

7-2016

Islam and Muslims in Macedonia

Ismail Bardhi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#), and the [Islamic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bardhi, Ismail (2016) "Islam and Muslims in Macedonia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol36/iss4/3>

This Article, Exploration, or Report is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN MACEDONIA

By Ismail Bardhi

Dr. Ismail Bardhi is an Islamic theologian as well as the founder of the Publishing House “Logos-A” in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia. He is the Chairman of the Board of the Center of Islamic Civilization Foundation (FOCIC), Skopje and a dissident of the Islamic Religious Union in Macedonia.

*“Don’t rush to agree with me – even for me
everything isn’t clear.”*

A. Platonov

We live in a time which has lost its physiognomy, a time in which efforts are made for religion to become a type of human “property.” As far as philosophy is concerned, it has already forgotten its consent with nature’s principle, i.e. with the *logos*. Nature in that original, natural sense is not only a sphere of the pre-human and pre-rational, nor is it only a sphere of the animal or of the vegetable. Physiognomically, this means that not only does language or words have something to say, but even things can speak to those who know how to use their sensorium. Within this physiognomy, freedom expresses itself in the net of observations, in which all meanings are mutually interrelated. And if we have lost the personal perceptive competence or the capacity for authentic observation, it is not difficult to notice that this integrity in the contemporary civilization has been lost. This was well noticed by Albert Camus, who a half a century ago, spoke about the logic of the theory that wished to unite the entire world:

There is no other way, but to cut the roots that bind man with life and nature. It is not accidental that important books today instead of dealing with the nuances of the heart and the realities of love, they indulge only with judges, proceedings and mechanisms of accusation, when, instead of opening the windows to the beauty of the world, they are carefully closing over the anxiousness of the lonesome.

This is that knowledge that does not harm the beings it knows; it does not instrumentalize nor humiliate them. It is interesting to show that this is that human behavior which knows that everything has its own image and, as A. Sharchevich says, “each and every form speaks to us in multiple ways: skin can listen, ears can see, and eyes can distinguish the warm from the cold.” Today, there are people however, who have buried in themselves this physiognomic mind, which is an antidote for violence and humiliation, for all savagery. This is why today, theologians and philosophers, and even more so wise people are not interesting. The Prophet of Islam, s.a.w.s. would have said: “... knowledge doesn’t die by itself, but by taking away the scholars and thinkers from the society”, and “when something is put in trust to the one who doesn’t deserve it – expect the moment of *Qiyamah* [Judgement Day].”

Our society in its original nature is a traditional one. This means that as its source, it has the idea of the “sacred community,” or if we use Karl Jaspers’ insight, the complex identity of the axial time. Indeed, such communities are projections of the celestial perfection in the wordly order. Truth about celestial integrity is carried by the messengers and prophets, whose speech and acting are surrounded by language, signs, and symbols. Each and every individual phenomenon is transcended by such religious forms. God—the Truth—is at the center, and the ultimate responsibility is before God. People are in mutual relations through their relation with God: responsibility towards the human witnesses the responsibility towards God. They are interrelated by understanding (*confidentio*). Since language, meanings, and symbols cannot be accepted as ultimate values, the relation towards others who have a different religious affiliation is again a relation towards God, or if we paraphrase the words of the last Revelation, every individual, from any sacred community can say: our God and your God is One.

It has become common to emphasize that tensions in our society, which led to a conflict, are not of a religious nature. If such a thesis is accepted, then this does not mean that

religious interpretations are not involved in such tensions and conflicts. Religions *per se* are never identical with their interpretations in the social and historical reality. Even when many forms of wrong and dangerous interpretations as well as the use of language, meanings, and religious symbols can be proven, this does not mean that opportunities for understanding, offered by the religious variety for the harmonization of social relations are prevented. Unfortunately, the most recent conflict that took place here in Macedonia (which was a rigged and controlled process),¹ only made mutual understanding even more difficult, with consequences we have already seen throughout history. It was totally harmful for our cultures and co-existence.

I

Unfortunately, it has become common for religion to be confronted with something that in its essence, does not comply with it, like history and traditionalism, when it is known that man believes in religion with the intention to submit himself to God and to assume responsibility within the twofold dimension: the sacral and the profane. It is not important to know for how many years and with “how much” history one has become a believer, but it is important to be a believer constantly, because religion does not care about East and West.

By the end of the fourteenth until the end of the sixteenth century, Islam spread in large proportions through the Balkans Peninsula and established its roots with the arrival of the Ottoman Empire in these parts. Previous rare encounters in South-Eastern Europe with Muslims, which to some extent witnesses the inter-ethnic and interreligious contacts during the Middle Ages, should by no means be considered a forerunner of the Ottoman incursion.

During the time of the Ottoman governance, a regionally differentiated but ethnically homogenous population of Muslim believers was established. This Muslim population in the Balkan region at that time belonged to a centralized religious community of the Ottoman

¹ The reference is to the ethnoreligious conflicts in Macedonia starting in 2001 (editor).

Empire, and preached as well as adhered to the *Ahl-as-Sunnah* and the *Hanafi madhhab* (law school). It remained as the main feature of the Islamic Union (Community) during the former Yugoslavia, as well as of the Islamic Unions of the countries which emerged after the dissolution of that state. Unfortunately, recently we are witnessing the appearance of other *medhahibs*, something which causes the Muslim tradition of these parts to suffer.

It is worth mentioning that after 1878, i.e. with the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Austria-Hungarian authorities decreed the establishment of an autonomous Islamic Religious Union, independent from the center in Istanbul. At that time by decree of the Austrian Emperor, the supreme leader titled *Rais-ul-Ulama* was appointed, as were the members of the *Majlis of Ulama*, while the state assumed full control over the *waqf* properties. The *Shariah Courts* continued their work, but they were mainly dealing with matters related to Muslim marital right, issues of ownership and inheritance, as well as issues of guardianship.

On the other hand, the Kingdom of Serbia in 1886 recognized the freedom of expression and preaching of Islamic religion. After the Berlin Congress, the organization of the Islamic Religious Union (IRU) was decreed with the *Mufti* in Nish as its head. He, along with the imams of mosques, received salaries from the state budget, while the work of the Islamic Religious Union was supervised by the Religious Department of the Ministry of Education. After the Balkan wars (of 1912 and 1913) the Mufti of Niš was appointed as *Grand Mufti*, along with the establishment of the *Grand Mufti Office*.)

As for the Islamic Religious Union in Macedonia, as well as in Kosovo, until the Balkan wars they were a part of the unique Islamic Religious Union of the Ottoman Empire, which meant hierarchical submission to its central organs in Istanbul.

To summarize the above, we can say that the unity of the Islamic Religious Union in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was established in 1930 by the Law on Islamic Religious Union.

After World War II, with the Constitution of the newly established Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (in which Macedonia was one of the six federal units with a status of Republic) and the Law on the Legal Status of the Religious Communities (1953), the state established permanent principles of its relation towards religion and religious communities, from which it never essentially moved away until the last days of its existence as a state. Here, one has to have in mind the basic principles upon which the relation between the state and religion was founded: the separation of religion from the state; proclamation of religious freedom as well as the establishment of religious communities in compliance with the Constitution and laws, then the equality between religious communities and separation of religion from schools, with unhindered organization of religious education within the religious premises.

II

Religious unions or communities in general, and the Islamic in particular, are part of our society. They share its fate, feel responsible for its future, and are conscious of their duties and rights to contribute to the progress of society, through their participation in actual discussions about important social topics, so that the public will be informed about their stances and hence contribute for their general well-being.

The legal position of the Islamic Community in the Republic of Macedonia was regulated by Article 19 of the Macedonian Constitution of 1991, in which the Islamic Union of Macedonia is explicitly mentioned, and more recently with the amendments to the Constitution of 2001, where its name was changed to the Islamic Religious Union of the Republic of Macedonia. Nowadays, it is expected that the issue of religious communities will be further elaborated with the new law on religious communities and groups.

Amendments for the year, 2001, in the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia brought a change in the Constitution of the Islamic Religious Union as well, which was

adopted in 2003. According to this Constitution, the IRU has the *Rais-ul-Ulama* as its spiritual leader (earlier his title was President of IRU), and the territory of the Republic of Macedonia was administratively divided into 13 mufti districts in the country and two others abroad, the last two covering the organization of Muslim believers from the Republic of Macedonia who are temporarily living and working in Western countries. Within the IRU, there are also educational institutions of secondary education (“Isa Beg” Madrasah for boys in Skopje and for girls in Tetovo), and of higher education, the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Skopje. The IRU also includes some of the dervish orders existing in Macedonia.

Regarding the number of Muslims in Macedonia, it has exceeded one-third of the entire number of the population. This population is not ethnically homogeneous, because Muslims come from the ranks of almost all ethnicities and belong to different *mentalities*, though Albanians constitute the largest group with more than 25 percent of the entire population of the country. Of course, statistical data have always been disputed by members of different communities, ethnic or religious. It is worth noting here that the Albanian issue needs a deeper study, because it is rather complex due to their territorial division and different state systems they had throughout history.

If we were to analyze the main problems facing the Islamic Religious Union, generally they are problems inherited from the past, though there are also some new ones. The first and main issue is the problem of migration of the Muslim population from these parts as a consequence of many wars and oppressions, followed by the issue of properties, of religious culture, of the institutionalization of the religious community, i.e. the fading of the institution of the *khalifat* (caliphate), the emergence of religious groups and sects, and the last one being the phenomenon or the process of secularization and globalization.

In continuation, we will summarize the above-mentioned problems for further discussion, as well as the current problems many of us are witnessing:

- a) The Balkan wars, as well as the others that followed have left many problems behind. For nationalist historians, they were only problems of statistics/figures, but for the culture, they caused impoverishment and emptiness, because in addition to the casualties during the wars and following forced migrations, the number of theologians and religious scholars who left these parts was significant. For a long time, the entire territory of Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania remained with few scholars, the number of which could have been counted by hand. On the other hand, religion was there, among the people. This, of course, meant the possibility for wrong interpretations of religion.
- b) The *waqf* [Islamic religious foundations] as an institution was totally neglected and destroyed. Proofs to this end can be easily found not only in publications, but in archive materials as well. For the moment, this is an issue covered with dust on the administrative shelves, because nothing has been done to re-vitalize or to return them to their legal owner, the Islamic Religious Union. This is very important for the self-organization of religious life and its culture.
- c) For a long time, the religious cultural-educational institutions were not even a topic of discussion within the Islamic Religious Union itself, and until recently, they didn't even exist as such. As far as the issue of institutional religious culture is concerned, no one even thought about it, let alone did something regarding it. Knowing that the majority of Muslims used to live in rural areas, it becomes clear where we stand and what we are facing, i.e. problems only increased. The status and position of *hojas*—*imams*, or of the theologians in general was not discussed nor reviewed within the religious institution itself, let alone within the state institutions.
- d) The nonexistence of the institution of *khalifat* as a spiritual center of Muslims, created a gap in leading the life of Muslims on religious tracks. Namely, it paved the way for

the emergence of religious leaderism and the issuance of various *fatwas*, which are often rejected by Muslim circles.

- e) The emergence of religious groups and sects is a challenge of the time, and for small countries with low population, they can be an extremely disintegrative and disordering internal or external factor in the society. Here, we are not referring only to the sects which have nothing to do with religion, but to *Wahhabism* as well. Although the latter calls upon some kind of “traditionalism,” in fact it has nothing to do with the meaning of tradition according to the concept nourished among us. It is an ideological movement rather than a school of religious thought.
- f) Globalization as a phenomenon is shaping itself even in countries where it is not properly understood yet. In Macedonia, as well as in our surroundings, the issue of religion is not treated seriously, and we know that within the new Europe, efforts are being made to put it inside a constitutional framework. We are neither observers nor participants in this process.

As stated above, during the last few years, there was a “shaking” of the centuries-long religious tradition with the emergence of certain new interpretations, behaviors, stances, and outer appearances. These are problems not only for those outside, but even for those inside the same religious community. Here, we are not talking about nuances of interpretations, or about the richness of a multiple-interpretation that hermeneutics has, but about the ideologization of such interpretations. Imagine what all these can do to a religious community left in isolation by the state, facing an economic crisis, and treated without mercy by the media.

In Conclusion

Muslims in general, as well as Muslims in Macedonia in particular, are living and working in a pluralistic and multicultural world and society, where their belief is one of the

possible ways for interpreting the most important issues of human existence, such as: God, this world, the Hereafter, culture, human rights, and similar. Because of the multicultural importance of the modern world, Islam, and this means Muslims too, are called to enter into a dialogue with other religions with the sole purpose of attaining peaceful coexistence among people, with full respect for others' rights and freedoms.

Post-communist traumas are noticeable within the religious institutions in Macedonia in general, and within the Islamic Religious Union in particular; the Muslims' institution still "thinks" based on its past system, and lives according to democracy's freedom, which day by day only continues to show its harshness on the religious and cultural dimension. Today, we have several mosques which are not under control of this institution, and we have various movements under the influence of the countries where their members studied, that is, mainly in the Arab world, and they have become ever more disrupting to the religious peace and religious tradition of the country. It is a very dangerous phenomenon, which releases an unpleasant odor of a hard-hearted and scary fundamentalism and radicalism. This situation also obstructs the culture of interreligious dialogue and creation of a reformed religious institution.

Regretfully, the country's policy continues usurping and destroying the properties of this religious institution, namely the *waqf*, and is not concerned with the status of that institution as it has been done in some countries in the neighborhood.