

## WHAT IS "ISLAMIC TRADITION OF BOSNIAKS"?

Dr. Fikret Karčić

Recently more intensively in the public discourse on Islam we witness the introduction of certain terms marking the name of this universal religion with adjectives of geographic and cultural character, like "Indonesian Islam", "Turkish Islam", "European Islam" or as in our case "Bosnian Islam". This has been a consequence of the terminology transfer from Western religious studies, where the difference is made between "official" or "normative" religion, found in religious textual sources and their general interpretation on one side, and "folk religion" denoting interpretation and practice of a certain religion by its followers at a certain territory or within a certain group on the other. Study of "folk religion" is commonly performed through cultural phenomena study methods, including ethnography, cultural anthropology, etc. Cultural anthropologists for example, are in the case of Islam interested in the "process of socialization and symbolization in which Islam is mirrored in the local setting". "Folk religion" in this case is comprised of the name of the "normative" religion to which geographic and cultural adjectives are added.

Such terminology is not acceptable for normative religion. On the other side, cultural and anthropological approach to a certain religion is important since it focuses the attention on concrete understanding and practicing of this religion at a certain place and time, and also facilitates the understanding of a concrete social reality. This phrase can be useful as an instrument of sociological analysis but not as a way of expressing normative religious teaching. Therefore, for example "European Islam", cannot mean a special type of Islam with its specific sources but the understanding and practice of Islam in Europe. Nevertheless it is possible that someone is wishing for some special type of Islam, and therefore great number of Muslim scholars is reserved toward the usage of such phrases and prefers to call this "Islam in Europe". All this is applicable to other variants of cultural and anthropological approaches to Islam, including also the term "Bosnian Islam".

Institution of the Islamic Community (IC) in B&H until now has in its documents avoided the usage of any geographic and cultural determination of Islam. The term that is used in the IC Constitution, as its fundamental act, is "the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks" (Article 4 of the Constitution of the IC in B&H from 1997). This tradition is listed, after the Qur'an and Sunnah, as one of the sources serving as the basis for the structure of bodies and institutions of the IC in B&H and its work. Next on hierarchical list of sources for organization and activities of the IC after "the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks" are "the requirements of time". This phrase "the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks" has not been a subject of theoretical elaboration in the acts of the IC nor in the work of Bosniak theologians, although this presents a very important question. IC Constitution in its Article 8, Item 2 prescribes that: "The Hanafi *madhhab* shall be applied in interpretation and practice of the Islamic worship (*ibadat*) duties in the IC". This determinant confirms the historical position of the Hanafi *madhhab* in B&H and is connected to "the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks". By a strict interpretation of the abovementioned article one could conclude that the application of the Hanafi *maddhab* is limited only to worship (*ibadat*) and that in other segments (*furu' al-fiqh*), related to activities of the IC, one could refer to other maddhabs as well. This practice applied in contemporary Muslim world is called *takhayyur* (choosing solutions from another maddhab), and is applied by a decision of competent bodies authorized to interpret Islamic regulations through methodology of *usul al-fiqh*. Shari'ah courts in B&H used this method in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century while solving family law matters.

Another element mentioned in the Constitution of IC which can be related to “the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks” is the mention of the Islamic institutions from Ottoman period. Namely, Article 2 states that “the autonomy of the IC in B&H is based on religious and legal institutions of Bosnian Muslims from the time of Ottoman administration”. Institutions participate in the shaping of tradition and can represent one of its parts, and therefore this element can also be taken into consideration when trying to establish what is “the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks” comprised of.

On the basis of the elements mentioned in the supreme normative act of the IC, and also the insight into the available studies of Islam in B&H and the Balkans, we will try to sketch “the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks” and in this way give a contribution to the public discussion on this issue.

To start with we need to answer the following question: what is “tradition”? One of the meanings that this word has in Western languages is “a form of thought or behavior which one group is applying consistently from a generation to a generation”. According to this, tradition encompasses thought and practice, needs to have continuity and be accepted by this given group through generations.

In the Islamic vocabulary the term closest to the “tradition” defined in this previously described manner is *al-turath al-islami* (“Islamic heritage”). One aspect of tradition – the one related to continuous practice – is encompassed by a classic Islamic term *urf* (“a custom in accordance to Shari’ah”).

Tradition is not a static concept. It also implies adoption of new elements which are selectively adopted and becoming thus a part of tradition. An example for this is a *fez* (hat) as a part of Muslim clothing in Bosnia introduced after the abolition of *Janissaries* in 1826 as a mark of new wave of modernization reforms in the Ottoman state. At the beginning Muslims rejected this part of clothing considering it to be a negative novelty. Hundred years after that *fez* became a part of tradition, so much that the socialist government after the World War II suppressed it from daily practice.

Having in mind the fact that the tradition encompasses thought and behavior we will try to offer the answer to the question of what are important elements of “the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks”. According to our opinion this tradition is made of:

### **1. *Ahl al-sunnah* branch of Islam, including application of Maturidi thought in *aqaid* and Hanafi *madhhab* in *fiqh*, with respective Sufi orders (*tariqats*)**

Islam spread to B&H during the time of Ottoman administration, which determined basic characteristics of normative Islamic teaching and practice. Hanafi *madhhab* was the official religious and legal school in the Ottoman Caliphate. Previously in history a link has been established between Maturidi thought in theology and Hanafi thought in law. This had been made based on the compatibility of theological and legal interpretation on one side, and personal moment on the other. Namely, the founder of Maturidi school of thought Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (died in 905) established a school of theology which basically further developed theological positions of Abu Hanifa (died in 767). In this way the process of spreading of Islam in B&H under the Ottoman rule was also at the same time a process of spreading the Maturidi interpretation of Islamic belief and Hanafi interpretation of Shari’ah.

In the process of spreading of Islam a significant role was played by Sufi orders, whose practice was harmonized with Shari'ah. Manuscripts of our 'ulama from the Ottoman period testify to this, as well as the textbooks used in *madrasahs* (religious schools) and *silsilahs* (lineage) of our 'ulama. As an example we can take silsilah of Hasan Kafi al-Akhisari entitled *Nizam al-ulama ila khatem al-anbiya*, where it can be seen that most of the names in his intellectual genealogy belong to 'ulama from Transoxiana (*Ma wera al-nahr*), the region which was at that time the center of Maturidism and Hanafi *madhhab* since the Ottoman Turks took over the role of political leadership in the Muslim world. This knowledge was then through the 'ulama of the Ottoman state transferred to the Balkans. In the modern times, reformist authors like Sheikh Muhammad Abduh (died in 1905), leaned on the Maturidi school with an aim to reconstruct Islamic theological thought.

## 2. Belonging to Ottoman-Islamic cultural zone

Modern Islamic scholars were dividing the world according to the criterion of the dominant language and culture into several zones. These zones starting from North-West are: Ottoman-Turkish, Persian, Arabian, African and Malaysian zone. Ottoman-Turkish cultural zone spread from Bosnia, as the most western province of the Ottoman state after the Peace of Karlowitz in 1699, and all the way to the northern Iraq. This cultural zone is characterized by strong position of the central government, institutionalization of 'ulama into a strong hierarchical structure (*ilmiyye teshkilati*), domination of Maturity teaching and Hanafi *madhhab*, usage or influence of the Turkish language and culture, including the demarcation of urban life style, art, architecture, daily routines, characteristic epic and lyric poems, etc. For example, in this whole area we see characteristic forms of Ottoman mosques, and tall minarets, recitation of the popular *mawlid* (recitation on the occasion of the Prophet's p.b.u.h. birthday) written by Suleyman Chelebi, usage of Persian and Turkish terms such as "namaz" instead of "salat", "abdest" instead of "wudu", etc.

## 3. Existence of elements of "Islamized" practice of inhabitants of pre-Ottoman Bosnia

Some elements of practice of inhabitants of pre-Ottoman Bosnia entered the religious observance of Bosnian Muslims. This particular issue has already been subject to research in Bosnia and Hercegovina, but it needs to be continued in a systematic and critical manner. Some characteristic forms of pre-Ottoman practice which now gained their "Islamic" appearance were identified, and this was happening in parallel with similar processes developing in other Muslim societies. There is no Muslim community in the world today that has completely destroyed their pre-Islamic tradition. This tradition was a subject of a considerate analysis and its selective acceptance, and only after the agreement with Shari'ah was confirmed, it was included in the new tradition. In case of B&H these are: going to different places considered sacred for supplication (*dovište*), making prayers and supplications (*duas*) in nature: at lawns, caves and river banks, celebrating the calendar of events important for agricultural and cattle breeding seasons for inhabitants in B&H, celebrating certain days like *Alidjun* (St. Elias celebration on 2<sup>nd</sup> of August), etc.

These practices in our region were not established by Islam, there are "Islamized" previously existing practices, and they have a customary and not normative character. It would be interesting to study through analysis of *fatwas* how Bosnian 'ulama through history dealt with these issues.

#### 4. Tradition of Islamic reformism (*islah*) in interpretation of Islam

Islamic thought in B&H until the last decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century was developing under a strong influence of reformist movement known as *harakat al-islah wa-l-tajdid*. The reform in this context means reconstruction of religious thought and significance of religion in the lives of Muslims (*tajdid*), especially through revival of *ijtihad* (independent interpretation), and improvement of the conditions of the Islamic institutions (*islah*). This school of thought was one of Muslim answers to the internal crisis in Muslim societies and challenges of Western modernity. Such conditions in B&H were detected during the Austro-Hungarian project of modernization when B&H and Bosniaks pass from Oriental and Islamic to European civilization. This presence of two identities – Islamic and European – set before Bosniak *'ulama* and intellectuals a need for new interpretation of numerous issues and dilemmas that life brings.

A solution, among other things, was sought in the ideas of Islamic reformism, which spread in B&H through the influence of well-know authors of this orientation from Egypt, Turkey, Tzarist Russia, etc. presented in publications such as “*El-Menar*”, “*Sirat-i mustekim/Sebil-i rešad*,” etc. In the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century in B&H this school of thought was becoming stronger and stronger despite the fact that different trends were present in the country, including the traditionalists rejecting any type of change, and secular modernists supporting every change. In the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century the *islah* orientation became dominant thanks to especially theoretical works and practical solutions of the *'ulama*, like Husein effendi Džozo. This school became something that could be defined as official intellectual tradition in the interpretation of Islam in B&H. This school of thought also is not a given element of tradition, and should be a subject of critical evaluation due to the time span and development of the contemporary Muslim thought in the world

#### 5. Institutionalization of Islam in the form of the Islamic Community

In Ottoman period Islam was, like in other parts of that state, a dominant worldview and Islamic institutions were identical or closely connected to the state institutions through the concept of *din ve devlet* (“unity in religion and state”). Completely new situation arose after the Austro-Hungarian occupation of B&H in 1878 and the Annexation in 1908, when B&H was fully included in the administrative and legal frame of this Catholic monarchy. The question of institutionalization of Islam in this new setting was posed. This question was solved by the efforts of Muslim leadership and the orientation of the Dual Monarchy towards legal recognition of Islam as one of recognized religions, through unification of Islamic institutions in B&H into a unique organizational unit within one European state and its organization upon the principle of autonomy and certain elements of representative democracy. This model proved the possibility of coexistence of Islamic and European institutions.

Islamic institutional structure, established in that period, included four segments: *'ulama*, waqfs, education (*mearif*) and Shari'ah courts. These segments with different intensity level enjoyed autonomy and were connected to the state. Through a *menšur* (Shari'ah legal officiation authorization) which the Supreme religious authority of the Ottoman Caliphate – *Shaykh al-Islam* would issue to a *Reis ul-Ulema* (Grand Mufti) the

connection between national Islamic institutions in B&H with universal Muslim community (*ummah*) was insured. After the abolition of Caliphate in 1924, *menshur* continues to be issued by a board comprising of representatives of the Islamic Community in B&H, for which we can say, that in the sense of Shari'ah law represents a local gathering of electors who give legitimacy to their religious leader (*ahl al-hall wa-l-'aqd*).

The result of such developments is that since 1878 until today in B&H there has been a unique administration of the Islamic Community serving as an institutional framework in which Muslims practice their religion, and comprising of several functions like leadership (*imamat*), interpretation of Islamic teaching and regulations (*ifta*) and, until 1946 application of Islamic personal law (*qada'*). Similar situation occurred with other Muslim communities in the Balkans that also were under the influence of the Ottoman model of institutionalization of Islam and were in need of finding new models in the post-Ottoman period. The institutional framework of the IC is not a final or a given thing. It needs to develop – content and form wise – in such a manner which will allow it to respond to the challenges of the time, and especially to prevent the transformation of a religious community into a bureaucracised organization not able to creatively respond to impulses coming from its members and society.

## **6. Practice of expression of Islam in a secular state**

Socialist regime was established in B&H after WW2 and was based, in relation to religion, on the principle of separation of religious communities and the state, secularization of law, and understanding of the religion as a private matter of its citizens. Freedom of belief was guaranteed by the law. Legal framework for expression of belief was narrower than the one in international standards. The system with such a relationship between the state and religion can be called “a socialist secular state” in order to differentiate it from the Western model of secular states which unlike socialist ones have not been ideologically negatively oriented towards religion. Today, when we speak about a secular state in B&H, as an adequate model for modern, multi-religious societies, this does not mean that we will go back to this old regime, but that we will adopt the highest contemporary achievements in development of this model. One of such models would be a definition of a secular state as “neutrality with respect”. The state is neutral but respectful toward religion. Religious institutions are structurally and functionally separated from the state but they have the right to give their opinion on public matters.

In any case, the experience of living in a “socialist secular state” left a mark on understanding and expression of Islam in B&H. First, in the structure of Islamic institutions. Shari'ah courts were abolished as a part of state judicial system. Shari'ah law in this way ceased being positive law for Muslims and was transformed in Muslim religious, ethical or customary norms. Still the loss of this positive legal status for Shari'ah regulations did not mean that Islamic regulations lost their relevancy for Muslims in B&H. It is impossible to be an abstract Muslim. What is needed namely is to identify in Islamic normative system the core aspects which are important for preservation of Islamic identity and find mechanisms which will implement these aspects in practice. According to our opinion the Constitution of IC identifies such aspects to be religion and morality. In its Article 7 it says: “the aim of the Islamic Community is that all its members shall be living in accordance to Islamic norms. The aim of the Islamic Community is achieved by inviting to what is good and preventing what is wrong”. “Inviting to what is good and preventing what is wrong” is an activity that addresses the consciousness of individuals. Potential mechanisms for achievement of Islamic norms in

secular state could be: interpretation of regulations (*ifta*), education and upbringing (*adab*), advice and counsel (*nasihat*) and alternative solutions of conflicts between Muslims like mediation (*sulh*) and arbitration (*tahkim*) among other things.

Second, in teaching and practicing of the religion the focus is, after belief (*aqaid*), on religious rituals (*ibadat*), and in the end, in a limited scope, on social affairs (*muamalat*). This is best seen from the structure and the content of basic Islamic textbooks (*ilmihals*) and curricula of *madrasahs* from that age.

At the same time we witnessed a fast process of transformation of B&H society embodied in the rapid process of modernization. The indicators of such a process were industrialization urbanization, secularization, suppression of traditional norms and forms of life, etc. This process also left a mark on interpretation and practicing of Islam. The conclusions and the practice that were born in this period also need to be a subject of re-evaluation in the sense of their compatibility with the unchanged elements and objectives of normative teaching.

This attempt to sketch the main elements of “the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks” we will conclude with several concluding remarks. Firstly, “the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks” is not a theoretical construct but reality of understanding and living of Islam by our people for the last five centuries. Therefore the exact content of this concept needs to be established by the study of Islamic thought and practice of Muslims in B&H. Second, “the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks” is comprised by static and developing elements. These two types of elements have a dynamic relationship which includes tensions too. Thirdly, in terms of these developing elements, we think that the following two elements should have an important role in further development of the Islamic tradition of Bosniaks – development of Islamic thought which needs to ensure Islamically legitimate responses to the challenges of time, and institutional development which will guarantee individual and collective expression of belief and preservation of identity to Muslims.

Source: *Preporod*, 7 December 2006.

Translated from Bosnian by Đermana Šeta