

Mark Pegler  
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Mark Pegler

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A Perpetual 'Othering'

Politicization And Misappropriation of Myth and Religion In Kosovo, Serbia And The Western  
Balkans.

Author: Mark Pegler

Supervisor: Professor. Gary Bunt

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## Abstract

This dissertation aims to analyse and assess the use, misappropriation and politicization of religion and mythology in Republic of Serbia, Kosovo and the Western Balkans. Exploring the relative term and relationship of religious-nationhood, this essay briefly examines the fractious historical and contemporary interactions between Christian (Orthodox) and Islamic communities within the region and their impact and influence over time. This work will demonstrate how, in order to drive a perpetual 'othering' of each community, fragile state structures use a false hermeneutics, misusing ethno-symbolism, myth, identity, culture and religion within the region as an influencer of many individual and group decisions concerning assimilation versus annihilation (in the extreme). This essay will explore the historical influence of certain epochs, notably *Pax Ottomana* and more recently, post-communist secularization, with a focus on historical characters; 'heroes or anti-heroes' (notably Skanderbeg of Albania and Prince Lazar of Serbia), and the capture and ultimate misuse of myth surrounding their presence and provenance. Together with discussion on more contemporary arguments concerning traditional and more nuanced forms of Islam, the paucity of interreligious dialogue and detachment of religious observation at the expense of an aspired European identity on both sides of the religious and ethnic divide, the essay's core argument is that a practice of religious and ethnic 'othering', through misuse and deliberate politically motivated false interpretation of myth, ethno-religious symbolism, emblems and ceremonies, embodies a collective long-suffering for statehood and almost continuous victimization.

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**A note on language, names and pronunciation:**

I have followed the example of Malcolm, N (1998)<sup>1</sup> in that this essay will use the 'modern' (post 1945 'autonomous province') form of Kosovo throughout, as it is the most common form used in English language publications when naming the territory. In my work Kosovo refers to all of the geographical territory (the so called Kosovo and Metohija). The essay deliberately steers away from using the oft confusing 'Kosova' for one half of the territory (Alb) and/or 'Metohija' for the other (Srb). For the most part, the terms Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians are also used throughout, but occasionally and dependent on context, I have employed the term Kosovar- which is liberally used as a form of ethno-identity among Kosovar Albanians in that part of the territory. In terms of place names and translations of epic poetry, I have used (mainly in the footnotes) abbreviations to indicate the (original) language in each case: Alb (Albanian), Srb (Serbian) and Trk (Turkish). In exploring my dissertation I encountered various interpretations of the Karbala 'myth' concerning the defeat and martyrdom of Husyan in 680, an act considered as a cornerstone of Shi'ism. Various authors use the place term, Karbala, Kerbela, Kerbala, or even Qerbelaja. My dissertation uses the Western interpretation for the most part, Karbala, but where it is cited by other authors as Kerbala/Qerbelaja for instance, I have included that interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup> Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo A Short History*. (London: MacMillan, 1998), pp. xi-xiv.

## Introduction.

If a person were to stand on the bridge overlooking the divided city of Mitrovica in Kosovo, then when facing North they would not only be looking at the drab tower blocks of the post-socialist ex-Republic of Yugoslavia, but also a view which includes the Serbian Orthodox Church of St Dimitris with its tell-tale symbolic cross, comprising four distinct 'fire striker' shapes or Cyrillic letters said to depict Samo, Sloga, Srbina and Spasava ('only unity saves the Serbs').<sup>2</sup> Walking further across the bridge into the Serbian side while listening to the church bells that tell you that you are residing within a Christian region, the observer would encounter banners, flags and icons that leave a person in little doubt that this small enclave of Kosovo is anything but 'independent'. Signs 'welcoming you to Serbia' in English and Cyrillic, announce that you are entering 'Kosovo and Metohija', (from the Byzantine Greek meaning 'monastic estate'). In the eyes of most Serbs, Kosovo is a place that stands as part of the Republic of Serbia as much as any of the cities of that country do.<sup>3</sup>

The observer would, in all probability, at first notice the Serbian national flag draped across buildings and bill boards, pictures of the current Serbian Prime Minister, of Novak Djokovic the world renown Serbian tennis player, perhaps an image or two of Vladimir Putin a supporter of Serbia, and one who uses the 'Kosovo Question', to embolden his own country's annexation of Crimea (although currently due to the war in Ukraine the image is a probably a little less conspicuous than before).<sup>4</sup> Together with images of 'Knuz' Prince Lazar a mythical figure who for the past 600+ years has become the standard bearer of the 'Kosovo Myth', a myth which perpetuates the story of martyrdom, of a victimised Serbia, of a nation as blessed by God and Holiness, as it is bedevilled by corrupt politics, identity issues, territorial disputes and religious fervour, (See pages 19-21). A nation seemingly routed in an intractable sense of deep seated anger, frustration and at times hatred, that continues to scar relations between the Serbs, their Orthodoxy and 'The Other'.

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<sup>2</sup> John Bills, *The Serbian Cross: The History of Serbia's National Symbol*. (2018) Available on line at <<https://www.theculturetrip.com/europe/serbia>> [accessed 25 May 2023].

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm, *Kosovo A Short History*, P.3.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the 'Kosovo Question' see; Adam Balcer, 'Kosovo- The Question Of Final Status', *European Sources*, 10 August 2003. Available on line at <<https://www.europeansources.info/record/kosovo-the-question-of-final-status/>> [accessed 24 January 2023] .

And what of: 'The Other'?

When looking South from the same bridge a person sees an entirely different picture. One where minarets occupy the skyline, where the Turkish - Ottoman legacy is very much in evidence, from street cafes with a traditional eastern flavour, to the sound of the Imam calling the people to prayer; where a flag representing the double headed eagle (of Albania) flies next to the Kosovo 'independence' flag, itself loosely modelled on the EU standard. Here the images one sees are also of politicians. Pictures of ex United States President, Bill Clinton, and ex United Kingdom Prime Minister, Tony Blair, stare out from faded posters alongside local statesmen, who with names like Berisha, Thaci, Rugova, express eastern lineages that while remaining secular, are far removed from the Cyrillic language encountered just 200 meters away on the other side of the bridge.

If the casual observer walked a little further into the 'Albanian' side, they would notice streets named after those once fêted Western leaders and, as if in direct opposition to the image of Lazar, images of an Albanian 'hero' Skanderbeg, who for many on the Kosovo Albanian side of the Ibar river typifies the martyrdom of a new nation, a reborn nation. A nation which although struggling with its own nascent identity, could not be more different from that depicted on the 'other' side of the divide. A divide which in order to cross, the observer would have to first navigate past the permanently stationed armed peacekeeping force deployed on the bridge by the United Nations, this in order to keep the peace of the one from 'The Other'. <sup>5</sup>

The bridge across the Ibar tells a story of mistrust and othering, of one religious worldview pitted against another, as much alive today as it has been since the Orthodox Serbs were defeated by the Muslim Ottomans in a field of blackbirds near to the current capital of Kosovo, Pristina in 1389 and where the 'Kosovo Myth' was born. It is from that point that for the past 600+ years, myth, cultural identity, religiosity, the political presentation of false narratives and mistrust have contributed and still contribute to a 'perpetual othering'.

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the peacekeeping mission, see UNMIK, *United Nations Interim Administration Mission In Kosovo* (2023). < <https://unmik.unmissions.org> > [accessed 17 May 2023].

Using my own experience of being stationed in Kosovo for four years (2011-2015), as part of an European Union Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) and through research of various academic and generalist book titles, academic journals, documentaries and other media , my dissertation will explore the politicization of religion and mythology, its impact and influence on the fractious historical and contemporary interactions between Christian (both Orthodox and Catholic) and Islamic communities within the context of modern day Serbia, autonomous and 'independent' Kosovo and the Western Balkans.<sup>6</sup>

### **Methodology:**

Many times I have crossed the bridge in Mitrovica mentioned in my introduction. I have seen first-hand the cleavage of societies wrought by the politicisation of religion and myth when used to galvanise a population to the point of hatred, loathing and murder. From 2011- 2015, I spent four years in Kosovo working on the EU Rule of Law Mission on the 'de facto' disputed border and boundary between Kosovo/Serbia, together within the area of the more contentious Kosovo Metohija. I witnessed first-hand the divide between the two protagonists who until the present day do not address each other as Kosovo or Serbia, but as the parties from Belgrade and Pristina.

I was therefore minded to provide an academic study of the cultural and religious divide between the two communities to argue that religion; myth and nationhood have become so misappropriated by politics, that the contentious issue of division within one territory of the Western Balkans, an 'independent' Kosovo, seems intractable.

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<sup>6</sup> For more on EULEX see, *EU Rule Of Law Mission In Kosovo*, (2023), <<https://www.eulex-kosovo.eu>> [accessed 12 April 2023].

I argue that as well as external 'othering' between the worldviews, there is an element of internal 'othering' and division within the two traditions, particularly since the end of the Kosovo war (1999). My work will also discuss the latest 'othering' of a state led 'detachment' of religious piety in favour of the ever prized goal of EU membership.<sup>7</sup>

I am motivated to write this piece, because it is more than six centuries since the 'Kosovo Myth' took centre stage within the Serbian psyche and acted as a pre-cursor to an almost constant factor of victimization among the 'chosen' people of Serbia. Peoples who have often used a messianic approach buoyed through their Orthodoxy, to perpetuate a view that they are a Holy nation, a bulwark of Christianity against the Albanian, Islamic 'other', who in turn similarly use myth and their interpretation of Islamic historiography to embolden their own position. My focus and academic position centres on the politicization of the relationship between religion and myth becoming a fault line between statehood and religious nationalism, where history, mythology, religious tradition and false dawns of inter-religious dialogue have been usurped and combined into a religious- nationalist amalgamation of intransience. Where folk epics and myth are raised to a level of artificial truth and where the 'others' worldview gets blamed for all ills in society. I have no religious bias in favour of one side or the other. I am concerned only with the usurping of religion and ethno-mythology that purports to be a narrative of truth, when in reality it is largely a false account, open to interpretation and abuse.

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Püttmann, 'Imagining Islam in Kosovo - The Social Construction Of The Kosovar Muslim Subject Among European Political Actors', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20:2, (2020), 307-325,( p.323-325) <DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2020.1778984> .

My work is influenced by the following theoretical perspectives (among others), concerning religiosity and identity: Michael Sells, (2002), who posits concerning the 'construction of Islam in Serbian religious mythology and its consequences related to othering'.<sup>8</sup> This alongside a comparable offering from Mulaosmanović, (2018), associated with Muslims in the context of a 'Greater Serbian Identity'<sup>9</sup> and Duijzings, (2000), work on religion, politics and identity in Kosovo.<sup>10</sup> A fuller analysis of all three works is contained in the literary review section of this dissertation. Also worthy of note (and included in the literary review), are both Püttmann's views on the securitization of 'extremist' Islam observance in Kosovo (2020)<sup>11</sup> and Saggau's (2019), thesis on the Serbian Orthodox Church perception of Kosovo, post 1999.<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of my dissertation and its main research question focuses on identification, analysis, causation and implications of the never ending 'othering' among the communities of modern day 'independent' Kosovo and of the Western Balkans and the lack of will to meet each other, even half way. My work theorises and explores the rendering of a status quo of inability and partial unwillingness to move on from an historical past that has captured and divided a population for more than 600 years. It is a study of politically motivated religious ideology and myth used to legitimise othering, hatred and war. One of religion being used to further political and nationalistic tendencies as an ideology based on Said's 'Orientalism', as referred to by Aleksov, 2005, where negative stereotyping is to the fore.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Michael A. Sells, 'The Construction Of Islam In Serbian Religious Mythology And Its Consequences', in *Islam And Bosnia Conflict Resolution And Foreign Policy In Multi Ethnic States*, ed.by Maya Shatzmiller (Ontario: McGill- Queens University Press, 2002), pp. 57-82. (p.65-66).

<sup>9</sup> Admir Mulaosmanović, 'Islam And Muslims In Greater Serbian Ideology: The Origins Of An Antagonism And The Misuse of the Past', *Journal Of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 39:3, (2019), 300-316 <DOI. 10.1080/13602004.2019.1652408>.

<sup>10</sup> Ger Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, (London: Hurst and Co, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Püttmann, 'Imagining Islam in Kosovo'. p.324.

<sup>12</sup> Emil Hilton Saggau, 'Kosovo Crucified—Narratives In The Contemporary Serbian Orthodox Perception Of Kosovo', *Department for Church History, University of Copenhagen, 2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark*, (2019), 1-16. <<https://www.mdpi.com>> [accessed 04 March 2023].

<sup>13</sup> Bojan Aleksov, Perceptions of Islamization In The Serbian National Discourse (2005). *Southeast European And Black Sea Studies*, 5.1(2005), 118-125 (p.121) <DOI:10.1080/1468385042000328394 >.

It is not a study of inter religious dialogue, or if it is, then it is one of failure on behalf of both the Christian Orthodox and to a lesser extent Catholic tradition and of Islam, be that Sunni, Shi'ia, Sufi, or Wahhabi. Ultimately it is a study of intransience.

In my analysis of the perpetual 'othering' between the two worldviews, Orthodox/ Islam, Serbian/Albanian, Kosovo/Metohija, I have focused my research observations and analysis toward the central question of how far religion and myth are intertwined, politicised , captured, used and abused and to what extent this causes ever perpetuating mistrust and hatred. Most of my research is taken from published works across the spectrum of the heavily politicised religious divide, with emphasis on the mythical influences toward Kosovo and the Western Balkans.

Contemporary accounts of religious-nationhood in Kosovo tend to curtail around the time of the cessation of hostilities post 1999; however there are various journal articles which posit theoretical discussion concerning the introduction of Wahhabism during reconstruction of a post-war Kosovo through aid provided by the Gulf States.<sup>14</sup> This together with journal articles relating to a softening of the approach of the Serbian Orthodox Church, whilst still pressing their case for recognition of their Holy sites in Kosovo and articles pondering as yet an unfulfilled 'Greater Serbian ideology'.<sup>15</sup> My research into this area includes updates (not only academic journals) on events post 1999, a period when Kosovo gained a partially recognised independence (2008) and more recently the perceived suppression of extreme religious piety by politicians in both Serbia and Kosovo, where the 'prize' of EU membership often outweighs the argument for fervent religious observation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Further research into the effects of Wahhabism in Kosovo since 1999 are potentially interesting given shifting perceptions of traditional v modern (Salafi) Islamic observance, this particularly in light of the large number of 'recruits' that left Kosovo to join Islamic State In the Levant (ISIL) in the mid 2000's. See Carlotta, Gall. 'How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS', *New York Times*, 21 May 2016 .Available online at < <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html>> [accessed 04 April 2023].

<sup>15</sup> Mulaosmanović, 'Islam And Muslims In Greater Serbian Ideology', p.301.

<sup>16</sup> Püttmann, 'Imagining Islam in Kosovo', 307-325.

As I have further researched this work, a question that has arisen has been the lack of progress on the part of either tradition to try and bridge the gap. Despite Kosovo and other ex-Yugoslav nations obtaining and affirming 'independence', the religious and ethnic divide is maintained, if not actually strengthened. Inter-religious dialogue has so far failed to answer 'The Kosovo Question'.<sup>17</sup>

Given the history, it is perhaps obvious to see why ethno-centric identity religion and myth have supported and continue to support a narrative of division and othering. My assertion is that ethno-symbolism and mythology are misappropriated by the state with help from religious benefactors/ actors as a causation of 'othering' (and worse), resulting in either a shift of identity (assimilation), or conflict (annihilation). My research in to this area together with personal experience of the tension and 'othering' that continues to exist due to the ever present cultural, ethnic and identity cleavage, writ large when standing astride the bridge across the Ibar in the divided city of Mitrovica, leads to a position where it is difficult to vision a more positive outcome.

## Background

In a journal article entitled 'Myth, Ritual and the Early Development of Shiite Identity', Hylen defines "myth" as a 'narrative that is foundational to the world view and identity of a group of people'.<sup>18</sup> He enhances his definition with a quote from McCutcheon (2000), who posits that 'mythmaking is an active, natural process, a construct which authorises and reconstructs identities and social formations'.<sup>19</sup> Hylen proceeds to introduce 'ritual' into the argument exploring how ritual and myth combine to become mutually re enforcing, changing over time often in a re interpretation of the telling. For Hylen, ritual internalises and habitualises myth and in turn myth interprets and provides meaning to ritual, thus sustaining group identity.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See note 4 page 6 of this dissertation.

<sup>18</sup> Torsten Hylen, Myth , Ritual, And The Early Development Of Shiite Identity *Intellectual History Of The Islamicate World*, 6, (2018), 300–331. Available online at <<https://Brill.com/ihw>> [accessed 15/05/2023] .

<sup>19</sup> Hylen, 'Myth, Ritual, And The Early Development of Shiite Identity', p.301.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.301.

Exploring religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo, Duijzings posits that the characters popularized by myth through ritual cause disorder when related directly to historical truth. Citing Evans-Pritchard, he notes that 'myth is not concerned with the succession of events, but with the moral and symbolic significance of situation where myths tend to be timeless, bringing the distant past into the present'.<sup>21</sup> The ritual politicising of the Kosovo myth has lasted for more than 600 years. It is central to notions of populism intertwined and often usurped by religious-nationalism, which, based on an 'artificial truth', results in the permanent 'othering' of identities of different groups.<sup>22</sup>

### **The historical and mythical argument**

Myth a definition; a reality lived; an event believed by some to have once happened which continues to have influence today.<sup>23</sup>

In his article 'Kosovo Crucified', Emil Saggue discusses contemporary narratives of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its perception of Kosovo. Citing Kolsto, Saggue describes four types of myth that play a role in identity creation; 'sui genaris; antiquas; martyrdom and Antemurale'.<sup>24</sup> Saggue describes how the first two relate to people and/or how a nation was created- sui genaris, representing the cultural genealogy and antiquitas, the notion that an ethnic group or people had always been inhabitants of a certain place. Martyrdom features as the myth of suffering oppression, while Antemurale is descriptive of persons or groups as defenders on the frontline acting as a bulwark for the greater whole.<sup>25</sup> In citing Housley, he describes the 'function and signs' of the Antemurale myth, positing that the 'Antemurale myth is more commonly known as a bulwark myth', essentially built on an Old Testament image of a covenant entitling people to 'Holy soil'.

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<sup>21</sup> Duijzings, *'Religion And The Politics of Identity in Kosovo'*, p.193.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.p.195.

<sup>23</sup> Strenski Ivan, *Malinowski And The Work Of Myth*. (Princeton: University Press, 2019), p.118.

<sup>24</sup> Saggue. 'Kosovo Crucified'. p.2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p.5.

The myth's main function is to 'create an identity and entitlement in which defenders of a 'wall' (murale) are seen as crusaders, whose actions mirror that of Christ's own salvation'.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Karbala Myth.**

Although the majority of Kosovo Muslims identify as Sunni, there are a number of resident Bektashi orders, a form of Shi'a Sufism.<sup>27</sup> The Bektashi follow devotion to Ali, the Prophet Mohammad's cousin and to his son Husayn. Ali, although elected as the fourth caliph, was eventually assassinated by the Umayyad clan under the reign of Yazid. In a subsequent revolt against Yazid's rule, Husayn found himself surrounded in the desert near Karbala in 680 C.E.

In refusing to give up the fight, much like the Orthodox (saintly) Lazar and his death in battle against the Ottoman invaders some centuries later, Husayn was 'martyred'. Duijzings notes the significance of this, positing that 'Husayn's legacy and martyrdom at the hands of the enemy became the cornerstone of Shi'ism'.<sup>28</sup> Hylen theorizes that the events at Karbala and the cult built up around Husayn; elevate the account of a battle to a myth with its associated rituals. Hylen depicts the myth and ritual surrounding Husayn as a 'process of transformation from that of someone merely human (albeit the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad), to someone that transcends the human'.<sup>29</sup> Much like Duijzings, Hylen concludes that the myth and story of Husayn's death at Karbala combine to define a specific group (Shi'ism) in an emerging Islam.

Facing oppression and subjugation from the Ottoman In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Albanian national poet Naim Frashëri (1846-1900), used the Myth of Karbala in an attempt to insert religion into the Albanian national ideology, which unlike that of Serbia had not seen hitherto an advent of religious nationalism.

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<sup>26</sup> Saggue, p.6.

<sup>27</sup> Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, p.121.

<sup>28</sup> Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, p.122.

<sup>29</sup> For a full description of the Myth of Karbala, see Torsten Hylen, (2018) Myth, Ritual, And The Early Development Of Shiite Identity. *History Of The Islamicate World* 6 (2018) 300–331. Available online at <<https://brill.com/ihw>> [accessed 15 May2023].

Using Bektashi symbols and ritual as part of the national discourse, Duijzings posits that 'Frasheri promoted the Karbala myth to inspire Albanians in the struggle against the Ottoman Empire' further noting that 'in his Kerbala epic Frasheri exalts the Albanians to rise as a nation and revere the heroes of Kerbala'.<sup>30</sup>

Come closer Albanians  
Mourn his death  
Do not let Albania fall  
For the sake of Husayn  
Remember Kerbela!<sup>31</sup>

As the Bektashi order was in a much weaker position than the Serbian Orthodox Church in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Albania, Frasheri ultimately failed to convince Albanians to rise up against the Ottoman.<sup>32</sup> Yet the myth provided a 'history' of revolt against a perceived Sunni Islam domination resulting in a form of Shi'ia Islam practiced by the Bektashi orders and further afield among Shi'ia devotees (Republic of Iran), identified as the 'Karbala paradigm', a doctrine which holds the battle of Karbala in high regard symbolizing the idea of a 'community of sufferers'.<sup>33</sup> Duijzings therefore focuses on the rise in the Bektashi dervish orders just prior to the Kosovo war of 1999, where Bektashi elders struggled against what they saw as a corrupted Islamic establishment within Kosovo coupled with the struggle for autonomy within the Yugoslav state apparatus who saw them as 'primitive and illiterate' Albanians, thus invoking an image of an oppressed religious community and highlighting their profound 'otherness'.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, p.122.

<sup>31</sup> (Alb). Translation by Vjollca Henci, in, Duijzings, 'The Bektashi Response', *Religion And Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, p.173.

<sup>32</sup> Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, p.174.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. P.123.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. P.127.

Two main historical characters symbolize historical influence in today's contemporary interactions between the Islamic and Orthodox Christian communities in Kosovo, the wider Balkan region and the myths surrounding them. Skanderbeg (Gerji Kastrioti) and the Serbian cult like figure that was Prince (Kunz) Lazar, latterly beatified by the Serbian Orthodox Church as Saint Lazar. When taken on their own, the myths are seen much like any other, as a source of interpreted history, not necessarily factual, but a story which manipulates and romanticizes subjects into heroes. In the context of Kosovo and in citing Denich, Duijzings posits that this manipulation may result in 'people thinking and acting according to the polity of the day, often leading to a collective violence that would have at one time been unthinkable'.<sup>35</sup>

### **The 'Myth' of Skanderbeg**

The 15<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman conquest of Albania resulted in the partial Islamization of a country which at that time, held no particular strong religious conviction other than in an effort to preserve title to family land through currying favour and support from either Christians in Venice or Orthodox Serbs. That being so, in an effort to save family land during the Ottoman invasion a young Gjergj Kastrioti (1405-1468), was sent by his father, himself a feudal lord of the region, as a tribute to the Ottoman Sultan Murad II (1404-1451), under a system known as 'devshirme', namely the conscription of boys into military academy and conversion to Islam.<sup>36</sup>

Young Kastrioti's initial presence in Turkey and his conversion to Islam earned the trust of the Sultan who named him Iskander after Alexander the Great and rewarded his excellence at the academy with an army command and the title 'Beg', hence the name Skanderbeg .

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<sup>35</sup> Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, p.193-194.

<sup>36</sup> 'Devshirme Ottoman Government', in *The Brill Encyclopedia Of Islam*, [online], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

<[https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/search?s.f.s2\\_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&search-go=&s.q=devshirme](https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/search?s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&search-go=&s.q=devshirme)> [ accessed 08 May 2023].

Despite his son being a commander in the Ottoman army, Kastrioti's father feared the ever present threat of Ottoman subjugation. Seeking assistance from Venice, he led a failed revolt against the Sultan's occupying forces in 1430, resulting in the loss of most of his land and a pauper's death in 1437.<sup>37</sup> Citing Noli and Treptow, Kabashi opines that Skanderbeg was 'deeply shaken by the news of his father's death'. With little loyalty left for the Sultan and the lands of his birth right under Ottoman rule, Skanderbeg deserted the Turkish forces at the battle of Nis in 1443, leading his men (mainly Albanians), to his homeland. Abandoning Islam, he reverted to Christianity, in so doing ordering others who had embraced Islam to convert/revert to Christianity.<sup>38</sup>

In recognition of the importance of Skanderbeg's re-embracing of Christianity and his turning away from Islam, Ramat posits:

This conversion was not merely a public gesture of defiance. It was the first act in a revolutionary drama. For, after changing his religious allegiance, Skanderbeg demanded that Muslim colonists and converts alike embrace Christianity on pain of death, declaring a kind of Holy war against The Sultan.<sup>39</sup>

Removed from his senior post as an Ottoman leader, an important feature of Skanderbeg's consolidation of power in Albania was in part due to the help and financial assistance he received from the Vatican. Kastrioti realized that outward practice of Christianity was a key element in garnering Christian support to fight the Ottomans and regain his possessions. Recognized as an important commander against the infidel, his religious behaviour did not go unnoticed. Appointed Captain General of the Holy See, Pope Calixtus III referred to Skanderbeg as 'Christ's Athlete'.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Artamida Kabashi, *The Memory Of George Castriota Scanderbeg, Among The Arberesh Of Italy: A Study On The Role Of Diaspora In The Creation Of Albanian National Identity*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, Texas Tech University, 2004). < <https://ttu-ir.tdl.org/bitstream/handle/2346/15436/thesis.pdf?sequence=1> > [accessed 15 May 2023].

<sup>38</sup> Kabashi, *The Memory Of George Castriota Scanderbeg*, p.11.

<sup>39</sup> Sabrina P Ramet, 'Albania's Triple Heritage', in *Nihil Obstat: Religion, Politics, And Social Change In East-Central Europe And Russia*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 202-258, (p.211).

<sup>40</sup> Kabashi, *The Memory Of George Castriota Scanderbeg*, p.17.

Skanderbeg's legacy as a conqueror of the infidels lived on after his death, but by the late 18th century although not traditionally given to religious coalescence, Islam became the dominant faith in Albania. With Christian enclaves in existence, skirmishes continued until in removing all traces of religion, Albania became a model communist dictatorship under Enver Hoxha. Yet even Hoxha recognized the myth of Skanderbeg and his importance to the Albanian people having a monument erected in his honour. With the end of the Hoxha dictatorship, the myth of Skanderbeg continued under a nationalist cause which transformed him into an Albanian hero, signifying the sacrifice of the Albanian people in defence of their lands against the Asiatic hordes.<sup>41</sup>

During the 1980's, before the rupture of Yugoslavia and the Kosovo war, Milosavljević notes that ironically the Serbian Orthodox Church also laid claim to the Myth of Skanderbeg. Giving him greater prominence as a direct descendent of Ivan Kastrioti (his grandfather), also known as the Serbian horseman of Albania insisting that contemporary Serbian writers promulgated the argument that Skanderbeg was of Serbian descent, ruling Northern Albanian lands inhabited by Serbs'.<sup>42</sup> Milosavljević notes however, that Dordević eschewed this, reflecting that; 'It is actually quite embarrassing (for Serbs), that we must claim this sole Albanian hero, for in our six-century long struggle we have gained so many heroes, that we could have done without this one!'<sup>43</sup>

In the 1990's Albanian intellectuals began pushing the Christian component of Skanderbeg's resistance into the background. The myth became ingratiated in the psyche of the ethnic Albanian community resident in Kosovo as the struggles of a man mirrored in a 'Greater Albania', albeit not from a religious (Muslim) standpoint.

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<sup>41</sup> Michael Goodyear, 'Skanderbeg: Fountain of Albanian National Memory'. *Balkanum Blog*, 26 January 2017. Available on line at <<https://balkanumblog.wordpress.com/2017/01/26/skanderbeg-fountain-of-albanian-national-memory>> [accessed 15 June 2023].

<sup>42</sup> Olivera Milosavljević, 'Skanderbeg Was A Serb, Or How Serb National Identity Constructed The Image Of The Albanian As The Enemy', *Pešćanik*, October 2015, 1-6 (p.2), < <https://pescanik.net/skanderbeg-was-a-serb/> > [accessed 03 June 2023].

<sup>43</sup> Milosavljević, 'Skanderbeg Was A Serb', p.4

Duijzings claims that religion was never that important in terms of Albanian nationalist ideology as Albanians had never united behind one faith. Duijzings sees Language as the main marker of their national identity and for this reason Skanderbeg becomes sufficiently ambiguous or undetermined in a religious sense and therefore acceptable to all.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Kosovo Myth: Prince (Saint) Lazar**

To understand the historical and contemporary tensions of the 'Grand Serbian Narrative' and the hostilities between ethnic and religious worldviews within the region is to understand the 'Kosovo Myth'.<sup>45</sup> 'A myth with a status unlike anything else in Serbian history'.<sup>46</sup>

Bieber posits that the myth is actually a series of interrelated narratives, the first of which concerns the creation of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and its formation in the late 1100's within a medieval Kingdom which today sits uncomfortably on the fault line of a (de facto) 'border' between Kosovo and Serbia.<sup>47</sup> This Serbian realm was centred in the town of Raska, as well as being close to the last resting place (Ravanica monastery) of the main protagonist of the myth, Prince Lazar Hrebeljanovic. Often referred to as the 'Serbian Holy root', the Kingdom and hence the Orthodox Church, ruled over swathes of land that encompass much of today's 'independent' Kosovo.<sup>48</sup> Within that land sits a series of monasteries including the current patriarchal seat of the Serbian Orthodox Church just outside the town of Pec/Peja, which Saggau refers to as, 'The Holy cradle of the Serbian people'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Duijzings. *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, p.159.

<sup>45</sup> Tatjana Marković, 'Idiosyncrasies Of The Grand Narratives On Serbian National Identity', *Kakanien Revisited Blog*, 5 April 2007, <<https://www.kakanien-revisited.at/beitr/emerg/TMarkovic1.pdf>> [accessed 23 June 2023].

<sup>46</sup> Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo A Short History*, p.80.

<sup>47</sup> Florian Bieber, 'Nationalist Mobilization And Stories Of Serb Suffering: The Kosovo Myth From 600<sup>th</sup> Anniversary To Present', *Rethinking History*, 6:1 (2011), 95-110, (p.104) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/136425200110112137>> .

<sup>48</sup> Duijzings. *Religion And The Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, p.192.

<sup>49</sup> Saggau, 'Kosovo Crucified', p.16.

In the battle of Kosovo Polje (1389), Lazar fought and died trying to defend Serbian soil from an invading Ottoman army and along with Miloš Obilić another Serbian epic hero of the battle who the myth determines as the slayer of the Ottoman Sultan, remain the centre piece of the Kosovo myth.

Epic folk tales have kept the myth alive over the centuries, not least of which the collective works by Vuk Karadžić (1787-1864). Karadžić effectively canonised the Kosovo myth preserving it as a cornerstone to Serbian national ideology. Karadžić used the notion of suffering in many popular folk songs to highlight the covenant of a Serbian Heavenly Kingdom against a backdrop of defeat to the Turks (Muslims). Duijzings posits that as part of Karadžić collection of epic folk songs, *The Fall of The Serbian Empire* (1816) where Lazar faces a choice of death and Heavenly power in the knowledge that he will lose the battle, remains central to the notion of suffering within Serbian national identity.<sup>50</sup>

Oh Tsar Lazar, Prince of righteous lineage,  
Which of the two kingdoms will you embrace?  
Will you chose a heavenly kingdom, or an earthly one here?  
If here and now you chose an earthly Kingdom,  
Saddle horses and launch you then an assault against the Turks  
If instead, you choose a heavenly Kingdom,  
Then you must build a church at Kosovo.  
And call the Serbian patriarch;  
And beside him twelve great Serbian bishops,  
Who together with the whole Serbian army,  
Come to take communion before the Holy battle.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Duijzings. *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, p.185.

<sup>51</sup> (Srb) Translation, Arsenijević, Holton and Mihailovich, in Duijzings. *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, p. 186.

Central to the myth, Duijzings views this communion as a 'last supper' of 12 Serbian noblemen, one of whom betrays him to the Ottoman Sultan, echoing that of Christ's betrayal, death and resurrection.<sup>52</sup>

Citing Malcolm (1999), Bieber further posits that this echo of Christ's story is depicted as a 'national myth', with Serbia being founded in Kosovo, representing Christ's birth, then a narrative of a migration of Serbs from Kosovo in the 17th and 18th century portrayed as Christ's death and his resurrection represented as Serbia's eventual conquering of Kosovo during the Balkan wars of 1912.<sup>53</sup>

Citing Evans Pritchard, Duijzings projects the moral significance of myths as 'allegorical, yet symbolic in form where myths tend to be timeless, the distant past as if like yesterday, playing havoc with the historical truth'.<sup>54</sup> The Kosovo epic therefore establishes continuity with the past projecting a fundamental narrative of a collective notion of nationalist boundaries, predicated on a pre-destined 'Holy' future.

Eventually this notion of a powerful myth, which alters somewhat the facts of history, came to be expressed at a time (1989) when Serbian nationalist rhetoric was at a high point due to perceived injustices and a (false) notion of Serbian migration from Kosovo (see page 23), once again threatening the bulwark of Christianity in Europe. Enter Slobodan Milošević 'descending by helicopter onto the field at Kosovo Polje/ Fushë Kosova as if from heaven', to be greeted by adoring Serbs making the sign of the cross before kissing posters adorned with his face and that of the saintly Lazar. Calling on the myth itself, with an 'us against them narrative' appealing to the Serb consciousness, Milošević used the rhetoric of 'battles and quarrels and potential armed conflict'.<sup>55</sup> Duijzings views this as, 'a Serbia reborn, finally able to avenge the defeat and suffering of some six centuries earlier'.<sup>56</sup>

Notions of suffering, victimization, loss and lamentation are therefore central to both the Kosovo and Karbala myths.

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<sup>52</sup> Duijzings. *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, p.186.

<sup>53</sup> Bieber, 'Nationalist Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering', p97.

<sup>54</sup> Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, p193.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.197.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p.198.

Citing Canetti (1962: 143) Duijzings explores this 'religious lament' which Canetti describes as 'the legend, around which they form, of a man or a God like figure who dies unjustly, one where death should not have taken place. By lamenting such loss in a grief beyond all measure, they themselves feel persecuted'.<sup>57</sup>

### **Other historical factors.**

As this work is limited by word count, there is not enough space to write more fully about one of the most imposing and lasting effects of Islam on Kosovo and the Western Balkans, that of life under Ottoman rule, which was cemented following defeat to Ottomans at the second battle of Kosovo in 1448, some seventy years after Lazar died in almost exactly the same spot. Skanderbeg who is today revered among Albanians as a great hero, failed to join the defending army on that occasion, which Malcolm posits as 'the greatest negative military consequence for Skanderbeg and Kosovo, leading to both the end of the medieval Serbian state and two hundred years of subjugation under Ottoman rule'.<sup>58</sup>

Sunni Islamic thought dominated Ottoman philosophical thinking, yet folk mysticism in the form of Sufism was allowed and encouraged by the Ottoman Sultan in relation to his crack troops, the Janissaries, who drawing on elements of Shi'ia Islam, embraced Bektashism (see page 15), a reverence for Ali and the martyrs of Karbala combined with a Christian belief in the Trinity of Allah, Muhammad and Ali.<sup>59</sup> The Ottomans introduced the *millet* system into their conquered Balkan territories, which despite inferiority of a subordinated religious community, instilled a sense of community offering some autonomy among tolerated non-Muslim religious groups.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Duijzings. *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*. p.158.

<sup>58</sup> Malcolm, *Kosovo A Shorty History*, p.89.

<sup>59</sup> Fitzroy Morrissey, *A Short History of Islamic Thought*, (London: Head of Zeus Limited 2021) pp, 74-90.

<sup>60</sup> This term refers to non-Muslim religious communities which designated indirect Ottoman rule through existing church organisations (i.e Orthodoxy).

Duijzings suggests that this system:

Recognized ethnic and religious differences within a hierarchical order, unlike today where any such religious tolerance between Serb and Albanian is at a premium and where the current cleavage of ethnic delineation and division is now defined through the use of religious symbols and customs. <sup>61</sup>

More recently, following World War II and the imposition of Communism in both Albania and Yugoslavia, restrictions were placed by Yugoslav premier Tito on Kosovo Albanians. Observance of Islam was severely curtailed. Qur'anic schools were abolished and Dervish/Bektashi orders outlawed by 1952. <sup>62</sup> Yugoslav authorities 'encouraged' ethnic Albanians to identify themselves as Turks, a general minority term for Muslims and promoted state sponsored emigration of Yugoslav 'Turks' to Turkey. Malcolm posits this as a principle of 'divide and rule' on behalf of the Yugoslav state, suggesting a discrete policy of complete removal of Albanians from Kosovo. <sup>63</sup> For Albanians, the lack of a similar ethno-religious identity to that of Serbia/Yugoslavia (Orthodoxy), together with the suppression of religious observance, resulted in what Duijzings terms as the one true faith of the community, 'Albaniansm'. <sup>64</sup>

Following the fall of Communism in the late 1980's, another impact on identity, culture and ethnic division was the growing influence of secularism. A period which saw the 'autonomous' province of Kosovo fluctuate in fortune in terms of its identity. Although the Yugoslav administration granted some concessions, permission to fly the Albanian flag for example together with provision of Albanian language school textbooks, including some religious (Islamic) texts, the struggle for republic status was never released either under Tito or his predecessors. <sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, pp.96-97.

<sup>62</sup> Malcolm, *Kosovo A Short History*, p. 320.

<sup>63</sup> Malcolm. *Kosovo A Short History*, p. 322.

<sup>64</sup> Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, p.158.

<sup>65</sup> Malcolm. *Kosovo A Short History*, pp. 354-356.

As the vision of a homogenous 'Yugoslavism' receded decentralization gathered pace. Demographic decline among Serbs was noticeable and led to the Orthodox Archimandrite Atanasije Jevtic (1938-2021), declaring in 1984 that 200'000 ethnic Serbs had fled the territory over the previous decade.<sup>66</sup> As a consequence, Milošević seized on the Kosovo question, the resentment among Serbs, who recalling the tragedy of Lazar at the hands of the Ottomans, once again determined that Albanians in Kosovo were making war against Serbs.<sup>67</sup>

It was Milošević who in 1989 standing together with the Serbian Orthodox Patriarch near the sight of Lazars defeat six hundred years earlier, invoked the myth using it for his own political ends by proclaiming that 'every nation has a love which eternally warms its heart, for Serbia it is Kosovo'.<sup>68</sup> From that moment Kosovo's autonomy was reduced to name only, leaving the brooding resentment of 'the other' simmering, until in 1998, it eventually it boiled over into the Kosovo war.

### **Literary review**

One of the major reference works which deals with the complexities of 'othering' through religious identity, epic poetry and mythology in the context of Kosovo, is that of Duijzings (2000), *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*.<sup>69</sup> Duijzings views the concept of identity from a statehood, religious, historical and cultural perspective and overlays his argument in the context of 'modern day' Kosovo. Borrowing the term 'Ethnic Unmixing', Brubaker (1995), Duijzings concentrates his thesis around social and religious difference. Duijzings argument is that eventually 'Ethnic Unmixing' is adopted by the state. In the case of Kosovo this led to the call to arms for Serbians to prosecute a war against the mainly Muslim Albanian majority population within the territory.

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<sup>66</sup> Malcolm, *Kosovo A Short History*, p.329.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p.340.

<sup>68</sup> Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, pp 343-344.

<sup>69</sup> Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*, pp1-218.

Duijzings book is well researched with chapters ranging from the resettlement of Christian (Catholic) Croats in the early 1990's, joint pilgrimages (Orthodox and Muslim), ambiguity and revival of popular Sufism and the polemics of Shi'ite tendencies among the Bektashi and Dervish orders of Kosovo, who increasingly through the late 1980's faced threats from Serbian (Orthodox) nationalists.<sup>70</sup> In relation to the political use of myth, epic prose and culture as a divisive weapon of hatred and othering, Duijzings work partly focuses on Albanian nationalism seen through the eyes of the Bektashi doctrine. As previously mentioned (see pages 14- 15), Albanian national poet Naim Frasheri's contributed to the epic genre in writing 'Qerbelaja' and 'History of Skanderbeg', both published in 1898.

Duijzings promotes a view that despite epic prose capturing the nationalist mood in Albania, Frasheri was ultimately unable to promote Bektashism as a national creed either capable of bridging religious differences between Christianity and Islam, or undermining Ottoman hegemony. The polemics of suffering and victimhood, is riven through the animosity between Serbs and Albanians over time and Duijzings explores these themes by considering the epics of Qerbelaja (Karbala) and Skanderbeg juxtaposed with that of what he terms the 'Kosovo epic', Skanderbeg's failure to ultimately defeat the Ottoman, with that of the defeat of Lazar at the battle of Kosovo in 1389.<sup>71</sup> In a chapter entitled '*The Recent Political Use of the Myth*', Duijzings looks at how the fusing of folk poetics and populist politics culminated in a Serbian understanding of 'victimhood' where Milošević as a new national hero would end the Serbs 'humiliation':<sup>72</sup>

With his appropriation of the myth, Milošević predicated a rallying cry to arms against the Muslim, a cry that was co-opted and blessed by the Serbian Orthodox Church who saw themselves and the Serbian state as a 'Heaven sent' defender of Europe and Christianity against Islam.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> For more on Bektashi orders and association to Shi'a beliefs, see this dissertation, pp. 14-15.

<sup>71</sup> Duijzings. *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*. pp184-185.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p.185.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. pp.196-200.

Duijzings concludes his book in the spring of 1999, a few months before the Kosovo war ended ultimately in the defeat of Serbia and the establishment of an 'independent' Kosovo. Duijzings cites Silber and Little (1993), by highlighting:

A resolution among the population that everything that had befallen the region was someone else's fault as each nation had embraced a separate orthodoxy in which it uniquely claimed to be the victim and not the perpetrator'.<sup>74</sup>

Ultimately Duijzings finds that many of Kosovo's problems are not ethnic in origin, but have been 'ethnicised by politicians',<sup>75</sup> who for easy political gain create a populace deeply suspicious of the 'other', particularly those belonging to a different ethnic and/or religious group.

In his academic title *The Construction of Islam in Serbian Mythology and Its Consequences*, (2002), Islamic scholar Michael Sells explores an ideology that he calls 'Christoslavism', which he describes as 'a revival of nineteenth century ethno-religious conflict fashioned by the actions of modern day militant nationalists appropriating the myth of Kosovo and its epic hero Lazar through a mixture of romantic nationalism and anti-Islamic rhetoric.'<sup>76</sup>

Sells points to a 'collapse of time' at the juncture of the 600 year celebrations of the myth where Slobodan Milošević became slave to expatiations among the Serbian faithful who no longer viewed the event as a re-enactment, but rather something ancient that has become present occurring in the now.<sup>77</sup> Sells posits that Christoslavism was supported by anti-Muslim rhetoric dating back to the epic prose of Bishop Petar Petrovic (Njegoš) (1813-1851), in his writing of the *Mountain Wreath* (1857) which calls for the slaughter of all 'Turkifies and Non-Muslims' within Serbian Orthodox Christian areas of the time.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity IN Kosovo* p.204.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p.205.

<sup>76</sup> Sells, 'The Construction Of Islam In Serbian Religious Mythology And Its Consequences', P.63.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p.64.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p.64.

A theme that was then captured by the leading state sponsored Serbian Academy of Arts (SANU) which in the mid 1980's issued a memorandum (much discredited after the Kosovo war), calling on Serbians to rise up against what Sells describes as the 'false claim' of an Albanian campaign to systematically annihilate Serbian culture. Sells describes the SANU memorandum as:

Being a hostage to fortune, culminating in the symbolic power of the Christ like figure of Lazars' remains being paraded at the 600 year celebrations, portrayed as a Serbian Golgotha, one where the complex symbolic representation became immune to evidence or argument culminating in the myth being used by Milošević, with support from the Serbian Orthodox Church, as an ideology of genocide.<sup>79</sup>

Sells gives thought to, yet ultimately dismisses the argument of author Giselle Littman, who under her pen name Bat Ye'or, takes this theme of Albanian/Islamic domination of Serbian culture in describing 'Dhimmitude' (parasitic absorption) as the 'unchangeable nature of Islam to aggressively parasitically attack all non-Muslim culture'.<sup>80</sup>

Sells touches on the reconstruction of Kosovo following the war in describing the Gulf States (Saudi) led re-construction of Kosovo as:

A venal attack, one not unlike that of Serb nationalist destruction of Kosovo in the 1990's, by an 'institution bent on destruction of Kosovo's Muslim heritage and replacing Sufi influence with (their own), Wahhabism'.<sup>81</sup>

Sells concludes his study of Islam and 'Christoslavism' in the context of Serbian religious mythology positing that, 'the Yugoslav conflict placed Serbs within an ideology of ethno-religious purification, constructed through manipulation of symbolism'.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Sells, 'The Construction Of Islam In Serbian Religious Mythology And Its Consequences'. p. 68.

<sup>80</sup> Sells, p.69.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p.72.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p.71.

Describing the 1990's as a (Serbian) sacred struggle between good and evil, noting how religious mythology with support from the Serbian Orthodox Church shaped the image of the Muslim 'other' as inferior and a threat to Serbia, Temoney explores the notion of a, 'religion and genocide nexus of a Holy nation suffering for divine truth and justice which enhanced the Serbian states perceived legitimacy and moral right to act upon justifications for genocide'.<sup>83</sup>

Two main titles try to unpick Kosovo and its (modern) identity, through a historical lens and a prism of ethnicity and religion. Noel Malcolms' *A Short History of Kosovo* (1998), which is a weighty tome taking the reader on a journey from the medieval, including a chapter on the 1389 battle of Kosovo Polje and Lazars legacy, through to the point where 600 years later war seems inevitable after the fall of Tito, the earlier conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia and the rise of Milošević.<sup>84</sup> Much cited by other authors as a point of reference and yet dismissed by some as a title written with an Albanian bias,<sup>85</sup> Malcolm's supposition more broadly revolves around Serbs having to learn to think more rationally and critically about how they use their ethno-religious mythology and that the fate of Kosovo in the late 1990's (on the brink of war), depended very much on the Serbs willingness to compromise (or not) over the issue which saw democratic development of Kosovo 'poisoned by constant politics of fantasy and hatred'.<sup>86</sup>

The title which brings Malcolms' work more up to date is Judah's '*Kosovo, What Everyone Needs To Know*'. (2008). Much like Malcolm, Judah extracts the historical divisional arguments, including discussions concerning the myth. In highlighting two crucial elements Judah posits that the Kosovo myth became a central part of the Serbian narrative.

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<sup>83</sup> Kate E, Temoney, 'Religion And Genocide Nexuses: Bosnia As Case Study', *Religions* 8, no. 6: 112 (2017). 1-8 (p.2), < <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8060112>> .

<sup>84</sup> Malcolm, *Kosovo A Short History*, pp 1-474.

<sup>85</sup> For more see Dušan T. Bataković, 'Kosovo and Metohija Living in the Enclave', *Serbian Academy of Science and Arts, Institute for Balkan Studies* (2007) notes p.13 and Thomas, Emmert. 'Challenging Myth In A Short History of Kosovo', *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*. 1(2), (2007), 217-221, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14613199908414002>> .

<sup>86</sup> Malcolm, '*Kosovo A Short History*', p.356.

Firstly; the role of the Orthodox Church which was maintained as an anchor in the Serbian world even after the state was swept away by the Ottomans. Secondly; the epic poems surrounding the myth which preserved the Kosovo story in the mind of the Serbs through the ages, to the present. Judah describes Skanderbeg as similar to that of the mythical notion of Lazar as a 'backbone of Serbian history'.<sup>87</sup>

However, Judah is keen to recognise that although his image is ubiquitous within Kosovo (to which I can vouch for), Skanderbeg is a problematic hero due to his Christian orientation following his desertion from the Ottoman ranks. Judah describes Kosovo overcoming this religious dimension, through Skanderbeg becoming the embodiment of the 'myth of continuous resistance', against Albania's foes.<sup>88</sup> As this title was written much later than Malcolm's 1990's work, its focus is on where Kosovo found itself following the Balkan/Kosovo war, to the point of a declaration of independence. In a cleverly crafted final chapter, entitled 'Not the Last Chapter: Independence', Judah highlights the question of division and identity and to what extent those living in Kosovo, be they Orthodox Serbs or Kosovar (Albanian) Muslims see themselves as Serbian, Albanian, or Kosovar.<sup>89</sup>

The theme of identity is carried forward by the work of Edona Maloku in her study, *'Similarities and Differences of the Ethnic, Religious and National Identity among the Albanian Majority and Serbian Minority in Post Conflict Kosovo'* (2017). Maloku explores the notion of a new national Kosovo identity as a concept through incorporation of all ethnic groupings. She investigates the process mindful of the fact that Kosovo's identity characteristics are largely undertaken by the Albanian (Muslim) majority. Her findings detail Serbs consideration of identity as closely related to religion, whereas her study finds that Albanians consider religious identity as given at birth, but not necessarily as important as a national ethnic identity.

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<sup>87</sup> Judah, *Kosovo, What Everyone Needs to Know*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). pp.1-208.

<sup>88</sup> Judah, *Kosovo, What Everyone Needs To Know*, p 143.

<sup>89</sup> Judah, *Kosovo, What Everyone Needs To Know*, pp.198-208.

On this point, Maloku posits that for Serbs 'religion is unchangeable as is ethnicity, whereas for Albanians, religion is changeable, as is national identity, this given the historical Albanian concept of converting between crypto Christianity- Catholicism, or Islam, depending on the circumstances of the individual'.<sup>90</sup>

The study summary looks at causation of impediment in intergroup relations and ethnic and religious segregation as having a negative outcome and de-humanizing attitude towards the 'other', or what it terms 'out grouping'.<sup>91</sup>

In terms of interreligious dialogue the selection of Bakrač et al (2023), *'The complexities of Interreligious Dialogue in the Post-Yugoslav Context'*, is enlightening in its association of religion and politics, both in context of Serb nationalism and a defined identity, compared with a less strident, yet no less important association of Islam with Kosovar Albanians. The journal article makes much of the lack of dialogue since the Yugoslav wars, be they interreligious or otherwise and the fact that despite almost twenty five years since the conclusion of the Kosovo war, the contractual relationship between religion and politics on both sides of the argument (Muslim and Christian), has directly restrained the prospects for prejudiced free dialogue in what remains a fragile peace. Bakrač concludes by noting that :

Contractual relationships lack individual or collective accountability and that rather overcoming the problem of intolerance to 'the other', any interreligious dialogue which brings the two competing traditions closer together, is likely to remain speculative at best.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Edona Maloku, Kelmendi et al. 'Who Is The New We? Similarities And Differences Of The Ethnic, Religious And National Identity Among The Albanian Majority And Serbian Minority In Post Conflict Kosovo', in *Shaping Social Identity After Violent Conflict, Youth In The Western Balkans*, ed.by ed. by Pratto, Žeželj, Maloku, Turjačanin, Branković, (2017), pp. 113-133 (p.130). <DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-62021-3\_6>.

<sup>91</sup> Maloku, Kelmendi et al. Who Is The New We? p.132.

<sup>92</sup> Vladimir Bakrač, 'The complexities Of Interreligious Dialogue In The Post-Yugoslav Context' . *Journal of Balkan And Near Eastern Studies*, 25.5 (2023), 811-831 (p.830) <DOI 10.1080/19448953.2023.2167176>.

In his 2005 journal article, '*Perceptions of Islamization in the Serbian national discourse*', Aleksov concentrates his argument on the inherited religious divisions through time having resulted in the survival of a mythological view of Islam within the Serbian discursive.<sup>93</sup> Citing Ekmečić (1989), Aleksov notes that national traditions values and symbols are transformed through a process described as 'religious-nationalism', which ironically he argues has religious intolerance at its core.<sup>94</sup>

Aleksov concentrates much of his argument around never ending religious conversion of Serbs, often as a result of coercion, particularly in the time of the Ottoman. Aleksov posits that although having converted to Islam, in the mind of Serbian intellectuals the converts were still Serbs, 'because Islamization could be undone or overcome by other factors, language, customs, kinship'.<sup>95</sup>

He further posits that 'Islamization' (Aleksov's own use of the term) is seen as both the cause and synonym for the Albanization of Kosovo and Metohija and that as inter religious tension rose in the 1980's, stereotyping and myth provided a fertile ground for (Serbs) constructing an image of a neighbouring peoples (Albanians) as renegade dissidents and cowards, concluding that 'this revived notion of an anti-muslim position shared many of Said's original observations regarding the Western construct of Orientalism'.<sup>96</sup>

At the time of writing, other academic journal articles include, '*Kosovo Crucified- Narratives in the Contemporary Serbian Perception of Kosovo*', (Saggau 2019). In his article Saggau focuses on the antemurale (bulwark) myth, noting (as does Judah 2008), that in contemporary Serbian Orthodox texts, Kosovo is often referred to as the Serbian "Jerusalem": a city calling for a Christian defence.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Bojan Aleksov, 'Perceptions of Islamization In The Serbian National Discourse', *Southeast European And Black Sea Studies*, 5.1.(2005) 113-127, (p.120) <DOI:10.1080/1468385042000328394>.

<sup>94</sup> Bojan, Aleksov, 'Perceptions of Islamization', p.114.

<sup>95</sup> Aleksov, 'Perceptions Of Islamization', p.125.

<sup>96</sup> Aleksov, 'Perceptions Of Islamization', p.126.

<sup>97</sup> Saggau, 'Kosovo Crucified', pp.2-3.

Through an investigation into the development of Serbian narratives and imagery pertaining to Kosovo and their modern form in the Serbian Orthodox Church, his article explores the extent to which a Holy Serbian nation is involved in a long suffering fight as a Christian shield against Islam.

Using a 2018 publication by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) as the mainstay of the piece, Saggau notes that:

Within their statements, the assembly of Serbian bishops no longer talk of a 'wall' or of battle against Islam, rather Kosovo is now seen as an inalienable part of the SOC homeland, where the infusion of myth, antiquity, suffering and martyrdom expresses an air of entitlement to the soil of the 'Jerusalem of Serbia' that now lies within the Albanian (Muslim) heartland of present day independent Kosovo.<sup>98</sup>

Complementing Saggau's article, in his critic of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its support for the Serbian state ' *Islam and Muslims in Greater Serbian Ideology*', (2019) Mulaosmanović puts the Serbian Orthodox church at the 'axis of Serbian state policy', noting that 'the coordination and cooperation of political and religious establishment was crucial to the nationalist movement which took hold of Serbia in the later 1980's'.<sup>99</sup>

Broader perspectives of Islam and its impact on Balkan states emerging as European Union candidates is explored in two academic papers. The first by Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy (2015) *Islam in the Post-Communist Balkans: alternative pathways to God*. They examine Islamic revival through a series of interviews with 'believers', shifting the argument away from an empirical focus of the nation centric debates concerning the revival and how it is likely to impact on EU candidate status. They discuss faith and religious observance as a choice, rather than as a state guided prescription noting that Balkan polities continue to see Islam as a disputed other.

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<sup>98</sup> Saggau, 'Kosovo Crucified', p.12.

<sup>99</sup> Admir Mulaosmanović, 'Islam And Muslims In Greater Serbian Ideology: The Origins Of An Antagonism And The Misuse Of The Past', *Journal Of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 39.3 (2019), 300-316 (p.305) <DOI. 10.1080/13602004.2019.1652408>.

Citing the Salafist (Saudi sponsored) notion of Islam versus the Neo-Ottoman model that is evident in today's Kosovo , they posit that:

Both are seen as reinforcing the ethno-religious divide and that in the 'Return to Europe' political project both Albania and Kosovo have re-cast Islam in line with the new democratic ideals of an aspirational definition of a 'European' national identity. Their conclusion; Islamic observation is a contested notion within the Balkans, however it all depends on who speaks for Islam – state authorities, religious hierarchies and/or informal faith communities.<sup>100</sup>

The comparison of traditional Islam (Ottoman) versus contemporary (Whabbism) in Kosovo and the potential and tendency towards a political Islam in Kosovo is further discussed by Krasniqi (2011), in *The 'forbidden fruit': Islam and politics of identity in Kosovo and Macedonia*. The paper discusses the interplay of religion and politics arguing that despite occasional attempts to politicize and use it for nationalist gain, Islam has never been fully allowed into the political space. Krasniqi cites the large Catholic cathedral that dominates the skyline in Pristina, the Kosovan capital and the adoption of Mother Teresa as a national icon as part of the Kosovar elite and government response to the question of political Islam, in as much as Catholicism is seen as more acceptable form of religion in Western states, a space which Kosovo has aspirations to join.<sup>101</sup>

One other journal article that explores Kosovo's European aspiration in light of the securitization of Islam is, *'Imagining Islam in Kosovo - The social construction of the Kosovar Muslim subject among European political actors'*. Püttmann (2020). Alluding to Krasniqi (2011), Püttmann explores further the notion of the securitization of Kosovo's pious practicing Muslims as 'forbidden fruit'. He notes that as the EU has large political agency within Kosovo the influence by foreign powers (Saudi) through indoctrination, material incentives or appeals to identity, necessitates their securitization.

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<sup>100</sup> Arolda Elbasani & Olivier Roy, 'Islam In The Post-Communist Balkans: Alternative Pathways To God', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 15:4, (2015), 457-471, <DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2015.1050273>.

<sup>101</sup> Gëzim Krasniqi, The 'Forbidden Fruit': Islam And Politics Of Identity In Kosovo And Macedonia, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 11:2, (2011) 191-207,< DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2011.587285>.

Much like Krasniqi, he suggests that the securitization argument is shaped by Kosovar elites who crave 'Crypto- Christianity' as an alternative to Islam in an effort further their own political agenda.<sup>102</sup>

Most other titles referencing two of the main protagonists in this dissertation -Lazar Hrebeljanovic and Giorgi Kastrioti 'Skanderbeg' are historical accounts.<sup>103</sup> Other titles update and broaden the identity, religious and cultural aspects of Kosovo and its relationship with Serbia/ Yugoslavia and to a lesser extent Albania.

In summary, while a lot is written from a historical perspective, excepting the few journalistic articles that I have reviewed here, little is written about the contemporary religious aspects of division and conflict in Kosovo. This creates gaps in an objective literary discussion as articles that are available tend to lean to one side or the other, dependent on the author's provenance. This is particularly the case when discussing arguments fomented as a result of the religious ethno-symbolism and myth manifest in the 'othering' of communities (Islamic and Orthodox) of a seemingly past, yet still prevailing, divide.

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<sup>102</sup> Friedrich Püttmann, 'Imagining Islam In Kosovo - The Social Construction Of The Kosovar Muslim Subject Among European Political Actors', *Southeast European And Black Sea Studies*, 20:2, (2020), 307-325, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2020.1778984>.

<sup>103</sup> For a precis of the 1389 battle and its legacy, see, *The Battle Of Kosovo: The History And Legacy Of The Battle Between The Serbs And Ottomans That Forged Serbia's National Identity* (Boston: Charles River Editors, 2019).

### **Kosovo And Serbia; The Modern Narrative. Religious- Nationalism, Identity And Myth.**

The fall of communism in the late 1980's and the rise of nationalism within Serbia and Albania led, if not to combat on the battle field, then to fight out a political, ethnic and religious conflict within the Western Balkans. Within that conflict, a constant polemic in both the ethnic and religious narrative of the two main protagonists- Albanians and Serbs, particularly those living in Kosovo, is that of 'othering'. A theory advanced by Huntington (1996), in his seminal title, *The Clash of Civilizations*:

'Some Westerners including ex United States President Bill Clinton, argue that the West does not have a problem with Islam, only with Islamist extremists. Fourteen hundred years of history demonstrate otherwise. The relations between Islam and Christianity, both Orthodox and Western, have often been stormy. Each has been the other's Other'.<sup>104</sup>

When looking more closely at the causation of othering and the role played by religion, Temoney cites Durkheim's theoretical interpretation of human behaviour:

Given the right context and circumstances human behaviour which frames social religion as a fundamental set of beliefs, is useful for understanding how religion impacts 'othering'. Styling a group as an essentialist enemy radically different from the perpetrator group promotes mass violence where passions so torrential are unleashed in conditions so far outside that of that of the ordinary, legitimising a need to set themselves above regular morality through elimination of the enemy group.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash Of Civilizations And The Remaking Of World Order*, (London: Schuster & Schuster, 1997), p. 209.

<sup>105</sup> Kate E, Temoney. 'Religion And Genocide Nexuses: Bosnia As Case Study', *Religions* 8, no. 6: 112 (2017), pp.1-8. (p.2.) <DOI:10.3390/rel8060112>.

As the 1990's progressed, the tension between the two traditions manifested itself with a Serbian plan of expulsion of non-ethnic Serbs, essentially the 'other', Islamic (and Catholic) religious groups and individuals. The Orthodox Church continued to reinforce communal boundaries where ethnoreligious identity symbolized inescapable memories of historical grievances. Although some clergy voiced dissent, the blessings that many of the priesthood bestowed upon the violence of the Milošević regime, put the Orthodox Church in a position of essentially framing the Balkan wars of the 1990's as a sacred struggle between good and evil, with religious mythologies of the institutional Church enhancing the Serbian state apparatus legitimacy and moral right to act upon justifications for genocide, within a 'Greater Serbian Plan'.<sup>106</sup> This Orthodox rhetoric assisted in shaping the stereotypical image of the 'other' ( Muslim), as alien, inferior and a threat to all that Serbia held dear, but was in direct contrast and contradiction to the Serbian inward reflection of it being 'Christ's nation, a Holy suffering nation, bearers of truth and divine justice.'<sup>107</sup>

Yet it was the culmination of this Orthodox Church led rhetoric at the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1989, which put the Serbian state on a path to war. In a nod to Huntington, (see p.35), Temoney notes that 'In the build up to the Kosovo war, the Battle of Kosovo Polje and the cult like reverence for Prince Lazar figured prominently in speeches by both politicians and Serb Orthodox clergy, potentially framing genocide as a defensive strike by the perpetually victimized Serbs against the Muslim 'other'.<sup>108</sup> The confirmation of Serbia's reverence for Lazar is confirmed by Malcolm, 'no other event has imprinted itself indelibly on the Serbian character than the Battle of Kosovo'.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Temoney, 'Religion And Genocide Nexuses'. p.5.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. p.6.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p.4.

<sup>109</sup> Malcolm, *Kosovo A Short History*, p.58.

Having been stripped of its autonomous status some months prior Kosovo witnessed more than a million Serbs gathering at the battle ground just outside the (now) capital of Kosovo, Pristina, in celebration of the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary recalling the myth surrounding Serbia's long suffering wait for a proposed new ethical, cultural and religious-nationalist dawn for the country. The stage was set for the Serbian leader Milošević, to frame himself as the new Prince Lazar.<sup>110</sup> In rallying the nationalist cries with an image of a suffering martyr-nation, Milošević refers to the Kosovo myth again portraying it as 'a bulwark securing order, one where if Kosovo falls, the Serb nation would fall into chaos'.<sup>111</sup> According to Temoney, this shifted the enmity between Orthodox Serbians and Slavic Muslims into a 600 year blood feud of good versus evil, where the Muslims became 'the other' and killing them was not only worthy, but sacred.<sup>112</sup> The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) was however reluctant to endorse all of the Milošević policies and began to criticise the states stance in the months just prior to the Kosovo war. However, once the conflict erupted the SOC actively championed the regime utilizing the myth in its support for Serbian nationhood, some of the more nationalist Bishops even criticised Milošević for failing to forcefully pursue Serbian national interests.<sup>113</sup>

In what Mulaosmanović (2019) describes as a 're-casting of the myth', to influence Serb opinion in the early 1990's, claiming that Serbian Orientalists, supported by the Orthodox Church 'dehumanized' the Muslim population of former Yugoslavia, stereotyping Albanian Muslims as 'cultural aliens on European soil, primitive, dishonest, selfish and stupid and not like that of 'other' nations acting as a bridge-head for re-Islamization of Serbia'.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Florian Bieber, 'Nationalist Mobilization And Serb Suffering'. p. 102.

<sup>111</sup> Saggue, 'Kosovo Crucified'. p.10.

<sup>112</sup> Temoney, 'Religion and the Genocide Nexus'. p.7.

<sup>113</sup> Bieber, 'Nationalist Mobilization And Serb Suffering'. p.104.

<sup>114</sup> Mulaosmanović, 'Islam And Muslims In Greater Serbian Ideology', p.304.

He further notes how The Serbian Orthodox Church position was expressed more explicitly by Metropolitan (Bishop) Amfilohije (1938-2020), in the early stages of the War when anticipating victory, he announced that 'God has given the Serbs a new chance to achieve their dream of living in one state and that God expects something great from His enduring people. As the victory belongs to the innocently crucified, let God grant every assistance and power [for Serbs] to withstand the pressures of the world'. <sup>115</sup>

Duijzings notes that in order to prosecute the war, central heroes of the Kosovo epic (see page 20), were resurrected as "super-Serbs". One such was nationalist politician and suspected war criminal Arkan (Željko Ražnatović 1952-2000). In what he notes as a transformation of a murderer into a hero through epic 'turbo-folk' songs, he cites a poem by Pavković (1995);

I pray to God and to Obilić  
Oh Serbia, give birth to a younger Bird,  
Suddenly from heavenly heights  
God sent us Arkan, his son.  
Oh Kosovo, since the time of the battle  
You did not have such a great hero. <sup>116</sup>

Duijzings notes further, the significance of Arkan's close relationship with the previously mentioned Bishop Amfilohije, observing that in the heat of battle, the SOC patriarchy was his 'main commander' and that Arkan's reputation was 'cemented in the eyes of the Serbian public by his marriage to a turbo-folk singer, noted at the time as a mythical bond between a Kosovo girl and a Kosovo hero'. <sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Mulaosmanović, 'Islam And Muslims In Greater Serbian Ideology', p.313- see note 25.

<sup>116</sup> Pavković, translated from the (Srb) original in Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*. p 200.

<sup>117</sup> Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, p 200-201.

History and myth tells us then that suffering and victimhood is a constant theme running through the centuries old cleavage in the Balkan region. This notion is further explored by Aleksov (2005), who looks at perceptions of Islamization in the Serbian national discourse through the prism of forced conversion. He posits that Serbs have sought to paint a picture of suffering aggressive conversion campaigns (from Orthodoxy to Islam) and that in denying any common or cultural trait with so called 'forced converts', they (Serbs) continue to provide substantiation of a sui-generis Antemurale Kosovo myth, one that frames theirs as a 'Holy nation, suffering for the bulwark anti-Islamic cause'.<sup>118</sup> A cause which reinterpreted 'hard facts' as narratives of mythicized religious and nationalist notions arranged with imaginary logic to support moral and cultural superiority and rights to expansionism and as posited by Temoney, genocide, (see page 34).

Misappropriation of myth is a theme continued by Sells In his theory of 'Christoslavism', (see page 26). He describes the Lazar story as being 'tied to a revolutionary mixture of romantic nationalism and anti-Islamic polemic'.<sup>119</sup> He further suggests that:

The eternal and absolute nature of appropriation of the Kosovo myth is one of false logic, miss- interpretation of historical facts and reality, manifest in configurations of hate stereotyping, ultimately resulting in the state sponsored nationalistic provocation of extreme violence.<sup>120</sup>

The 1999 NATO bombardment of Serb forces and of Serbia itself signalled the end of the war. At its conclusion, the expansionist dreams of Serbian nationalist leaders be they secular or religious, lay in tatters. In a sense of betrayal, Kosovo was all but lost to Serbia. Saggue cites Amfilohije's conclusion following the wars end in the context of Serbia history, suggesting that the Serbs (including the SOC) lost because they lacked a true leader. 'There was no new Prince Lazar; instead Serbs were left with irreligion'.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Bojan Aleksov, 'Perceptions of Islamization In The Serbian National Discourse', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, ( 2005), p 125. <DOI:10.1080/1468385042000328394>.

<sup>119</sup> Sells, 'The Construction Of Islam', p. 67.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. p.68.

<sup>121</sup> Saggue. 'Kosovo Crucified'. P.13.

While the war had ended in defeat for the Serbs, it left a cleavage writ large on the territory of Kosovo, one that festered with division and hatred between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians right through a 'declaration of independence' (February 2008) and indeed until today.

Commenting on the immediate period following Kosovo's declaration of Independence and the deployment to the territory of the EU Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) in which I served, Judah notes that in 'North Mitrovica Serbs refused to cooperate with EULEX and denounced the EU as an occupier'.<sup>122</sup> Belgrade treated the declaration as null and void with senior parliamentarians condemning the move, stating that 'Kosovo was Serbia's first name', as 'Kosovo forever belonged to Serbia'.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, in the heady and often tense days following the declaration, Judah describes a rally at St Sava's Orthodox Church in Belgrade where Metropolitan (Archbishop) Amfilohije called on the Serb population to 'see Kosovo and Metohija as the apple of our eye, the heart of our hearts, our Holy city, our Jerusalem'.

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Since the end of the war, The SOC narrative is slightly more benign, one of Kosovo as a land that needs to be protected. The polemic of superiority and hatred is now rather distant, yet what is seen by the SOC as essential is a need to protect the 'Holy land' of Kosovo. Although not directly referring to the threat of Muslim majority Albanians in Kosovo, their memorandum published in 2003, is a thinly disguised plea to the international community that the Serbian identity enshrined within religious sites in Kosovo must be protected:

Kosovo and Metohija, the Holy Land of the Serbian people. What Jerusalem means to the Jewish people, that is Kosovo for the Serbs. It is not just a matter of geography, or demography. It is a question of identity.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Judah, *Kosovo What Everyone Needs to Know*, pp.145-147.

<sup>123</sup> Judah. *Kosovo What everyone Needs to Know*, p.147.

<sup>124</sup> Sermon Of Metropolitan Amfilohije, February 21, 2008, <<http://www.orthodoxengland.org.uk/sermmetam.htm>>. Their translation, [accessed 14 August 2023].

<sup>125</sup> The Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), *Memorandum On Kosovo And Metohija*, (2003) <[http://www.spc.rs/eng/message\\_holy\\_assembly\\_bishops\\_kosovo\\_and\\_metohija](http://www.spc.rs/eng/message_holy_assembly_bishops_kosovo_and_metohija)> [accessed 17 May 2023].

Today the Kosovo myth still contains an idea of entitlement to the land, salvation and protection of identity. It represents a continual tale of entangled relations, prioritised for cultural, social and political benefit, of a martyr nation where suffering repeats itself from the primordial fall, to Christ (Lazar), through Kosovo Pole, to the war. Kubric posits, 'The overlap between Church and state makes it 'difficult to separate religion, politics and identity'.<sup>126</sup> Yet, it was not just the Serbs who utilised religious identity during the war. Kosovar Albanian Muslims used religious motives and historical imagery, including that of Skanderbeg, in constructing a self-image of a 'popular Islam' in opposition to the Serbian (Orthodox) 'other'.<sup>127</sup>

It is that (religious) identity, which is the focus of Krasniqi's article concerning Islam and the politics of today's Kosovo. The armed conflict had destroyed more than 200 mosques and 'Bektashi' Sufi lodges (see page 15), along with a number of Islamic schools (madrassas). That and the genocidal ethnic cleansing in the name of the martyr state of Serbia drove many an impoverished and devastated Kosovar to seek assistance from an 'invasion of aid organisations from around the globe'.<sup>128</sup> Krasniqi posits that 'Kosovo's new administrators (UNMIK) who lacking knowledge of the complexities of religious life and identity among Kosovars, formulated an incoherent plan broadly dividing the majority Albanian's as Sunni Muslim against a minority Serb Orthodox population'.<sup>129</sup> However, the incoherence and naivety of the UNMIK plan led 'faith based' organisations to claim a right of assistance purporting to serve Kosovo's Islamic majority 'in their best interests'.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Zorica Kubrić, 'Serbian Orthodox Church In Kosovo And Metohija: Between Past And Future', *Balkan Journal of Philosophy*, 2, (2014), 137-146 (p.145) <<https://doi.org/10.5840/bjp20146219>>.

<sup>127</sup> Krasniqi, 'The Forbidden Fruit', p. 4.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.p.5.

<sup>129</sup> For more on the 'Ahtisaari plan', see Tim Judah. *Kosovo What Everyone Needs to Know*, p111. Note 6 'a supervised independence where Orthodox Churches and Monasteries would have 'special status, but a note of caution in that as Serbs and Albanians had diametrically opposed views, no amount of additional talks in any form will overcome the impasse'.

<sup>130</sup> Krasniqi, 'The Forbidden Fruit', p.5.

Krasniqi further posits that the arrival of foreign faith based charity groups, including missionaries from the Gulf region, primarily Saudi based humanitarian agencies:

Filled a spiritual vacuum designed to meet the needs of Kosovo's Muslims built upon a nascent form of radical Islam, Wahhabism, previously imported through a similar route at the end of the Bosnia conflict, which then spread to Kosovo.<sup>131</sup>

The devastation wrought in Kosovo and the resulting lack of opportunity created an ideal ground for the success of Saudi funded organisations spreading their own form of Islam and Islamic education. Meeting face to face with many disillusioned young, mostly male and unemployed Kosovars, Saudi 'missionaries' also used the opportunity to rebuild mosques and Qur'anic schools, installing their own imams, who began preaching a Salafi form of Islam, quite different from that which the practicing Muslims of Kosovo were used to.<sup>132</sup> Sells describes this period as a 'Wahhabi dictate', technically intra- Islamic 'othering', whereby its representatives set out to destroy five centuries of (Ottoman inspired) Islamic culture, in order to wrestle control of local Islamic institutions, remove the Sufi notion of the myth of Karbala and 'other' non-Wahhabi influence.<sup>133</sup> Krasniqi is keen to point out however, that although this form of Islam took hold in the newly formed state, the Kosovar constitution guarantees freedom of belief and the right to accept or refuse religious membership and that the first 'freely' elected political parties of Kosovo applied as an antidote to the politicisation of Islam, a strategy of rapprochement with Kosovo's Western allies, chief among them, the United States.<sup>134</sup>

With a Bill Clinton avenue and a Wesley Clarke street in most of its major cities, Kosovo is often described as Europe's most pro American state.<sup>135</sup> Yet even among the confusion at the wars end it was unthinkable that a relatively isolated yet reasonably secular Kosovo would establish a 'political Islam'.

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<sup>131</sup> Krasniqi, 'The Forbidden Fruit', p.6.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>133</sup> Sells. 'The Construction of Islam', p.78.

<sup>134</sup> Krasniqi. 'The Forbidden Fruit' p. 8.

<sup>135</sup> Albana Kasapi, *Kosovo's Jihadis*. [podcast], BBC Radio 4. Assignment, 09 October 2014 [Podcast], BBC Sounds on line <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p027rh94>>. [accessed 19 June 2023].

However, it is estimated that over 200 Kosovars left their homeland to fight alongside Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) during the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This was more per head of population than any other European state.<sup>136</sup> A 2014 BBC assignment investigation cites cases of Albanian/Kosovar Muslim families living in and around Syria. In interviews conducted by the broadcaster with family members left behind in Kosovo, there is a tendency for people to reference the Kosovo war where the killing of non-Islamic Serbs is still celebrated. The programme focuses on Kosovo's status as remaining outside of the UN, not recognised by some EU countries let alone by those states (Russia) that supported Serbia and denied visa free travel status. In reference to Kosovars being denied freedom of movement and referring again to the assistance provide at the wars end by Islamic charitable foundations, the programme details:

A ruining of the religious equilibrium of a people's Islam, through the advocacy of the NGO's from Saudi who brought with them their own culture and a different form of Islam, an Islam that played well to the young unemployed, who sought financial incentives to travel.<sup>137</sup>

This theme of disaffection was also reported by the international press:

Now defeated, disaffected Kosovars are returning from ISIL to their own country, still bitter, still unemployed, still harbouring a sense of betrayal and a hatred of the 'the other', this time not so much of the Serbs, but a wider Western 'other' .<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Kasapi, Kosovo's Jihadis, 2014.

<sup>137</sup> Kasapi, Kosovo's Jihadis, 2014.

<sup>138</sup> Anthony Lloyd, 'Isis Fighters Return To Kosovo With A New Mission', *The Times Online*, 5 October 2018, <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/isis-fighters-return-to-kosovo-with-a-new-mission-v75gx0hs9>> [accessed 18 May 2023].

On the other hand and as Ibrahim posits, 'hatred of the other' during and after the Kosovo war were not unique to Muslims.<sup>139</sup> Ibrahim refers to the ongoing war between Christendom and Islam as having a distinctive Serbian pedigree, citing a speech from Radovan Karadzic, a Bosnian Serb leader who talked of Muslim birth rate and demographics as a 'strategy to dominate at the expense of Serbs'.<sup>140</sup>

Ibrahim describes this as 'rhetoric that resonates strongly among current Serb nationalists with thousands of Christian veterans returning to their homes after the war, radicalized and ready for new action as volunteers of an Orthodox Serbian militia'.<sup>141</sup>

Identity, whether that be ethnic, cultural or through religion and the relationship to nationalism is a constant theme within written appraisals of both historical and more recent literature in the context of the 'Kosovo Question' (See page 6 footnote 4). In terms of interreligious dialogue in the post-Yugoslav space, Bakrač et al (2023) posit the view that the Yugoslav wars were not fought because of religion, but that identity issues where religion was affirmed as a cause were contributing factors in the conflicts of the 1990's.<sup>142</sup> Their research looks the role religious- nationalism played in the run up to the war following the collapse of Communism in the former Yugoslavia and subsequently to what extent has interreligious dialogue been able to resolve the divide, particularly in Kosovo. Their paper explores interreligious dialogue within the same religion (Christianity) Catholic and Orthodox as well between different faiths – Christianity and Islam and also between believers and non-believers.

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<sup>139</sup> Azeem Ibrahim, 'The Balkan Wars Created A Generation Of Christian Terrorists'. *Foreign Policy Magazine*, 24 May, 2019, < <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/24/the-balkan-wars-created-a-generation-of-christian-terrorists/>> [accessed 17 May 2023].

<sup>140</sup> Ibrahim, 'The Balkan Wars', 2019.

<sup>141</sup> Ibrahim, 'The Balkan Wars', 2019.

<sup>142</sup> Bakrač et al, 'The Complexities Of Interreligious Dialogue In The Post-Yugoslav Context', p.821.

Bakrač paper explores the 'post-Milošević' transition where despite renewed hope of reconciliation, the post-war interaction between Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community in Serbia proved 'burdensome', with religious denomination proving to be a key stumbling block, not least of which because Orthodox Serbs see Kosovo as the cradle of Serbian culture.<sup>143</sup> The historical influence of Orthodoxy among the Serb nation, particularly Orthodox Church support to Milošević has been discussed previously in this dissertation (see pages 38-39), as has the notion that Albanians and therefore Kosovars not traditionally coalescing around one religion (see page 24), but rather through ethnic and cultural identity.

Bakrač theorises that religion and nationalism have continued to dominate the discourse following Kosovo's declaration of Independence and that the reliance of Serbia on its Christian heritage, customs and symbols and its claims toward its Holy root in Kosovo have not created a climate favourable for dialogue between the two worldviews. The paper explores solutions to further bridge the religious and ethnic divide through the spectrum of interreligious dialogue, notably transparency, inclusivity and tolerance as a method by which civic leaders can evaluate the work of religious leaders, but their conclusion is not a positive one, noting that:

As traditional notions of identity, dominant in post-Yugoslavia are linked to religion as choice, not necessarily through acquisition by birth, or through state-sponsored programmes this results in religious leaders and elites providing mutual support to legitimize their rule, which directly restrains prospects for any form of prejudice free dialogue, be that interreligious or otherwise.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Bakrač et al, 'The Complexities of Interreligious Dialogue In The Post-Yugoslav Context', p. 824 .

<sup>144</sup> Bakrač et al, 'The Complexities of Interreligious Dialogue In The Post-Yugoslav Context', pp.15-16 .

In a 2019 occasional paper on Religion in the context of Eastern Europe, Doci explores the notion of an Interfaith Council for Social Cohesion in the Western Balkans.<sup>145</sup>

Noting that his observations are ‘oversimplifications and generalisations’, he nevertheless looks at the potential of interfaith councils judged from three perspectives; theological, political and peacebuilding, he highlights that when used with appropriate language, ritual and symbolism, all three can provide a powerful example of interfaith solutions to present day issues of division.<sup>146</sup> Yet he is also quick to point out that at the time of writing, Albanian was but a ‘rare case’, as the only country within the region to actively promote such a council.<sup>147</sup>

The theme of identity and inclusivity through religion as choice is a notion that Maloku (2017) explores in her study concerning similarities and differences of ethnicity, religion and national identity among the Albanian majority and Serbian minority in post-conflict Kosovo. (see my notes in the literary review p 29). Whilst recognising that any such study of a ‘Kosovo identity’ is limited as it is largely determined by the majority population- Albanian Muslims, the study identifies the following attributes:

- Both groups see identity as unchangeable, something one is born with.
- Serbs consider their religion as unchangeable. They do not see a Kosovan identity as representative of their ethnicity and in fact see it as a threat, one which is intertwined with religion which given that the majority population in Kosovo is Muslim, alienates their Orthodox values as a group.
- For Albanians on the other hand, they see religion as changeable, a choice to be made when circumstances dictate and allow, for them national ethnic (Kosovo) identity trumps religion.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Ylli, H. Doci, ‘Role of Religion In The Western Balkans’ Societies’, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 39 : Iss. 5 , (2019) , 88-95 (p94) <<https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol39/iss5/2>> [accessed 12 September 2023].

<sup>146</sup> Doci, ‘Role Of Religion In The Western Balkans’, p.94.

<sup>147</sup> Doci, ‘Role Of Religion In The Western Balkans’, pp.91-95.

<sup>148</sup> Maloku, Kelmendi et al, ‘Who Is The New We?’, p.123.

For Maluku such factors breed a sense of impediment resulting in de-humanizing attitudes towards 'the other', she highlights inclusivity together with neutralization of historical ethnic and religious narratives in education to effect positive change.<sup>149</sup> Yet given how disparate the two communities are, inclusivity is an ideal far removed from reality.

Still focused on (religious) choice, Elbasani and Roy's hypothesis on Islam in a post-communist Yugoslavia, specifically Kosovo, identifies the division and conflict as one 'developing along ethno-religious lines, with both Orthodox and Muslim barricading themselves into opposing ethno-religious fronts.' A scheme which 'forgoes choice' by 'subjecting believers to polities including secularism, ethnic mobilization and partition under a central authority that had little to do with faith'<sup>150</sup>

At the time of writing, securitization at the expense of (extreme) religious observance is once again exercising minds in both Pristina and Belgrade. No longer is it just a matter of religious choice, or tolerance between communities and the opposition of two worldviews on the Kosovo stage, but a new dimension of inclusion into a new 'European ideal' and potential EU membership. Püttmann (2020) explores the EU Stabilization Agreement, of which I was but a small part in the years 2011-2015.<sup>151</sup>

In the context of 'religion as choice' in terms of 'piety versus securitization', Püttmann paints a picture of 'Europe's Chaotic Orient', when he notes that:

Kosovar leadership expresses an orientalist understanding of a European identity, one that advocates Balkan Islam as a 'European Islam', primarily through the 'othering' of non-Balkan Muslims, where the suspect Muslim other falls into three categories; the indoctrinated, manipulated by foreign actors [Saudi Arabia], through

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<sup>149</sup> Maluku, Kelmendi et al, 'Who Is The New We?', p.130.

<sup>150</sup> Elbasani & Roy, 'Islam In The Post-Communist Balkans', p.461.

<sup>151</sup> For more on the EU Stabilization And Association Agreement, see, <[https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/stabilisation-and-association-agreement\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/stabilisation-and-association-agreement_en)> [accessed 11 July 2023].

religious brainwashing, the rational actor, those seeking financial reward in exchange for their piety and identity affirmers, those who feel marginalised or manipulated by the EU who now seek solace in a belonging to a like-minded group i.e. non-Balkan Islamic patrons.<sup>152</sup> Anyone conforming to any of the three categories therefore requires what Püttmann refers to as, 'politically based specific security management'.<sup>153</sup>

Undoubtedly, the most divided and therefore most monitored and securitized place in all of Kosovo is the city of Mitrovica, a place where, during my deployment, I witnessed many religious and ethnic provocations. The bridge is both a symbol and a product of the material manifestation of the religious, nationalistic and ethnic divide in Kosovo, the politicization of these differences, and the inability of both Serbs and Albanians to co-exist under one national border.

Judah describes the bridge across the Ibar River as a:

One hundred meter separation point, where on one side everyone speaks Albanian, spends euros, has Kosovo vehicle number plates, Kosovo cell phones and regularly attend a mosque. Whereas on the other, people speak Serbian, use the dinar, have Serbian vehicle number plates, Serbian mobile phone networks, read Serbian newspapers and celebrate religious festivals in an Orthodox Church.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Püttmann 'Imagining Islam In Kosovo', p.307.i

<sup>153</sup> Püttmann, 'Imagining Islam In Kosovo', p.308.

<sup>154</sup> Judah, *Kosovo What Everyone Needs to Know*, p.100.

In her article on the ongoing entanglement of the relations between the two traditions, the 'othering', victimization and suffering, Sidhita sees the bridge across the river Ibar in the city as a representation of 'carnage and politically-charged hatred'. As well as noting that 'As long as this structure delineates Serb versus Albanian narratives within Kosovo, it will continue to portray a dangerous, unproductive, and painstakingly constructed dimension of Balkan identity politics'.<sup>155</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Almost twenty five years after the war, in terms of identity, ethnic, social and religious observance and in actuality, Kosovo remains divided. Although not on the scale of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, religious-nationalism continues to usurp myth and re-enforces ethnic and cultural division. Tradition trumps logic and efforts, including those of the two main religious worldviews at the centre of the divide, Islam and Orthodoxy, have so far failed to find a solution. For the most part, the 'othering' continues.

The concept of culture is 'bounded, unique and semi-permanent to circumstance' (for more See Huntington, 1993), However, this concept is not wholly appropriate for the Balkans, which at best sees culture as mixed, contradictory, incoherent and in terms of religious observation, fluid. Duijzings suggests that, 'the origins of problems in Kosovo are not ethnicity or religion, the problems originate and are perpetuated by politicians and religious leaders providing an ethnic and religious- nationalistic slant, in order to serve their own ends'.<sup>156</sup> Whilst annihilation may have been avoided and (forced) assimilation a thing of the past, in Kosovo social and political structure continues to limit individual agency.

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<sup>155</sup> Kushi Sidhita, 'Mitrovica's Symbol: Reconciliation Amidst, Inevitability, History And Violence In Kosovo'. *Open Democracy*, 2 November 2015. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/mitrovica-s-symbol-reconciliation-amidst-inevitability-history-and-violence-in-kosovo/> [accessed 20 May 2023].

<sup>156</sup> Duijzings, *Religion And The Politics Of Identity In Kosovo*. P204.

Over the centuries leaders both monarchical and political have sought to sow division to serve their own aims, drawing on notions of victimization and perpetual suffering. Following an historical line leading from Skanderbeg and Lazar that has seen the politicization of the relationship between religion and myth becoming a fault line between statehood and religious nationalism, they have misused myth entwined in a false narrative, to give false hope. Whether or not Lazar gave up his fate to a 'Heavenly' pursuit mirroring Christ's story, myth is perpetuated in complex, tangled relationships and interaction, comprising disputed property rights, martyrdom, treachery, mistrust, othering and ultimately, war.

While the influence of myth together with that of religious nationalism has spread not only through the Balkans, but into a wider world bringing with it political Islam and Orthodox right wing extremism, the Kosovo myth, and that of Skanderbeg, oft use by politicians and religious leaders in the recent past to promote violent oppression in order to dehumanise 'the other', has a little less import today. Myth remains important in society, however, it is my experience that both younger generation Serbs and Albanians are more pragmatic and less prone to the message of suffering and victimization for the cause of myth. And while the 'Kosovo Question' is a both a story of failed intra and inter-religious dialogue to date, ironically political expediency of EU accession may actually bring the two sides closer. Serbs, who see religion, ethnicity and identity as inseparable, crave closer relations with the European ideal.

Likewise a promised new Kosovo identity is placed by Kosovar (Albanian) politicians at the forefront of negotiations to secure a new European future. An identity which eschews extreme religious observance that divided Islamic tradition within the Muslim community of Kosovo, brought about by the introduction of Wahhabism at the expense of five centuries of Ottoman influenced Islam to Kosovo.

Yet, as Sidhita's article (among others) demonstrates, the Antemurale myth is still alive in Kosovo. Historical notions of the past remain an influencing factor in the politicization of Serbian and Albanian ethno-identity, religious differences and interactions.

The inability of the two worldviews to co-exist and find a common answer to problems of division, is as relevant today as it was when Skanderbeg turned his back on Islam at the battle of Nis or when Lazar faced defeat at the hands of the Ottomans at Kosovo Pole. Serbia still claims its Orthodox 'Holy root' in the heartlands of an ethnic and majority Islamic Albanian community in an independent Kosovo.

Six centuries of misappropriation and misuse of myth and religion to support nationalist agendas, which to this day still employ both a mythical and religious rhetoric of 'othering' as an excuse for intransience on both sides of the divide, answers the central research question. Excepting a push towards a yet to be realized European integration, there remains little encouragement for the future. Religion and myth endure; intertwined; politicised; captured; used and abused and to an extent remain the causation of perpetuated 'othering'.

Word Count 14'688

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