

Remaking Muslim Lives: Everyday Islam in Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Lived Islam: Colloquial Religion in a Cosmopolitan Tradition

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How are Muslims so diverse, yet mutually recognizable *as* Muslims? What is the Islam they live in their everyday lives? How do Muslims live Islam? These are some of the questions which underpin two recent studies which were published in 2020: *Lived Islam: Colloquial Religion in a Cosmopolitan Tradition* by Kevin Reinhart, a professor of religion at Dartmouth College, and *Remaking Muslim Lives: Everyday Islam in Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina* by David Henig, an associate professor in the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Utrecht University. The books seemingly have different foci, partly because of their respective disciplinary backgrounds and partly because of the perspectives used in each: Reinhart proposes a large scale interpretative key to intricate relations between local manifestations of Islam, the standardized shared religious framework, and Islam of its cosmopolitan layer (the '*ulamā*'); Henig, on

the other hand, zooms in on a particular period and geography, that of postwar Bosnia, piercing together the ways in which Bosnian Muslims articulate religion and make meaning with Islam and to Islam. While Kevin Reinhart's book ultimately stresses place as the key factor in his interpretative model, David Henig emphasizes the role of historical consciousness in Islam as it is lived by its practitioners. Both books together give a complementary picture of understandings of Islam in the modern world beyond essentialization and relativization, by observing what values and practices are labelled as Islamic and by fleshing out how Muslims interweave Islam in the thread of their lives.

Kevin Reinhart's *Lived Islam* contains six concise chapters containing critiques of previous and current academic approaches to Islam; an elaboration of his own interpretative model through the focus on key concepts of Dialect, Koiné, and Standard or Cosmopolitan Islam; and a consideration of Islam in the modern period. David Henig's book *Remaking Muslim Lives* is divided into two parts: the first one, titled "Making and Unmaking Village Lives," traces the inner workings of Islam in the social fabric of the postwar and post-socialist Bosnian Muslim community, paying particular attention to the notions of house, neighbourhood, and "halal exchange"; the second part of the book, titled "Vital Exchange", focuses on Bosnian Muslims' understandings of Islam and the religious experience in relation to considerations of material and social life. This review will offer a reading of both books in a dialogue. It will not follow the books as they progress from the beginning to the end, but will highlight the key structures and concepts which allow us to see the methodological, theoretical, and practical possibilities they offer for the study of contemporary Islam.

In order to reveal his interpretative key to the study of diversity and Islam, Reinhart exposes the dangers inherent in common other academic approaches. These approaches either essentialize Islam and deprive it of local specificities, or they relativize it to the existence of multiple "Islams", rejecting any kind of inner connectivity and consistency, which is according to Reinhart a parochial approach that denies

what Muslims themselves strongly affirm. Both approaches carry inherent flaws in studying Islam, either by assuming that it means “an identity, a set of practices, an allegiance uninflected by time or place” (20), or failing to see what it is that truly connects Muslims across different temporalities and geographies. Simultaneously, many aspects of Muslim lives are left out in this regard: the study of “normative religious rituals” is especially neglected, with a particular lack of interest in the local production of meanings ascribed to those practices. In other words, we may know a great deal about the normative rituals in *fiqh* rulings, and plenty about specific locales of the Muslim world, but we do not know much about these rituals as lived, imagined, and performed by Muslims in these places.

A great part of Reinhart’s critique is directed against some tendencies in contemporary anthropology, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Shahab Ahmed’s critique in *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. As many scholars in the field of Islamic Studies know, anthropological insights and conceptualizations of Islam have been most useful to other fields, exhibiting curiosity about the subject of Islam as analytical object.¹ The recent years, however, have shown an increased interest in the other direction as well: anthropology has also benefitted from large scale conceptual studies of Islamic history² which embrace ambiguity and contradiction.³ In that way, we can observe the “cross-pollination” of the two fields, which itself is bound to engender new complexities. For example, one of the questions which deserves a separate treatment is whether the exclusive focus on ambiguity and ambivalence might be generating an anti-textual scholarly stance which dismisses the role of Arabic and the Scripture (the Qur’an and the hadith) in the Lived Islam of *all* Muslims.

In an almost parallel way to Reinhart, Henig’s book is a direct critique of identitarian approaches to the study of Bosnian Muslims. Many studies of Islam in the Balkans, and in particular in Bosnia during the 20th and 21st centuries, focus on nationalist frameworks as the major determinant of people’s lives, reducing religion to a position of a nationalist handmaiden and, moreover,

subduing religious expression to the whims of political changes and processes. The current scholarship on Islam in Bosnia, thus, turns to the top-down approach which privileges institutions over practitioners, without exploring *lived* religion on its own terms. This framework prefers ruptures over continuities, which is why the idea of the “revival” of religion became so popular among researchers of the post-socialist Balkans, potentially because it also implies a “decline” which would happen when the right socio-political circumstances occur. As a result of applying such an analytical framework, Bosnian Muslims are cut off from their coreligionists, while being ultimately tied to contingencies of the nation state. Going against the grain, Henig proposes looking at how Bosnian Muslims make meaning of their religion in their lived context that has been full of socio-political ruptures, but with awareness of different temporalities and practices which also ensure continuity. These temporalities (which take into account ruptures such as the Bosnian War as well as eschatological potentialities of otherworldly fate) define Bosnian Muslims’ *moral horizons*. And in defining those, as Henig states, the true question of their lived religion is *how to live*, rather than *who I am* (13).

The time, but also the place, is what frames the difference, and ultimately gives rise to varieties of Islam, which are all *Lived Islam* for those who reside in particular locales (34). Reinhart strikes a fine balance between considerations of the local and the global by proposing that we look at the variations of Islam through an interpretative model inspired by sociolinguistics. Namely, in that model, Islamic practice and belief would be a kind of language spoken and shared by Muslims across the world, yet appropriated in locally specific ways, akin to colloquial speech. In that way, all Muslims “speak” a colloquial variant of Islam, according to their respective contexts. In that way, if we turn to Henig’s study, the inhabitants of the villages in the Zvijezda highlands, which is the focus of his book, have like many other Bosnian Muslims experienced decades of socialist Yugoslavia, horrors of Serbian aggression, and years of economic precarity. These have influenced the way in which major

rituals of Islam are understood and performed. To take the example of *kurban*, the ritual slaughter done during the Eid al-Adha: in the postwar period, the number of people who could afford to perform the deed fell drastically. Yet, at the same time, a type of *halal exchange* emerged where people offer not just the scarce material resources, but also gestures of help and care in order to earn a spiritual merit. People exchanged a range of material and non-material things which they understood according to their own moral framework that ensured the “perpetual flow of divine grace, abundance, and prosperity in their everyday lives” (14). Non-material goods, in the shape of performing a *sevap*, a good deed, was often one of the ways in which postwar Bosnian Muslim villagers kept the flow of the “vital exchange” with God, even in times when the formal ritual could not be performed. A range of additional specific terms is associated with the exchange, as shown in the following passage:

living a Muslim life consists not so much of claiming a specific ethnonational identity but of taking part in day-to-day exchanges of blessing (*bereket*), prosperity (*nafaka*) and fortune (*hajr*), in good deeds and merits (*sevap*), and in prayers (*dova*) between the living, the dead, and the divine. (14)

While the colloquial (as one of the manifestations described above) tends to be easily associated with common practitioners, Reinhart states that Lived Islam is always colloquial and always shaped by the locale. In order to understand how local/regional variants exist and correlate with Lived Islam of other Muslims as well as the Scripture (the Qur’an and the hadith corpus), Reinhart proposes three aspects: the Dialect (referring to specific places, “whether geographical, temporal, or otherwise locative”), the Koiné (what is shared between different “speakers” or practitioners of Islam), and the Cosmopolitan or Standard (the Islam of the Scripture). The Dialect Islam is Islam of difference, whether denominational, sectarian or otherwise. Yet, in contrast to both the essentialists, who operate with binary oppositions of real/ignorant,

orthodox/heterodox or urban/rural Islam, and to those anthropologists who opt for the validity of “all islams”, Reinhart points to the interaction between these different layers of Dialect, Koiné, and Standard Islam. Thus, while “Dialect Islam is local and particular, Koiné Islam is shared by most Muslims, Standard or Cosmopolitan Islam is the sophisticated, prestigious, academic aspect of Islam” (41): the last two offer space for the rise of the first. Koiné Islam presents the rituals and beliefs shared by most Muslims, while Standard or Cosmopolitan Islam is the scholarly Islam, the Islam of texts, which Reinhart likens to the English of the grammar books (36). Yet, they are themselves far from fixed: they offer the rituals as a language recognizable by Muslims across the world, but, in the case of Standard Islam—the Islam of texts—the actual religious prescriptions, “the actual scope of Standard Islamic religious ritual” and “the religious demography of belief” is quite sparse (41). This opens a range of possibilities for the Dialect Islam. All three layers, however, get dramatically reshaped in the course of the twentieth century and under the pressure of modernity. Through mass literacy and media, travel and the rise of the idea that Muslims share an ideological unity (also channelled through the idea of the Muslim World)⁴, the Islam of the modern age has become standardized, wide-spread, and subdued to the service of the nation-state, which disciplines the practices and attitudes of Dialect Islam.

The interplay of these three layers and the tension between them in the modern period is most obvious in the rich ethnography of Henig’s book. The cadence of Bosnian villagers’ lives is largely dictated by a variety of rituals, some of them shared with other Muslims’ (the Eid sacrifice, daily prayers or *namaz*, fasting during Ramadan) and some of them regional (such as the annual visitation or *ziyāra* to sacred places of Ajvatovica and Karići) and even local (village prayers for rain). Some rituals, such as the *istikhāra* prayer (118-122) are intimate and exclusive. The performance of some of these rituals (such as the prayer in community or *džemat*, the regulation of annual fasting in Ramadan) brings the believers in close connection to structures of religious authority: local imams are

performing communal prayers, and the centralized religious body of Islamic Community (*Islamska Zajednica*, more on which later) issues calendars marking dates and times important for the correct observance of the fast. While Bosnian Muslims belong to the Hanafi school, the rituals would be recognizable and shared with vast majority of the other coreligionists across the world. Yet, even on this basic level of compatibility, the shared rituals are appropriated and understood differently: as Henig shows, even among the villagers themselves, Ramadan was given a different meaning by those adhering to the Sufi path. While “common” villagers would say that it was simply “worthwhile to fast”, the Sufi oriented ones would emphasize the cultivation of the *nafs* and “realization of what it means to be a human (*insan*) before God” (105-106). The Dialect, thus, is interwoven with the Koiné, namely what is shared between different Muslims.

Some rituals, on the other hand, are profoundly regional and local in their nature: while some know the *dovište* (the place of the *ziyāra*) of Ajvatovica as one of the largest Muslim gatherings in Europe, not many are aware of Karići, located in the Zvijezda highlands. The *ziyāra* to both places is connected to Sufi rituals and centered around the figures of *good people* (*dobri*, also known as *evlije/awliyā*). The practice of visitation to these places in recent years has caused the consternation and wrath of Salafi-oriented Bosnians, “vehabije”, who had labelled it as unbelief or *širk*. The rise of salafism and the scriptural reading of Islam is certainly connected to the modern transformations in understanding the religion, which have been in collision with many features of Dialect Islam, as manifested in these local *ziyārāt*. And while the ways in which Salafism manifested in Bosnia are more complex, one of the defining elements was the role of scholars educated in the Gulf. Accordingly, here we can observe how some instances of Cosmopolitan Islam (the one carried by the ‘*ulamā*’) clashed with forms of Dialect Islam.

As Henig deftly shows, the sites are places of wider contestation over “religious authority, authenticity, and historical consciousness

in post-socialist, postwar Bosnian Muslim politics at large” (135). Islamska Zajednica (IZ)—the official authoritative religious body established in the late nineteenth century through the Austro-Hungarian incentive which aimed at severing the links of Bosnian Muslims with the Ottoman Empire—regulates most of the activities related to the pious visitations. The relationship of the IZ to the places was historically ambiguous, at best. A profoundly modern institution, it fostered a close link to the framework of the nation-state and accordingly sought control over interpretations of Islam in Bosnia. In that regard, it “pruned” and regulated the practices accordingly. The IZ, however, has often been at the mercy of the modern secular state: its activities were severely limited in the socialist period and made to comply with state policies. This, coupled with the twentieth-century Islamic modernist eschewing of Sufi practices as backward and superstitious, stifled and consequently (in the case of Ajvatovica) banned the practice of *ziyāra* for many decades.

With the relaxation of the state grip on the religious activities in the late 1980s, the *dovište* of Ajvatovica (but not Karići) entered the renewed focus of the IZ, the believers and, as we will see, non-Bosnians as well. Because of its contested history that symbolized the repression of Bosnian Muslims by the socialist state, Ajvatovica regained new visibility, further exacerbated during the Bosnian war (1992-95). The IZ, as well as Bosniak politicians, embraced the *ziyāra*, which became “re-orchestrated and instrumentalized in Bosniak political discourse as a fertile national symbol in post-Yugoslav public debates on collective Bosnian Muslim identity” (141). The Salafi objections to the ritual, itself a Cosmopolitan modernist phenomenon, were discarded, and the new, nation-state oriented type of public religiosity was promoted. Yet, despite being imbued with nationalist rhetoric, the focus on Ajvatovica was not isolating, but related to other national interpretations of Islam. Henig dedicates the conclusion of his book, titled “The Sultan is Back,” to show how other actors had stake in influencing the interpretations and understandings of Islam in Bosnia. In the postwar years,

the presence of Turkish state bodies in regulating the rituals in Bosnia (Ajvatovica, but also others), was visible and jarring for many common Bosnian Muslims. In that way, the official national Islam has shown its truly trans-national dimension. This dimension is, however, exclusive: the Salafi interpretations, although cosmopolitan in terms of their origin and spread, are not welcome in the vision, yet the Turkish-state-approved practices are tolerated.

The other *dovište*, Karići, presents an antithesis to Ajvatovica. Despite having a similar foundational narrative that centres around a holy person (*dobri*) in the postwar and post-socialist years, Karići have been much less visible in the contested Bosnian public sphere. By giving voice to traveller-visitors to *dovište*, Henig shows how Bosnian Muslims themselves differentiate between standardization of religious practices by the IZ and the perceived continuity of traditions that defy time and political pressures. In the eyes of these visitors, Ajvatovica has become a place of tourism and artificial ritual choreography; Karići, on the other hand, have retained their pristine place of *ibadet* and *mehabet* (142), thus referring to vertical and horizontal connections to the divine and to coreligionists. Yet, despite this, Karići have also been a place regulated by the IZ, and where the representatives of Turkish religious and state bodies made their presence (143-144). Despite the oft repeated, appropriated, and adjusted narratives of the Ottoman origin of Islam in Bosnia, the encounters with those who claimed to uphold the continuity and foster post-Ottoman brotherhood in many cases annoyed and were resisted by Bosnian Muslim villagers. Thus, as Reinhart points out in the last chapter of his book, despite the homogenization of modern Islam, encounters may actually solidify “differences into antagonisms” (158).

Yet, Bosnian Muslims did not aspire to live in a spatial or temporal vacuum, nor could they live so. David Henig is one of the rare contemporary researchers of the Balkans who proposes closer study of the links between the Bosnian Muslims and the wider region, which are not only physical, but also genealogical and affective.⁵ Furthermore, in *Remaking Muslim Lives*, the author offers an

efficient model of how to study religion which is embedded in the social fabric of the community of its believers, and which is simultaneously reconfigured by the vicissitudes of the war and postwar realities. This process is constantly negotiated, but what keeps it in place is the *everyday historical work* (4) that puts Muslim subjects “in charge”. In other words, ruptures such as the Bosnian war or the longer historical processes of socialist Yugoslav suppression of religion and postwar economic precarity are just some of the vicissitudes that are “thrown” at Bosnian Muslims. Neither do these define and fix Bosnian Muslims’ relationship with the world, nor with other-worldly matters. What Henig suggests is that, rather than being limited to the critical events, their “historical work” engages with other temporal frameworks and ethical considerations, of which the Islamic are among the key ones. In that context, Muslims are not passively subdued to pressures of the nation-state. They are instead active upholders of Islamic practices and beliefs, to which they continuously add new layers of meaning in the process. Moreover, through rituals such as prayers for rain or *istikhāra*, the believers are actively trying to influence the present and the future.

However, the Islamic imbuing of imagination and experience also happens through the “materiality of social forms” (5). This is perhaps the most original aspect of Henig’s work, which shifts the investigation to elusive and less visible elements of Lived Islam. How are Muslims *making* (Islamic) meaning from the mundane, that which is outside the ritual? By focusing on elements such as house, family, and neighbourhood, Henig brings forth the importance of an ethical framework of ‘guardianship’ which encompasses human interactions with nature, materiality, other people, and, ultimately, God. Bosnian villagers cultivated a close relationship to the land they were living on, feeling the obligation to it even as they would move to cities seeking employment. The division of land in communities that relied on subsistence farming also collided with gendered aspects that made men the primary guardians. Similarly, the obligation to the physical house—the site which Bosnian villagers visually marked with photos of Mecca and Medina, or displays

of *tespîh*—was a part of the guardianship of the land. Yet, the villagers feel that the obligation spreads across the land to the neighbours, through practices of care articulated in forms of “living together” and “eating together.” Finally, the responsibility extends to encompass most actions one does in order to act the “halal way”, which is “everything that satisfies Allah” (67). Thus, and while not explicitly stated, Henig’s book points to the necessity of research beyond the ritual domain.

The meaning-making impulse of Bosnian Muslim villagers, articulated through an extensive framework of Islamic symbols, images, and attitudes, encompassed the daily and yearly rhythm of their lives. Yet, this framework is not static. It is open to acceptance and incorporation of other contextual elements. For example, the villagers of Brdo observed several temporalities that overlapped on the key points of Muslims’ lives. In his chapter titled “Cosmological Time”, Henig shows how material elements such as beads, the calendar, and the clock presented the blend of the national, religious, and secular temporalities (92). By reminding us of the everyday objects that constitute lives of Bosnian villagers and their attitudes to them (not only calendars and clocks, but also houses, utensils, and tractors), Henig is asserting the materiality of religion, as well as its omnipresence for practitioners.

In this aspect, Reinhart and Henig’s books speak to two different but compatible approaches to the study of Lived Islam. While Reinhart’s vision is focused on the vast and almost limitless geo-temporal body of Islam held together by ritual practices, attitudes, and beliefs that has the ability of recreating itself in a continuous flow from local/Dialect to Standard and back through Koiné, Henig’s book deals directly with mechanisms that make Islam an inseparable, permanent, and continuous part of everyday life. Both books make strong statements against the peripheralization of Lived Islam: Reinhart by seeking what connects Muslims from all over the world, and Henig by stressing the perseverance and creativity of religious feeling and expression at the perceived margins of the Islamic world.

These two books open a further theoretical and methodological dialogue between anthropology and the study of Islam. Taking Reinhart's interpretative model into account, we can ask: If Islam can be observed as a language in different grammatical states, what happens with translation? What are the mechanisms through which Islam is rendered into its local variants, but also to spaces outside of it? Studying how Muslim lives are remade, as in the example of villagers of the Zvijezda highlands, can give us some answers.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Gregory Starrett, “The Anthropology of Islam,” cited in Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 114.
- ² Such as the aforementioned book by Ahmed, as well as Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islam* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011).
- ³ One of the examples is David Henig and Magnus Marsden, “Muslim Circulations and Networks in West Asia: Ethnographic Perspectives on Transregional Connectivity,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2019): 11-21; also Magnus Marsden, *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- ⁴ See more on the development of the idea in Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).
- ⁵ David Henig, “Crossing the Bosphorus: Connected Histories of ‘Other’ Muslims in the Post-Imperial Borderlands of Southeast Europe,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58, no. 4 (2016): 908–934.

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