

# Visiting of Christian Holy Places by Muslims as a Strategy of Coping With Difference<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Based on fieldwork in western Macedonia, I examine Muslim attendance of Orthodox churches and monasteries. Today, only Muslims live in the villages I researched, although in the 1960s and 1970s these places were also inhabited by Orthodox Christians. In all villages, there were two groups (*maalo*) of Christians and Muslims as well as two temples (church and mosque). Interlocutors recall this neighbourhood as being very close and friendly. They indicate a necessity of cooperating since they used to live and work together, i.e. all depended on each other. The politics of neighbourliness was revealed in paying and receiving visits, exchanging gifts and respecting of others' feasts and customs. In practice, however, they did not meet very often. Even though currently Christians do not live in the villages of western Macedonia, material signs of their presence still exist: churches, monasteries, cemeteries. Christian holy places are often attended by Muslims who need some non-medical forms for healing. Interviewees admit they lived together on very good terms; they also highlight differences between Christianity and Islam and diminish them by emphasizing similarities between feasts and values presented in the Bible and in the Koran. Their narrations vary depending on each person's theological knowledge. Both, however, point out the current politicisation of religion that, in their opinion, is taking place in Macedonia.

**KEYWORDS:** Macedonia, Islam, Christianity, Islamicisation, Christian holy places, Macedonian Muslims

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## Introduction

In the Republic of Macedonia, as in other parts of the world, one can observe visitations of shrines by people of different faiths. In Macedonia, Christian churches and monasteries are visited by local Muslims – predominantly by the so-called Macedonian Muslims or *Torbeshi*. There are also Muslim holy places, such as the graves of saints (*tourbe*) visited by both Muslims (mainly *Bektashi*) and Christians. Elizabeta Koneska and Jankuloski (2009: 14) indicate two reasons for visiting the same shrines by members of various religious groups in Macedonia: a belief that a certain shrine used to belong to one community (if now is a mosque, a *tekke* or *tourbe*, on the same place in the past there was a Christian temple), and another belief by local Muslims that some Christian shrines or saint associated with a shrine have miraculous healing powers.

In the cases of my research, I found only the second reason for attending Christian holy places. Having assumed these visits are one of strategy of copying with religious differences and an example of neighbourliness (*komšiluk*), I would like to analyse local narratives on the similarities and differences between Muslims and Christians as well as between Islam and Christianity.

This paper is based on my own ethnographic fieldwork<sup>2</sup> carried out in the western part of the Republic of Macedonia (surroundings of Debar) from 2006 to 2008. Last summer (July 2008), I conducted my fieldwork in some villages of the Reka region, also quite close to Debar, inhabited by people of different confessions – Orthodox Macedonians and Macedonian Muslims. During this research, I lived in a female monastery in the outskirts of Debar (in a village of Rajchica), thus I had an opportunity to meet some Orthodox officials and talk to nuns as well as to visitors (both Orthodox and Muslim). It was only two weeks of research, but I consider it crucial for my current conclusions.

The fieldwork method I applied was ethnographic interviews – structured as well as semi-structured and unstructured (viz. Bernard 2005). Participant observation was used as well. I followed requirements of multi-sited ethnography proposed by George E. Marcus; thus, I was trying to follow my interlocutors and their problems, and not to focus on one particular place and issue (Marcus 1995: 95–117). All my observations were recorded regularly in field notes and a journal along with introductory interpretations. My interlocutors were primarily nuns, monks and officials from both Christian and Muslim communities as well as inhabitants of Muslim and mixed Muslim and Orthodox villages (simple believers). Among Muslims, I found almost exclusively male informants, mostly young, while my Christian interviewees were primarily middle-aged women.

The western part of Republic of Macedonia is inhabited predominantly by Muslims of different ethnic or national<sup>3</sup> backgrounds: Albanians, Turks and the so-called Macedonian Muslims (*Torbeshi*). The name *Torbeshi* is quite often perceived as pejorative. There are

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<sup>2</sup> I use also some data collected by my assistants: Anna Kijewska and Katarzyna Paczóska.

<sup>3</sup> National identity I understand in this essay as a collective identity defined by language, ethnic and religious affiliation as well as citizenship.

some theories regarding this, but the most popular etymology is linked with confession and describes the *Torbeshi* as those ‘who sold themselves for a sack of cheese’ (in another version – flour). This is explained as selling their Christian faith to Turks (Svetieva 2003). For that reason, it is deemed pejorative. I will use here for stylistic reasons (certainly, without any evaluative connotation) the terms *Macedonian Muslims* or *Torbeshi*. Sometimes, the term *Macedonian-speaking Muslims* is used as well that defines them according to their mother tongue, which is very important factor of their identity. There is also the term *Islamicised Macedonians* that refers to a theory of forced Islamicisation, which I describe below.

While researching all of the abovementioned ethnic groups, in my paper I will focus only on the *Torbeshi*. However, it is a necessary to make a digression regarding ethnicity.<sup>4</sup> Macedonian Muslims are people who are rather confessional than ethnic group but there are some who declare very strong affiliation to the Macedonian nation and do not connect nationality with religion, e.g. a former chairman of the organisation *The Culture and Science Centre of Macedonian Muslims* Nijazi Limanoski – both a Macedonian Muslim and ethnologist, who promoted the creation of a secular definition of nationality, based on language, customs, origin and folklore common to all Macedonians. Islam is, in his opinion, an additional feature and had not deeply changed the social and spiritual life of the Macedonian Muslims (Lubaš 2007: 174). At present, only a part of Macedonian Muslims agree with Limanoski. They do not want to diminish the role of Islam in their collective identity. Most of them declare themselves simply to be Muslims. In the official political and academic discourse of Macedonians (cf. Svetieva 2003), *Torbeshi* are claimed to be highly politicised in Macedonia, predominantly Albanianised.

Albanians constitute the largest community in Macedonia (depending on sources and censuses it is from 20% up to 40% of the population), and their relations with the Macedonian majority are strained. This is predominantly linked with the armed conflict that took place in 2001 between Macedonian security forces and the *Albanian National Liberation Army* (UÇK) in northwestern Macedonia (mainly in Tetovo). It was concerned with the rights of the Albanian community, above all with access to higher public education in Albanian, with the recognition of Albanian as one of the official languages of the Republic of Macedonia and with regard to Albanian people having the same status as Macedonian. The conflict was terminated with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement on 13 August 2001.

*Politicisation* in this context means that religious Muslim organisations, led by ethnic Albanians, are used for political propaganda. Moreover, both in *medresas* (Muslim theological schools) and in mosques, the language that is most widely used is Albanian. Then, Albanian political parties (especially PDP – Party of Democratic Prosperity – *Partija za demokratski prosperitet*, quite popular among Macedonian Muslims) refer to connections between Albanianess and Islam and that religious affiliation is stronger than their ethnicity, i.e. that they are above all Muslim (as a nationality) rather than Macedonian. This is done in order to reduce the number of Macedonians in censuses. Moreover, Albanians are registered as Albanians, not as Muslims (cf. Friedman 1993: 89).

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<sup>4</sup> See Bielenin-Lenczowska (2008) for a more detailed description of *Torbeshi* identity.

In 1990, Riza Memedovski, Chairman of the *Torbeshi* organisation, sent an open letter to the Chairman of PDP on the subject of a 'quiet assimilation'. He accused this party of abusing religion for political ends through attempted the 'Kosovoisation' and 'Albanicisation' of western Macedonia (Poulton 2001: 115). Politicisation of religion is related with association the term *Muslim* has in Macedonia. During the Ottoman Empire, to be a Muslim equalled being a Turk, while being Orthodox meant being Greek. In contemporary Macedonia, the word *Muslim* has begun to signify *Albanian* as Albanians are the largest Muslim community in this country. Thus, many *Torbeshi* declare themselves to be Albanians, although they do not speak any Albanian and their declarations are connected only with confession. Confession, in turn, is more a matter of living in a community associated with the faith than the professing of religion (cf. Hayden 2003: 208). In the region researched, one can observe rather Turkicisation, since recently many *Torbeshi* have started to declare themselves to be Turks (there is a group of people in one community who consider themselves to be 'Turks who forgot their mother tongue'). In local primary school, Turkish has been introduced as a third language of instruction – in addition to Macedonian and Albanian. Such declarations coincided with the activity of the Turkish ethnic party, the Democratic Party of Turks in Macedonia – DPTM – *Demokratskata Partija na Turcite vo Makedonija*, in this region. One Muslim Albanian interlocutor explains a politicisation of religion this way:

Macedonians forgot that all Christian temples were pagan before. And all churches in Macedonia are both theirs and ours, Albanian... sv. Naum [a monastery close to town of Ohrid] is Albanian, Vlah and Slavic shrine, it had served for Albanians and Vlachs who built it and for Slavic people who lived nearby – my grandmother, although she was Muslim, would wash me in consecrated water from sv. Naum and perceived this church as holy house of God and as her own house. The biggest problem is that Macedonians nationalise churches; because of it there are all these conflicts between Macedonian, Bulgarian and Serbian Orthodox Church... I presume all sacred objects are for everyone: for all Macedonians, all Albanians, for all Balkan people. Look, what is going on in Kosovo – if the Serbian church had not been nationalised, there would have not been a war. They [Macedonians] think everything is theirs, here in Struga, in Ohrid. And you must know that on the today Plaošnik [a place in Ohrid where, according to sources and legends, a literary school was established by St. Kliment Ohridski to whom invention of Cyrillic alphabet is usually ascribed; Macedonians used to call this place 'the first university in the world'] was a mosque before...

Only Muslims live in most of the villages where I did fieldwork recently, while until the 1960s and 1970s, Orthodox Christians lived in all those localities as well. For economic reasons, the Christians migrated to Macedonian cities, while Muslims either stayed at family villages or migrated abroad. In the former Yugoslavia, most migrants – *pečalbari* or *gurbetaši* – travelled to Slovenia, the wealthiest Yugoslav republic, and

to Germany. An agreement concluded between Yugoslavia and Germany about *gastarbeits* (guest workers), gave opportunity for Yugoslav citizens to work legally in Western Germany. Among Muslims (at least here, but this phenomenon is typical for all over the Balkans) there is a long tradition of seasonal male work migration. The model of *pechalba* has changed – entire families migrate and live abroad during almost whole the year. In the region researched, most migrants are in Italy. They arrive in Macedonia especially in August, during season of weddings. Moreover, they have strong family ties with those who remained in villages – not only do they support them financially, but also pay visits to them regularly and keep a close contact. Marriages are also contracted between the local people and always in Macedonia, not abroad. Christians, in turn, migrated to cities in Macedonia, but visit villages during the holidays or weekends (usually they have houses there).

Although there were or are religiously heterogeneous villages, we cannot say that there were close neighbourhoods. In every locality, there were two parts (*maalo*) of Christians and Muslims; thus, they did not live together as next-door neighbours. However, there were also common places, such as schools, market place, cafés etc. The same situation is in Reka: Muslims live in one part of the village, Christians in the other.

My interlocutors recall religiously mixed neighbourhoods as very close and friendly. They point to the necessity of cooperating since they used to live and work together (although traditionally Muslims were mostly herdsmen while Christians were farmers and craftsmen), i.e. all depended on the others. The politics of neighbourliness (*komshiluk*) is revealed in paying and receiving visits, exchanging gifts and respecting others' feasts and customs.

Cvetana Georgieva, who researched a Christian and Pomak (Bulgarian Muslim) neighbourhood, writes that narratives about peaceful coexistence are one of the important grassroots strategies of living together. She uses a term 'system of coexistence'<sup>5</sup> that is defined as 'the historically emerging model which combines the poly-ethnic and poly-religious situation in Bulgaria and all over the Balkans, outside and irrespective of big politics and history' (Georgieva 1999: 61). The main principle for the functioning of such a system is the mutually recognized otherness of the individual communities, based on their inner differentiation. For differentiation, the ethnic marker is fundamental, while the religious factor is paramount for the inner division of the ethnic group (ibid.: 61–62). A system of coexistence is based on a twofold code – the first one is used to maintain the peaceful coexistence, while the second one creates the ground for conflict to break out (ibid.: 80).<sup>6</sup> In my research, I encountered those two codes or strategies – on the one hand, interviewees admit they live together on very good terms and, on the other hand they highlight the differences and inferiority of the other group as well as depict the problem of politicisation of religion in Macedonia.

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<sup>5</sup> Magdalena Lubańska, rightly, uses a term *cultural strategy* instead of *code of coexistence*, since *code* suggests something rather unchangeable, exacting conformity, and inhibiting the initiative of individuals who are not entirely determined by social patterns, but are social actors. As such, they may not only adopt, but also create social reality (Lubańska 2007: 185).

<sup>6</sup> See also Lubańska, who writes on a Muslim-Christian neighbourhood in Bulgaria (2007b: 240).

Is it important to note that while coexistence is usually connected with a positive attitude among representatives of two groups, sometimes one can observe competition and negative tolerance, defined as ‘noninterference with others’ practices’ (Hayden 2003: 205). Positive tolerance, in turn, means ‘to recognize and respect’ and is not only passive attitude. In the case of my research, I can observe both passive and active tolerance – a social exchange takes place, paying and receiving visits, and observing (or at least respecting) feasts of others. However, they are not close neighbours, and they are living not *with* but *beside* each other. Moreover, passive, negative tolerance also is also revealed in the prohibition of intermarriages between persons of different religious affiliations. The same conclusions are drawn by Tone Bringa, who analyses *komšiluk* in a Bosnian village. This term means both neighbourhood and neighbourliness and regulates mutual relations between close neighbours. In the case of religiously various groups, while reciprocity is obligated, intermarriages are prohibited (1995: 66–84).

### **Belief in relics – *moshti* and miraculous power of icons**

In the Balkans, sharing shrines by adherents of two religions was common during the Ottoman period and afterwards. Furthermore, it is known practice all over the world (cf. Hayden 2003 and his analysis of Muslim and Hindu communities in India).<sup>7</sup>

In Orthodox theology, belief in holy relics, as well as in the miraculous power of icons is recognized. It is believed that saint’s body does not decay after death and miraculously smells pleasant. *Moshti*, i.e. remnants of saint’s body, have been usually kept in monasteries. Believers can adore those relics and kiss them in order to attain some grace. In Rajchica, there is a relic of St. George (a patron of the monastery), while in St. Jovan Bigorski are many *moshti* brought by *igumen* (Orthodox bishop) from Holy Mount Athos. People also visit churches and monasteries with icons considered miraculous. In the Orthodox Church, icons are understood not only as saints, angels, representations of Christ or the Virgin Mary, but also as God’s revelation. An icon is believed as a ‘window into spiritual world’, thus the cult of the icons shall be in fact veneration to God who dwells in holy beings depicted in an icon.

Everyone, regardless of religious affiliation can come and pray or ask a priest for special prayer, depending on intention. In the Sv. Jovan Bigorski monastery, there is an icon of St. John Baptist that is believed to be miraculous. In the monastery, the monks keep *A Book of Miracles*, a notebook (kept by Father Dositej since 1995), with sixteen written testimonies of experienced miracles. I read them and found many examples given by people from all over the Macedonia – both Orthodox and Muslim. People usually come to the monastery in order to pray for conception and safe delivery. That is why they bring votive offerings that symbolize gained grace: a figurine of a child or of a cradle. There are also

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<sup>7</sup> In 10<sup>th</sup> EASA conference in Slovenia (26-29.08.2008), in a workshop *Mutuality and Difference in Multireligious Local Communities: The Politics of Neighbourliness* presented by Glenn Bowman and I, we discussed cases of neighbourliness and coexistence of religiously various groups on the data from the Balkans and from some regions in Africa.

some other testimonies of recovery (one of woman suffering from kidney inflammation, one of lame man), but less frequent. Visitors are used to coming to the monastery, to pray or ask for prayer, to take some consecrated water or to stay overnight in the monastery. All testimonies have a similar structure – there is information about a person ill, the place he/she is comes from and his/her religion, followed by a description of illness or problem he/she had and ways he/she was trying to overcome it. This is followed by some information about a prayer or other practices done in monastery (taking water, staying overnight) and – later – a testimony of miracle and offering brought by healed person.

As an example, I will show a note about one Muslim woman who was possessed:

Boys from Prisojnica, Macedonian Muslims, came [to monastery] after vespers. They led monks to their village, where a possessed Muslim lady lived. Every evening for several hours she was afflicted by a demon – few men hardly could hold her... but after that she did not remember it. Father Partenij and some brothers were coming there several times and were reading strong prayers *designed for non-Orthodox* [author's emphasis]. Later, when she came to monastery, one of Fathers read her a prayer to St. John – and she recovered. She had had such problems some time before, but she got better after visit a monastery. But later on she went to some magician and she became worse again. This demon tortured her during Ramadan.

Using consecrated water (for drinking or anointing) as well as staying and sleeping in monastery are considered very helpful. In Rajchica, where I stayed during my fieldwork, there were two Orthodox women, one of whom suffered from cancer and the second from osteoporosis. They regularly visit monastery and meet with their confessors. Also, in both monasteries several young people who have been addicted to drugs reside. Monks and nuns, by means of praying and talking with them, assist them in overcoming addiction. As interviewees say, people regardless of religion can come there in looking for help. Currently in the Rajchica monastery one girl is staying; her parents are Orthodox, but she consider herself atheist.

Even though at present many Christians no longer live in the villages of western Macedonia, material signs of their presence still exist: churches, monasteries, cemeteries and shrines. Christian holy places are often visited by Muslims who need some form for healing. In the village of Broshtica, there is an old church that is being renovated by local Muslims and frequently visited by them. Almost all my interviewees claim they had been in this church and lit candle for some purpose. It is a common custom to bring children who are not calm and cry a lot. My interlocutor who has three-year old son acknowledges this custom: '[Did you bring him to this church?] I did not, but my wife did. Our women do it very often. I was there to light a candle. [Why? What for?] Well, just for health [za zdravje]'. Also, an Orthodox woman from Melnichani (a Christian village, now inhabited constantly by only one family) claimed that during Easter the Albanians come to church and take some consecrated water; they give it to children and drink it before work.

Monasteries, especially St. Jovan Bigorski, are regularly visited by Muslims (e.g. ‘I was in monastery of Saint Jovan Bigorski maybe ten times; my mother was there as well. It is normal: it is the house of God’). It is a place particularly significant for Macedonian Muslims since the first meeting of the *Torbeshi* cultural organization, set up in 1970, was held at this place (cf. Poulton 2001: 115).

In the above-mentioned Book of Miracles there are many testimonies of Macedonian Muslims (from nearby villages like Rostushe, Velebrdo or Kosovrasti) who asked for help in giving birth or recovering from illness. As a token of gratitude, they bring votive offerings as well as money donations. In the monastery of Struga, which is also frequently visited by Muslims, there is an icon of the Holy Virgin, which is said to have miraculous power. Believers who visit this place pray for conception and safe childbirth as well, and in gratitude they usually offer lambs. Both Muslims and Christians attend this place on the day of The Birth of the Holy Mother of God (21 September) in order to pray for conception and safe childbirth, light candles and take special belts that should be worn by a barren woman for defined period of time. A highly similar custom is described by Duijzings with reference to Gypsies’ visits of monastery Gračanica in Kosovo:

After vespers, barren Gypsy women circle the church three times with long coloured ribbons, which remain tied round the building overnight. These are taken home and a belt is made of them for a woman or sometimes her husband to wear... it is believed that within the year the woman will conceive. At daybreak the next morning, many Gypsy families sacrifice a hen or a lamb, which they prepare for a festive family meal on the spot (Duijzings 2000: 68–69).

## **Local narratives**

Local explanations of the practices described above vary depending on the interlocutors’ religious affiliation and their theological knowledge. Christians usually claim that visiting holy places are connected with respect of Muslims towards Christianity. One of nuns from monastery in Rajčica says about this:

They respect our churches, especially these, our Muslims [Macedonian Muslims]. They helped us in building this monastery... monastery was destroyed during communism, now we rebuilt it. Actually all of bricklayers were local Muslims, from surrounding villages.

Regarding Albanians, however, the nuns from Rajčica indicate their fanaticism and political involvement:

Albanians? No, they do not come here... And, you know this expression: “The religion of Albanians is Albanianess?” You know? They are interested only in politics. They are even not good Muslims. And these who are Muslims are fanatics.



Muslims' explanation is that if someone needs help, he can ask everyone for it and has to try different methods: 'First you try medicines, then herbs and if it doesn't help, you can go to imam or Orthodox priest'. The same explanations are given by Orthodox: 'They believe here they recover. That is why they come, although they are Muslims. God is merciful'.

There are also some other statements as one of Albanian young man, that refer not to religion itself but rather to customary diversions: 'I like to go to church and look at girls. Orthodox girls are more liberal than ours, dress very modern and sexy. I always try to pick up one of them after a service and do this... you know...'

Christian holy places are defined by Muslims as houses of God, equal to mosques. 'God is only one and the same' or 'I was in a monastery of Saint Jovan Bigorski maybe ten times; my mother was there as well. It is normal, it is the house of God', explain interlocutors. There are similarities between feasts and – especially – values presented in the Bible and the Koran.

Both Muslims' and Christians' explanations depict a need for defining differences between Christianity and Islam and diminish them. Both perceive the faith of the other as a false religion. Muslims give examples from the Koran (e.g. Jesus, Isa, was a prophet i.e. human being, not God or God's Son). According to them, Christians did not understand correctly words of God and the Gospel (*Indžil*) has numerous mistakes based on misinterpretations preached by Apostle Paul, e.g. according to Islam, the Prophet Isa is only going to be resurrected (Lubańska 2007a).

One of muftis, i.e. Muslim theologians, lectured me on the differences: We recognize biblical Prophets: Adam, Abraham, Jesus i.e. Isa etc. And I respect all of them, I cannot say a name of Prophet without a greeting "'alai 's-salam.'" Thus I can say I am a Christian to some extent! However, you must know, Muhammad dominates other Prophets as he came here for all people in the world, not for one particular nation. Every nation can belong to Islam, every man can be Muslim. Jew can pray only in synagogue, Christian only in church, but Muslim – everywhere: in the mountains, in a factory, at home and in the mosque. Furthermore, we recognize all holy books: Koran, Bible and Torah. Gospel, we call "Indžil" we respect as well. But there a lot of mistakes in Gospel – after all it is written by people, not by God. They did not understand God's Word correctly.

In his book *Islam and Christianity. The Bible & the Q'uran*, El-Mogamis asserts that the original version of the Gospel was true, i.e. indeed represented God's Word revealed to Jesus, but it got lost. Only five parts remained and intermingled with interpretation written by people. Thus, today's Gospel contains plenty of mistakes and contradictions (El-Mogamis 2007: 21). My previous interlocutor referred to this book, which is, regardless of very neutral title, very one-sided. I bought this book (translated into Macedonian) and showed it to nuns from Rajchica. One of them said, 'Now in Macedonia you have a lot of such books. I do not like it.' Others, however, were much more irritated and, as I learned later, wanted to burn this book.

Such strict statements on the similarities and differences between both religions were expressed only by people who had greater theological knowledge, e.g. priests or imams. Simple believers usually highlighted resemblances as believing in one God, recognizing of Isa and other Prophets and individuals common for the Koran and the Bible, or similar customs.

Similarly, Islam is treated as inferior religion comparing to Christianity. Some Muslim religious practices are condemned, e.g. ritual ablution (*abdest*): 'Before praying they have to wash themselves. They wash their faces, noses, ears and legs... they wash their bodies, but not their souls...'

Furthermore, Muslims are perceived as backward and their image is orientalised (in the sense used by Said 1979). It is revealed in female subordination, the high birth-rate in Muslims families or the veiling of women (cf. Lubańska 2007a: 199). Christians also perceived Islam as a worse religion since simple believers cannot understand the language used in mosques – Arabic – and in fact cannot understand their prayers or holy book, the Q'uran. One of interlocutors from Rajchica asks rhetorically: 'How can you pray, speak to God, if you do not understand a language? It is only repeating some words, like parrot, not a conversation with God.'

Christian interviewees who want to diminish the distance between themselves and Muslims give an opinion on the forced Islamicisation of Macedonian Muslims.<sup>8</sup> It is actually a kind of symbolic violence that is revealed not only in the terms of *Islamised Macedonians*, *Torbeshi* or *Poturks* (that also points to the connection of Islam with Turkish nationality), but also in implying inferiority of their practice of Islam (Crypto-Christians) and depriving Muslims of agency. They themselves used to claim that they are descendants of Ottoman Turks, who only later 'forgot' their mother tongue – Turkish. According a version of history that seems to be official in Macedonia, all *Torbeshi* were Orthodox before, but during the Ottoman Empire they were compelled to convert into Islam – predominantly because of economic reasons. That is why they preserved the Macedonian mother tongue and observe Christian festivities. As one of interlocutors says:

They are not Muslims, they are Macedonians but Poturks. They still yearn for Christianity and that is why they visit our shrines. They saved their language and that is why they want to pray in Macedonian. [Why did they convert into Islam?] They were poor. But one day they will return. [What do you mean?] They will be Christian again.

Brunnbauer, who analysed narratives about origins of Pomaks, writes that 'to be able to declare that the Pomaks were Bulgarians and to cope with the fact that they believed in Allah – the god of the former oppressors! – a history of forced Islamisation was invented' (1999: 41).

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<sup>8</sup> After all, there are some scholars in Macedonia who use in their publications a notion *Islamised Macedonians* (cf. Svetieva 2000)

The same problem is visible in Macedonia. When I asked about the *Torbeshi*, orthodox interlocutors said, 'They are ours, i.e. Macedonians, they speak Macedonian... but they have to convert during the Turks [Ottoman Empire period]'. Macedonian Muslims are perceived as bi-confessional or as Crypto-Christians and this way their practices are justified.

The history of Islamicisation shows that bi-confession or crypto-Christianity, i.e. the situation in which people changed faith only officially but still practised their old religion, was widespread all over the Balkans (cf. Zirojević 2001, Skendi 1967; Duijzings 2000). As numerous historians claim, the main reason for conversion was economic. Muslims in the Ottoman Empire enjoyed some political privileges and a relief of very high tributes paid to the authorities. Therefore, in many situations, conversion was only superficial. That is why there were a lot of people who had two names, e.g. Hasan-Bogdan, who baptised children and after that circumcised them, got married in churches etc. Also, because of these practices, a kind of syncretistic Islam arose that includes many non-islamic elements such as cult of saints and the crucifix, visiting churches and monasteries, keeping icons at homes and observing both Christian and Islamic festivities.

Currently, some of these practices are well noticeable in mixed societies, e.g. in Debar and in the Reka region. Interlocutors admit that they respect both Muslim and Christian feasts: 'We invite them for Easter and they invite us for Bayram', and exchanging gifts (eggs and baklava). However, these practices are not called crypto-Christian or bi-confessional, unlike visiting churches and monasteries by Muslims. Staying at monasteries, lighting candles, taking consecrated water and ask for prayers are perceived as crypto-Christian by Christians who want to highlight either similarities between two religions or to point forced and superficial Islamicisation of *their* Muslims. One Muslim theologian used the term *kriptohristijani* as well in order to depict Macedonian Muslims as not being true Muslims. Nevertheless, the same person admitted he exchanges gifts with his Christian neighbours as well as visits them for their festivities.

Exchanging food, as well as hospitality in general, are some of the principles of neighbourliness. Tone Bringa, who analysed this phenomenon in a Bosnian village, cited by Dolina, notes that these activities involves two communities and emphasizes a shared but nonreligious identity as being a neighbour, woman, villager or Bosnian. In this way, national or religious differences are diminished (Bringa 1995: 66). Social exchange, defined as 'the voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring' (Vinogradov 1974: 2), takes numerous forms, as ceremonial gift-giving, voluntary work,<sup>9</sup> ritualized hospitality, and institutionalized visiting patterns (Bringa 1995: 68). Social exchanges are practised by women (coffee visits) as well as men (voluntary work), and both (evening gatherings) (ibid.: 69).

In the village of Rostusha, which is mixed Macedonian Orthodox and Macedonian Muslim, a level of declaration related to neighbourly relations is very positive: 'Here is calm, here is super!' One my female interlocutors, when asked about paying and receiving

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<sup>9</sup> Bringa (1995) elaborates an involvement in building neighbours' houses.

visits, used to answer: 'Yes, we meet each other for a coffee. Very often.' However, every time I visited her, she was sitting with her Orthodox friends from other parts of the village, and I even did not have an opportunity to meet her next-door Muslim neighbour. I asked her about this and she admitted: 'Now it has changed. They started to be fanatics. They do not want our eggs for Easter. They do not want to be with us. It is politics.' Later she explained that for several years new imams educated in Middle East have come to Macedonia and they brought newer more radical Islam. She connected it with the influences of ethnic Albanians in state politics. Nevertheless, daily coffee-visits by women as well as gatherings of men in local cafés constitute important marker of village social life.

In Kosovrasti, although Orthodox do not live there, people, those declaring themselves as Macedonian Muslims, still observe some Christian feasts, like *Gjurgjovden* (St. George's day) and *Vasilica* (St. Basil's day): 'For Gjurgjovden we bath small children in a water with some herbs collected by village women at dawn – for health [za zdravje]',<sup>10</sup> explained one of my interlocutors and friends who was expecting a child during my last stay in Macedonia. Certainly, they do not consider these days as religious festivities, but in social and cultural categories as days when neighbours meet and do something together. Moreover, they paint eggs for Gjurgjovden and exchange them between each other.

The described practices are observed almost only by Macedonian Muslims, although I heard some opinions that Albanians or Turks also attend church or observe both Muslim and Christian feasts as well. In numerous monasteries, many of the Muslim visitors are Roma. In western Macedonia, they attend the monastery in Kichevo and sv. Naum in Ohrid (viz. Koneska, Jankuloski 2009) as well as church in Debar. Before 1991, they were the largest group of Muslims visitors in Grachanica in Kosovo (Duijzings 2000).

## **Conclusion**

Holy places in Orthodox Christianity are visited frequently by Orthodox as well as Muslims – especially Macedonian Muslims – since everyone, irrespective of confession, can pray or ask a priest for a prayer in various intentions. It is related to belief in the miraculous power of icons and relics recognized by Orthodox theology.

These practices performed by Muslims are explained differently, depending on the interlocutors' religious affiliation and their theological knowledge. Muslims try to diminish differences between two confessions by claiming that they believe in one God, recognize common individuals for the Koran and Bible (e.g. Isa/Jesus) and have similar customs. Imams, in turn, point out fallacies in the Christian faith.

Christians use a symbolic violence upon Muslims by mentioning a theory of forced islamisation and calling their practice of Islam as Crypto-Christianity or bi-confession. In this way, they can justify their practices of visiting churches and observing both Christian and Muslims festivities. Furthermore, they perceive the traditions of Islam as backward and condemn some of their religious and customary activities.

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<sup>10</sup> On this custom among Orthodox Macedonians see Tomovski 1996.

One can analyse these explanations in Georgieva's category of system of coexistence. On the one hand, both groups consider neighbourliness to be an important value and try to maintain peaceful coexistence by paying and receiving visits, exchanging festive food and respecting of each other customs. On the other hand, they perceive the tradition and religion of the other group as inferior. Those two codes of coexistence control each other in local communities and it is completely grassroots strategy, i.e. worked out by those communities itself. Therefore, in the Orthodox Macedonian opinion (and also among some *Torbeshi* who declare themselves to be Macedonians), the severe problem of mutual relations is claimed to be politicisation (nationalisation) of religion – Albanianisation and Turkicisation of Macedonian Muslims as well as tends to fanaticism connected with the *new*, radical, Islam brought here by young imams educated in Middle East. This opinion on politicisation is also spread by Macedonian politicians and scholars. But, certainly, Macedonians who claim that *Torbeshi* are Macedonians also use the same strategies for the *Macedonianisation* of *Torbeshi* as the only official version is that they are Macedonians who covert into Islam during Ottoman Empire. Such a practice is connected with desire of incorporation of the *Torbeshi* in order to increase the number of Macedonians, Albanians or Turks living in the Republic of Macedonia.

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## **POVZETEK**

Na svojem terenskem delu v zahodni Makedoniji sem preučevala muslimansko obiskovanje pravoslavnih cerkva in samostanov. V proučevanih vaseh danes živijo le muslimani, čeprav so še v šestdesetih in sedemdesetih letih dvajsetega stoletja ta področja naseljevali tudi pravoslavni kristjani. V vseh vaseh sta živeli obe skupini (maalo), kristjani in muslimani, vsaka vas pa je imela tudi obe svetišči (cerkev in mošejo). Sogovorniki se spominjajo, da je bilo to okolje vedno zelo povezano in prijateljsko, vsi pa tudi poudarjajo nujnost sodelovanja, saj so vseskozi živeli skupaj v soodvisnosti. Politika sosedstva se je po pripovedovanjih izkazovala v medsebojnih obiskovanjih, v medsebojnih obdarovanjih in v vzajemnem spoštovanju praznikov in običajev. Vseeno pa se v praksi niso pogosto družili. Čeprav kristjani v vaseh zahodne Makedonije danes ne živijo, so materialni znaki njihove prisotnosti še vedno tam: cerkve, samostani, pokopališča. Te kščanske svete kraje pogosto obiskujejo muslimani, ki iščejo alternativne, nemedicinske načine zdravljenja. Intervjuvanci priznavajo, da so živeli skupaj v zelo dobrih odnosih, ob tem pa tudi poudarjajo razlike med krščanstvom in islamom, a jih istočasno izničujejo s poudarjanjem podobnosti med verskimi prazniki in vrednotami Svetega pisma in Korana. Tako pripovedi kristjanov kot muslimanov so zelo odvisne od teološkega znanja vsakega posameznika, oboji pa menijo, da trenutno v Makedoniji poteka proces politizacije religije.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** Makedonija, islam, krščanstvo, islamizacija, krščanski sveti kraji, makedonski muslimani

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