

**MISSIONARY DISCOURSE(S) ON CATHOLIC IDENTITY
IN THE 17TH CENTURY WESTERN BALKANS
(BOSNIA, DALMATIA, ALBANIA)***

**МИСИОНЕРСКИ ДИСКУРС(И) ВЪРХУ КАТОЛИЧЕСКАТА
ИДЕНТИЧНОСТ ПРЕЗ XVII В. В ЗАПАДНИТЕ БАЛКАНИ
(БОСНА, ДАЛМАЦИЯ, АЛБАНИЯ)**

Това проучване има за цел да разкрие основните характеристики на мисионерския/те дискурс(и) относно католическите общности на Западните Балкани (Далмация, Босна и Албания), тяхната религиозна идентичност в сравнение с мюсюлманите, а така също и да определи до каква степен тези дискурси очертават връзката между религиозните пристрастия и социалните и духовни фактори при изграждането на тази идентичност.

През XVII в. в Западните Балкани имало значителни групи от католическо население, живеещо сред православни и мюсюлмански общности, като в някои области (Босна, Северна Албания) то било преобладаващо. Съществувала църковна организация, представена в Далмация от архиепископите в Скардона, Макарска-Требине и Дувно, в Босна – от францисканския викариат и апостолическата епископия, в Албания – от архиепископите в Драч и Антивари. Църковната структура в Далмация и Албания била доста нестабилна и слаба и в повечето случаи не успявала ефективно да управлява католическите общности. Францисканският викариат в Босна бил единствената църковна структура, която успявала да организира католическите енории и да осигури подкрепа за мисионерската пропаганда в Западните Балкани благодарение на 14-те си манастири с няколкостотин монаси.

За много мисионери, изпратени от *Propaganda Fide* през XVII в., Западните Балкани изглеждали като мултирелигиозен свят, в който религиозната идентичност била лесно променлива и нетрайна, особено поради взаимното влияние между религиозните практики и вярвания на католици, православни и мюсюлмани. Феноменът на религиозния синкретизъм, смятан за специфична характеристика на Западните Балкани в наши дни, се споменава и от мисионерите през XVII в.

Както Антон Минков показва в своето известно проучване за петициите *kisvebahasi* и ислямизирането на България, споделянето на религиозни обреди и вярвания в

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ежедневието способствало не само за обръщането към исляма, но и за добре познатия феномен на криптохристиянството и други смесени форми между двете религии.

Според мисионерски източници за криптохристиянството приемането на исляма ставало или насилствено, или под влиянието на социални и материални фактори като нуждата от социално признаване и запазването, и умножаването на семейното наследство. Епископът на Антивари Андреа Змайевич отбелязва в писмо от 1684 г., че идентичността на криптохристияните била поставена между двете религии. Тези хора изглеждали нещастни, съзнанието им било раздвоено между „устата” им (обществената сфера) и „сърцето” им (интимната сфера). Не всички криптохристияни могли да се примирят с тези две същности.

Съпротивата срещу ислямизацията започнала, когато обвързаността с католическата вяра се превърнала в отличителен белег за социалната и общностната същност. В анонимен разказ от 1661 г. относно католицизма в Сърбия се упоменава фактът, че православните сърби наричали католическата вяра „албанска вяра” поради силната привързаност на косовските албанци към Римската църква. Въпреки това да се устои на процеса на ислямизация било много трудно, когато невежеството по отношение на религията било широко разпространено.

В заключение следва да отговорим на ключов въпрос: как мисионерите описват същността на „истинските” католици от Западните Балкани? В анонимния разказ от 1661 г. се казва, че католиците в Южна Сърбия, живеещи с мюсюлмани и православни, с готовност се отричали от суеверието и религиозните заблуждения. От преданост и преклонение до невежество и свобода на религиозното съзнание – картината на католическата идентичност на Балканите, обрисувана от мисионерите, изглежда по-сложна в началото на контрареформацията.

Ключови думи: религиозен синкретизъм, криптохристиянство, ислямизация.

In 1633, the missionary Giorgio Vušković visited the Catholic communities from Gruda and Bialo Pavliki in Southern Serbia, following the desperate appeal of the unhappy (“infelici”) parishioners, who complained that they had been deprived of religious assistance for more than 12 years. Being informed about the existence in the neighbouring village of 90 former Catholics who recently converted to Islam, the missionary asked about the reason of their abjuration and he was told that „loro non erano ni Turchi ni Christiani ma si erano fatti perchi non era che li dicese quando erano le feste, le vigilie, le tempora, ni quaresima, ni altri giorni di precetto”. In other words, their apostasy was caused by the complete absence of a parish priest leading to the dissolution of their major religious benchmarks. However, Vušković added an interesting comment in his letter: „e la principale credo che era per la liberta della cuscientia perchi tra di loro non si tiene quaresima, ni vigilie, ni tempora”. The missionary clearly dismissed the long absence of a parish priest as the main cause of their abjuration; moreover, he added that they embraced Islam „perchi si sono datti alla liberta e non si curano”. At a more general level, this judgment was applied also to those who remained faithful Catholics: „sine lege vivunt et sine lege peribunt”.

The details regarding Vušković's visitation can be found in his letter sent to the Sacred Congregation "De Propaganda Fide" on December 3rd, 1633 from Sestani (Jačov 1986: 210–211). To contextualize his considerations on the religiosity of the Catholics from Southern Serbia, the missionary referred to their primitive, unrefined customs, such as their exaggerate appetite in eating and drinking (considered a major mark of manliness) or their superstitions concerning the afterlife.

The term "lege" used by Vušković referred, of course, to the religious norms and commandments to be followed by every faithful of the Catholic Church. Living by *ignoring the law* could mean living *without law*, and many missionaries generally agreed that the lack of parish priest whose main task was to ensure that his flock knew the law and obeyed to it, could have led to a life outside the Christian commandments. However, unlike this general opinion shared also by the Catholics from Gruda and Bialo Pavliki who invoked the ignorance as the main cause of the success of Islamization, Vušković reached a different conclusion: it was rather "la libertà della cuscientia", the inner freedom of distancing oneself from confessional limitations. As the American scholar John V. A. Fine noticed in the case of the Bosnians after the Ottoman conquest (as he considered them to be „shaky Christians”), the apostates mentioned by Vušković seem to have not shared a strong religious affiliation – as the missionary said, they were neither Muslims nor Catholics – they opted for a specific religion mainly on circumstantial factors (Fine 1975: 386).

The above mentioned case illustrates to my opinion an example of a missionary perception on the Catholic confessional identity in the 17th century Western Balkans. In this sense, the aim of my contribution is to draw the main lines of the missionary discourse(s) regarding the confessional identity of the Catholic communities from Western Balkans in relation with Islam.

Some basic information regarding the Catholic communities in the early modern Ottoman Empire needs to be resumed here for a better contextualization of my argument. In the 17th century Western Balkans, one can document the existence of large groups of Catholic population living intertwined with Orthodox and Muslim communities especially in areas such as Bosnia, Dalmatia or Northern Albania¹. The Catholic ecclesiastic structures in this area in the 17th c. were the following: in Southern Dalmatia – the Archbishopric of Spalato (Split) and the dioceses Nona (Nin), Trau (Trogir), Scardona (Skradin), Lesina (Hvar), Sebenico (Sibenik), Makarska, Mercana-Trebinje (Trebinje was part of Bosnian territory); in Bosnia – the bishopric of Bosnia and the Franciscan Vicariate of Bosna Argentina; in Albania – the archbishoprics of Antivari (North) and Durazzo (South). The Archbishopric of Antivari (Bar) had under its jurisdiction the bishoprics of Scutari (Shkodër), Sfacci, Zadrima, Alessio, Corbino. The Archbishopric of Durazzo (Durrës) included the bishoprics of Croja, Stefano, Benda, Canovia and Albania. All of them were under the direct authority of the Roman Pontiff, their appointees being in most cases recruited among the local clergy and bearing apostolic rights and privileges *in spiritualibus*. However, due to the

local conditions, while the bishoprics and archbishoprics from Dalmatia and Albania were rather unstable and weak, in most cases unable to efficiently administer the Catholic communities due to the lack of sufficient priests and the absenteeism of the bishops, the Franciscan vicariate of Bosnia was the only ecclesiastic structure able to cover the Catholic parishes in Bosnia and to provide support for the missionary activity of the Propaganda in the Western Balkans, due to its 14 convents and several hundred monks active in the region (in 1623 there were registered 355 Franciscans in Bosnia)².

Many scholars have analyzed the impact of the Ottoman administration over the confessional realities in the Balkans, within the frame of the so-called *dhimmitude*, which encoded the juridical status of the non-Muslims according to the Islamic law³. The general conclusion is that the Islamization process, regarded as a part of the assimilation policy of the Ottomans, affected many Catholic communities, more vulnerable than the Orthodox because of the frailty of the Roman Church in this area (Dávid 2001: 149–158; Odile 1975: 231–244; Jeliaskova 2002: 223–267). According to Anton Minkov, the 17th c. witnessed the peak of the Islamization process in the Balkans, being called “the Balkan age of conversions” (Minkov 2004: 107).

For many missionaries sent by “Propaganda Fide” after its creation in 1622, the Western Balkans appeared as a multi-confessional world, where the religious identities seemed to be rather “fluid”, especially due to the contaminations between various devotional practices and popular beliefs shared by the different confessions living one next to the other. The particular religious syncretism between Christianity and Islam, a specific feature of the Balkans as acknowledged nowadays, is mentioned in the 17th century also by the missionaries. I will quote here the archbishop of Scutari, Pietro (Pjëter) Bogdani, expressing his worries regarding the situation of the Catholicism in Albania in a letter written in 1669: „né altro antidoto posso vedere per la estirpatione delle inconvenienze e vitij che han’preso tanto piede; che **una dilucidatione della verità** [emphasis mine] col fare vedere al Popolo christiano le tenebre delle menzogne nelle quali è costituito per **la continua pratica che hanno in una Babilonia di sette, massime de Turchi et scismatici** [emphasis mine]” (Marquet 1997: 223–224). Nilo Catalano, Apostolic Vicar for Cimarra (Epirus), during his visitation in 1693 noted the “confusion and disorder”, which reigned the spiritual life of the Catholic Albanian peasants and pointed to the „superstiziosa mescolanza dei Riti Cristiani con ceremonie di Maometto” as one of the main causes for this situation (Borgia 1942: 45–46).

Scholars like Stavro Skendi (Skendi 1967: 227–246) or Anton Minkov demonstrated that sharing religious rites and beliefs in the everyday life made possible not only conversion to Islam but also the well-known phenomenon of crypto-Christianity, a peculiar form of confessional identity experienced by many Catholics. The crypto-Christians were those people, former Christians, who professed Islam in public and Christian rituals in private. To manage this religious strange mixture was not really

difficult, at least according to Simeon Laskaris, the missionary archbishop of Durazzo, who noted in 1661 that the Muslims from Cimarra, formerly Catholics, kept all the Catholic feasts and rites, married Catholic women and the only custom which made them Muslims was the consumption of meat during the lent („si può dire che sono Turchi, perchè mangiano sempre carne”) (Jačov 1992 (2): 187). Earlier, in 1647 the apostolic visitor Gregorio Masarecchi (Mazrreku) noted that for many Catholics changing their names was sufficient to be officially considered Muslims and be exempted from paying taxes, the main reason and purpose of their conversion: „Alcuni dicono, et sono moltissimi, che con il cuore semo Christiani solamente habbiamo mutato il nome per non poter pagare li datij impostici dagli Turchi” (Jačov 1992 (1): 153). However, the new converts could not openly confess Christianity and receive religious assistance in public otherwise they risked death penalty for apostasy according to *Sharia* law. In fact, it was much more difficult for the missionaries themselves to categorize these people, due to their dualistic religious background. In 1684, the archbishop of Antivari, Andrea Zmajević, gave express to his confusion and amazement: „rinegati per forza, che possono dirsi nè Turchi, nè Xpiani, mentre nell’infedeltà osservano anche hoggidì alcuni riti de loro antenati Xpiani” (Jačov 1983: 87).

According to the missionary sources on crypto-Christianity, the conversion to Islam took place either forcefully or due to social or material factors, such as the need of social recognition and the necessity of preserving the family patrimony. In 1671, bishop Zmajević described the fears of some crypto-Christians from Antivari: „Alcuni Rinegati nella Città stimano di conservarsi nella Santa Fede, facendo occultamente le loro divotioni in casa; mà perchè nell’extrinseco mostrano d’esser Turchi e di far professione di quella setta frequentando le Moschee per timore c’hanno di perder la vita et altri beni temporali (...)” (Jačov 1998: 157). According to Zmajević, other crypto-Christians, forcefully Islamized, remain more faithful to their “internal” (secret) religion, even avoiding going to the mosque: „si ritrovano alcuni xpiani che presi per forza coll’imposizione del nome turchesco furno circoncesi et in tal maniera dichiarati Turchi. Questi hora se bene di nascosti professan la Religion Xpiana, facendo ciò che deve fare ogni fedele, e s’astengono d’andar nelle Moschee à far l’oratione, mentre communemente vengono stimati Turchi, et in publico non dimostran alcun segno della loro fede interna” (Jačov 1998: 165).

This double identity was regarded by the missionaries as similar to a perpetual state of unhappiness caused by the imminent eternal damnation. In 1610, the archbishop of Antivari, Marino Bizzi, spoke about those “infelici, che hanno fermata la coscienza di creder, che per rispetti humani possano professar il maomettismo con ritener nel cuore la fede Christiana” (Rački 1888: 105). It is clear that Bizzi understood the circumstances that determined such religious “schizophrenia”, but he had major difficulties in understanding the way crypto-Christians could live with their conscience split between “mouth” (public sphere) and “heart” (private sphere). It was even more difficult to accept the validity of their concealed confession, mainly

due to the opposition of Roman Curia, which invoked strict legalist arguments in forbidding the missionaries to administer the sacraments to crypto-Christians.

However, the missionary sources let the modern readers to understand that for the crypto-Christians themselves, there was no equivalence between the two religious hypostases. Being openly Muslims or cohabitating with them meant for most Catholics being especially loyal to the Ottoman state and not to a particular religious hierarchy. To missionaries' dominant opinion, they actually risked their own salvation by trafficking their religious beliefs. The above mentioned visitor Bizzi noted: „E quei miseri hanno fermata la coscienza in creder di non peccar per simil concubinato per esser i Turchi signori del paese, e che però non si possa ne deva far altro, che obedirli quando comandano qualsivoglia cosa. Siccome anco nell'apostatar dalla fede per interessi umani (...)” (Rački 1888: 108). However, according to missionary Gregorio Masarecchi, not all crypto-Christians could reconcile the two hypostases: „Queli che hanno rinegato la fede molto si pentono del error fatto, et dicono, che habbiamo perduto la misericordia di Dio et non haveremo mai misericordia per haver fatto tanto delitto d'esser rinegati, che è il peccato contro Spirito Santo” (Jačov 1992 (1): 151).

On the other hand, resistance towards Islamization represented the affirmation of a strong sense of confessional identity. In 1610, archbishop Bizzi described in his relation sent to Pope Paul V the case of a Christian woman married with a Muslim from the Albanian city of Sappa, seeking with despair the spiritual comfort of the Catholic sacraments, which were refused to her by the Church due to the invalidity of her marriage. The desperation of the woman was underlined by expressions such as „era la più infelice e disperata di quei paesi” or „essend'ella in tale stato di confusione, che se non veniva consolata da qualche parte dubitava di ridursi à tale, ne hauria causata la morte à se stessa per non viver nella miseria nella quale vivea” (Rački 1888: 91–92). In 1659, the missionary Domenico Bubiæ mentioned the case of Angelina Boris from Antivari, wife of a renegade Christian, who decided to divorce her husband and take her sons to avoid their forced conversion to Islam: „risoluta d'abbandonare il marito per salvare l'anima sua e suoi filioli” (Jačov 1992 (2): 91–92).

To resist Islamization was much more difficult when ignorance in matters of religion was widespread among many Catholics: „quelli xpiani che sono trà gl'infedeli sono semplici e devoti e da questa semplicità nasce, che è sorella dell'ignoranza, che alcuni si fanno Turchi” wrote in 1649 Giorgio Vladagni, the Vicar General of the diocese of Scutari (Jačov 1992 (1): 228). Bernardino Romano, who activated as missionary in Macedonia, provided in 1642 an example of ignorance: the Catholics from Gruda, considered to be fully devoted to the Roman Church, believed that Jesus and Muhammad were one and the same person and thought that every language (i.e. nation) has its own religion (Jačov 1986: 593) (a wide spread belief among the Orthodox and Muslim population in the Balkans). For Pietro Masarecchi and other

missionaries, such ignorance was comparable with that of the savage people, a widespread *topos* in their relations regarding the Catholic communities from the Balkans.

It was possible to resist Islamization, however, when the attachment to Catholicism functioned as a distinctive identity mark. An anonymous missionary relation from 1661 concerning the Catholicism in Serbia noted that the Orthodox Serbs used to call the Catholicism as “Albanian faith”, due to the strong attachment of the Albanians from Kosovo to the confession of the Roman Church. Their capacity of resistance at Islamization was expressed by a widespread saying „un buon Albanese non può esser un buon Turcho” (Jačov 1992 (2): 202).

To conclude, I will address one interrogation: how did the missionaries describe the identity of the “true” Catholics from the Western Balkans in the 17th century? To answer, I will use two missionary accounts. In 1623, Archbishop Pietro Masarecchi pictured an ambivalent portrait of the Bosnian Catholics: “buoni e devoti, hanno cognitione della fede christiana (...) frequentano i sacramenti et, rispetto alle altre Provincie di quelle parti mostrano d’essere più dediti alle divotioni: et alla fine si sanno accommodate al tempo et luogo **fingendo d’essere migliori, di quello che in effetto sono** [emphasis mine]” (Draganović 1938: 46). The above cited anonymous report from 1661 referred to the Catholics from Serbia living with Muslims and Orthodox as being willing of renouncing their superstitions and errors: “sono molti che hanno continua prattica con Turchi e Scismatici, che nodriscono quel errore, over superstitione, mà volentieri domandano, et si emendano” (Jačov 1992 (2): 204). From devotion and obeisance to ignorance and freedom of conscience, the picture of Catholic identity in the 17th century Balkans drawn by the missionaries looks far more complex at the beginning of the Counter-Reformation.

NOTES

¹ For statistical data regarding the Catholic populations in the 17th and 18th c. Western Balkans see Dzaja 1984 (for the Bosnian case), Tacchella 1984 (for the Albanian case), Molnár 2007 (for the Dalmatian case).

² See Dzaja 1984: 159–160. For the relation between the Bosnian Franciscan Vicariate and the Ottoman authorities in the 17th c. see Tóth 2003: 409–433.

³ On the historical evolution and content of the *dhimmitude* in the Ottoman Empire and in the Islamic world in general, see also Fattal 1958, Braude 1982; a more controversial approach at Ye’or 1994. For the status of the Catholics in the Ottoman Empire see a more general synthesis in Frazee 1983.

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