Riada Akyol Presents the "Tolerant Islam" of Bosnia

by Hugh Fitzgerald

Riada Akyol wants Europeans not to worry about the ongoing invasion of Muslims – there are now 44 million of them in Europe – but to take heart from the experience of Bosnia, where, she claims, a "liberal European Islam" developed that could serve as a model for Muslims all over Europe.

> *What is too little noticed, however, is that a tolerant European Islam has already existed for centuries—on the southeastern part of the continent, where Bosnian Muslims, Albanians, Turks, and others see themselves as fully Muslim and fully European. A 2013 Pew Research Center study shows that they're among the most liberal Muslims in the world. For*

> *example, only tiny minorities of surveyed Bosnian Muslims, known as Bosniaks, think adulterers must be stoned and apostates executed, in contrast with large majorities in favor of both stances among Pakistani and Egyptian Muslims.*
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> *The majority of Bosnians gradually accepted Islam after the Ottomans brought it to the region in the 15th century. They ruled until 1878, when they lost Bosnia to a longtime rival: the Austro-Hungarian empire. Many Bosniaks at that point felt uncomfortable under their new rulers, not least because classic texts of Muslim jurisprudence had banned living in territory ruled by non-Muslims. From 1878 to 1918, an estimated 150,000 emigrated to Turkey.*

Why did the "majority of Bosnians" under Ottoman rule "accept" – i.e., convert – to Islam? They did so, as so many non-Muslims did elsewhere, in order to be free of the many onerous conditions, including payment of the Jizyah, that were imposed on non-Muslim dhimmis. The author leaves the piquant subject of the dhimmi out of her telling. In the case of the Ottoman Turks, there was an additional demand made on their Infidel subjects. From the fourteenth century on, the Turks established the devshirme system, whereby in the Balkans, Christian boys, from the ages of 8 to 18, were delivered up to the Turks, who would then convert them and raise them up to be soldiers for the Sultan. This was another inducement for Christians to convert to Islam, so as to avoid having to hand over their sons in this cruel system..

It is likely that the 150,000 Bosnians who emigrated to Turkey after Bosnia became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were mostly the more fervent Believers, those who did not believe Muslims should continue to live in a country ruled by non-Muslims; those who remained in Bosnia were likely less devout, and more willing to compromise with their new, non-Muslim masters, than those who left.

But prominent Muslim intellectuals voiced arguments that helped stem the tide of Bosniak emigration. Among them was Grand Mufti M. T. Azabagi?, who argued in the 1880s that a Muslim can in fact live happily under a tolerant non-Islamic state "where he is neither abused nor insulted for his acts of devotion." In response, Bosniaks accepted Austro-Hungarian rule and began to organize themselves under the secular state.

In 1882, the official "Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina" was established. The organization's structure continued to evolve in response to shifting historical circumstances, gradually becoming a body that operated with a degree of independence from the state as it sought to govern Islamic affairs such as spiritual education. Eventually, it had an elected leader and its own religious and legislative bodies. It was self-financed, with much of its income coming from membership fees and charitable donations, and was responsible for maintaining mosques, appointing and training imams, drawing up fatwas, and directing theological studies at various schools. (Even today, it is still in place and very much functioning.)

Another pressing issue at the time was the conscription of young Bosniaks into a non-Muslim army. Could Muslims serve in a military led by Christians? The tension was eased when Mustafa Hilmi Hadžiomerovi?, then mufti of Sarajevo, issued a fatwa in 1881 calling on Bosniaks to obey the draft. He then issued another fatwa declaring that the appointment of judges by a non-Muslim ruler was valid, which led the Bosnian religious leadership to accept the modernization of Sharia courts and their gradual integration into the Hapsburg state judiciary's jurisdiction. This was, notably, based on mutual concession, as the Hapsburgs were flexible enough to allow Sharia to operate in the realm of civil law under their rule. (The Sharia courts were abolished in 1946 with the arrival of socialist Yugoslavia.)

In all of these examples, the true explanation for this "moderation" by the Muslims was that they had no choice. They were in no position to refuse to live under non-Muslim rulers, even though many Muslims believed that they were forbidden to live under such rule. To their rescue came the Grand Mufti M. T. Azabagi?, who argued in the 1880s – just a few years after the Bosnians became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – that a Muslim can in fact live happily in a tolerant non-Islamic state "where he is neither abused nor insulted for his acts of devotion." And now that Muslims were drafted to serve in the Christian-led military of the Hapsburgs, a way had to be found to justify their serving. The fatwa of Mufti Hilmi Hadžiomerovi? provided that justification. He also issued a fatwa supporting the appointment of judges by the non-Muslim rulers, because there was nothing he could have done to prevent the practice.

> *Bosniaks also debated Muslim women's issues, including use of the face veil. One of the most renowned debates on the subject dates to 1928. It began when Mehmed Džemaludin ?auševi?, the grand mufti of the Bosnian community and an important religious reformist, argued that the face veil was a product of historical tradition, not of religion per se, so it was possible to change veiling practices without violating Islam. Religious conservatives, who considered covering a woman's face to be a religious duty, reacted harshly. But through a long and vigorous back-and-forth, ?auševi? eventually earned the support of notable intellectuals and professionals, some of whom soon became the leaders of a self-defined progressive movement.*

Again, this was a case of finding an Islamic justification for submitting to superior forces. The Austro-Hungarian rulers discouraged the veiling of women, and finding an "Islamic" justification for what would have to be accepted in any case was a way to avoid a clash between the non-Muslim rulers and the Muslim ruled, a clash that could only lead to the defeat

and humiliation of the latter. Furthermore, Bosnia was right next door to Turkey, where by 1928 Ataturk had pushed through much of his grand plan for the secularization of Turkish society, including outlawing the wearing of the veil in the public square (such as universities and all government offices) and giving women the right to vote. This no doubt influenced the religious reformers in Bosnia.

> *After World War II, during Communist rule in Yugoslavia, the "emancipation" of Muslim women was enacted through authoritarian means. The face veil was perceived as backward—an obstacle to women's much-needed participation in the socialist rebuilding of the newly formed country. The Women's Antifascist Front, a state-sponsored organization, organized campaigns to unveil Muslim women in Yugoslavia from 1947 to 1950. At public unveiling ceremonies, women clambered onto stages and removed their zar—a black garment resembling today's burka—en masse.*
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> *State-imposed unveiling ultimately culminated in a legal ban on face veils in 1950. The new law was presented to the public as the state's response to Muslim women's mass requests. Although some women did welcome the ban, many ended up more isolated as a result of it; they felt they had to stay home because they couldn't go outside with their heads uncovered. Written and video testimonies confirm the difficulties they endured.*
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> *Concerned for the position of Muslim women in society, Bosnia's highest official Islamic religious body supported the unveiling campaigns at the time. It made several statements in 1947 asserting that veiling one's face and covering one's hands up to the wrists was not required by religious code. Ibrahim Feji?, a mufti who then served as the leader of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, said Islam asks women to dress modestly, but that this does not require face veiling or isolation from the public. He added, "It is a sin in Islam to allow oneself what the*

> *religion forbids; it is as much a sin to forbid to oneself what the religion permits."*
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> *Today, the history and practice of Bosnian Islam yield a number of noteworthy lessons for those seeking to cultivate a liberal Islam in Europe.*
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> *One is that an institutionalized, centralized form of Islam can be highly successful, as seen in the case of the Islamic Community. This probably can't be replicated precisely in other European countries—the Bosnian organization of Islamic religious affairs is distinct in that it is independent of the state and incorporates elements of representative democracy for legislative and representative bodies—but it can still serve as a useful example to the rest of Europe.*

The Muslims in Bosnia share a sect and an ethnicity, which allowed them to create a "centralized form of Islam." The Muslims now all over Europe are identical neither in sect nor, even more important, in ethnicity. The vast variety, of Turks and Kurds, Pakistanis and Afghans, Arabs and Berbers, Iranians and Azerbaijanis, Somalis and Sudanese, black Africans and white converts, would make it difficult to gather them into one Islamic organization capable of representing all of them.

> *The Islamic Community cites the "requirements of time" (in the words of Bosnia's top Islamic legal scholar) as one of the principles animating its religious interpretations: Islamic thought can and should offer Muslims answers on how to practice Islam here and now. The result is that "the institutions are given an element of flexibility, while maintaining Islam's timelessness." The same institution today asserts its credibility to "serve as a constructive partner for other Muslim communities and EU institutions."*

If some Bosniaks – the author doesn't tell us how many – think that the texts and teachings of Islam must change with the

times (yielding to the “requirements of time”) to be flexible, that is welcome news. But very few Muslims believe that. For them, the Qur’an’s text is uncreated and immutable. It cannot be changed.

> *Forced secularization—including bans on wearing face veils—can be counterproductive. As the testimonies of Muslim women from Yugoslavia revealed, such restrictions can produce deeply negative consequences, including insults and attacks against veiled women. Instead, Muslims’ own questioning of the religious foundations of the face veil can yield progressive interpretations that feel authentic because they’re coming from within the community. For instance, the Bosniak reformist leadership argued that Islam grants men and women rights and responsibilities, and unveiling is both true to Islam and can facilitate women’s access to fulfilling their given rights. Instead of legal bans or enforced dress codes, democratic Western governments would do better to promote Muslim women’s freedom of choice.*

The author believes that by not enforcing a ban on the veil, Western governments are more likely to achieve voluntarily the uncovering of Muslim women. But that assumes that Muslim women really can exercise free will in this matter. All around the world, we see Muslim women being forced, by terrific family and societal pressure, to remain veiled. That pressure can include the threat of physical violence, and there have been many cases of Muslim women and girls being beaten, or even killed, for daring to remove their cover – whether hijab, chador, or niqab. If, however, the power of the state is brought to bear, and wearing the veil outlawed, it becomes much harder for Muslim men to enforce their own dress code on “their” women.

The greatest example of “forced secularization” of a Muslim people occurred in Turkey under Ataturk. It was, by all accounts, a great success. The state now required, among many

reforms, that women not wear the veil in most public places (courts, universities, government offices). Turkish women did not rebel at this; most were glad to be required by law not to wear the hijab. Those who wanted – or were forced by their husbands – to wear the veil, could still do so at home. Having lost their empire after World War I, many Turks were sufficiently jolted by this colossal defeat to embrace Ataturk's reforms, and to share his determination to secularize the country and bring it into the 20th century.

> *Finally, Islamic modernism, born in the 19th century as an effort to reinterpret Islam with a liberal spirit, is not as ineffective as some pessimistic commentators on Islam believe.* ***In today's Bosnia, Islam is internally diverse: Many Muslims see it as part of their cultural heritage, while others emphasize the importance of daily religious rituals.***

Islam in Bosnia may be "diverse" not in an ethnic or sectarian sense, but in the varied level of religious commitment by its adherents. We have no way of knowing, from Riada Akyol's piece, how many in Bosnia are "cultural" Muslims, who may not even believe in God, and how many are strictly devout, which can reasonably be taken to mean not only that they think the "daily religious rituals" are important – the author limits herself to mentioning that as the sum total of their devotion, deliberately leaving out the most disturbing aspects of the faith, which requires that they also accept, among other things, the 109 Qur'anic verses that command them to wage violent Jihad against the Unbelievers and to "strike terror" in their hearts.

> *Our modernist Islamic tradition is not immune to global trends, including Salafist currents. But Bosnia's intellectual legacy offers plenty of evidence that Europe and Islam are far from incompatible—in fact, they have been intertwined for centuries.*

Europe and Islam have been “intertwined” in the sense that they have been at war for 1,400 years. Muslims in the West conquered the Iberian Peninsula and thrust deep into central France before being halted at Tours by Charles Martel in 732; they remained the masters of Spain for centuries, mistreating the Christians and Jews with whom Akyol says they were (peacefully) “intertwined.” During the Reconquista by the Christians, that lasted more than 700 years, the Muslims lost first one and then another territory, until Granada, the last kingdom to fall, surrendered to the Christians in 1492. In the West, the Muslims made repeated attempts to conquer the Byzantines. Their final victory over the Christians in this theater of war was achieved with the conquest of Constantinople on May 29, 1453. For centuries after, Muslims raided up and down the coasts of Europe, seizing loot, and kidnapping Christians to be slaves, striking as far north as Ireland and, in one recorded case, Iceland. Later still, Muslims – history’s “Barbary pirates” – would prey on Christian ships and seamen in the Mediterranean. That ‘intertwining” was soaked in rivers of blood.

The moderate Islam that the author claims can be found in Bosnia is the result of one thing: the fact that from 1878 on, the Muslims were under the stern rule of Unbelievers, when Bosnia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They had no choice but to compromise, and to find muftis willing to issue fatwas that would justify such compromises as had to be made with the rule of non-Muslim masters.

Riada Akyol does not mention how those “tolerant” Bosniaks demonstrated a much darker side when, during World War II, they formed the S.S. Hanjar Division, that took part in some of the worst atrocities of the Second World War, with the roundup and murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews. Hajj Amin al-Husseini made a substantial contribution to the Axis war effort by organizing “in record time” recruitment to Muslim SS units.

Altogether, it is estimated that some 20,000 Muslims were chosen to serve in the elite Hanjar (Sword) SS Division – there was no lack of volunteers – where they not only murdered Jews, but also fought against the anti-Nazi partisans. Along with the infamous Bosnian 13th Waffen Hanjar (or Handschar) SS division, the Nazis also raised the Albanian Skanderbeg 21st Waffen SS division, consisting entirely of Muslims. SS conscription in Yugoslavia during the war produced a total of 42,000 Waffen SS and police troops.

Facing a true test of their "tolerance," the Bosnian Muslims failed utterly. Riada Akyol makes no mention of this most important chapter in the history of the Bosniaks. It's easy to guess why.

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