

# articles

Gendering the History of Spiritualities and Secularisms in Southeastern Europe



## Introduction

Pamela Ballinger and Kristen Ghodsee



Scholars of religion have increasingly brought secularism within the framework of critical studies of spirituality, analyzing the dialogic relationship between religions and secularisms past and present. This emerging field of “postsecularist” studies examines the multiple meanings and practices that different cultures and societies attach to the concepts of “religion,” “faith,” and “piety.”<sup>1</sup> The articles presented in this special section of *Aspasia* contribute to these larger academic debates by focusing on the multiethnic and historically pluralistic region of Southeastern Europe, an area too often ignored in larger scholarly discussions that have focused primarily on Western Europe and the so-called Third World. More important, the articles in this volume demonstrate how secularization projects are intricately interwoven with gender relations in any given society. Collectively, the articles urge readers to draw connections between the shifting spiritual cartographies, state formations, and definitions of appropriate masculinity and femininity of particular Southeastern European societies.

This collection of articles is the intellectual product of two workshops funded with a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies: the first held at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine in October 2009 and the second at the Faculty of Political Science at the National School of Political Sciences and Public Administration in Bucharest, Romania in June 2010. The first workshop brought together social scientists and historians from across the United States, scholars specifically pursuing research projects in Southeastern Europe examining the intersections of gender, modernity, and secularist discourses in Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, and former Yugoslavia, as well as the historical legacies of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. Our scholarly deliberation focused on the ways in which the long history of Balkan religious pluralism challenges many of the currently fashionable accepted histories of secularism and their lack of attention to the fundamentally gendered nature of secularizing projects. Many of these current studies unwittingly reproduce Occidentalist biases by grounding the history of secularism in a Protestant/Roman Catholic Christian tradition, ignoring the importance of Eastern Orthodox Christianity,<sup>2</sup> while simultaneously neglecting the ways that secularist projects differentially affected men and women in Balkan societies. The second workshop allowed two representatives of the first workshop to solicit feed-



back from scholars of Orthodoxy in the region and to lay the groundwork for future collaborations between scholars based in the United States and in Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Much of the emergent discourse in the interpretive social sciences has sought to produce genealogies of secularism that demonstrate its complicity with the ambition to political hegemony of Western European powers. This selective genealogy rests primarily on assumptions of a Western philosophical tradition derived from ancient Greece and Rome and refracted through Renaissance and Enlightenment thought. Although acknowledging this history, we contend that alternative histories of secularity would be generated if one took seriously the local debates—which are intrinsic to all religions and societies—about how to engage others; this category encompasses both foreigners and those who, though familiar, do not share the same conceptions of the world or notions of social justice. The history of doctrinal debates and socio-cultural change in Southeastern Europe demonstrates that most religions represented here carry within themselves the seeds of their own auto-critique. The articles included here examine the ways in which various populations in Southeastern Europe have attempted to actualize these possibilities, thus facilitating peaceful coexistence with others for extended periods of time, contrary to the stereotypes that plague the Balkans. Studying this historically recurrent possibility has great relevance to the present moment, when the apparently divergent claims of religion and secularism seem resistant to any mediation, and when the need for strategies of co-being is so great.

At the same time, the collection of articles presented here go beyond the romantic and idealized visions of coexistence that have characterized some recent reassessments of pluralist regions, such as the Balkans or the pre-Reconquista Iberian Peninsula.<sup>4</sup> In multiconfessional empires like those of the Habsburgs and Ottomans, as well as pluralist states such as socialist Yugoslavia, religious coexistence could at times prove precarious, particularly given the ways in which religious identities increasingly intersected with ethnic and national identities from the nineteenth century on. Anthropologist Robert Hayden has described such coexistence in terms of “antagonistic tolerance,”<sup>5</sup> a formulation that underscores the potential for religious difference to become a flashpoint, as has occurred in different moments in the recent history of Southeastern Europe.

Key to rethinking this delicate balance between religious and other identities, as well as between religiously defined communities, is a critical eye on various state formations that have sought to manage, co-opt, or contain religious identities and movements in the region. The ways in which both states and their subjects found religious identity useful—or not—helps explain many seeming paradoxes or contradictions in Southeastern Europe. The Slavic pirates or *uskoks* sponsored by the Habsburgs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries along the Military Frontier between the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, for example, could act out of sincere motivation as Christian warriors against Islam. This occurred even as they attacked the ships of (Christian) Venetians—Habsburg rivals—and engaged in practices of blood brotherhood with Muslim neighbors who shared their warrior code.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the Habsburg Emperor Joseph II (1741–1790) maintained a Catholic identity even as he introduced wide-ranging reforms, such as the Patent of Toleration and sought to subordinate church to an enlightened state. Joseph’s particular version of church/state separation preceded the

French Revolution, thereby unsettling one enshrined narrative of the history of the secular state. A century later, the *Kulturkampf* would continue to pit liberals against conservatives in the empire over the issue of the appropriate relationship between church and state.<sup>7</sup> Within the context of these formal, state-directed policies there thus unfolded a wide range of contests and accommodations on the ground, which articulated with other understandings of “cultural” and political identity, such as language, nation, and particularly gender.

Scholars have recently described the Habsburg Monarchy as characterized by the “parallel realities” of ethnic-national identification and loyalty to the dynastic, multinational state.<sup>8</sup> This phrasing does not assume from the outset an oppositional relationship between nationalism and supranational/imperial loyalty but rather seeks to determine the complex interplay and tensions between such ideologies. Other scholars have similarly questioned dichotomies such as cosmopolitanism and traditionalism (or nationalism) in the region and beyond.<sup>9</sup> The articles in this special section do not treat religion and secularism as inevitable opposites, thus complicating the simple historical narratives that have often defined the past and present realities of religion and secularism in Southeastern Europe. In doing this, the articles implicitly build on an earlier generation of critical scholarship that questioned common myths about the millet system in the Ottoman Empire and the antipathy of Balkan religions to Enlightenment ideologies.<sup>10</sup>

Southeastern Europe offers a particularly apposite site for uncovering alternative genealogies and understandings of secularism and religious diversity, as it reveals in dramatic fashion both the perils and promises of religious pluralism. The region has witnessed a wide range of state types within which such pluralism has been negotiated, including empires, nation-states, socialist states, and now European Union (EU) member states. All of the states in the region host significant religious minorities, which can mobilize both past narratives of coexistence and contemporary international norms about religious protections and tolerance. In contemporary Southeastern Europe, articulations and experiences of secularism and religion take place in a landscape unevenly transformed by capital, warfare, and recent violence, and access to EU resources as well as an ever-shifting terrain of local gender systems.

In the first article of the thematic section, Ballinger and Ghodsee use the examples of socialist Bulgaria and Yugoslavia to propose new directions for rethinking scholarly understandings of secularism and the ways in which socialist secularizing projects were intricately intertwined with questions of gender equality. This article takes two cases of Balkan states to explore the theoretical contours of what the authors refer to as “socialist secularism.” Although Bulgaria and Yugoslavia’s experiences of socialist secularism differed in the degree of their coerciveness, this article demonstrates that there are important similarities in the conceptualization of the secularizing imperative and the rhetoric used to justify it, specifically the rhetoric of communist modernization and women’s liberation from “traditional” religious backwardness.

In the case of communist Romania, Maria Bucur explores the feminization of Eastern Orthodox piety against the socialist secularizing impulses of the government. Bucur examines in depth the seeming paradox that despite the antireligious campaigns of the Ceaușescu regime, the number of women entering the Orthodoxy nunnery in-

creased substantially during the communist era. Historically, Romanian women had always provided a spiritual foundation for the Romanian Orthodox Church and Bucur investigates the fascinating continuities between the precommunist and communist periods. Her article is a reflective one; using her own experiences as a child in Romania and drawing on an emerging body of oral history scholarship, Bucur aims to outline the contours of a research agenda that will inspire new scholars from the region.

Historian Melissa Bokovoy directs our attention to underutilized materials, such as photographs, in the study of spiritualities and secularisms in Southeastern Europe. Bokovoy examines the tensions that arise when nation-states (or, more precisely *nationalizing* states) seek to appropriate ritual practices of mourning grounded in both “universal” religious doctrine and deep (and gendered) local histories. In an empirically rich analysis, Bokovoy explores how the emerging field of photography simultaneously drew on and competed with women’s practices of remembering the dead in Serbia during and after World War I, in particular women’s laments derived from epic poetic traditions. The efforts of the Serbian and successive Yugoslav state to harness local Orthodox traditions of grief in service to a project of national identity proved a key aspect of a secular (if not necessarily a secularizing) project. The gendered celebration of sacrifice in service to the nation proved common to states throughout Europe in the aftermath of World War I, pointing to further directions for comparative research.

Focusing on questions of consumption and identity in Ottoman Bulgaria and the early independence era, historian Mary Neuburger explores the local construction of “successful” masculinity in the public spaces of the tavern and the coffee house. Neuburger skillfully uses Western archival sources to examine the discursive construction of Christian Bulgarians as lazy drunkards compared to the supposedly sober, industrious Turks. Early Bulgarian communists found unlikely allies in American and British Protestant missionaries hoping to spread the message of temperance to the Balkans. Despite the intransigence of local masculine ideals of sociability, which required Bulgarian Christian men to demonstrate their spiritual and ethnic allegiances through inebriation, the Turkish coffee shop did eventually gain popularity among Bulgarians eager to engage in international trade and commerce. Neuburger’s article aptly demonstrates that both religious and ethnic allegiances, and the practices associated with their maintenance, can easily melt away in the face of emerging commercial opportunities.

The articles presented here are meant to be read as a collection, with each contribution building on and expanding on the others. The authors come from different disciplinary perspectives, and the editors hope that together these articles will stimulate further research and discussion on the interwoven relationships of gender, religion, and secularism in Southeastern Europe. The articles encompass a wide range of cases, methods, and intellectual traditions, pointing to the productiveness of intellectual ecumenism and pluralism on these topics. We hope that scholars of Southeastern Europe will bring their expertise in the particular histories of religion and secularism in the region to bear on broader debates from which the Balkans have been largely absent. Finally, the examples from Southeastern Europe explored here point to the centrality of gender to secularist projects, an insight that surprisingly few scholars of secularism have explored. Far from being a marginal or peripheral case, the Balkans emerge

here as an exciting new site of innovation for the larger study of spiritualities and secularisms.

## ◆ Notes

1. For key texts, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Philip Blond, *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

2. Kristen Ghodsee, "Symphonic Secularism: Eastern Orthodoxy, Ethnic Identity and Religious Freedoms in Contemporary Bulgaria," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 27, no. 2 (2009): 227–252.

3. We would like to thank Adrian and Mihaela Miroiu for generously agreeing to host the second part of the workshop in Romania.

4. On Bosnia, see Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). On Iberia, see Maria Rosa Menocal and Harold Bloom, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance* (New York: Little, Brown, 2002). For a critique of such romanticization, refer to Pamela Ballinger, "Imperial Nostalgia: Mythologizing Habsburg Trieste," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2003): 84–101.

5. Robert Hayden, "Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites in South Asia and the Balkans," *Current Anthropology* 43, no. 2 (2002): 205–231.

6. Catherine Wendy Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj: Piracy, Banditry, and Holy War in the Sixteenth-Century Adriatic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

7. Nancy Wingfield, "Emperor Joseph II in the Austrian Imagination up to 1914," in *The Limits of Loyalty: Imperial Symbolism, Popular Allegiances, and State Patriotism in the Late Habsburg Monarchy*, ed. Laurence Cole and Daniel Unowsky (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), 62–85.

8. Laurence Cole and Daniel L. Unowsky, "Introduction," in *The Limits of Loyalty*, ed. Cole and Unowsky, 1–10.

9. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbin, eds., *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Pamela Ballinger, *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

10. Traian Stoianovich, "The Conquering Balkan Orthodox Merchant," *Journal of Economic History* 13, no. 4 (1953): 398–411; Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982); Paschalis Kitromilides, *Enlightenment, Nationalism, and Orthodoxy: Studies in the Culture and Political Thought of South-Eastern Europe* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994).