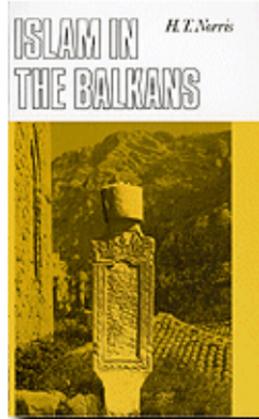


Book Review

By James Pettifer

Islam in the Balkans

HT Norris



THE  INDEPENDENT

BOOK REVIEW

Strong roots under the razed mosques

As, LITTLE by little, Muslim communities in Bosnia have been destroyed, onlookers have been found it hard to describe precisely what has been lost. There has often been a central ambiguity in the way the tragedy has been perceived by European liberals, in that what was a tolerant, secular urban society was under siege, but the objects of the assault in towns such as Banja Luka were actually religious.

But the same difficulty has not affected the attackers, whether Serb or Croat. The razed mosques and burnt madrasas to them were something alien, relics of oppressive Ottoman occupation. Balkan Islam is seen in Zagreb and Belgrade as "Turkish" something without legitimate native roots.

In this important and learned book, Harry Norris

explodes this lethal myth by setting out the main factors in the cultural formation of the 3.5 million Muslims living in the Balkan peninsula. In the propaganda associated with the myth, Balkan Islam whether in Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia or Bulgaria is a poor, impoverished dependent tradition, which has been in retreat for a long time. It therefore follows, particularly in Belgrade demonology, that the remaining believers are likely to become extreme, fundamentalist and dependent on outside powers such as Isran or Turkey for survival.

The Particular value of the book is the exploration Professor Norris makes of the complex nature of Balkan Muslim belief, based on his vast reading in many languages. He shows convincingly that the Ottoman element never determined reli-

Islam in the Balkans

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Hurst, £27.50

gious or cultural identity in any exclusive way, and how much was owed to Arab and Sufi thinkers.

In many cases these influences were at work before the Ottoman invasions of the 16th century, in the Byzantine world, long before people formally became Muslims at all. He has an encyclopaedic grasp of later Islamic poetry and literature written or orally composed by the Balkan peoples, and his chapters on topics such as the Albanian Sufi poets are likely to remain standard points of reference for a very long time.

But despite this intellectual richness, these commu-

nities have always been on the edge of the Muslim world, and have suffered periodic uncertainties and losses of identity, Communism in Yugoslavia undoubtedly caused one such period of doubt, and when renewal came, in the shape of increased religious practice and renewed political commitment, as in Izerbegovic's prison writings, the reaction in neighbouring Christian communities was predictably aggressive.

Professor Norris sees this in some ways as a reaction of intellectual inferiors, almost a cerebral matter, and if this masterly survey has any real weakness it is that it understates some of the key practical elements in the Serb-Muslim conflict. In Kosovo and elsewhere, one such element has been the high Albanian birth rate, supporting Serb fears of alien

domination this applies as much to the Catholic Albanians in Kosovo as to the Muslims.

He is gloomy about the future, seeing the Albanians as facing "chaos and famine", and a nomadic future for many Balkan Muslims. If he is right, the future is bleak indeed, for, despite the efforts of the ethnic cleansers, the Islamic tradition will survive - as it always has - but in endemic violent conflict with those who seek to exterminate it. The events of the past few days only go to show how easy it will be for the Muslims to be forced into their traditional role. It already seems as if there is no option for the Islamic tradition in many areas of the Balkans other than to return to its original underground status.

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