence can trigger different weighting and balancing between religion and ethnicity in the process of identity building.

The transformation in former Yugoslavia starting with the early 1990s, in particular the rise of new national states, meant a deep break for the established relationship between migrant communities and the new socio-politi-

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6   With regard to the fact generally observed in sociology of religion and migration research of, as Vertovec underlines it, a "conscious disaggregation of 'religion' from 'culture'" (Vertovec 2009: 150), the comparison made here between the Albanian and Bosnian Muslims in Switzerland is revealing. Indeed, whereas especially in the second-generation immigrant Muslims there can be observed the tendency towards a deliberate turning away from culture-specific religious practices and a move towards observing 'true' Islam (Waardenburg, 1988; Roy 2006), as it is the case among the Albanians, the example of the Bosniacks shows that a particular community, under the conditions of a specific discourse on Islam, may, just because of their origin – in this case, European – place more emphasis in the public discourse on the appropriate ethno-cultural background than on the normative guidelines of the Koran or the Sunnah.

cal order in their country of origin. In order to make the creation of national states (that were to arise from the former larger unit of Yugoslavia) possible, various strategies of 'diasporisation' versus the migrant communities were applied by both political and religious actors in the respective immigrant countries as well as in the country of origin. In this respect William Safran is right to emphasize that

> *"Yet there are periodic 'triggering' events, either in the home-land or the hostland, that tend to revive the diasporic identities of ethnic or religious groups, such as systematic persecution, religious intolerance, genocides, or natural disasters." (Safran 2004: 15f).*

The events of 9/11 have given new relevance to the question of belonging to a religious community in the context of West-European debates on immigration and integration. The debate on 'Islam' and 'the Muslims' in Swiss context had influenced the different strategies of Albanian and Bosnian Muslim migrants with respect to the balancing between ethnic and religious identity. Both communities encounter in their Swiss living context not only other non-Muslim religious traditions, but also come into contact with other unfamiliar practices and perceptions of Islam that differ from their own. Since Islam, as universal religions, pays no heed (at least in principle) to differences in language, *blood*, and territoriality, there is, however, as we have seen, a dialectic and discursive relationship between religion and ethnicity. Under the conditions of migration the equation of religion with ethnicity can be maintained or founded anew, or elsewhere, as the example of Albanian Muslims shows us, one can observe tendencies towards a de-ethnification of religion. As a multidimensional phenomenon and depending on different transnational factors religion thus can trigger both the processes of construction and deconstruction of ethno-specific diasporic identities.

With regard to the Albanian and Bosnian Muslims in Switzerland we saw that diasporas are not objective facts but should rather be considered as situational fields of discourse where both the strategies of conscious 'diasporisation' of a community and at the same time the processes of religiously justified 'de-diasporisation' can be observed.

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Samuel M. Behloul (Phd), he studied Theology and Philosophy in Lucerne and Arabic and Islam at the Free University of Berlin. From 2001 to 2012 he was lecturer and researcher at the Department for the Study of Religions at the University of Lucerne with main focus on Islam in history and in present time. Since 2013 he is director of migratio, the Commission for migrants and itinerant people at the Swiss Bishop's Conference.