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► **To cite this version:**

Albert Doja. In Hoc Signo Vinces: The Politics of Religion as a Source of Power and Conflict. *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, 2019, 20 (4), pp.447-466. <10.1080/21567689.2019.1697871>. <halshs-02440393>

HAL Id: halshs-02440393

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02440393v1>

Submitted on 30 Jan 2020

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In Hoc Signo Vinces: The Politics of Religion as a Source of Power and Conflict

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore the importance and passion for historical reconstructions by means of media events and public representations. To this aim, among other illustrative examples, I take issue with the celebrations to mark the legacy of Emperor Constantine to Christianity among Southeast European peoples, including Albanians. Similar celebrations are often used and misused to forward or contest various claims to immutable ethnic belonging and religious tolerance. They always support negotiating or challenging ethno-political agendas. They may show the ways in which historical, cultural and religious heritage is entangled in identity politics, which could provide new insights to a better understanding of the politics of religion in international affairs and everyday life in the Balkans.

KEYWORDS

Identity; religion; politics; legacy; tolerance; celebrations; historical reconstructions; Albania; Serbia; Kosovo; Macedonia; Greece; The Balkans; Southeast European Studies

Religion and politics

Much of the philosophical reflections about the relations between religion and politics, prompted by Rawls's notion of public reason,¹ fall within the liberal tradition of religious restraint,² which has generated the worrisome backlash of a new traditionalism among prominent theologians cum political theorists.³ The conceptual middle ground is occupied by the importance of politics of recognition related to individual freedom and personal autonomy,⁴ which makes it even more challenging to adjudicate conflicts between religion and politics. The trigger for religious war is not always or even typically grounded in religious considerations,⁵ neither the dynamics and range of ideological wanderings and

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¹John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, Expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

²Robert Audi, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Michael Perry, *Under God? Religious Faith and Liberal Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Richard Rorty, 'Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31:1 (2003), pp. 141–149; Jürgen Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere', *European Journal of Philosophy* 14:1 (2006), pp. 1–25; Martha Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Gerald Gaus, *The Order of Public Reason: A Theory of Freedom and Morality in a Diverse and Bounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Kevin Vallier, *Liberal Politics and Public Faith: Beyond Separation* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

³John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁵Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics from the Great War to the War on Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

political implications of religion can be reduced to a universally identified pattern of relationship to state policies,⁶ or to formalistic and factual aspects of personalities and events. Presumably, many observers and commentators are merely mouthpieces for either the secular left or the religious right. Similarly, the opinions of politicians are driven mostly by vested interests and many academic scholars are too gripped by political correctness to provide any authoritative analysis or practical solutions.

Arguably, we must reverse the perspective and get rid of the fruitless philosophical debates between new liberalism and conservatism, which seem so enthusiastic about the demands of essential justice and the pursuit of an essential common good. It may be rather more profitable to think anthropologically why at a given time the community of a religious identity becomes a relevant medium for spiritual, cultural, social, or political mobilization. What local people hold for their identity and their history must be treated as a discursive ideological construction, for we can reveal its possible situational relevance or its sociological and political determinants. To build a relatively autonomous analysis of religious discourses, it is necessary to study the context that produces such ritualized discourses and practices, to convert the interpretations of the actors into data to be interpreted, and to incorporate in the subject of study as much their attempts to organize a memory as their strategies to balance or reverse power relationships. Far from politicizing and ethnicizing religious issues, a critical and analytical approach must reveal and de-essentialize the hidden ideological undercurrents of discourses mobilized around religious identity and political projects.

Extant research and a quite rich and inspiring literature provide sufficient evidence on the important and actively debated issues of the entanglement of historical, cultural and religious heritage with identity politics and the politics of ethno-religious ideologies from the late Ottoman Empire to the end of Communism in the Balkans.⁷ There is not the place here to review the steady rise of solid studies that after the 1990s address the ideological foundations and political impact of religious activity in East and Southeast Europe, neither the increasing publications that document the revitalization of religion and the de-secularization of Southeast European societies. I rather take issue with historical reconstructions to show the intricate network of the politics of religion through the ways in which beliefs collectively held by actors in local society are constructed as media events and public representations to forward or challenge ethno-political agendas. I follow an anthropological approach and ethnographic method, including sociological surveys on opinions and interpretations of media events, based mostly on research in print and social media.

Southeast Europe, including Albania, provides a colorful display of the political functions of religion in what might be called an unholy alliance between religious officials, state actors, and intellectual elites to gain political advantage by manipulating the souls of ordinary people in everyday interactions. To explore these dimensions, I focus on questions relating to religious and political identity by examining how ethno-political agendas

⁶Emilio Gentile, *Le religioni della politica: fra democrazie e totalitarismi* (Roma: Laterza, 2001); Hans Maier, ed., *Totalitarismus und Politische Religionen: Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs*, 3 vols., vol. 3 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2003); Anthony-James Gregor, *Totalitarianism and Political Religion: An Intellectual History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

⁷Peter Sugar, *Nationalism and Religion in the Balkans Since the 19th Century*, vol. 8, *Treadgold Papers in Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington, Jackson School of International Studies, 1996); Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nihil Obstat: Religion, Politics, and Social Change in East-Central Europe and Russia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

are developed. In particular, the legacy of Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity and the celebrations to mark the 1700th anniversary of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and the promulgation of the Edict of Milan are examined in the context of the constant struggles for the recognition of religious antiquity and moral superiority. Further examples include the way the religious legacies and the constant celebrations of the Serbian medieval Kingdom, Greek Rum Orthodoxy, and Kosovo medieval Myth, are used and misused by different politico-religious communities throughout the South-Eastern Europe. This article does not aim, however, to establish the truth about personalities, facts, or events. I do not aim either to be a part of the heated debate on the 'ownership' of Constantine and the various ethno-political claims to religious tolerance.

While the relations between religion and politics consume much of political philosophy and most of the areas specialists, it may be rather more profitable to think anthropologically of the functions of religion in society, considering both religion and politics as one and the same thing. Triggered by the ethnic conflict in former Yugoslavia, a common approach to religion assumes its deliberate use in warlike situations where *In Hoc Signo Vinces* comes to justify the political purpose of conflict.⁸ In turn, the increasing place that religion seems to have taken among Southeast European peoples, just as in current regional and international affairs, might elicit a closer attention to the inherent political function of religion where *In Hoc Signo Vinces* comes to signify the politics of influence and domination in religious and ecclesiastic disguise.

In this analysis, media events are conceptualized as collective actions in which individuals and groups of people focus their attention on one particular event, by drawing on certain historical themes and images, which cyclically perform a sense of collective identity, shared membership and moral beliefs.⁹ Such a consensual nature of media events should not underestimate how and why they developed into full-fledged media events in the first place. The narratives may tell us something about the ways in which local actors imagine their own social worlds, rather than a knowledge about events. Hence, the distinction between imagination and knowledge is important for understanding the distortion of representations. It implies a critical assessment of the narratives in newspaper publications and social media through an analysis of discursive practices and an investigation of wider social and cultural structures, including the question how such practices, events and texts are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power.

Constantine the Great

According to the early Church fathers, Lactantius and Eusebius, it is assumed that on 28 October 312 Constantine won the battle that paved him the way to Rome and secured him Emperor's throne after a dream showing *In Hoc Signo Vinces* 'in this sign you conquer', which was the *Chi-Rho* sign of Christ.¹⁰ What is significant in this evidence

⁸Mitja Velikonja, 'In Hoc Signo Vinces: Religious Symbolism in the Balkan Wars 1991–1995', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 17:1 (2003), pp. 25–40.

⁹Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Nick Couldry, Andreas Hepp, and Friedrich Krotz, eds., *Media Events in a Global Age* (London: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁰Raymond Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

of the early Church fathers is the capturing of a myth, which must have been very important to the growth of early Christianity. The early Christian movement had to seize Constantine's growing power and turn his imperial influence to protect the expansion and consolidation of the early Church authority. In fact, such a process led in February 313 to the Edict of Milan, in which Constantine granted Christianity with a status of *religio licita* within the Roman Empire. Even though Christianity did not yet gain the status of an official religion,¹¹ the Edict of Milan promoted a new religious worldview, one of religious tolerance and respect towards people with a different religious orientation.¹²

We may never know for sure what really happened, whether or not Constantine had a dream and won the battle of the Milvian Bridge under the sign of Christ. However, it is quite clear that Constantine was first and foremost a military commander and for one thing we can be absolutely sure that he won his battle using the best arms of his time.¹³ At the same time, we may think that he was also a skilled politician. Ever since 235 AD, rivals for the imperial throne had bid for support by either favoring or persecuting Christians. To increase his power, Constantine must have also benefited from many influential opinions of a time when the growing Christianity was no longer persecuted but tolerated.¹⁴ This must have been especially true in the Roman Southeast European provinces of which Constantine had a first-hand knowledge because of his own origin. Arguably, in political terms, Constantine must have used the Christian movement for power while 'maintaining the illusion of divine power',¹⁵ just as the Christians exploited the growing political power of Constantine to consolidate their religious movement, thus finding support mutually to each other. Actually, Constantine tolerated other religions, but he actively promoted Christianity.¹⁶ The importance of this topic in hotly debated among historians and theologians.¹⁷ In all cases, there must have been an unholy alliance between Constantine and early Christianity, the sole purpose of which was to increase authority and consolidate power, in the case of the disputed Emperor as in the case of the persecuted religious movement.

If the story of Constantine's acceptance of Christianity became important to the growth of early Christianity as well as to the growth of Constantine's own power, it also embedded a narrative of providence within a political act that would later serve as a foundation of identity politics for contemporary claims to the Balkan peoples being foundational to Christendom. Such moves are neither neutral nor unilateral. People often repurpose history and politics to legitimate their view of how the world is and should be, almost about anything, including religion. Though such forays into history may seem innocent, often their impact on political and everyday life is not. Apparently, an essential aspect of religion that ordinary people might have learned from history is that religious movements and political movements have something in common.

¹¹Mark Edwards, *Religions of the Constantinian empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹²Martin Wallraff, ed., *Religiöse Toleranz: 1700 Jahre nach dem Edikt von Mailand* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016).

¹³Elizabeth James, *Constantine the Great: Warlord of Rome* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012).

¹⁴Edward Siecienski, ed., *Constantine: Religion and Imperial Policy* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁵Samuel Slipp, *The Quest for Power: Religion and Politics* (Charlottesville, VA: Pitchstone, 2010).

¹⁶Marta Sordi, *I cristiani e l'impero romano* (Milano: Jaca Books, 2004).

¹⁷Peter Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010); John Roth, ed., *Constantine Revisited: Leithart, Yoder, and the Constantinian Debate* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013); Edward Smither, ed., *Rethinking Constantine: History, Theology, and Legacy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014).

The *Rum* Patriarch

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, pragmatic political reasons often glossed over in Islamic religious rewording forced the Ottomans to preserve and even extend the Byzantine status, authority and competences of the Orthodox Church ruling over the Orthodox communities. One of the first things that Mehmed the Conqueror did was to allow the Byzantine Church to elect a new Patriarch. Clearly, the Ottoman Sultan aimed to assure the loyalty of the Christian population and above all avoid them appealing to the West for liberation. To this aim, he approached the most anti-Western scholar he could find and in 1454, upon his order, Georges-Gennadios Scholarios was first ordained at a forced and non-canonical pace to the ranks of deacon, priest, Bishop and then Patriarch of the Orthodox Church without prior resolution by the Church Holy Synod.¹⁸ Similarly, in 1479, Mehmed II created a new Armenian patriarchal office in Istanbul appointing Joachim of Bursa as a Patriarch of Istanbul, in accordance with Ottoman policies of integrating non-Muslim subjects in the Ottoman Empire, but in contrast to their practice of sanctioning pre-existing religious offices and leaders without establishing new ones.¹⁹ In this case, as the Armenians had a spiritual center beyond the borders of the Empire and within the limits of Turkmen factions that could potentially turn them against Ottoman interests, the Ottomans forced its deportation from sensitive areas to the relative security of Istanbul.

In the Ottoman Empire, 'millet' became the technical term used for the organized religious-political communities recognized by the Sultan and enjoying certain rights of autonomy under their own leaders. The organization and composition of the largest and most important of the non-Muslim millets makes it clear that the former Orthodox Byzantine Church acquired substantial additional power. Remaining subjects to the Islamic state like all other non-Muslims, the Orthodox Christians came to be recognized administratively within the Ottoman *Rum Millet*, literally from *Romioi* 'Romans' (formerly Orthodox subjects of the Byzantine Empire). By accepting the status offered by the Ottomans, not only it preserved its Byzantine status and ecclesiastical organization, it also extended its rights and found ways to play an important role.

The *Rum* Patriarch became both spiritual leader and administrative ruler, or Ethnarch (*Milletbashi*), invested with civil and religious authority over all Orthodox Christians of the Empire.²⁰ He became part of the Ottoman administration, while the Orthodox Church was granted privileges based on the political and economic relations between the Ottoman administration and its Christian subjects. The Ottomans did not interfere in the internal organization of the Church, but in a stunning 1474 Patriarchal decision the Church was subjected to a new tax to the Sultan in a profound attempt to pragmatically anchor relations of interdependence.²¹ In return for its status, the Orthodox Church also incorporated the public functions of the Ottoman state into its religious pastoral and administrative practices, thereby securing a 'natural' acceptance of its condition by the Christian subjects of the Ottoman state.

¹⁸Marie-Hélène Blanchet, *Georges-Gennadios Scholarios (vers 1400-vers 1472): Un intellectuel orthodoxe face à la disparition de l'Empire byzantin* (Paris: Institut français d'études byzantines, 2008).

¹⁹Konstantinos Giakoumis, 'Dialectics of pragmatism in Ottoman domestic interreligious affairs', *Balkan Studies* 37 (2013): 81.

²⁰Halil Inalcik, 'The status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch under the Ottomans', *Turcica: Revue d'études turques*, no. 21–23 (1991).

²¹Giakoumis, op. cit., pp. 77–78.

The *Rum millet* meant the Orthodox Church and all its followers speaking different languages, including Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Rumanians, and Albanians. Though they may have been distinguished ethnically and linguistically, the considerable ethnic-linguistic variation strengthened the basic religious classification rather than the ‘racial’, ethnic or linguistic differences. Practically, the foundational myth of the *Rum millet* officially sanctioned the ecumenism of the former Byzantine Church, enlarged the jurisdictional authority of the *Rum*-aka-Ecumenical Patriarch within the hierarchical structure of the Eastern Churches, and facilitated the legitimation of Greek-speaking ecclesiastical elites over all Orthodox Christians in the Balkans.²² During the long centuries of Ottoman rule, the *Rum* Church acted as the official protector and administrator of the *Rum millet*, in which Greek had been the traditional language of church service and official communication. The Orthodox *Millet* became a basic form of Ottoman social organization and an indispensable source of identity, which conflated Greek ethnic identity with *Rum millet* identity. Belonging to this community became increasingly more important than ethnic origin and most people began to identify themselves simply as ‘Greek’ in the sense of being Orthodox.

At the time of Balkan nationalisms in the nineteenth century, the ideological orientation that emerged in the intellectual and urban class of Ottoman Greek Phanariots ‘tried to combine the nationalistic forces of Hellenism in a passionate if illogical alliance with the ecumenical traditions of Byzantium and the Orthodox Church’.²³ They re-conceptualized the supra-ethnic ‘Eastern Romanity’ of the *Rum millet* into a new, secular ethnic identity by considering ‘Greek’ all Orthodox Christians and arguing for the establishment of a future Greek-Byzantine state, which in their vision should include all Orthodox Christians of the Balkans.²⁴ Hailed as a ‘Great’ (*Megali*) Idea, this Greek megalomania was spread in a part of the urban populations of Vlach, Slavic and Albanian origins, who began to be perceived increasingly as ‘Greek’.

The single-minded official dedication to irredentism of the early Greek state may have been distracted by internal priorities and some reformers disavowed the principle of the ‘Megali-Idea’ altogether as utopian, while feeling that the state should pursue its improvement as an end in itself.²⁵ From 1839, within the framework of the *Tanzimat* Reformation that set in motion a process of secularization, the ecumenical ideology of the *Rum* Church became closely connected with the argument that the clergy should preserve the pre-eminent political position it held in the Orthodox *millet*.²⁶ As a result, on various occasions the *Rum* Patriarch may have found himself at loggerheads with the religious and national priorities of the Greek Megali-Idea.²⁷ The ecumenical ideology remained nevertheless identified with models of Patriarchal centralization that attempted to

²²Benjamin Braude, ed., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, With a New Introduction, Abridged ed. (Boulder, CO: Lynne-Rienner, 2014).

²³Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity: A Study of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from the Eve of the Turkish Conquest to the Greek War of Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 378–379.

²⁴Victor Roudometof, ‘From *Rum Millet* to Greek Nation: Enlightenment, Secularization, and National Identity in Ottoman Balkan Society, 1453–1821’, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 16:1 (1998), pp. 11–48.

²⁵Elli Skopetea, *Το Πρότυπο Βασίλειο και η Μεγάλη Ιδέα: Όψεις του εθνικού προβλήματος στην Ελλάδα (1830–1880)* [The Model Kingdom and the Megali Idea: Aspects of the National Question in Greece] (Athens: Polytyro, 1988).

²⁶Dimitris Stamatopoulos, ‘Ecumenical Ideology in the Orthodox Millet (19th–20th Century)’ in Lorans Tanatar-Baruh and Vangelis Kechriotis (eds) *Economy and Society on Both Shores of the Aegean* (Athens: Alpha Bank Historical Archives, 2010).

²⁷Thanos Veremis, ‘From the National State to the Stateless Nation 1821–1910’, *European History Quarterly* 19:2 (1989), pp. 140–144.

reconnect the imperial perspective with *Rum* ecumenism, in order to reunite the Orthodox world of the Ottoman Empire with the Orthodox world of the 'unredeemed Greeks'.

As early as in the 1830s, the cultivation of Greek national identity and Greek Megali-Idea became an integral part of the domestic and foreign policy of the newly independent Greek state. An internal dimension comprised stages and initiatives of nation building within the independent state of Greece and an external dimension involved the orientation of the Greek state toward the Greek-inhabited territories of the Ottoman Empire. State institutions like the Greek military, the educational network of Greek schools, including the University of Athens, and the nationalized Greek Church took on the task of Grecizing the diverse 'other' Greek Orthodox populations, through the linguistic homogenization of society both in the Greek state and in the 'unredeemed territories'.²⁸ Unavoidably, the dynamic interplay of these processes for the spread of Greek language and the homogenization of Greek culture presupposed a normative discourse of Greek nationalism that essentially supplied the most effective medium to legitimate both Greek national identity and Greek irredentism.

The Serbian Kingdom

Another noteworthy example is the two-hundred-years history of the medieval kingdom that consolidated Serbian tribal groups coming from Asia in their current dwelling places. The royal legacy provided Serbs their identity and their claims to the lands where they are currently settled, and this legacy is preserved and transmitted through the Serbian Orthodox Church, which in itself was nothing but a pure creation of the Serbian dynasty. Between Serbian and Albanian peoples, there are often fiery debates about the religious and ethnic origin of the founder of the Nemanjici dynasty in the late twelfth century who is said to have been Catholic and most likely without any substantial connection to other Serbian tribes. Not surprisingly, to the minds of ordinary people in Serbia, as it can be deduced from the fierce reaction in the Serbian local daily papers, these allegations quickly meant a 'scandal of the brutal usurpation of our [Serbian] dynasty' and another 'attack on Serbs'. The claim that the old Serbian dynasty, like the new Karadjordje dynasty of the nineteenth century, could be of Albanian blood is simply considered 'nonsense'.²⁹

Nevertheless, after his supposed conversion to Orthodox faith, the founder of the old Serbian dynasty began the tradition of building churches and monasteries that will play the most important role in the future for perpetuating the memory of his dynasty and which have served as outer limits to his holdings and as a means of subjugation of the local peoples. The resourceful diplomacy of his third son, the monk-cum-politician Sava, simultaneously reinforced the reign of his brothers and the autonomy of the Serbian Orthodox Church, by becoming its primate under the Patriarch of Byzantium. His own sanctification like the sanctification one after the other of almost all Serbian rulers from this Church more than anything else served to embed a sacred character to royal power. As saints, Serbian royal family joined the church liturgy and they were immortalized in frescoes within the churches and monasteries that they themselves

²⁸Paschalis Kitromilides, 'Imagined Communities and the Origins of the National Question in the Balkans', *European History Quarterly* 19:2 (1989), pp. 162–165.

²⁹'Napad na Srpstvo: Nemanjići i Karađorđe su poreklom Albanci!' *Kurir*, 29.03.2014, <http://www.kurir.rs/napad-na-srpstvo-nemanjici-i-karadorde-su-poreklom-albanci-clanak-1298687>.

built in Serbia and Kosovo. These frescoes clearly show their ambition for power directly sanctioned by God's will, a kind of power replica that could only be compared with the Byzantine imperial greatness. In fact, in the Easter Sunday of 1346, the most powerful king Dushan was self-crowned 'Emperor' (Tsar) of the Serbs, Greeks, Albanians and Bulgarians. This 'Emperor' did not restrain from strangling his own father in 1331 to take the throne. He is also said to have triggered the Byzantine intrigues and rivalries that paved the way to the first penetration of the Ottomans in the Balkans. But given that only the Patriarch of Byzantium could crown an 'Emperor', without the least dilemma he created his own Patriarch, thus establishing the Patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church, wholly independent from and of equal rights with the Greek-Byzantine Patriarchate.³⁰ In this way, much the same as Henry VIII established the Church of England, the independent Serbian Orthodox Church was created absolutely to sanction and perpetuate the legacy of a political power under which it could only exist.

Any ordinary Albanian, especially in Kosovo, will be quick to remember another similar myth that is used similarly to celebrate similar stories. Namely, on 28 June 1989, Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic used the 600th anniversary commemoration of the Kosovo Battle of 1389 to strengthen his power by exploiting the myth of the battle,³¹ probably not unlike Constantine once did with Christianity or the Nemanjici with their own Church. The narrative of a Christian loss, despite both sides suffering heavy losses, is reinterpreted by Serbian nationalist politics, from the nineteenth century until today, as the emblematic Christian Serbian sacrifice at the hands of Muslim Ottoman armies. Gatherings to commemorate this myth served exactly the politics of setting, validating and justifying the boundaries of Serbian holdings at the expense of other populations, as well as any means needed to enforce them.

Ethnic conflicts in former Yugoslavia

Far from being a Balkan peculiarity, the use and misuse of religious symbolism and mythological rhetoric during the ethnic conflicts of 1990s in former Yugoslavia is a very specific version and regional manifestation of a much broader process, in which religions have always been used and abused for political ends, even in the most advanced liberal democratic countries. Apparently, the mixing of religion and politics is the most enduring mean to the legitimation of power. In the specific context of former Yugoslavia, religious activists and officials engaged in a battle for the de-secularization of society. Political developments in the late 1980s provided them an excellent opportunity for the long-awaited re-Christianization and re-Islamization of the political and cultural identity of 'their' nations, in an effort to reconquer the social space that was denied to them by the previous atheist regime.³² The radicalization of religious fundamentalism rapidly became an important part of the dominant strategy in close alliance with identity politics. This total alliance between nationalist policies and religious institutions was of mutual benefit and religious legitimation became an important part of the process of the ethnicization of politics and the politicization of ethnicity.

³⁰Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

³¹Jason Edwards, 'Bringing in Earthly Redemption: Slobodan Milosevic and the National Myth of Kosovo', *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 18:sup1 (2015).

³²Velikonja, op. cit.

Although the role and influence of religious hierarchies before and during the wars in former Yugoslavia were quite different, all the warring parties employed religious symbolism in their political mobilization and military efforts. Opinions about the nationalist and militaristic role of religious institutions in former Yugoslavia from the late 1980s differ considerably from author to author. The Roman Catholic Church in Croatia has received a considerable amount of criticism, both in Croatia and overseas, for its connection with the conservative nationalism of the political regime.³³ The role of the Bosnian Islamic community was also very active in securing political allegiance and nationalist mobilization.³⁴ Often controversial Muslim protagonists of the war were afforded similar religious backing as their Christian counterparts. For some Islamic believers, Izetbegovic became a 'fighter for Islam', sent by God 'to lead the Muslims along the true path', or the first person after Muhammad to reveal and fulfill 'the ultimate truth', and even Saudi King Fahd awarded him with a medal for 'his contribution to the spread of Islam'.³⁵

The majority of commentators claim that the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church was more important and 'the most harmful'.³⁶ At the very beginning of 1980s, empirical evidence could not have proved that Orthodoxy was coming back to the social scene in the local religious areas in former Yugoslavia. However, it was in this period that Orthodoxy emerged from several decades of isolation in the margins of social and political life, especially after the events in Kosovo, which was to become the central social and political issue in former Yugoslavia and today Serbia. During this time, with a general politicization of culture in former Yugoslavia, Orthodoxy was also politicized as one of the most efficient spiritual resources of national homogenization and political mobilization for the conflicts to come. The collapse of socialism and the ethnic conflicts served as the most general social setting in which Orthodoxy was to regain its cultural domination and institutionalized significance and influence it used to have.

Serbian sociologists of religion proudly claim that there could have been no revival of Serbian national identity and the Serbian state without the revival of Orthodoxy. They cannot even refrain themselves from being proud of the Serbian Orthodox Church as 'not only a religious institution, but a national one as well, and probably the only institution that had never betrayed Serbian people throughout history'.³⁷ Actually in Bosnia, the Serbian Orthodox Church became a servant of religious nationalist militancy,³⁸ and remained loyal to Greater Serbian politics and ambitions. It is not accidental that the Greek Orthodox Church also sided publicly with the Serbian side.³⁹ Public support for the Serbian Orthodox brethren has been consistent with popular geopolitical thinking in Greece whereby the goal of forming a Balkan-wide Orthodox alliance against Muslim threats was widely circulated and discussed.⁴⁰ To this aim, the Serbian Orthodox

³³Alex Bellamy, 'The Catholic Church and Croatia's Two Transitions', *Religion, State & Society* 30:1 (2002).

³⁴Xavier Bougarel, *Survivre aux empires: islam, identité nationale et allégeances politiques en Bosnie-Herzégovine* (Paris: Karthala, 2015).

³⁵Velikonja, op. cit., p. 31.

³⁶Paul Mojzes, ed. *Religion and the war in Bosnia* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1998), 84.

³⁷Mirko Blagojevic, 'Desecularization of Contemporary Serbian Society', *Religion in Eastern Europe* 28:1 (2008): 42.

³⁸Michael Sells, *The bridge betrayed: religion and genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 79.

³⁹Takis Michas, *Unholy alliance: Greece and Milosevic's Serbia* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002).

⁴⁰Victor Roudometof, 'Eastern Orthodox Christianity and the uses of the past in contemporary Greece', *Religions: Open Access Journal of Theology* 2:2 (2011): 106.

Church did not refrain to glorify and sanctify the ethno-homicidal criminals who best served Serbian identity politics.⁴¹ Political and military leaders and war criminals like Karadzic and Mladic or Arkan received a flattering religious reputation. They described themselves as the defenders of 'our tribe and our Church',⁴² and high-ranking Serbian and Greek Orthodox dignitaries declared them 'the most prominent sons of our Lord Jesus Christ working for peace'.⁴³

Politicking over great legacies

The courtesies, exaltations, consecrations and celebrations point to the mutually reinforcing and locally contextualized nature of the politics of religion, and the ease with which nationalist tropes emerge as ordained and legitimate, while incursions into history hold political clout to the extent they make the present seem purposeful. Histories are not without bias and questions about the primacy of different Churches and cultural heritages are often answered with political ends in mind.

In April 2012, not without reason the Vatican organized a first world congress on 'Constantine the Great and the Roots of Europe' to mark the 1,700th anniversary of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, followed by a second congress held in Milan in 2013 for the 1,700th anniversary of the promulgation of the Edict of Milan.⁴⁴ In October 2013, the Serbian Orthodox Church organized in Nish, the birthplace of Constantine, an even larger world conference and exhibition.⁴⁵ Serbs can also look to the churches and monasteries built by the Nemanjici dynasty to claim a territorial holding,⁴⁶ just as they look to the Kosovo myth to speak of a Christian sacrifice in the past,⁴⁷ and construct the Muslim other in the present.⁴⁸ Similarly, Albanians look to the efforts of the Greek Orthodox Church in obliterating the use of Albanian language as an example of systematic oppression. The political functions of religion represent both the imagined and the real state of everyday life, while the celebrations strongly recall the unholy alliance between religion and politics, which in each case enable and reinforce each other.

A series of international conferences are organized annually in Kosovo, to which I also participated, respectively in Prishtina (May 2012), Peja (May 2013) and Prizren (May 2014), where religious beliefs and interfaith dialogue are extensively debated as a tool for democratic development at the international level. Notably, the first conference was organized by the American University in Prishtina to commemorate the 1,700th anniversary of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and the legacy of Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity. In my presentation, I asked why such a conference was organized in

⁴¹Florian Bieber, 'Nationalist mobilization and stories of Serb suffering: The Kosovo myth from 600th anniversary to the present', *Rethinking History* 6:1 (2002).

⁴²Mojzes, *Religion and the war in Bosnia*, 89.

⁴³Sells, *The bridge betrayed: religion and genocide in Bosnia*, 85.

⁴⁴'Academics in Rome to Mark Anniversary of Constantine's Conversion', *Zenit*, 17.04.2012, <https://zenit.org/articles/academics-in-rome-to-mark-anniversary-of-constantine-s-conversion/>.

⁴⁵Dragisha Bojovic, ed. *Sveti Car Konstantin i Hrišćanstvo: Međunarodni naučni skuo povodom 1700. godišnjice Milanskog edikta (31 maj - 2 jun 2013)*, 2 vols. vols. (Nish: Centre of Church Studies, 2013); Ivana Popovic and Bojana Boric-Breshkovic, *Constantine the Great and the Edict of Milan 313: the birth of Christianity in the Roman provinces on the soil of Serbia* (Belgrade: National Museum in Belgrade, 2013).

⁴⁶Judah, op. cit.

⁴⁷Branimir Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

⁴⁸Milica Bakic-Hayden, 'National Memory as Narrative Memory: The Case of Kosovo' in Maria Todorova (ed) *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), pp. 25–40.

Kosovo.⁴⁹ Of course, Constantine was of Balkan origin and Dardanian descent, being born in Nish, located within the Illyrian province of Dardania, which corresponds approximately to present-day Kosovo. In fact, this reason was stated very clearly during the conference. Similar events were also organized the following year in Tirana, in Prishtina, and even in remote localities in Kosovo,⁵⁰ receiving great acclaim in Albanian and Kosovar local media and public opinion.⁵¹ These celebrations forward political agendas and claims of identity politics hoping to find legitimacy in religious history. Among other things, they claim to prove Kosovo and the Albanians as a land and a people of religious tolerance, since Constantine's story is ultimately a story of religious tolerance. These are not merely neutral characterizations of the past, but rather political claims to the moral superiority of one group over another, competing claims made by all, whether Albanians, Serbs, Greeks, or Macedonians.

In April 2013, a Symposium titled 'Constantine: 1700th Anniversary of the Edict of Milan and the Religious Freedom' was also organized in Tirana at the initiative of the Catholic Church with the support of major Albanian research institutions. In his address, the Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha acclaimed of Constantine the Great: 'Illyrian in origin, Dardanian in descent, in this anniversary, he makes every Albanian proud'.⁵² In September 2013, another three-day Symposium on Constantine and the Edict of Milan was organized in Prishtina, again at the initiative of the Catholic Church in Kosovo with the support of Kosovo major research institutions. The explicit aim was to show that 'the historical legacy of Constantine the Great and the Edict of Milan are relevant to the historical memory of Kosovo and its European identity'. In his address, Kosovo Foreign Minister Enver Hoxhaj emphasized that Constantine the Great was a native of the Illyrian Dardania: 'Given the Western scientific line of thinking about *our* Illyrian origin, as one of the oldest nations in Europe, Constantine the Great is part of the historical consciousness of the citizens of Kosovo and the Albanians wherever they live'. He is 'the symbol of *our* European roots' and his legacy 'is very precious for *our* Illyrian-Albanian world'.⁵³

During the conference lunch in May 2012, the Serbian translator who was from Nish, the birthplace of Constantine in present-day Serbia, told me that people in Nish know where the Palace of Constantine is located and some want to dig it out to build a monument, but they have not yet the necessary funding. It could be argued that today's Serbs in Nish have nothing to do with Constantine, as he was an Illyrian and in Illyrian Dardania there were not yet any Slavic people. Surely, in terms of identity, the people of Constantine's era are not today's people. Yet, nothing prevents Serbs or Albanians from trying to recover a glorious past that connects them to times and figures of greatness like Constantine. Surely, there is no need to deal here with the 'right' of Albanians to consider themselves the descendants of the Constantine's Illyrian fellow countrymen, even though

⁴⁹The politics of religion and the construction of instrumental realities and identities against an imagined future of the Balkans', *Faiths in Kosovo: Past, Present, Future*, International Conference Commemorating the 1700th anniversary of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and the Conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity, American University in Kosovo, Prishtina, 15–17 May 2012, <http://youtu.be/APpTBffsjfc>.

⁵⁰'Konstandini Ilir, Edikti i Milanos dhe Shqiptarët', 21.09.2013, <https://www.facebook.com/katedralja.org/photos/a.10150139439732494.331320.59216752493/10151957634782494/>.

⁵¹'Teksti Original i Ediktit të Milanos (Latinisht e Shqip)', 19.02.2013, <https://www.facebook.com/katedralja.org/photos/a.10150139439732494.331320.59216752493/10151541268837494/>.

⁵²*Konstandini: 1700 vjetori i Ediktit të Milanos dhe Liria fetare*, Tirana: Albanian Episcopal Conference, 2014, p. 29.

⁵³Press Releases & Media, 'Symposium: Edict of Milan – Constantine the Great, 2013', <http://www.interfaithkosovo.org/constantine-the-great-edict-of-milan-symposium/>.

this 'right' cannot reasonably be with the Serbs. Still, everyday talk among ordinary Albanians, written press, social media, and blogging is constantly full of that. Likewise, Serbian fiction is instrumental to this aim. Dejan Stojiljkovic's novel *Kostandinovo raskršće* 'Constantine's crossing' (2009), about the quest of Constantine's sword in Nish, remains one of the most widely read books in Serbian public libraries.⁵⁴ Even scientific events of electrochemistry become a good opportunity to remind others of Constantine's greatness in Serbian land.⁵⁵

What is more, for whatever reason the Serbs advance their claims to Constantine, this will annoy the Greeks, because of their own claims of an elective affinity with Constantine and his alleged Christian Orthodox legacy. During the Prishtina conference, the Greek Envoy to Kosovo noted very well such a connection that according to him is indisputable. The recent dispute between Greece and North Macedonia over the very ownership of the name of 'Macedonia' has strikingly illustrated that conflicts arising around the possession of symbols, rituals and 'true' names may occur in the so-called 'modern' Europe, similarly to what is well documented for the once-called 'primitive' Melanesia.⁵⁶ This may really seem like another fight over intangible properties of names, personalities, events, or legacies, but we know very well how it happens and what is going on still over another 'Greater' than Constantine between Greece and North Macedonia. Both seem to have good reason to fight with each other for their own Alexander the Great. Why not for Constantine the Great? This suggests that seeing Constantine as someone native of the region and fighting for his belonging is not only naïve, but also politically dangerous.

The paradox of religious tolerance

The celebration of Constantine and the Edict of Milan was also marked in North Macedonia. The reconstruction of St. Constantine and Helen Church was consecrated at its supposed original location on the Macedonia Square in the Center of Skopje, but also in other North Macedonian towns. In May 2013, a World Conference was organized in Skopje on issues of Freedom and Dignity as basic values in interpersonal, interreligious and intercultural relations. In September 2013, a formal meeting and a holy liturgy took also place at the St. Sophia Church in Ohrid. However, the current disputes and discord with the Serbian Orthodox Church that does not recognize the Macedonian Orthodox Church could not fail to affect the celebration of the Edict of Milan in North Macedonia.⁵⁷ In his Easter address, the Macedonian Archbishop highlighted explicitly the main message of the Edict of Milan in the context of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. 'This is an event that should unify all Christians, and be our encouragement and reminder for strengthening and developing unity as well as overcoming our differences and misunderstandings that still exist among Christ's followers'.⁵⁸ Blatantly, the representatives of the

⁵⁴<http://www.konstantinovoraskrsce.com/>.

⁵⁵*Second Regional Symposium on Electrochemistry: South-East Europe Program & Book of Abstracts*, Belgrade, 06-10/06/2010, p. 32, http://www.shd.org.rs/RSE-SEE_2/RSE-SEE_2-Book_of_Abstracts.pdf.

⁵⁶Simon Harrison, *Stealing People's Names: History and Politics in a Sepik River Cosmology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵⁷Gjoko Gjorgjevski, 'Macedonian Orthodox Church in the Context of Balkan and European Orthodoxy', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 37:4 (2017), pp. 1–16.

⁵⁸Ruzhica Cacanaska and Maja Angelovska, 'The Edict of Milan Through the Prism of Students at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Macedonia', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 34:1 (2014), p. 4.

Macedonian Church were not invited at the celebrations in Serbia, but Church dignitaries in North Macedonia pointed out that they, as an Orthodox Church, 'shall celebrate the jubilee appropriately'.

A sociological research on opinions and interpretations among students at the University of Skopje Faculty of Orthodox Theology on these issues showed that they also commented on the relation between religion and politicking, while they mentioned a number of 'weak spots' in the current actions of Orthodox religious institutions in the Balkans. North Macedonian students of Orthodox theology followed these media events both in print media and in social networks in North Macedonia as in other Southeast European countries.⁵⁹ Some of them talked about their 'zealous' online discussion with people from neighboring countries. Others sent their extensive email discussion with 'colleagues and fellow-believers' from Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and Greece, in which the 'established positions' were highlighted, as well as the 'awareness of the need for additional studying of the historical data basis with a particular emphasis on the Edict as an act of tolerance'. Yet others pointed out that even though they start from similar historical basis, the problem is that they interpret them differently.

All agree on the great symbolical influence that the Edict of Milan continues to have on Christianity, but often there are no 'actions' conform to such symbolism. To their opinion, it is very important 'to refer back to the Edict of Milan, not just as a historical document but as an act that provided Christianity with new attire, stirred its development into a new direction and gave it great power'. The Edict of Milan must have brought 'drastic changes', most of which were good, especially before Christianity was declared a state religion and when the believers distinguished themselves with 'dedication and love'. However, after Christianity became a state religion, the 'passion for it' declined and 'people are no longer ready to give their lives for it'. Instead, 'various divisions and hidden goals take its meaning to different directions, and one just needs to read the statements and comments of many church dignitaries from the Balkans to notice what is happening now with the Edict of Milan'. Many current events in Christian Orthodoxy 'are a result of a great deal of irresponsibility of the religious leaders'. Some may even believe that 'the significance of this document increasingly fades away in respect to current events, and sometimes it is not the best answer to refer back to it and to glorify it', especially when people are now 'trying to use religion to secure for themselves a better position in society'.⁶⁰

More blatantly, after the inauguration of the Resurrection Cathedral in Tirana in June 2014, where the Serbian flag was also briefly but aggressively displayed,⁶¹ the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church stated for a national TV channel in Albania that 'Kosovo is the sacred land of Serbia'.⁶² In Albanian public opinions, this was characterized as a 'brutal and unscrupulous provocation',⁶³ which claimed at showing a kind of politics, in this case

⁵⁹ibid.

⁶⁰quoted in *ibid.*, 11–13.

⁶¹'Shenjtërimi i Katedrales Ngjallja e Krishtit shoqërohet me incidente', *Dita*, 01.06.2014, <http://www.gazetadita.al/shenjtërimi-i-kishes-ngjallja-e-krishtit-ne-ceremoni-kreret-e-ortodoksise-boterore/>; 'Shpaloset flamuri serb para Katedrales ortodokse n'midis Tirane', *Presheva Jonë*, 01.06.2014, <http://www.preshevajone.com/shteti-shqiptar-ne-rrezik-shpaloset-flamuri-serb-para-katedrales-ortodokse-nmidis-tirane/>.

⁶²'Irinej: Kosova, e shenjtë për Serbinë', *Top Channel TV*, 01 June 2014, <http://top-channel.tv/lajme/artikull.php?id=278998>, <https://youtu.be/mF48ld7PxCw>.

⁶³'Tirana dhe Prishtina në këmbë kundër kryepeshkopit serb, Berisha e shpall armik, Rama e sulmon ashpër, tension në Kosovë', *Gazeta Express*, 03.06.2014, <http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/tirana-dhe-prishtina-ne-kembe-kunder-kryepeshkopit-serb-berisha-e-shpall-armik-rama-e-sulmon-ashper-tension-ne-kosove-18533/>.

a nationalist politics, in blatant support to the territorial and political interests of Serbia over the state of Kosovo. The Albanian Prime Minister was outraged and offended and at his meeting with the primates of World Orthodoxy, he demonstrably pointed his finger to the Serbian Patriarch: ‘Your colleague abused our hospitality, he derogated our religious celebration day and he changed the evidence of our religious coexistence into an outdated politicking issue’.⁶⁴

Among Albanians, it is not unusual that Muslims and Christians celebrate each other’s religious festivals.⁶⁵ This reflects a long tradition of religious coexistence in a country where even members of the same family may follow different faiths.⁶⁶ In September 2014, Pope Francis described religious tolerance in Albania as ‘a precious treasure’ to preserve, while he held a Sunday mass in front of 300.000 people, many of them Muslims.⁶⁷ In January 2015, senior clerics from the four Albanian main faiths – Sunni Muslim, Bektashi Muslim, Orthodox Christian and Catholic Christian – walked arm in arm at the memorial march in Paris after the attacks on Charlie Hebdo.⁶⁸

However, the long Albanian tradition of religious coexistence faces a challenge from the rise of an intolerant strain of Islam among a minority of Albanians, which has even resulted in some jihadist seedbeds. So far, the tensions raised by radicalization have been confined to vitriolic online debates, with some condemning any display of Muslim identity and others accusing them of not understanding the Islamic faith.⁶⁹ Similarly, there is a clear note of criticism in the interpretation of the Edict of Milan by the North Macedonian students of Orthodox theology who see it first and foremost through the prism of contemporary religious living that throughout history has been pervaded by ‘intolerance’ and numerous conflicts and divisions in the Balkans. Not inviting representatives of the Macedonian Orthodox Church to the celebration in Serbia ‘is a direct lack of understanding of what we believe Constantine did, while here you have a politicization of the dispute’.⁷⁰

In everyday discussions among Albanians, religious tolerance is also only theoretical and may seem quite far from practical life. For some, ‘we are normal people until there are no religious people, but at the moment the religious-minded come, the normal disappear, especially when they point to whom they call the heathen’. For others, any forced conviction turns into a criminal action. ‘If through the violent denial of religions the Communists replaced people’s fear of the Lord with the fear of the Dictator, there is a reason to consider atheism as a criminal communist belief following Enver Hoxha’s criminal madness’. Yet others are convinced there are hundreds of thousands of people who

⁶⁴Rama kritikon patriarkun serb: Shpërfille besimin, na ke fyer!, *A1Report-Shqiptarja*, 02.06.2014, <http://shqiptarja.com/news.php?IDNotizia=217677&NomeCategoria=home&Titolo=rama-kritikon-patriarkun-serb-shp-rfille-besimin-na-ke-fyer&IDCategoria=1&reply=384881&page=1>.

⁶⁵Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo* (London: Hurst, 2000).

⁶⁶Giovanni Cimbalò, *Pluralismo confessionale e comunità religiose in Albania* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2012).

⁶⁷Papa Françesku në Shqipëri, 21.09.2014, <http://www.oranews.tv/vendi/papa-francesku-miresevjen-ne-shqiperi-ora-news-ndjek-live-viziten-historike/>.

⁶⁸Marshimi, harmonia fetare çudit Parisin, duartrokiten 4 klerikët shqiptarë, *Shqiptarja*, 11/01/2015, <http://shqiptarja.com/aktualitet/2731/marshimi-harmonia-fetare-cudit-parisin-duartrokiten-4-klriket-shqiptare-265002.html#sthash.b961LdaY.dpuf>.

⁶⁹Albert Doja, ‘Religionspolitischer Alltag im Südosteuropa’, *RGOW: Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West* 45:2 (2017), pp. 24–27. Similar debates regarding a certain apology of Islam also plague public opinions in Western Europe. See: Albert Doja, ‘Débat: Pourquoi certains penseurs de l’islam font fausse route’, *The Conversation*, 18 March 2019, <https://theconversation.com/debat-pourquoi-certains-penseurs-de-lislam-font-fausse-route-111352>.

⁷⁰Cacanaska and Angelovska, op. cit., p. 14.

abuse falsely as ‘pious believers of God’. They follow religious rituals, worship God and confess their sins before a priest, thinking they wash themselves before God, whereas just out of the church or the mosque, they do not only commit minor sins of human nature, but criminal and barbaric murder or incitement to bloody conflicts causing numerous victims’.⁷¹

Religion as a cultural and political system

The philosophical and anthropological problems raised by the various ways in which religion and politics may intersect, as I explore in more detail elsewhere,⁷² have been important in previous eras, especially the early modern era, even though some discussions have been more pressing for contemporary political thought. The topic of establishment of a church versus its complete separation from state has been central to political thought in the West since at least the days of Constantine. The Latin concept of *tolerantia* was also a highly developed political and judicial concept in medieval scholastic theology and canon law, used to ‘denote the self-restraint of a civil power’ in the face of heretics, Jews, Muslims, and other social groups like lepers, witches, or prostitutes,⁷³ even though toleration ‘as a government-sanctioned practice’ is not attested before the sixteenth century.⁷⁴ In the wake of the Enlightenment and the Protestant Reformation, European societies wrestled with determining what roles church and state should play in each other’s sphere, while humanist thinkers were formulating legal codes and theories of religious toleration in order to limit both government and church coercive actions.

A distinction developed between civil tolerance, concerned with the policy of the state towards religious dissent, and ecclesiastical tolerance, concerned with the degree of diversity tolerated within a particular church.⁷⁵ In modern parlance, toleration is analyzed as a liberal view of human rights, which for a long time has been the most prevalent argument of liberal philosophers, who conceive of toleration as a pragmatic response or what Rawls calls ‘overlapping consensus’ to the fact of diverse metaphysical views and comprehensive schemes of practice.⁷⁶ The new liberalism seems to imply that it is wrong for government to discriminate in favor of or against any form of society animated by a definite conception of the good. Although there are many reasons to be tolerant, traditional discussions have emphasized the respect for autonomy, pedagogical concerns, a general commitment to pacifism, and other values that are thought to be good for human flourishing, including a sense of self-conscious philosophical modesty about one’s ability to judge the beliefs and actions of others.⁷⁷ A further concern for racial equality, gender neutrality, an end of prejudice, respect for cultural and ethnic difference, and a general commitment to multiculturalism

⁷¹Toleranca në provë: Shqipëria përballë sfidës së radikalizimit’, *Mapo*, 10.12.2015, <http://www.mapo.al/2015/12/toleranca-ne-prove-shqiperia-perballe-sfides-se-radikalizimit>.

⁷²Albert Doja, ‘The Unholy Ethics of Religious Politics: A Contrastive Account from Political Philosophy and Political Anthropology’, *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, Forthcoming: under review (2020).

⁷³Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500–1700* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 234.

⁷⁴H.A. Drake, ‘Lambs into Lions: Explaining Early Christian Intolerance’, *Past & Present* 153:1 (1996), pp. 3–36.

⁷⁵John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558–1689* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 11–12.

⁷⁶Rawls, op. cit.

⁷⁷Andrew Fiala, ‘Toleration’, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/tolerati/>.

have fueled ongoing debates about the nature of toleration in the age of globalization and homogenization.⁷⁸

In itself, however, the notion of toleration implies a certain disrespect as it is directed toward something perceived as negative. It is often about absurd beliefs and foolish acts, which we have the power to negate as undesirable, false or at least inferior, but we deliberately refrain from negation and we tolerate them even though we know them to be absurd and foolish.⁷⁹ Philosophical discussions on the paradox of tolerance also show that most minority religious groups who are the beneficiaries of tolerance are often intolerant, at least in some respects,⁸⁰ while 'pure tolerance' that permits all may promote totalitarianism and the tyranny of a majority, or its ideal of state neutrality may turn into another hegemonic ideology.⁸¹ Today there are strains of conservatism that argue for the establishment of church and what Marcuse called a 'repressive tolerance' by emphasizing the ethical benefits of a substantial social cohesion, especially with respect to adherence to certain values that are claimed to accrue to the political system or society at large.⁸²

The effects of democracy that ground political authority in the rational consent of the people rather than in divine authorization, together with religious criticism and secularism, have not yet resulted in the disappearance or privatization of religion from public life and political culture. The same can be said for the general commitment to religious diversity, the demands of justice and the pursuit of the common good that include principles of toleration. The relation between religion and politics continues to be an important theme in political philosophy, despite the emergent consensus both among political theorists and in practical political contexts on the right to freedom of conscience and on some sort of separation between church and state. This also implies the need for society to be unwilling to tolerate unjustified religious beliefs about morality, spirituality and politics, especially beliefs that promote violence.

Inadvertently, ongoing philosophical debates between new liberalism and conservatism on the politics of religion and religious tolerance seem to come dangerously close to theological apologetics considering that we have religion because religion is true and that we are the kind of beings that can see and receive the truth. People may also believe their religion is a moral good and that they are the sort of people who appreciate and promote it. Albanians also seem to believe they are tolerant because tolerance is the best of the common good.⁸³ Whatever these assertions might mean, they could hardly satisfy social scientists and anthropologists. Not only because they may not share theologians' views and people's beliefs, or because the purpose of a social scientific approach cannot be the apologetics of religion, even not that of religious tolerance. More simply, the ethnographic experience shows that different people in different times and places have seen, have received and have appreciated many of such truths and goods that are very different from one another.

⁷⁸Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Odysseys: Navigating the New International Politics of Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷⁹Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty, Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁸⁰Michael Walzer, *On toleration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 80–81.

⁸¹Herbert Marcuse, 'Repressive Tolerance' in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 81–123.

⁸²Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, Rev. 3rd ed. (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2002).

⁸³Albert Doja, 'The Everyday of Religion and Politics in the Balkans' in David Montgomery (ed) *Everyday Life in the Balkans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), pp. 321–336. doi:10.2307/j.ctv80cbk7.36.

Since all truths and goods are relative, we ought to be tolerant of those who hold different points of view or we ought to know the truth and the good in their specific cultural and social situations. From an anthropological perspective, when we think and talk about religion and tolerance, we are dealing with some very different things that must not get confused. First, we have to do with the truth of God, which we can believe that it is as we are told or we may leave it in its own sanctity. Second, when we talk about religion, we are dealing above all with religious officials and religious institutions that are like politicians and patrons of power and authority. In Albania, they are those who officiate in Greek or in Arabic, even though the politics of religion can be felt more profoundly at the level of everyday interactions. When we talk about religion and religious tolerance, only a few are believers, and not all of them are necessarily tolerant or intolerant, which is not their fault, and ‘Lord shall forgive them, for they do not know what they do!’ Finally, when we think and talk about religion and religious tolerance, we are dealing with the large mass of ordinary people. In most cases, the definition of their religious affiliation and identity is a political issue for the entrepreneurs of social groups, ethnic minorities or religious communities where any individual is taken to belong.

The various ways in which the social and cultural functions of religion are distributed and accomplished in society show that religion plays always an important political role. Religion does not only fill individual psychological and emotional needs, provide explanations of the origins of cultural institutions, and soothe immediate problems. It is also the source of rules, norms, and ultimate sanctions, either filling needs of social cohesion and perpetuation or providing motivations of rebellion and social transformation. As I explored in more detail elsewhere,⁸⁴ religion shows human beings as builder of symbolic worlds whose function is to serve as a political balance to the rest of social life. One reason for the importance of this topic in both political philosophy and political anthropology is that religions often make strong claims on people’s allegiance. Simply put, to get the belief and authority granted in faith, religious leaders need followers who believe in the holy word, just as to get the power granted in politics, politicians need voters who believe in the promised policy. From this standpoint, as I showed more specifically in the case of Bektashism,⁸⁵ the political readjustment of religion may show how the transfer from the religious to the political domain points to an ideological dimension that might be hidden behind categorical discourses and authoritative doctrines.

The deeply political significance of religion becomes even more apparent when looking at the extent to which contemporary societies are at an important crossroad that requires making bold choices. Whether in West or in Southeast Europe, they are faced with an increasing competition between different religions to obtain people’s souls. The Albanians, whether in Albania or in Kosovo, are undergoing radical transformations in almost every area, every aspect, and every detail, even though in the first place this tells more about the dynamic vitality of transformations than about the outcomes. At the same time, social life both in Albania and in Kosovo is experiencing radical destruction in almost any field,

⁸⁴Albert Doja, ‘Histoire et dialectique des idéologies et significations religieuses’, *The European Legacy: Towards New Paradigms* 5:5 (2000), pp. 663–686. doi:10.1080/713665519.

⁸⁵Albert Doja, ‘A political history of Bektashism from Ottoman Anatolia to Contemporary Turkey’, *Journal of Church and State* 48:2 (2006), pp. 421–450, doi:10.1093/jcs/48.2.423; Albert Doja, ‘A Political History of Bektashism in Albania’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions [Politics, Religion & Ideology]* 7:1 (2006), pp. 83–107, doi:10.1080/14690760500477919; Albert Doja, ‘Spiritual Surrender: From Companionship to Hierarchy in the History of Bektashism’, *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 53:2 (2006), pp. 448–510. doi:10.1163/156852706778941996.

especially in terms of social and moral values. All this dynamic transformation and destruction is clearly reflected everywhere, including religious belongings and traditional affiliations. Different religious traditions challenge coexistence and tolerance in everyday life, while traditional affiliations of religious belongings are constantly challenged by open proselytizing policies that are eagerly taken over by religious organizations of any kind.

The concept of religious identity cannot be taken uncritically to imply a self-explanatory religious belonging. One cannot simply accept that Orthodox Albanians, for instance, are Greek because of the claim that they practice a Greek-Byzantine rite, just as one cannot accept that they are Muslims because of the claim that a majority are said to belong to Islam, nor they are Muslims or Christians because they may say 'I am Muslim' or 'I am Christian'. The prominence of religious belonging is evident when a religious label is attached and when religious identity is emphasized by the very act of religious belonging. Only then cultural behavior and religious practices and values seem marked within one or another religion almost as a matter of course. As I showed elsewhere,⁸⁶ what is important is not the question 'who are' the Albanians, whether they are Muslims or Christians, whether they are tolerant or intolerant, nor to understand the intensity or the nature of their religious beliefs. It seems more useful to understand how their religious identity is of use to them, and to understand whether, when, how and why a particular identification may be preferable to another, for example religious belonging as opposed to other possible means of identifying people.

As we know since the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*,⁸⁷ what people chose to do in terms of one or another way of identifying themselves depends on the social situations in which the identification becomes organizationally relevant. As I showed more specifically in the context of Albanian society, such an approach may be useful to refine the meaning of religious and moral values,⁸⁸ in relation with the social organization and the social transformation of a given society.⁸⁹ As I showed more specifically in a wider Southeast European context, it may also reveal the discriminatory and stereotyping ideologies that lie behind the categorizing processes of religious affiliations in local, regional or international contexts.⁹⁰

Conclusion

While analyzing historical reconstructions and public celebrations of religious and political legacies in a number of Southeast European countries, the aim of this article was to frame an argument about the political uses of religion. An articulate analysis of the main philosophical reflections about the contentious relationships between religion and politics, linked to a careful examination and historical contextualization of media events

⁸⁶Albert Doja, 'The Politics of Religion in the Reconstruction of Identities: The Albanian Situation', *Critique of Anthropology* 20:4 (2000), pp. 421–438. doi:10.1177/0308275X0002000404.

⁸⁷Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969).

⁸⁸Albert Doja, 'Honneur, Foi et Croyance: approche linguistique anthropologique des valeurs morales et religieuses', *Anthropos: International Review of Anthropology and Linguistics* 106:1 (2011), pp. 161–172. jstor/23031808.

⁸⁹Doja, op. cit.

⁹⁰Albert Doja, 'Instrumental Borders of Gender and Religious Conversions in the Balkans', *Religion, State & Society* 36:1 (2008), pp. 55–63. doi:10.1080/09637490701809738.

in the perspective of political anthropology, can result in a more critical understanding of the political functions of religion. I argued for a critical approach to the politics of religion by focusing on the discourses and processes that define the media events of public celebrations and historical reconstructions. This article could not possibly exhaust the rich and complex topic of the politics of religion, and certainly, a number of questions remain open. I offer here a localized account of specific reflections on historical reconstructions and everyday public discussions, confronted to the actual tense situation in the Balkans, which may be an indication of the unholy alliance between the politics of religion and religious entrepreneurs.

Throughout the Balkans, religious stories of Albanians, Serbs, Greeks, and others normally claim moral and political heritage by selectively drawing upon history to infuse the everyday life of ordinary people with claims of legitimacy and belonging. The way religious leaders tell their stories and celebrate media events to promote their political claims significantly affects the everyday of the politics of religion, while the escalation of religious aggressive policies are aimed to radicalize belonging to one or another religion. In this context, the performative practice of certain religious and political discourses transform them into media events to construct a representation of religion, which is used increasingly as a justification to occupy the public liberal space, which often lead to the use of violence. It is exactly under these conditions that the essentialism and fundamentalism of religious and moral values are reaching their peak. Ultimately, the side effect of this situation seems to be a potential underestimation of the pressing problems at both local, regional and global levels, for we ought to know, not only how and why it works, but also how to deal against the instrumental use of the religious politics of nationalism and fundamentalism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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