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Religious History and Culture of the Balkans

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Introduction

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In her well-known travelogue, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Dame Rebecca West recounts being awakened in her Paris hotel room by the sounds of slapping and sobbing, followed by a woman's accusative cry, "Balkan! Balkan!" West does not indicate whether the woman's vociferations arose from pain or pleasure, but as literary reviewer Peter Maas observes, "Balkan is a geopolitical term that signifies more than a place . . . If the woman had shouted 'Mideast! Mideast!' or 'Australia! Australia!' she wouldn't have been saying much. But 'Balkan! Balkan!' is something else" (Maas).

European travelogues have long characterized the Balkan region as among the most alluring destinations in all of Europe, at least in part because it is one of Europe's most culturally and religiously diverse regions.¹ In fact, it is perhaps one of the few places in Europe

¹ There is no consensus – scholarly or popular – over the geographical boundaries of the Balkans (Veznekov). For example, inhabitants living toward the northwestern end of the triangle-shaped peninsula (Croatia, Slovenia, and the western half of Bosnia and Herzegovina) often reject the designation, preferring to identify with central European, specifically Austrian culture. Sometimes Greece and western Turkey are also excluded. During the Cold War period, western observers sometimes extended the designation northward along the eastern side of the

where religion and culture are virtually synonymous. Situated at the crossroads between East and West, its dark forested mountains, plains, and plateaus, steeped in blood and beauty, remain an ethereal mystery to westerners attracted to the ubiquity of its monasteries and mosques; legends of vampires and other supernatural phenomena; the lilting joy and sadness of gypsy violins; and the harder realities of politically-motivated ethnic and religious violence.²

The articles assembled here combine to convey something of Maas's "something else." They began as papers presented by invited Balkan scholars called to participate in a symposium titled "Currents and Crosscurrents: The Religious History and Culture of the Balkans," convened in Bucharest on June 18-19, 2018. The symposium was organized as part of this writer's Creighton University Presidential Global Initiative grant project, which brought together ten scholars from six different Southeast European nations – Romania, Greece, Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Poland – who presented their papers before an audience of ten Creighton University applicants selected from among its faculty, staff, students, and alumni to take part in the project's Balkan immersion experience.³

By all accounts, the symposium exceeded expectations in terms of the quality, depth, and breadth of the subject matter; the collegial integration of presenters and topics; and the intellectual benefits for its audience. Over the course of both days, the Creighton contingent was exposed to the religious texts, images, spaces, mores, music, dress, holidays, architecture, and monuments of the Balkan region's Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews; Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians; Slavic, Albanian, and Turkish Muslims; Roma; and various other religious and ethnic communities forced to straddle lines imposed upon the region by the modern world's formidable political powers, most notably the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires.

Of course, the success of any symposium is commensurate with the intellectual and personal magnitude of its participants. Jana Jevtić, an anthropologist affiliated with the Sarajevo School of Science and Technology in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and visiting scholar at the University of California at Berkeley, was the first symposiast to be invited. Jevtić first came to my attention when I read her powerful personal essay in the *Huffington Post* published a year or so before conceiving the grant project. As a daughter of parents of mixed religious ethnicity growing up in Sarajevo amid a devastating war that precipitated one of the longest sieges of a capital city in modern times, Jevtić openly defies all the usual categories. It was her

Iron Curtain, including Poland and what was then Czechoslovakia. For purposes of the project, the designation Balkan comprises Romania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Albania, the disputed Republic of Kosovo, the newly-christened Republic of North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Greece, and the western end of Turkey (west of the Bosphorus). Although Poland is not usually considered a Balkan nation, it is represented among the papers in this volume by a specialist in Roma musical culture.

² It was the latter that gave rise to the geo-political term "balkanization" from the 1960s on. The term developed further as a dysphemism during the war of Yugoslavia's dissolution, which has led many scholars to abandon the designation "Balkan" in favor of Southeast Europe.

³ I am grateful to Creighton University President Fr. Daniel Hendrickson, S.J., generous benefactors, and Global Engagement Office staff for making this project possible. Thanks also to Dr. Felicia Waldman, Associate Professor of Hebrew Studies and Coordinator of the Goren-Goldstein Center for Jewish Studies, in the Faculty of Letters at the University of Bucharest, for her help in organizing the symposium.

perspective that inspired me not only to invite her participation, but to organize the symposium in a similar way, avoiding the well-worn ruts of Balkan studies in order to focus on areas of religious and cultural overlap and listen to voices often crowded out by headline-grabbing demagoguery and exclusivist ethno-nationalist and religious rhetoric.

In order to achieve this result, the initial plan to extend invitations to religious leaders was abandoned in the interest of cultivating a more inclusive, cross-cultural learning experience. The result of soliciting diversity is reflected in the papers, which readers may notice are linked thematically and/or dialogically. For example, Jevtic's ethnographic study of hijabi women in Sarajevo is followed by Bădescu's article on Sarajevo's religious architecture, which in turn thematically links with Waldman's paper on cross-cultural religious architecture in Bucharest, and so on. Dialogically, the present collection includes a paper by an Islamic Turkish scholar examining the iconography of the Other in the frescoes of Romanian Orthodox monasteries; a Romanian Orthodox Christian scholar analyzing Bosnian Muslim cityscapes; a prominent Bulgarian Jewish writer, ambassador, and politician exposing the heroic actions of the Bulgarian Orthodox hierarchy in rescuing Bulgaria's Jews during World War Two; and other such religious and cultural crosscurrents.

To be sure, the personal and scholarly interplay among the presenters and their topics made for a richly textured symposium that proved to be truly greater than the sum of its parts. The desire to share their contributions is accompanied by the hope that this collection will convey that "something else" anticipated above, along with the knowledgeable and congenial personalities of contributors shining through. May it be an enjoyable and informative travelogue winding through the fascinating religious and cultural mosaic of the Balkans.

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