

Response to the “Provocation” for the Indiana University Roundtable on Post-Communism

2008: Islam and Post-Communism

EMERGING CONFLICTS BETWEEN “TRADITIONAL” AND “ORTHODOX” ISLAM IN BULGARIA

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The small southeastern European country of Bulgaria is one of the two newest members of the European Union and has the distinction of being the member state with the largest Muslim minority. At more than 12 percent of the population as of the 2001 census, Bulgaria’s Muslims make up a larger percentage of the population than in France, Germany or the UK. More significantly, the country has the most sizable autochthonous Muslim population in the Union; there have been Muslims living on the territory that is now Bulgaria for centuries – remnants of the Ottoman domination of the Balkan Peninsula. Bulgarian Muslims are not immigrants or the children of immigrants from South Asia or the Middle East, but truly “European Muslims.”

The forms of Islam historically practiced here differ in many ways from the forms of Islam practiced in Western Europe or in the Muslim heartlands; Balkan Islam has always been a “frontier Islam,” deeply influenced by its contact with local Christianity and by its persecution under the atheistic communist government that tried to squelch the practice of religion for the half a century following World War II. Yet since the onset of what Bulgarians ambivalently refer to as “democracy” in 1989, there has been a proliferation of new religious influences in the country (Ghodsee 2007), including the growing presence of Salafi-like Islam being imported to

the country by nongovernmental organizations with roots in the Arab Gulf. This ostensibly more scripturalist and more overtly proscribed form of “supranational” Islam is fundamentally changing the beliefs and practices associated with Bulgarian Islam, particularly among the Salvic Muslims or “Pomak” population in the Rhodope Mountains located near the southern Greek-Bulgarian border.

Beginning in the late 1990s, Bulgaria started to experience the displacement of what the anthropologist Talal Asad (1986) referred to as “traditional Islam” – an Islam rooted in the unique, local condition of a Muslim community’s past – by what he has called “orthodox Islam.”ⁱ For Asad, Orthodox Islam refers specifically to forms of Islam that claim to be “purer” versions of the religion based exclusively on sacred, original texts and not on culturally-specific interpretations of those texts. Although the distinction between “traditional” and “orthodox” Islam was initially mapped onto a rural-urban divide (Ibid.), in its current manifestation it can be seen as a conflict between nationally bounded forms of Islam (that have been “corrupted” by local influences) and a “universally true” version of Islam that has been de-ethnicized and de-nationalized (Roy 2004), creating a more cosmopolitan and universalized Muslim identity.ⁱⁱ

The subject of my current research is the growing importance of this imported form of Islam in the postcommunist space of Bulgaria, and how it is interacting with the Marxist-Leninist legacies of the country’s communist past. Although I have been studying Bulgarian society for over a decade, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork on the new form of Islam in Bulgaria between 2004 and 2008.ⁱⁱⁱ I spent ten months cumulatively living in both the capital city of Sofia and in the south-central Rodopi region of the country where there is a high concentration of Pomaks. In addition to participant-observation, a wide variety of locally produced magazines, brochures, newsletters, books and websites – all promoting a more orthodox form of Islam –

were collected and analyzed, as were local newspapers covering events in the Smolyan *oblast* where the field site was located. Finally, I conducted both formal and informal interviews with local religious leaders, government officials, and NGO activists in both Sofia and the Smolyan region.

Although this project is ongoing, I have found ample evidence that new (external) forms are challenging local forms of Islam. But the displacement of local Islam may be qualitatively different in Bulgaria because of its communist past. In Western Europe, scholars like Gilles Kepel (2004) and Olivier Roy (2004) argue that this “globalized Islam” is being Westernized and individualized, and that the vast majority of Muslims are slowly coming to share the liberal values of multiculturalism and social democracy that shape many European polities. Tariq Ramadan (2003) has also argued that Islam should feel at home in the West and that Western values are compatible with the dictates of the Qu’ran. In Bulgaria, however, this “globalized” or “orthodox” Islam is not being laid over and therefore shaped by a strong foundation of democratic traditions and a multicultural tolerance for religious pluralism in Eastern Europe. Instead, orthodox Islam is interacting with Bulgaria’s 45-year communist history and its discourses may be appealing to Bulgarians because of its strong emphasis on social cohesion, redistributive justice and a critique of individualism – all values and criticisms that are familiar to those raised in countries shaped by the lingering legacies of Marxist-Leninism, but now free from the compulsory atheism that scientific socialism required. These circumstances may produce a very different kind of religious discourse than those typically attributed to Islam in Europe, and the growing presence of orthodox Islam in Eastern Europe should be examined on its own terms and not casually lumped in with analyses of Muslim minorities in Western Europe.

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ⁱ I am well aware that these terms are very specific to the debates in anthropology and that those outside of the discipline find them problematic. Recently, scholars have come up with different ways of referring to this form of Islam, "objectified Islam," "authenticated Islam," or "Wahhabism." My informants specifically called this form of Islam, "Arab Islam," because they associated it with the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. Here I will use Asad's "orthodox Islam" and Roy's "Globalized" Islam, despite the slipperiness of both terms.

ⁱⁱ Although one that is both spiritually and financially ties very strongly to the Gulf Arab states.

ⁱⁱⁱ The author would like to thank the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (NCEEER), the International Research Exchanges Board (IREX), The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and Bowdoin College for their generous support of this research.