Ganka Cvetanova, PhD

(Political sociology)
University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius"
Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research
Skopje – Republic of Macedonia
ganka968@yahoo.com

RELIGION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE BALKANS

Abstract

In those societies where a given religion prevails, its integrative function may provide a high level of social cohesion. In this context, religion played a relevant and almost a historical role in the national identity formation. On the other hand, the greater the role of religion in the process of unification of the community is, the greater the intolerance to the groups and individuals from another religion shall be.

The paper addresses the role of religion in the national identities formation in the Balkans during the Ottoman Empire's reign, with particular emphasis to the events and development on the territory of the present Republic of Macedonia.

Key words: religion, national identity, ethnicity, Balkans, Macedonia, Ottoman Empire.

INTRODUCTION

The interplay between religion and national identity formation is a subject matter of many scientific analyses, particularly those scientific disciplines that examine the phenomenon of "nation' and "nationalism".

Despite the fact that religion and nationalism are two separate and different phenomena, in many societies throughout history, they become so interlaced so it is almost impossible to draw a line where one ends and other begins.

The sociologists, who consider religion as a social and collective phenomenon and examine how religious activities affect society as a whole, point out mainly three major reasons for the interconnection between religion and national identity:

1. culture;
2. social functions of religion;
3. civil religion.

Culture. For many sociologists, religion represents an integral part of each and every culture. Both culture and religion penetrate numerous identical spheres of human existence, thus influencing and complementing one another. Religion has played an influential role in the formation of system of cultural values, moral convictions and practices. On the other hand, culture has influenced the perception of religion, the determination of its position and relevance in society. As an illustration one may highlight the huge discrepancies prevailing among the Indian, Iranian and Algerian form of the Islam on one hand, and the Chinese, Egyptian and American form of Christianity on the other hand. Namely, these discrepancies derive from the diverse cultural traditions of the communities. Considering their mutual interconnection, one may acknowledge that no religion is independent from culture, and in the words of Parekh, Jesus Christ may be a divinity, but, nonetheless, Christianity remains a cultural phenomenon.

On the other hand, culture, comprehended as a set of elements used by the group for the purpose of self-identification, becomes one of the most significant markers of national identity. Numerous eminent scholars, such as Gellner, Hobsbawn and others, dealing with the study of nation and nationalism, underline the role and relevance of culture in the national identity formation.

According to Pool, the nation is a specific cultural object. It exists in and through the language we speak, the public symbols we acknowledge, the history and literature we were taught in school, the music we listen to, the currency we use, the sporting activities we enjoy, and the news bulletins on the television. These cultural artifacts enable us to recognize that our way of life has an objective external existence, and constitute the social environment which we recognize as ours and in which we are "at home" (*Pool*, 1999: 13).

As one of the markers that provide the basis for a national identity formation, culture, at the same time, represents a common denominator of religion and nation.

Social Functions. In Yinger's definition, religion is a system of beliefs and practices through which each group of people fights against the ultimate problems of human life. Religion offers people meaning and purpose for their lives, as well as certain ultimate values that help a society to function as an integrated social system. Durkheim, who was the first sociologist to recognize the significant importance of religion in society, viewed religion as a collective act. He was interested in the social functions of religion - in general, in social integration. According to Durkheim, religion unites people through shared symbolism, values, norms and established rituals.

The exercise of some religious customs, because of someone's profound personal belief or as a part of someone's cultural tradition, is one of the elements that determine the integrative function of the religion within the society:

....*" we might celebrate Christmas because its profound religious significance, or because it represents an important cultural monument in our history, or because it is a good way to affirm our membership of our society or not to attract critical attention (Parekh,* 2000: 148).

Hence, religion, both as an integral segment of culture or as a collective act, provides the sense of belonging towards a particular community.

For Barbara Hargrove, who has also perceived the integrative function of religion, this human phenomenon tends to integrate the cultural, social and personal systems in a consistent whole.

Civil Religion. It is not uncommon for people of various levels of belief to fuse their religious convictions with sate authority, and for the sate authority to come to be seen in people's minds as divinely ordained for some specific purpose. Indeed, this is the purpose of civil religion, and religion is quite often used by political leaders in this way to great effect, as citizens are called upon to serve both "God and country" (*Marsh*, 2007). Even in the democratic, basically secular societies, citizenship has taken on religious qualities: the invocation of God in political speeches, religious gatherings with the presence and participation of political leaders, singing the national anthem and waving the flag at public gatherings and events, the use of founding myths and other national myths etc. In other words, civil religion, by the use of quasireligious commitment, binds individuals in largely secular societies. In their book "*Varieties of Civil Religion*" (1982)*,* Robert Bellah and Phillip Hammond claim that civil religion comes into existence only in modern society, where church and state are separated.

Hence, one should not be surprised by the fact that religion strengthens the sense of national belonging and national unity, both historically and today. It may be that

religion is prone to becoming an important part of a nation's group identity when a particular nation has a historic attachment to a certain religion which is distinct from that of other neighboring nations. For instance, Catholism is an important component of Irish nationalism perhaps because it is a major line of demarcation between Irish and British. Likewise, Catholic Poles stand in contrast to the orthodox of Russia, and their independent identity has been historically stronger than that of other nations which are coreligionists of the Russians, such as the Belarusians, despite the fact that all three nations are Slavic. In this way, religion has also played an important role as a national identifier in the Balkans, not only between Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats, but between the South Slavs in general and the Turks of the Ottoman Empire (*Marsh*, 2007).

1. NATIONAL IDENTITY: CIVIC OR ETHNIC

There is neither a simple nor a unique definition concerning the issue of national identity. This corresponds to the fact that there is neither a simple nor a unique definition of the notion of "identity".

For Anthony Smith (1991: 14), national identity is fundamentally multi-dimensional; it can never be reduced to a single element, even by particular factions of nationalists, nor can be easily or swiftly induced in a population by artificial means:

"…*national' identity involves some sort of political community, however tenuous. A political community in turn implies at least some common institutions and a single code of rights and duties for all the members of the community. It also suggests a definite social space, a fairly well demarcated and bounded territory, with which the members identify and to which they feel they belong"* (*Smith*, 1991: 9).

Nonetheless, Smith mentions some other markers, in particular the so-called "common beliefs" that contribute to the formation of the national identity. They include the idea that nations are territorially bounded units of populations and that they must have their own homeland; that their members share a common mass culture and common historical myths and memories; that members have reciprocal legal rights and duties under a common legal system; and that nations possess a common divisions of labor and system of production with mobility across the territory for members (*Smith*, 1991: 13).

Bearing in mind the relation between religion and the process of formation of the national identities in the Balkans, it is crucial to differentiate the national identities to ethnic or civic ones.

When Hans Kohn initially proposed the distinction between "civic" and 'ethnic" nations he explained it in terms of different patterns of historical development. He argued that Western nations, such as England, France and United States, developed within the boundaries of existing states (hence, they are "territorial" nations), and their national identities were formed in terms of the particular political traditions of the State. On the other hand, Eastern nations, such as those of Germany and Russia, were formed in opposition to existing political structures; hence, their identities were formed in terms of cultural or ethnic patterns, not political ones, and they emphasized natural and organic forms of belonging rather then political ones. Because of their political and cultural inferiority to the advanced Western countries, these nations tended to avoid the unpleasant empirical truths of their own history and rely on mythical conceptions of their past. Or, as Hobsbawm has pointed out, the nineteenth century was a time of "inventing" traditions, it was also a time of "inventing" ethnicities (*Pool,* !999: 41, 42).

Dominique Schnapper comprehends the nation as a specific form of political unit, i.e. a politically organized unit. As it is the case with any other political unit, the nation is also defined by means of its internal sovereignty so as to integrate the populations it encompasses, and by means of its external sovereignty so as to acclaim its position as a historical entity in the world order based on the existence and relations among nations, i.e. the political units. Nonetheless, its singularity lies in the fact that it integrates the populations in one single community of citizens the existence of which legitimates the internal and external functioning of the state (*Schnapper*, 2003: 22).

Hence, defining the nation as a politically organized unit different from the ethnicity, Schnapper makes a clear distinction between these two notions. The ethnicity is perceived as prescribed nature, whereas the nation presupposes existence of a political ground where the differences among population are to be surpassed by way of public debate and law adherence, established on the idea of collective interest. The number is not what differentiates the ethnicity from the nation; it is rather the nature of the relationship that unites people. As opposed to the ethnicity, the nation is regarded artificial, particularly in the non-European countries, the type that in the context and spirit of anthropology, Anderson defines in his book "*Imagined Communities*".

Ultimately, as Ross Pool argues, the difference between "ethnic" or "civic" nations is not a matter of history or geography, but of morality and politics (1991: 42).

2. NATIONAL IDENTITIES FORMATION ON THE BALKANS

For the purpose of perceiving the essence of the national identities formation in the Balkans, i.e. to categorize them either as ethnic or civic ones, we are to go back

to the period of the *Treaty of Karlowitz* (1699)[1], i.e. the period that Jelavich regards as the one when the first movements were initiated for the purpose of segregating the Balkan nations from the imperial religious organization of the Ottoman Empire and to direct them to establishing a national secular character. According to Jelavich, the national uprisings were based on personal initiative, with rather low and insignificant cooperation among the Balkan peoples. Nonetheless, the activities of certain groups shared certain common features. For example, each and every ethnic movement was related to cultural revival, thus encompassing the creation of a standard language and arousing the interest of people for the pre-Ottoman history.

Unwilling to accept substitute for the Ottoman rule, the Balkan ethnic leaderships fought against all external attempts aimed at annexation or domination. Simultaneously, they were greatly tempted by the material and cultural benefits for the European countries. In this respect, despite the fact that the ethnical movements were aimed at revival of the pre-Ottoman political organizations, their leaderships accepted the European political institutions and frequently justified their actions by referring and appealing to the contemporary Western ideologies of liberalism and nationalism (*Jelavich*, 1999).

Within the framework of these ethno-national movements, religion and its institutions played a crucial role, referring also to the movements ongoing on the present territory of the Republic of Macedonia.

Namely, within the framework of the Ottoman Empire and in conformity with its establishment, i.e. the so-called millet system, the Church acquired a novel and ambiguous role thus strengthening its position and gaining in power.

By way of integrating the Orthodox institutions into their system, the Ottoman rule benefited from integrating an overall administrative network. Under its jurisdiction, the Church had already established parishes and sub-parishes based on the number of their congregation in the region. On the Balkan territories there was hierarchy from the lowest-ranking priest all the way to the patriarch. The Church and its representatives were accustomed to work with, and not against the civil authorities. The most significant aspect is that in the ideological context it retained the Christian community almost intact by the period of the national movements (*Jelavich*, 1999: 60, 61).

Apart from its primary role, namely the spiritual one, which it had exercised in the past, the Church was entrusted other competences, too, regarding the management and regulation of the relations of the Christian population in the sphere of its secular existence: namely, the jurisdiction, administration, tax collection and

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1) The provisions from the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699) had a tremendous impact on the Ottoman rule in the Balkans.

keeping the public order. The Church, as a minister of the Christian population, through its activism and participation in different bodies in conformity with the hierarchical structure, was involved in the Empire governance. Hence, in addition to the spiritual, it performed secular functions concerning the existence and life of the Christian population. In this context, to a certain extent it acted as an individual political unit.

The Church had an additional exceptionally significant function – the function of Enlightenment – which in the consequent period played a crucial role in the process of national perception and formation of the national identity.

The nineteenth century marks a pronounced interest in education on the part of the Christian population. The Church assumed the role of an educational institution and commenced its role of Enlightenment, i.e. commenced providing secular education. Consequently, this led to strengthening its role in the capacity of a coordinator regarding the movements for formation of the national identities. In this sense, the churches would more assume the role of national institutions thus participating in the new activities of the national states that were either constituted or were being in the process of constitution. In the Christianity areas they initiated their role as the first echelon of newly established Balkan states with imperialistic ambitions (*Tasheva*, 1998:47).

Henry Brailsford, an English missionary, publicist and writer, who arrived in Macedonian prior to the Ilinden uprising in the year 1903, writes about the passionate affiliation of the Macedonian believers and worshippers to their respective Church and the huge role it played in the process of formation of the national identity:

"The Macedonian believer remained loyal and devoted not only due to the traditional belief in its principles, but more because its casting off imposed denial of one's own nationality and betrayal of the cause of one's own nation. Basically the Church is a national organization. Hence, the Church paid the inevitable price. To a certain extent it became secularized and its spiritual functions deteriorated. The mission was more patriotic than spiritual" - wrote Brailsford in his travelogue entitled *"Macedonia: its Races and their Future"* (1906).

Unlike the case with the Catholics, the Orthodox people were allowed to establish national churches, i.e. to embed their national identity in the churches. In this respect, the national church played the role of an identifier of the collective/national belonging and was the pillar of the nation's identity.[2]

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2) In this context the role of the Macedonian Orthodox Church is to be considered, as well as its efforts aimed at recognition of its autocephaly, having in mind the aspirations and rebuttals by our Orthodox neighbors that have also based their respective national identities on the existence of a national church. Hence, the conclusion that may be drawn is that each and every rebuttal and non-recognition of the existence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church implies denial and rebuttal of the Macedonian national identity.

Almost identical was the role of the Islamic community, as well as the functions (spiritual and secular) performed by its institutions. Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the Islamic institutions established close correlation and were in unity with the newly established countries in the Balkans. On the other hand, the Islamic community which was one of the pillars of the Theocratic millet system, transformed itself into ethnical Islamic religious communities and assumed the role of preparing the population to face their new position, descending from groups of highest ranking order to marginalized social groups. The very nature of the Islamic religion, namely its powerful collectivism dimension, since the early beginnings enabled these communities to successfully maintain and sustain the cohesion of their groups at a level uncustomary for the Balkans (*Tasheva*, 1998: 47).

For a period of fifty years, i.e. from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire until the establishment of the new socialist system (within the framework of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), the Islamic Religious Community was the only institution where its believers and followers would acquire their education. Hence, it is not surprising the fact that these Islamic religious groups, the members of which were groups with minority status, by encouraging and fostering the collective spirit, affirming the Islamic values and emphasizing the ethnicity, became centers where the ethnic mobilization of the Muslim population commenced.

We may come to the conclusion that during the Ottoman Empire's reign, religion, through its institutions and activities it exercised, genuinely encouraged the ethno-national movements, and simultaneously played a significant role in the preservation and cultivation of the ethnical and cultural identity of the communities that resided and still reside on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia.

4. THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN RELIGION AND ETHNICITY

Religious communities are often closely related to ethnic identities. While the "world religions" sought to overstep, and abolish, ethnic boundaries, most religious communities coincided with ethnic groups. The Armenians, Jews and Monophysite Amhara offer classic instances of this coincidence, as did the Copts before Arab conquest Egypt. The relationship can be even closer. What began as a purely religious community may end up as an exclusive ethnic community (*Smith,* 1991: 6).

The historic experience underlines the fact that provided a relation of religion and ethnicity is established, it leads to their mutual encouragement and fostering. Religion fosters ethnicity and vice versa. Ethnicity pronounces the feeling of religious affiliation. In this respect, the substantive dimension of religion plays

a more important role. Religion is not just a marker of identity, but rather its symbols, rituals and organizations are used to boost ethnic identity (*Mitchel*, 2006: 1140).

Ethnicity, as a notion, is most frequently used in the definition of a group of people that share common culture and common cultural heritage. Other, no less significant markers such as the language, common territory, history, customs, traditions, sense of common belonging and solidarity, contribute to the further definition of ethnicity. In this context, one must not neglect the fact that religion represents an integral segment of culture. Consequently, religion becomes one of the more significant markers when it comes to the ethnical identity. If culture is comprehended as a range of elements used by the individuals or the group for their own identification, then one may state that the religious symbols and religious buildings are elements serving the groups to recognize and acknowledge their own identity. In this respect, in the event of an interethnic conflict, where the confronting parties have different religious affiliation, the religious buildings are most frequently subject to devastation. However, the devastation of a given church by the Muslims or devastation of a given mosque by the Christians leads to a completely adverse effect due to the fact that it contributes to the fulfillment of the primary function of any religion – spiritualization. Indisputably, the devastation of the religious landmarks reinforces the spiritual symbols. Each and every devastated place of worship on Earth is yet another place of worship in the conscience of people. Thus, the devastation of the buildings of any institutional religion strengthens and boosts one's personal religion, and reinforces the fundamentalism, not only the Islamic one, but the Christian one as well (*Stojkovic*, 2002: 38).

Hence, the relation between religion and ethnicity is to be considered in the context of the events from recent Balkan history, particularly from the aspect of ethno-national movements and inter-ethnic conflicts. [3]

Apparently, in the Balkans ethnicity even today still represents one of the most relevant criteria for national affiliation and belonging. In this respect, the markers that determine the ethnic identity, such as the language, culture, religion, common origin, common myths, customs, etc. are particularly important. Apart from the positive role of the nationalism in the formation of nations and establishment of the contemporary state, the ethno-national movements that do occur in the multi-ethic societies and that are in line with the principle of conformity of the ethnical boundaries with the political ones, imply disintegration of the political entities within the framework of

3) In the course of the 2001 conflict a large number of religious buildings of both ethno-religious confronting parties were devastated in the Republic of Macedonia. These buildings were listed in the register of Macedonian and world cultural heritage and protected in compliance with the Law on Protection of Monuments of Culture.

the broader social system and inevitably lead to interethnic intolerance, and thus likely to transform and escalate into violence. Simultaneously, such movements pose a threat to the safety and stability in the region and beyond. This is illustrated by the ethno-national movements that led to dissolution of Yugoslavia and destabilized the region. The dissolution of Yugoslavia, pursuing the principle of "*one people – one state*" was accompanied by a series of brutal and blood shedding ethnic and religious conflicts which literally marked the last decade of the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

In the course of humankind history, the relation between religion and nation has demonstrated itself to be exceptionally complicated and complex, being both positive and negative at the same time. Religion, through its integrative function, assisted the unification of individuals and groups and played a key role in the creation of a number of nations worldwide, thus securing a high level of national solidarity and social cohesion. On the other hand, one must not ignore the fact that the greater the role of religion in the process of unification of the community is, the greater the intolerance and impatience to the groups and individuals from another religion shall be. Additionally, if the religious differences among the communities are accompanied by ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences, religion may also be a source of conflict. Consequently, historic experience witnessed that when religion is profoundly embedded in any national identity and in case when the religious belonging is equated with the sense of national belonging, the national sentiment grow in intensity and become imminent, with the possibility of escalating into violent conflict.

Unfortunately, even though the political phenomenon known as "nation" is more than 200 years old, the process of formation of nations in the Balkans is not completed yet.[4]

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4) Twenty years since its independence, the Republic of Macedonia still has open issues with the neighboring countries. Namely, the neighboring country to the south denials the constitutional name of the nation and the state. Another neighboring country does not recognize the existence and uniqueness of the Macedonian language. The national Orthodox Church of the neighboring country to the north not only denies the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, but also endeavors to establish its parallel church in the Republic of Macedonia. Since recently, the Republic of Macedonia borders another new sovereign country. As a result of the recognition of Kosovo by the Republic of Macedonia, a historic agreement on demarcation of the border between Macedonia and Kosovo was reached, thus settling an exceptionally bitter territorial issue. These issues that penetrate into the sphere of the identity of nation and state, hinder the accession of Macedonia to international political organization and alliances, thus making the overall Macedonian reality more fragile and even more complex.

Having into consideration the complex geopolitical circumstances in the Balkans derived from the specific geostrategic position of the Balkan Peninsula, the posing of the following question is inevitable: whether do we need any additional fragmentation in terms of ethnic, linguistic or religious aspect in the already fragile existing political entities?

Thus, in the spirit of Renan, we are about to ask ourselves *"Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?"* (What is a Nation), or to be more precise, what kind of nations we would prefer in the Balkans in the twenty-first century. Nations that integrate their citizens by creating a common political ground where the political, cultural, linguistic, religious and social differences shall be surpassed by public debates and observance of the national legislation, i.e. nations based on the idea of collective interest, or, maybe, nations based on the principle of exclusivity, where the membership to a certain nation shall be an exclusive right only to those members of a given community that share the same language, same culture and same religion.

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