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Review of Elbasani and Roy's "The Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity"

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***The Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity.* Edited by Arolda Elbasani and Oliver Roy. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 280 pp. ISBN: 9781137517838. Hardcover.**

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The Revival of Islam in the Balkans, a collection of essays edited by Arolda Elbasani and Oliver Roy, offers further analysis of religious changes in the Balkans after communism. These particular studies represent valuable contributions to the subject due to their thorough identification and evaluation of crucial elements that have influenced the contemporary religious scene in the Balkans.

The first objective of the volume is to examine Muslim “believers’ different responses to the post-communist challenges of nationally organized religious spaces, and analyze how they adapt to swift changes, oppose rigid prescriptions, and envisage their own ‘local’ spaces”(p. 14). The empirical cases analyzed in the volume provide evidence of a number of factors that influence how Islam is practiced in the region. They further contextualize Muslims’ expressions and pursuit of faith in the locales where they operate. Furthermore, the volume offers cross-country parallels, attempting to decipher the ways in which believers discover and experience their new-found faith. Finally, the authors aim to “conceptualize post-communist trends of revival of faith, establish patterns and draw conclusions regarding the relationship between nation, state and faith, as well as traits of religiosity after the collapse of communism. To this end, specific cases tackle the revival of Islam incorporating sub-national, regional, European and globalized influences, which compete with official institutions and national ideas for market ‘shares’”(pp. 14-15) .

The book identifies three crucial breaks that help to reconfigure the ways in which Muslims in the Balkans grapple with their beliefs and the salience they gain in their religious lives: the consequences of decades-long socialist secularization, the new competitive market of religiosity, and the ‘EU-ization’ of the religious sphere.

The book is divided into three elements that delineate different levels of the re-discovery of faith in the post-communist Balkans. The first part deals with the attitudes that political elites have towards Islam. The empirical studies in this part attempt to demonstrate the desire of political actors to supervise

and control Islam as “a disputed faith” in order to “fit ethno-religious fabric of respective nation-states”(p. 15). All of the cases analyzed in this part show that Islam is perceived as either foreign or an enemy to the political visions of the post-community Balkan reality.

The second part discusses more specifically the experience of the everyday faith of believers, and how it fits within the new religious market of the competing practices of the local and traditional on one hand, and the new and foreign, on the other. In some case studies, however, it was difficult to decipher this objective, as, for example, Anna Zadrozna’s chapter on how group boundaries such as class, ethnicity, religion, and national belonging affect perceptions and practices of ‘love relationships’ in rural Macedonia.

The second part mainly deals with Muslims’ view of themselves, while the third part explores Muslims’ engagement with the public. Case studies offered here demonstrate Muslims’ “legitimizing arguments in order to justify their positions on crucial choices facing their post-communist polities, including contested issues such as women’s rights, religious pluralism and membership in the EU” (p. 16). It is quite interesting to see in the Behar Sadriu chapter, for example, how Kosovar *imams* criticize the state-led attempts to ban the *hijab* in public schools by navigating between trends toward secularization, international influences, and the impact of European normative spaces.

In his concluding remarks, Oliver Roy points out several important trends. He recognizes disturbing foreign influences that play an important role in shaping religious ideas and practices of the region’s Islam, delineating Salafism and neo-Ottomanism as the two most influential ones. He further places the revival of Islam in the context of nation-protecting, pointing at the portrayal of Islam as “the backward ‘other’ of an otherwise ‘European’ and ‘ecumenical’ collective identity” in Albania, or at anti-Islamic sentiments in the process of protecting the “Orthodox ‘core’ of national unity” in Greece” (p. 245).

Resistance of local faith communities to new foreign influences is another common thread in this volume. As Roy notices “all chapters in the second and third section show local actors and communities of faith coming of age and taking ownership of their acclaimed religiosity in practice” (p. 248). Thus,

religious revival in the Balkans is not indicating any kind of globalized movement or pan-Islamist ideologies, but it rather contributes to making religion more autonomous politically, institutionally and ideologically (p. 259).

It seems that this autonomy and strength of local Islam to reject new ideological encounters have often been overlooked in the past studies. This volume demonstrates that local Muslim communities have not only been able to reject foreign influences, but also to construct new methods to theoretically and practically defend their traditional practice. The case studies of this volume also indicate the readiness and capabilities of Muslim leaders to integrate European human rights vocabulary into Islamic discourse, and a resolution to shape an Islam that will become and remain a constituent part of the European religious and political landscape.