

Between Middle Eastern Heterodoxy, Indigenization and Modern Shi'ism: Competing Identities among the Balkan Alevi and Bektashi Communities in the Post-Ottoman Period

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The post-Ottoman evolution, interchange and occasional contrariety between traditional (and/or inherited) and ascribed (in the modern period) Alevi and Bektashi identities in the Balkans is part of the larger process of the transformation, reform and ever-changing politics of identity of heterodox religious communities in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East following the fragmentation and disestablishment of the Ottoman empire after World War 1. The phenomenon of the ongoing characteristic revival and re-conceptualizations of Alevism in Turkey and the Alevi diaspora in Western Europe since the late 1980s and their diverse religious, cultural and social manifestations has been explored by historians, political scientists, theologians, anthropologists, sociologists, ethnomusicologists and so on, and their respective perspectives and methodologies, with some of the research coming from within the Alevi community. This rediscovery of Anatolian Alevism (Alevilik) in the scholarly and public sphere has not been accompanied (with few exceptions) by a similarly pronounced interest (or comparable publications output) in the contemporaneous, if often differing processes among the existing ethno-religious Alevi groups in the Balkans and the (variously related to them) surviving or revived regional networks and lodges of the Bektashi dervish order. Hence the purpose of this article is to draw attention to these processes and the promising vistas for future research they offer.¹

The fact that many of the Balkan Alevi and Bektashi groups have remained little-known, 'barely researched'² communities is certainly regrettable. A comparative study of the patterns of Alevi and Bektashi interactions with post-Ottoman modernity in Anatolia and the Balkans against the background of the respective processes involving other heterodox religious communities in the Middle East can shed further useful light on the manifold effects of the related pressures

¹ I acknowledge with gratitude that my fieldwork and visits to and research in regional archives in the Balkans and Turkey in 2001-2004 (related to the research on this article) were supported by a Wingate Scholarship for 2001-2002, granted by the Harold Hyam Wingate Foundation, London, and British Academy Research Grants, awarded in 2003 and 2004.

² Markus Dressler, 'The Modern Dede: Changing Parameters for Religious Authority in Contemporary Turkish Alevism', in *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, ed. Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 271.

of migration, urbanization and secularization on the beliefs, ritual systems and traditional hierarchical and communal structures of such sectarian organizations and groups. The fortunes of the Alevi communities and the Bektashi order in the Balkans during the post-Ottoman, post-World War II and post-communist periods have followed divergent trajectories to those of their counterparts in Anatolia and the comparable communities or *tarikats* in the Middle East, being determined by very different religious and socio-political circumstances.

The absence of sufficient research interest in and publications on the ethno-religious Balkan Alevi communities and the networks and centres of the Bektashi dervish order variously associated with them in the region, which has continued until very recently, was caused to a great degree by objective factors such as the difficult access (by West European or Turkish researchers) to these communities, their religious and cultic sites (*tekkes*, *zaviyes*, *türbes*, etc.), internal written sources and oral traditions throughout much of the communist period in Eastern Europe. Thus various areas of research into these communities (especially related to the theological provenance of their beliefs and roots of their ritual observances), initiated in the post-Ottoman and interwar periods, were left in a state of suspended animation in the communist-dominated Balkan states, whereas local anthropological and folklorist research on these groups was developing slowly and erratically, as research on the spiritual and mystical aspects of Balkan heterodox Islam was variously deemphasized, discouraged or marginalized during the communist period. Still, the post-communist restoration of religious freedoms led not only to more public and social visibility for these Alevi and Bektashi groups in the last two decades but highlighted the necessity of a serious investigation of their history, beliefs and rituals and of integrating the resultant material and conclusions into the study of their Anatolian counterparts and of Middle Eastern heterodoxy and syncreticism in general. The need for such expansion of research into Alevism and Bektashism has acquired contemporary relevance by the fact that varying from one Balkan area to another, the restored presence of these communities in the various local and regional religious, political and social discourses has also reawakened some of the characteristic theologically, polemically and nationalistically motivated approaches to their identity developed in the late and early post-Ottoman period, a phenomenon which finds important and suggestive parallels in the contemporaneous Middle Eastern contexts, as illustrated by the ongoing intense polemics focused on the origins and religious affinities of Near Eastern religious minority groups such as the Yezidis, Ahl-e Haqq and the Druze.

Many aspects of the recently revived and continuing intense debates about (or within) Anatolian and West European- diaspora Alevism concern the problem of Alevi identity(ies), including the role of Shi'ism as well as contact with Middle Eastern heterodoxy in its formation. A closer study of the post-Ottoman identity politics and claims associated with the Balkan Alevis and Bektashis can greatly contribute to a deeper understanding of the far-reaching religio-political

implications of this problem and the debates stemming from it. Such a study is not easy to accomplish as yet, as it needs to take into account relevant material from disparate Balkan areas and periods, starting from the establishment of the first modern Balkan nation-states to the post-communist transformations and realignment of religious actors and institutions on the Balkan multi-confessional scene. The following analysis will try, therefore, to highlight some of the important venues of current research and public debates related to this problematic and provide some preliminary observations on their impact on the future identity politics of these Balkan heterodox minorities vis-à-vis contemporary religious and political developments in Turkey and the Middle East.

Post-Ottoman Alevism – Historiographies, Ideologization and Political Instrumentalization

The numerous religious and historical problems posed by the emergence and evolution in the early Ottoman era of the various Anatolian heterodox groups (which came to be described by the umbrella term *Kızılbaş*, to be largely replaced latterly, while also remaining interchangeable with 'Alevi'), the roots of some of them in the rebellious *Baba'î* groups of the Seljuk period and the exact nature of their early interrelations with the Bektashi order (as well as their development into the Ottoman era) remain outside the scope of this article.³ However, it is worth noting at this point that the presence, range and provenance of Shi'ite elements in the beliefs and rites of the early *Kızılbaş* communities and Bektashi dervishes, as well as the vexed question of whether some of them may predate the extension of Safavid proselytism into Anatolia, betraying an earlier impact of Middle Eastern *ghulât* traditions, continue to be under close debate. As in the adjacent Middle Eastern areas, the borderline between Shi'a-influenced and Shi'a-leaning heterodox Islamic currents in early Ottoman Anatolia was not always fixed and some of these heterodox circles or dervishes could also adopt *shari'a*-related notions and practices from Sunni Islam.

The investigation of the diverse evidence for the history of the Bektashi order, its interrelations with the *Kalender* dervish groups, its association with the Janissary corps, its links and organizational parallels to the Ottoman craft guilds, the *akhis*, and its role in the expanding Ottoman dominions from Anatolia into Europe and the Middle East has been undergoing steady, if somewhat (given the nature of the sources) slow progress. Recent studies have broken promising new

³ For earlier studies of Alevism and Bektashism, with an emphasis on their syncretism, see, e.g., John K. Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes* (London: Luzac, 1937) (repr. 1994). For more recent studies, see, among others, the various relevant articles of Irène Mélikoff collected in Irène Mélikoff, *Sur les traces du soufisme turc: recherches sur l'Islam populaire en Anatolie* (Istanbul: Isis, 1992) and Irène Mélikoff, *Au banquet des quarante: exploration au coeur du bektachisme-alevisme* (Istanbul: Isis, 2001); the relevant contributions in *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, ed. K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele and A. Otter-Beaujean (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 195-205.

ground, for example, in the research on the continuing presence and alliances of the order (and Bektashi-related circles) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the period following its suppression and confiscation of Bektashi property and lodges⁴ by Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839) in 1826 (along with his abolition of the Janissary corps) to the swiftly changing religious and political arena of the pre-War World I Ottoman empire and early Kemalist Turkey.⁵

At the same time, the history of the originally pro-Safavid Anatolian Kızılbaş groups following the Ottoman-Safavid conflicts of the sixteenth century, their persecution by the Ottoman authorities and the deportation of some of these communities to the Balkans in the same century continues to abound in major gaps and uncertainties. Despite these uncertainties and controversies surrounding some of the crucial problem areas in the study of early Kızılbaşlık and Bektashism, the accumulation of research on and publications of primary written source material (including the scripts of the Alevi doctrinal-catechistic book, the *Buyruk* [attributed to the sixth Shi'a imam, Ja'far al-Sādiq], the *Makālat*, the 'sayings' attributed to the eponymous founder of the Bektashi order, Hacı Bektaş Veli (c. 1300?), the *menakıbnames* and *vilayetnames* of Alevi and Bektashi sacred personages, religious hymns, *nefes* etc.) as well as fieldwork explorations of Alevi oral history and rural communities' ethnography clearly indicates that the roots of shared Kızılbaş and Bektashi beliefs and practices need to be sought in the influential syncretistic, antinomian and *ghulāt*-related currents which entered early Ottoman Islam from areas ranging from Central to Western Asia. These currents were capable of generating religious agitations and religio-political movements, challenging the stability of the empire and the ascendancy of normative Sunni Islam.

Some of the divergences in the sphere of doctrine and ritual between the two groups were evidently determined by their different socio-religious presence and evolution in post-sixteenth-century Ottoman society. The Kızılbaş groups in the post-sixteenth-century Balkans and Asia Minor generally tended to evolve into rural, peripheral, secluded and largely endogamic ethno-religious communities (with a strong focus on the oral transmission of their esotericized teachings and rites). They could practice when needed a Shi'ite-like dissimulation of their religious affiliation (*takiyya*), while still being exposed to periodic Sunnification pressures whose intensity could fluctuate from area to area. Bektāshīyya, on

⁴ On the confiscation of Bektashi properties and *tekkes* in and after 1826, see Suraiya Faroqhi, *Der Bektaschi-Orden in Anatolien: (vom späten fünfzehnten Jahrhundert bis 1826)* (Vienna: Verlag des Institutes für Orientalistik der Universität Wien, 1981), 107-129, passim; John R. Barnes, *An Introduction to Religious Foundations in the Ottoman Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 87-102.

⁵ See, e.g., the earlier study of Ernest E. Ramsaur, Jr., 'The Bektashi Dervishes and the Young Turks', *The Moslem World*, 32 (1942): 7-14, and the more recent studies of Irène Mélikoff, 'L'ordre des Bektasi apres 1826', *Turcica* 15 (1983): 155-178; Hülya Küçük, *The Role of the Bektashis in Turkey's National Struggle* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

the other hand, was eventually recognized and acted as one of the Ottoman Sufi (*tarikat*) orders with its increasingly fixed ritual. The Bektashi order also developed an urban network of lodges in the Ottoman provinces in Balkan and Eastern Europe and the Middle East, while fostering a literary tradition of its own and remaining receptive to fashionable and influential currents on the Islamic religious and Sufi *tarikat* scene of the empire.

Following the Ottoman-Safavid wars in the sixteenth century and the subsequent decline in their active contacts and religious exchange with the Safavid realm, the Anatolian and Balkan Kızılbaş remained thus isolated from some important post-sixteenth-century developments in the Twelver Shi'a Islam of Safavid Persia. The patterns of continuing interaction between these Kızılbaş groups (affected also by the continuous processes of migrations in the Ottoman period) and Bektāshīyya could vary on account of the stronger emphasis in some of these groups on their Baba'î pedigree and heritage or whether their links were with one or the other of the two 'branches of the order', the Çelebi or the Babāgan. These differing lines of allegiance could have significant implications for the interrelations and overlapping of the structures of religious, spiritual and social authority in the respective Kızılbaş groups. In Ottoman Kızılbaşlık and Bektashism one can encounter, therefore, types of and a potential for syncretism, significant patterns of which developed outside mainstream normative Ottoman Sunni and Twelver Shi'a Safavid Islam.

The main trends in recent and current academic and general discourse on Anatolian and Balkan Alevism and Bektashism and their links with other heterodox Middle Eastern groups have evolved in varied religious, theological, socio-political, anthropological and historiographical contexts. In Turkey itself since the early Kemalist period, Alevi socio-religious organization (with its distinct institution of hereditary religious leadership, the *dedelik*) and its traditional religious and liturgical life revolving around the *cem* ceremonies, the *cemevi* (Alevi assembly houses of worship) and the Alevi and Bektashi sanctuaries, has undergone the unremitting pressures of Turkish post-Ottoman modernity. These have included the ban on the Sufi orders and closure of their convents in 1925 (which affected both the functioning and status of the Alevi religious leaders, the *dedes*, and the Alevi sacred places), the massive effects of immigration to the cities, secularization and the emergence of secularized Alevi elites (challenging in various ways the authority of the *dedes*, also via their journalistic and literary output), the popularity of leftist ideologies among the Alevis in the 1960s and 1970s and the general politicization of Alevilik this entailed, and the more recent proliferation of trans-national networks of Alevi associations.

The post-1980s emergence of Alevism in the Turkish and West European public social and religious arena revived interest in the provenance of its doctrines and rituals as well as its socio-cultural and religio-political predilections vis-à-vis Sunni Islam, Shi'a Islam, other heterodox Middle Eastern sectarian minorities and indeed secular modernity. From early to current scholarship on Alevism (both in

Turkey and Europe) the syncretistic and heterogeneous nature of Alevi beliefs has been repeatedly emphasized.⁴ Since the recent 'reinvention' of Alevism as public religion the need to conceptualize this syncretism in relation to a 'revived' self-awareness became more pertinent. The consequent distinct plurality of discourses on the socio-political and religious planes comprises strikingly contrasting visions of modern Alevism and what religious course it should follow, since claims that it epitomizes the authentic essence of Islam (or Shi'a Islam) have been challenged by counterclaims that it represents a Turkish secular or secularizing version of Islam or an extra-Islamic faith altogether.

Positions on the left spectrum of the Turkish Alevi politics can emphasize what is seen as a traditional Alevi antiestablishment, nonconformist and oppositional ethos cultivated in protracted struggles against repressive political and religious elites. Such positions can simultaneously deemphasize the religious and esoteric dimension of Alevism so as to clothe the Alevi worldview and identity in popular Marxist or liberation-theology-like terms (integrating on occasions pro-Kurdish-emancipation trends).⁶ Among the currents with more pronounced religious self-identification, Sunni-leaning and *tasavvuf*-based mystical and intellectual trends, seeking to normativize Alevism within the framework of the Ottoman/Turkish strand of the Sunni *tarikats*, have coexisted with views which see Alevism as an intentionally well-balanced conglomerate of ancient and medieval Anatolian beliefs and rites, variously prioritizing pre-Islamic Turkic or Iranian strata (in Kurdish- and Zaza-speaking Alevi milieus) as its defining core layers.⁷

Furthermore, attempts to re-orientate Alevism in the direction of a legalist Twelver Shi'a Islam, as officialized in post-1979 Iran, have included the efforts of the Azeri Turkic-speaking Twelver Shi'a proper communities in eastern Turkey (and their urban enclaves) as well as the proselytism and publishing programmes sponsored for some time by the Islamic Republic of Iran and implemented by Alevis who have received religious training there.⁸ This politically marginal Twelver Shi'a-oriented trend preaches the enforcement of *shari'a* precepts and

⁶ On these trends, see, e.g., Karin Vorhoff, *Zwischen Glaube, Nation und neuer Gemeinschaft. alevitische Identität in der Türkei der Gegenwart* (Berlin: K. Schwarz Verlag, 1995), 102-105; Faruk Bilici, 'The Function of Alevi-Bektashi Theology in Modern Turkey', in *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, ed. Tord Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga and Catharina Raudvere (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 1998), 52-53; Markus Dressler, *Die alevitische Religion. Traditionslinien und Neubestimmungen* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2002), 124-191, passim; Élise Massicard, *L'Autre Turquie. Le mouvement aléviste et ses territoires* (Paris: PUF Proche Orient, 2005), 101-103.

⁷ On the Sunni-leaning trends in contemporary Alevism, see, e.g., Reha Çamuroğlu, 'Alevi Revivalism in Turkey', in *Alevi Identity*, Olsson, Özdalga and Raudvere, 81-82; Tahire Erman and Emrah Göker, 'Alevi Politics in Contemporary Turkey', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36:4 (2000): 106. On the prioritization of postulated pre-Islamic Iranian and Kurdish elements among Kurdish-speaking Alevi milieus, see, e.g., Karin Vorhoff, 'Discourses on the Alevis in Contemporary Turkey', in *Syncretistic Religious Communities*, Kehl-Bodrogi, Kellner-Heinkele and Otter-Beaujean, 101-102, n. 12.

⁸ On Twelver Shi'a proselytism and publishing programmes, targeting Turkish Alevism and organized and sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran, see, e.g., Bilici, 'Function', 55-57; Erman and Göker, 'Alevi

mosque worship in Alevi religious life, being highly critical of what it considers a secondary Bektashi impact on Alevism, the *cem* rituals and their performance at the Alevi *cemevi*. The Bektāshīyya entanglement with the Kızılbaş groups in Ottoman Anatolia is thus described by these groups as a ploy of the Ottoman Sunni establishment to keep in check these Shi'a-inclined communities and prevent the further spread of Twelver Shi'ism in the region.

An influential and academically respectable current in post-1980s Alevi self-definition has been advancing the view of Alevism as a mystical (*tasavvuf*-influenced and -leaning), heterogeneous to a degree (comprising as well some pre-Islamic Anatolian and Turkic traditions) version of Islam which has been at some stage of its development influenced by Shi'i notions and came to develop a humanistic and secularizing value system ahead of its time.⁹ Among the implications of this reconstruction of Alevism is the potential that a theological cultivation of its *tasavvuf*-inspired principles and ethos shared with Sunni *tarikats* such as the Mevlevi could contribute to the harmonization of the Sunni-Alevi socio-religious polarities in Turkey, and ultimately even build a kind of 'Sufi bridge' between Sunnism and Alevism¹⁰ and allow it to play a role in the Sunni-Shi'a dialogue on the greater Middle Eastern scene.

The Balkan Wings of Bektashism and Alevilik

The theologization, ideologization and political instrumentalization of Alevism in post-Ottoman Turkey proceeded thus along diverse patterns and against their background, the course of Alevi and Bektashi identity politics in the post-Ottoman Balkans furnishes some suggestive parallels and differences. The current areas of concentration of Kızılbaş communities in the Balkans are predominantly in its eastern areas, while the extant Bektashi groups and their extensive networks of cultic edifices in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo indicate the prominent role played by the Bektashi order in these areas in the past. The provenance and the early history of the Kızılbaş communities and the Bektashi order in the Balkans represent one of the most interesting and difficult religio-historic problems related to the religious history of the early Ottoman Empire. The continuing research on the Islamic heterodox communities in the eastern Balkans (who variously define themselves as having Baba'î, Bektashi or Kızılbaş roots) has produced some interesting results, indicating that some of these groups most likely descend from Kızılbaş deportees resettled there by the Ottoman authorities in the sixteenth century but some of whom may also originate from heterodox

Politics', 105-106; for some of their more radical offshoots, see Ruşen Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan Türkiye'de İslami Oluşumla* (Istanbul: Metis, 1990), 155-164.

⁹ On this current and its sub-trends, see Bilici, 'Function', 54-55; Vorhoff, 'Academic and Journalistic Publications', 37-38; Erman and Göker, 'Alevi Politics', 111-112; Massicard, *L'Autre Turquie*, 157-158, 190-192, 249-254; Dressler, 'Modern Dede', 277-282;

¹⁰ Çamuroğlu, 'Alevi Revivalism', 82.

Turkoman groups (at least some of whom may have been dervish- or *baba*-led) who migrated into the region in earlier periods.¹¹ It is worth noting that these Kızılbaş communities also comprise descendants of Anatolian Babaî groups and of followers of Shaykh Badr al-Dîn (1358-1416) and his eclectic religio-political movement, the Bedrettiniler, which adds further potential sources for syncretistic traditions in eastern Balkan Kızılbaş beliefs.¹² The study of the spread and history of the Kızılbaş and the Bektashi order in South-Eastern Europe has been made difficult by the substantial and widespread destruction or desolation of Kızılbaş/Alevi and Bektashi cultic sites, and the fragmentation and migrations of Alevi and Bektashi groups throughout the region in the period of the formation of the post-Ottoman Balkan states amid the political and military conflicts in the Balkans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the case of the Bektashis the order's heritage suffered considerable and irretrievable losses also after its suppression and the seizure of its property and its religious and cultic edifices in 1826, as well as following the general closure of all dervish *tekkes* as a result of the banning of the Sufi *tarikats* in Kemalist Turkey in 1925. Still, recent research on Alevi and Bektashi religious and cultic sites in the Balkans (some of which have been reclaimed by the respective communities over the past twenty years), anthropological fieldwork and work on Ottoman source material has made it possible to establish the general outlines of the chronology and at least some aspects of the history of the Kızılbaş groups and the Bektashi order in the Balkans during the Ottoman period.¹³

¹¹ On the origins and the dating of the settlement of the Kızılbaş groups in the eastern Balkans, see the studies of Irène Mélikoff, 'La Communauté Kızılbaş du Deli Orman en Bulgarie', repr. in Irène Mélikoff, *Sur le traces du soufisme Turc*, 105-115; Frederick De Jong, 'Problems Concerning the Origins of the Qizilbâş in Bulgaria: Remnants of the Safaviyya?' in *Convegno sul tema: La Shi'a nell'Impero Ottomano (Roma, 15 Aprile 1991)* (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1993), 203-216; Thierry Zarcone, 'Nouvelles perspectives dans les recherches sur les Kızılbaş-Alévis et les Bektachis de la Dobroudja, de Deli Orman et de la Thrace orientale', *Anatolia Moderna-Yeni Anadolu* 4 (1992), 1-11.

¹² De Jong, 'Problems', 205.

¹³ See, among others, Džemal Čehajić, 'Bektashis and Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Anali Gazi Husrev-begove biblioteke*, Sarajevo, 5-6 (1978): 83-90; Eustratios Zenkines, *Ho bektasismos ste D. Thrake: symvole sten historia tes diadoseos tou Mousoulmanismou ston Helladiko choro* [Bektashism in Western Thrace : A Contribution to the History of the Propagation of Islam on Greek Territories], Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1988; Ivanichka Georgieva, ed., *Bûlgarskite alianii, Sbornik etnograficheski materialii* [The Bulgarian Alevis: A Collection of Ethnographic Data] (Sofia: UI 'Sv. Kliment Okhridski', 1991); the relevant contributions in Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein, eds., *Bektachiyya: études sur l'ordre mystique des Bektachis et les groupes relevant de Hadji Bektach* (Paris: Geuthner, 1993); Harry T. Norris, *Islam in the Balkans: Religion and Society between Europe and the Arab World* (London: Hurst, 1993), esp. chs. 3, 5 and 6; Harry T. Norris, *Popular Sufism in Eastern Europe: Sufi Brotherhoods and the Dialogue with Christianity and 'Heterodoxy'* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006); John D. Norton, 'The Bektashis in the Balkans', in *Religious Quest and National Identity in the Balkans*, ed. Celia Hawkesworth, Muriel Heppell and Harry T. Norris (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001), 168-200; Lybomir Mikov, *Kultova arhitektura i izkustvo na heterodoksnite musulmani v Bûlgaria (XVI - XX vek) bektashi kûzûlbashi/alevii* [Cult Architecture of the Heterodox

One of the successfully explored areas in early Ottoman Balkans history concerns the important role played by the dervish orders, including and especially Bektashism, in the advance of the Ottoman colonization of the Balkans.¹⁴ During this colonization process the dervish orders appropriated a number of Christian churches, saints' tombs and sanctuaries, contributing substantially to the evolving process of Christian-Islamic interaction and syncretism which had already started in Anatolia earlier in the Seljuk period and was to magnify its range and acquire new forms and dynamics in the Ottoman Balkans. The study of Bektashi and Alevi cultic heritage and the records of the various ritual observances performed at the respective sites can doubtless contribute greatly to the evolving study of the interaction and cross-fertilization between the different local varieties of Christianity and Islam, particularly in the sphere of shared sanctuaries, saints and feasts, or certain superstitious and religious traditions. As in the Ottoman Middle East there is a significant amount of evidence that ordinary and mostly illiterate Christians and Muslims inhabiting rural areas in the Ottoman Balkans could blend and synthesize their Christian and Islamic traditions much easier than and without the theological or social bias and reservations of their respective communal and religious leaders,¹⁵ and such interchange occurred at least partially also in the spheres of religious heterodoxy.¹⁶ Clearly, the parallel patterns of Islamic-Christian interaction and syncretism in the Ottoman Middle East and South-Eastern Europe present a very promising avenue for future investigation, which needs to be initiated with some preliminary case studies.

Determined by various sets of religious, political and social circumstances, the various examples of crypto-Christianity in the Balkans under the Ottomans also highlight the ways in which superstitious attitudes and quasi-magical qualities attributed to religious rites such as Christian baptism or pilgrimages to saints' shrines could lead to the merging of Christian and Islamic practices and beliefs. Further study is needed to probe the occasionally advanced arguments that Bektashism came to be well established in areas where crypto-Christianity

Muslims in Bulgaria. Bektaşî and Kizilbaş/Alevî] (Sofia: AI 'Marin Drinov', 2005 [repr. 2007]). For the establishment and spread of the Bektashi *tarikât* in Ottoman Albania, see n. 46 below.

¹⁴ See the summary of the evidence and earlier research on this problematic in Irène Mélikoff, 'Un ordre de derviches colonisateurs: les Bektaşîs', repr. in Mélikoff, *Sur le traces du soufisme turc*, 115-126.

¹⁵ The collection and interpretations of the highly valuable material evidencing various cases of interchange and synthesis between popular Islamic and Christian traditions in the Ottoman Balkans and Anatolia assembled in F. W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), has been followed by a continuous stream of studies highlighting further examples and instances of such syncretism and interaction or revisiting Hasluck's material and analysis.

¹⁶ For a discussion of earlier and current approaches and theories regarding Islamic-Christian interchange in the spheres of religious heterodoxy during the Ottoman period, see Yuri Stoyanov, 'On Some Parallels between Anatolian and Balkan Heterodox Islamic Traditions and the Problem of Their Coexistence and Interaction in the Ottoman Period', in Gilles Veinstein, ed., *Syncretismes et hérésies dans l'Orient seldjoukide et ottoman (XIV^e- XVIII^e siècle)*. *Actes du Colloque du Collège de France, octobre 2001* (Paris and Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005), 75-11.

'prospered',¹⁷ and traditions reported among some Bektashis that their ancestors had been Christian,¹⁸ against the background of comparable cases involving claims regarding crypto-Christianity and Islamic heterodox groups in the Middle East.

Throughout the Ottoman period the Ottoman *ulema* could label the Kızılbaş *zındık*, 'heretics', *rafizi*, 'schismatic' (or 'Shi'a'), *mülhid*, 'atheist' and even *kâfir*, unbelievers. Some earlier reports of Western scholars, Protestant missionaries and travellers show awareness of these official Sunni anti-Kızılbaş attitudes and stereotypes and while describing the Kızılbaş as 'semi-Christian', 'debased Christian', descendants of forcibly Islamicized Christians or 'crypto-Christian',¹⁹ they effectively question or deny their actual belonging to the Islamic tradition. In the case of missionary reports such forging of a nominal Christian identity for the Kızılbaş also provided the needed legitimization and justification of missionary work among such heterodox sectarian groups.²⁰ However, their postulating the question of the relationship between Kızılbaşlık/Alevilik and Islam in this manner anticipates some of the already-mentioned recent debates within contemporary Alevism (naturally, lacking the Christian-ancestry preoccupations of the Protestant missionaries), as well as the subsequent scholarly reformulations and probing of what is posed as the methodological problem of whether Islamic identity is compatible with the belief system of Kızılbaşlık or other Middle Eastern syncretistic minorities.²¹ These first records of Western intellectual and theological

¹⁷ Stavro Skendi, 'Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under the Ottomans', in idem, ed., *Balkan Cultural Studies* (Boulder, CO and New York: East European Monographs, distributed by Columbia University Press, 1980), 249-250 (first published in *Slavic Review*, 26 [1967]: 227-246).

¹⁸ See, e.g., the report of the tradition attested among the Bektashi of Strumica (Macedonia) that the ancestors of the Bektashis originated from the Christians in Constantinople before its fall to the Ottomans in Milenko Filipović, 'The Bektashis in the District of Strumica (Macedonia)', *Man* 54 (January 1954): 11; on the oral traditions concerning the Christian origins of Alevi in the Deli Orman area, see De Jong, 'Problems', 207.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Ball, 'Letter from Mr. Ball, 8 August 1857', *Missionary Herald* 53 (1857): 394-395; J. A., comte de Gobineau, *Trois ans en Asie, 1855-1858* (Paris: Hachette, 1859), 339ff.; G. Nutting, 'Mission to Central Turkey: Oorfa: Letter from Mr Nutting, 30 July 1860', *Missionary Herald* 56 (November 1860): 345-347; E. Huntington, 'Through the Great Canon of the Euphrates River', *The Geographical Journal* 20 (1902): 175-200; M. E. Grenard, 'Une secte religieuse d'Asie Mineure: les Kyzyl-Bâchs', *Journal Asiatique*, ser. 10, 3 (1904): 511-522, esp. 513ff.

²⁰ For reconstructions of the agendas of the Protestant missionary efforts among the Kızılbaş, see Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, 'The Emergence of the Kizilbas in Western Thought: Missionary Accounts and their Aftermath', in David Shankland, ed., *Archaeology, Anthropology and Heritage in the Balkans and Anatolia: The Life and Times of F. W. Hasluck, 1878-1920*, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Isis, 2004), 328-353; Hans-Lukas Kieser, 'Muslim Heterodoxy and Protestant Utopia: The Interactions between Alevi and Missionaries', *Die Welt des Islams*, ns, 41:1 (2001): 89-111.

²¹ For discussions of and recent arguments that the Alevi are representative of a pattern of syncretistic Middle Eastern religious minorities which have a "pseudo-Muslim" character of little or nothing in common with Islam, see, e.g., Klaus E. Müller, *Kulturhistorische Studien zur Genese pseudo-islamischer Sektengruppen in Vorderasien* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1967), 3-51; Cristoph Elsas, 'Religionsfreiheit für die türkisch-manichäisch-(pseudo)-muslimischen Aleviten', in Holger Preissler and Hubert Seiwert,

encounters with Kızılbaşlık and their focus on what they see as a hidden Christian identity behind a quasi-Islamic sectarian mask also foreshadow the subsequent popular, religio-political and scholarly interest in the perceived Christian elements or postulated Christian core layers in Kızılbaşlık and Bektashism.

Alevi and Bektashi Identity Politics in the post-Ottoman Balkans

In the post-Ottoman Christian-majority successor states in the Balkans, the new elite's strategies for restructuring collective identities and dealing with the inherited multi-confessional polities in their territories could offer differing models, as exemplified, for example, by those developed in the post-World War II kingdoms of Yugoslavia and Greece. Unsurprisingly, the variously ideologized thesis of the original Christian identity of the Balkan Alevi and Bektashi groups enjoyed an understandable currency in local scholarly and popular discourses²² which also tended to disregard the Islamic dimension (or fundamentals) of their beliefs and rituals. Some of its exaggerations and sweeping generalizations were soon to be countered and invalidated by the unfolding, again locally, less biased research on the Islamic heterodox and Shi'ite elements in Alevi and Bektashi teachings and practices (and their links with Middle Eastern *ghulât* traditions) and the evidence it was producing.²³ Despite the growing evidence to the contrary, the thesis of the pre-Ottoman Christian identity of the Kızılbaş and Bektashi in the Balkans has endured into the post-communist period and on occasion continues to inspire populist historiographies of the Balkans in the Ottoman period. The enduring vitality of this thesis (apart from its obvious nationalistic ethno-religious underpinning) was reinforced by another theory that since the late Ottoman period has experienced intermittent popularity in the Balkans and Europe in general, according to which Balkan heterodox communities (and specifically, the Bogomils and Paulicians) chose to convert to Islam as a reaction against their suppression by the established church and became thus the ancestors of the modern Slav-speaking Muslim groups in Bosnia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia and Greece.²⁴ Subsequently accumulating research on and evidence of the Islamization processes

eds., *Gnosisforschung und religionsgeschichte. Festschrift für Kurt Rudolph zum 65. Geburtstag* (Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1994), 79-93.

²² For characteristic arguments that at least some of the Kızılbaş- and Bektashi-related groups in the eastern Balkans descend from Christian (or heretical Christian, i.e. Bogomil) communities, see, e.g., D. Marinov, 'Narodna viara i religiozni narodni običaji' [Popular Faith and Popular Religious Customs], *Sbornik za narodni umotvorenija, nauka i knižnina* 28 (1914): 423f.

²³ See the surveys of the development of the local studies of the Alevi and Bektashi Balkan groups in religio-historical contexts linking them to their coreligionists in Anatolia and the Middle East in Nevena Gramatikova, 'Changing Fates and the Issue of Alevi Identity in Bulgaria', in *Ethnology of Sufi Orders: Theory and Practice: Proceedings of the British-Bulgarian Workshop on Sufi Orders 19-23 May 2000, Sofia, Bulgaria*, ed. Antonina Zhelyazkova and Jorgen Nielsen (Sofia: IMIR, 2001), 567-581; Mikov, *Kultova arhitektura*, 21-33 passim.

²⁴ For an overview of the provenance and main tenets of this theory and some of its more recent reinstatements, see Stoyanov, 'On Some Parallels', 83-90.

in the early Ottoman Balkans have rendered this model, particularly its extreme forms, obsolete and untenable, but it has retained its appeal and potential to be politically instrumentalized, as demonstrated again during the Yugoslav wars of succession in the 1990s.

As in the Middle East evidence-based and -oriented research on the interaction of Islamic and Christian heterodoxies in the Ottoman period can yield some intriguing results, but given the past ideological and political abuses of the problematic, the material needs to be treated with extreme caution. Currently the Balkans still present examples of mixed, dual-veneration (Eastern Orthodox and Alevi/Bektashi) sanctuaries and sites, which continues unabated at some, but has attracted socio-religious and even legal controversies at others where these tensions are easily traceable to the interference of political and ideological factors and agendas.²⁵ The 'Christian' connection in the scholarly and popular discourse on Alevi and Bektashi identity in the post-Ottoman Balkans could be duly exploited in politically motivated initiatives or projects to 'indigenize' these communities/minorities in local and national contexts. For example, during the communist authorities' assimilationist campaigns against the large Turkish minority in Bulgaria (comprising the Alevi groups in the country) in 1984-1989, attempts were made to capitalize on the thesis of the Alevis' postulated Christian origin (and their traditionally good relations with the Eastern Orthodox communities) in order to drive a wedge between them and the Sunni Turkish population and weaken the anticipated resistance to the planned and implemented policies against their Turkish identity.²⁶

Unlike post-Ottoman Turkey where the posited or suspected Christian elements in Alevism and Bektashism did not constitute a major topic in the discourse on their identity, in the post-Ottoman Christian-majority states this Christian connection could be thus exploited in cases in which Alevi/Bektashi identity claims and politics appeared relevant to official (in the communist period) and populist historiographical or ideological constructs. Such indigenization of the posited origins of Balkan Alevi and Bektashi groups in local Balkan Christian contexts downplayed or ignored altogether the beliefs and rituals these groups shared with Middle Eastern syncretistic minorities, such indications of their links with Middle Eastern heterodoxy being treated as irrelevant or unimportant.

The Phenomenon of Albanian Bektashism

The ideologization and politicization of Bektashi identity followed more complex trajectories in post-Ottoman Muslim-majority Albania where at the time of the establishment of its independence in 1912 the Bektashi order formed a fourth

²⁵ Some earlier material has been presented and discussed, for example, in F. W. Hasluck, 'Ambiguous Sanctuaries and Bektashi Propaganda', *Annals of the British School in Athens* 20 (1913): 94-122 and Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam*; more recent case studies have also been attracting scholarly attention.

²⁶ See the thought-provoking analysis of the Alevi dimension of these assimilationist tactics in Gramatikova, 'Changing Fates', 283, 588, 597-600.

religious group (and third largest) in the country, besides Sunni Islam, Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, and came to actively seek a full legal separation from the Muslim Sunni community. The chronology of the introduction and early spread of the Bektashi order in Ottoman Albania and adjacent Albanian-populated areas and to what extent it was conditioned by or contributed to local popular Islamic-Christian religious syncretism still presents many uncertainties²⁷ which should decrease with further archival research in Albania and Turkey. Future research should also offer new perspectives on the role of the order in the formation of the culture and spirituality of Albanian Islam (and Albanian religiosity in the Ottoman era in general) through its interchange with the Bektashi networks in Anatolia, the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

The Bektashi order rose to real prominence in Albania in the nineteenth century and especially its last three decades. This elevation of Bektashism to the centre stage of Albanian political and religious life was conditioned to a large extent by the close links of Albanian elite Bektashi circles with the Albanian national movement and their involvement in the fostering of Albanian culture, language and literature in the last stages of the period known as the Albanian 'national awakening' (Rilindja) between 1878 and 1912.²⁸ The 'nationalization' of Bektashism and a kind of a blueprint for a leading role for Bektashi 'ecumenism' in transcending the internal Albanian religious lines of division and shaping a harmonious Albanian national identity is forcefully articulated by the noted Albanian poet Naim Frashëri (1846-1900), who was of a lay Bektashi background and along with his brothers played a key role in the 'national awakening'. Frashëri's tract, *Fletore e Bektashinjet* ([Bektashi Notebook] 1896), articulates his project of a religiously non-partisan, humanistic and Albanianized Bektashi order as a vehicle of a Bektashi unity-bringing national confessionism, a project which remained too elitist and ultimately unfeasible in the framework of contemporaneous Albanian political and religious realities.²⁹

²⁷ Cf. Hans-Joachim Kissling, 'Zur Frage der Anfänge des Bektaşitums in Albanien', *Oriens* 15 (1962): 281-286; Norris, *Islam in the Balkans*, 123-137; Alexandre Popovic, 'A propos des statuts des Bektachis d'Albanie', in Popovic and Veinstein, *Bektachiyya*, 301-326. See also the exhaustive list of Bektashi *tekkes* in Albania and their variously early and latter dates, yielding clues to the rise and spread of the order in Ottoman Albania in Nathalie Clayer, *L'Albanie, pays des derviches: les ordres mystiques musulmans en Albanie à l'époque post-ottomane (1912-1967)* (Berlin: Harrassowitz, 1990), 247-426.

²⁸ See the up-to-date discussions of this involvement in Nathalie Clayer, 'Bektachisme et nationalisme albanais', in Popovic and Veinstein, *Bektachiyya*, 271-300.

²⁹ On Naim Frashëri's treatment and Albanianization of Bektashism in *Fletore e Bektashinjet* and Bektashi-related projects, cf. Margaret Hasluck, 'The Nonconformist Moslems of Albania', *Contemporary Review* 127 (1925): 602; Clayer, 'Bektachisme', 118f.; Norris, *Islam in the Balkans*, 169-174; Ger Duijzings, 'Religion and Politics of Albanianism: Naim Frashëri's Bektashi Writings', in *Albanian Identities, Myth and History*, ed. Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers and Bernd Fischer (London: Hurst, 2000), 64-67, 69; Ger Duijzings, 'Naim Frashëri's Qerbelaja: Religion and Nationalism among the Albanians', in Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo* (London: Hurst, 2000), 169-175.

Along with other nineteenth-century Bektashi writers Frashëri dwells on the paradigmatic Shi'ite themes of resistance, suffering and martyrdom of the Kerbela complex (one of the obvious Shi'ite clusters of beliefs and rites absorbed in Bektashism).³⁰ Symptomatically, in his well-known and popular epic poem, *Qerbelaja* ([Kerbala] 1898), Frashëri transfers this Shi'ite complex of themes of resistance, suffering and martyrdom also to the perceived injustice and oppression of Ottoman rule over the Albanians, clearly aiming to mobilize anti-Sunni, hence anti-Ottoman sentiments and resistance ethos.³¹ The intriguing question of whether Frashëri's and other contemporaneous Albanian Bektashi writers' elaborate usage of the Shi'ite Kerbela complex of notions and imagery, based as it was on Persian literary traditions, amounted to an attempt to bring Albanian Bektashism closer to Twelver Shi'ism still remains open to debate.³²

Other blueprints for the role of Albanian Bektashism in a future Albanian state envisaged the order as evolving into a political party-like structure.³³ The literati of the Albanian-nationalist Bektashi circles were aware of the importance of mobilizing history and image-building in the period of national reawakening. Accordingly, they could resort to fashioning historico-mythic constructs by projecting their strong links with the Albanian national movement back to famed Albanian figures such as the de facto independent ruler of the Ottoman Pashalik of Yanina, Ali Pasha (1741-1822), and even to the national hero of anti-Ottoman resistance, Skanderbeg (1405-1468),³⁴ thus indigenizing even early Bektashism as an Albanian pro-independence movement.

Although the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 and World War I led to much devastation of the sanctuaries of Albanian Bektashism and fragmentation of its property and networks, given its strong association with the national movement, the order remained in a good position to continue to play a major role in the political and religious life of the newly established, multi-confessional and nondenominational interwar Albanian state. Following the ban on the dervish

³⁰ On the treatment of the Kerbela theme in nineteenth-century Bektashi literary epics, see *Robert Elsie*, 'Albanian Literature in the Moslem Tradition: Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century Albanian Writing in Arabic Script', *Oriens* 33 (1992): 301-302. See the analysis of the use of the Kerbela material in Frashëri's *Fletore e Bektashinjet and Qerbelaja* in Norris, *Islam in the Balkans*, 170-176; Duijzings, 'Naim Frashëri's *Qerbelaja*', 170-174.

³¹ See Norris, *Islam in the Balkans*, 182-187; 171-174.

³² *Ibid.*, 174-187 *passim*.

³³ Such development is envisaged in the influential book by Naim Frashëri's brother, Sami Frashëri (1850-1904), *Albania – What It Was, What It Is, and What Will Become of It* (1899), which outlined the governance and fabric of what he saw as a working model of an autonomous Albanian state. See the analysis in Norris, *Islam in the Balkans*, 188.

³⁴ Cf. Duijzings, 'Naim Frashëri's *Qerbelaja*', 174-175; Nathalie Clayer, 'The Myth of Ali Pasha and the Bektashis: The Construction of an "Albanian Bektashi National History"', in *Albanian Identities*, Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer, 127-133; on Bektashi image-building during this period, see also Nathalie Clayer, *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais: la naissance d'une nation majoritairement musulmane en Europe* (Paris: Karthala, 2007), 474-493.

orders in Republican Turkey in 1925, the Albanian Bektashi order started *manoeuvres* to effect the transfer of the Bektashi main centre, *pîr evi*, from Hacibektaşköy in Anatolia to Albania and establish a Bektashi 'world centre' in Tirana. The intellectual elite took an active part in the government's secularist and modernizing policies and the debates on the needed 'reform of Islam' in the public sphere.³⁵ The process of socio-political de-Islamization was enthusiastically promoted by certain Bektashi secularist politicians and intellectuals who could depict Sunnism as a 'fanatical' and anti-progress form of Islam, to be contrasted with 'liberal' and reform-oriented Bektashism.³⁶ Bektashism could be accordingly depicted as the 'Protestant element of Islamism'³⁷ and credited with the cultivation of a climate of religious tolerance within Albanian multi-confessional society,³⁸ a discourse which made Albania seem to Protestant missionaries a 'key' to the Muslim world and its conversion,³⁹ apparently envisaged to progress from Albania to Turkey and the Middle East.

By the early 1940s the Bektashi order seemed in very good shape, with an impressive number of Bektashi *tekkes* and *babas* throughout Albania and Kosovo. The early communist period in Albania, however, brought the predictable first cycles of repressions against Bektashism and the other Albanian religious denominations. The order went under the full control of the regime and finally was disbanded and prohibited when in 1967 the Albanian communist establishment imposed a ban on all religious institutions and activities. In the subsequent 'cultural revolution' the Bektashi order suffered an unprecedented systematic demolition or damage to its *tekkes* and libraries as well as a brutal crackdown on the residues of its functioning hierarchy.

With the reinstatement of religious freedoms in 1990s Albania, the revitalization of Bektashism proceeded somewhat erratically despite the fact that *tekkes* and *türbes* have been rebuilt and restored along with the territorial organization of the *tarikats* in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo. The real problems which plagued the proper reestablishment and functioning of the Bektashi order as a proper *tarikats* stemmed from the impact of the massive blows it suffered in the communist period (along with the other dervish orders) on its traditions

³⁵ See the up-to-date analysis of these processes in Nathalie Clayer, 'Behind the Veil: The Reform of Islam in Inter-War Albania or the Search for a "Modern" and "European" Islam', in *Islam in Inter-War Europe*, ed. Nathalie Clayer and Germain Eric (London: Hurst, 2008), 128-155.

³⁶ See, e.g., the view and policies of the prominent inter-war Albanian politician, Mehdi Frashëri, *analyzed* in Clayer, 'Behind the Veil', 133, 138-140, 147-151.

³⁷ Constantine Chekrezi, *Albania Past and Present* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 201, 204.

³⁸ See the analysis of Chekrezi's views on Bektashism in Noel Malcolm, 'Myths of Albanian National identity: Some Key Elements, as Expressed in the Works of Albanian Writers in America in the Early 19th Century', in *Albanian Identities*, Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer, 85-86.

³⁹ For such missionary attitudes towards Albania, see C. Telford Erickson, 'Albania, the Key to the Moslem World', *The Moslem World* 4 (1914): 115-119. On these attitudes, see Nathalie Clayer, 'God in the "Land of the Mercedes"', repr. in Clayer, *Religion et nation*, 399.

of higher theological and literary learning, its hierarchically ordered network and its structures of transmission of initiatory knowledge and *silsilas* (spiritual genealogy). While the Albanian Sunni community received much international Sunni support to revive their own traditions and institutions of religious education and higher learning, Albanian Bektashism faced serious difficulties when trying to re-establish some kind of religious education and training for would-be dervishes, although links with Alevi and Bektashi elite circles in Turkey were re-established. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic of Iran also entered the Albanian religious arena and reportedly, a number of Bektashi students have received Iranian grants to undergo Shi'ite theological and religious training there. The Iranian Saadi Shiraz foundation has been expanding its ambitious programme of translation, publication and circulation of Shi'ite religious (as well as classical Persian) literature in Albanian, a Saadi college has been set up in Tirana, whereas the Tehran-based Shi'ite foundation, the World Ahl-ul-Bayt Assembly, has been trying to cultivate close contacts with the current Bektashi elite (as well as with figures from the other *tarikats*) in Albania.⁴⁰ The new publications emerging from within Albanian Bektashism show the distinct impact of this newly translated corpus of Shi'ite literature, and the most influential book on Bektashi doctrines in post-World War II Albanian Bektashism, Baba Rexhebi's *Misticizme Islame dhe Bektashizma* ([Islamic Mysticism and Bektashism] 1970),⁴¹ tends to dwell on the Shi'ite elements in the Bektashi version of Sufism. Both this internal development and the renewed contacts with the principal religious and theological centres of Middle Eastern Twelver Shi'ism seem to indicate that the ongoing Bektashi revival in Albania may follow a trajectory of further rapprochement with the mystical and intellectual forms of Twelver Shi'ism.⁴²

In the Albanian public sphere some of the traditional discourses on Albanian Bektashism from the interwar and 'national awakening' periods, extolling the order as a carrier of 'Albanianism' and an intermediary between Christianity and Islam, Europe and the Middle East, have also been revived. These discourses have been actualized in the updated geopolitical framework of what is presented as

⁴⁰ On the activity of Iranian foundations and institutes in the religious life of post-communist Albania and their contacts with the reconstructed Bektashi order, see Nathalie Clayer, 'Islam, State and Society in Post-Communist Albania', repr. in *Religion et nation*, 315-335, at 323-324; Nathalie Clayer, 'God in the "Land of the Mercedes"', 418; Nathalie Clayer, 'Saints and Sufis in Post-Communist Albania', in *Popular Movements and Democratization in the Islamic World*, ed. Kisaichi Masatoshi (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 38-39; Rajwantee Lakshman-Lepain, 'Albanian Islam – Developments and Disruptions', in *Albania – A Country in Transition: Aspects of Changing Identities in a South-East European Country*, ed. Frank Kressing and Karl Kaser (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2002), 39-64 passim; Norris, *Popular Sufism*, 111-112.

⁴¹ Baba Rexhebi, *Misticizma Islame dhe Bektashizma* (New York: Waldon Press, 1970); abridged English translation, *Islamic Mysticism and Bektashism* (Chicago: Babagan Books, 2008). Baba Rexhebi immigrated to the United States in the early 1950s and established a Bektashi *tekke* in Detroit.

⁴² Norris, *Popular Sufism*, 112; Albert Doja, 'Spiritual Surrender: From Companionship to Hierarchy in the History of Bektashism', *Numen* 53:4 (2006): 448-510, at 499-500.

post-communist Albania's dual 'civilizational' dialogue with the European Union and the *Organization of the Islamic Conference*.⁴³ There have been also attempts, moreover, to remould Bektashism along the lines of a universally translatable world-religion scheme, and a new Albanian religious movement, drawing on Bektashi teachings and claiming a kind of successor status to Bektashism, has already made its appearance.⁴⁴

The Problem of Shi'ite Elements and Self-Conceptions in Modern Alevism and Bektashism

One of the intensely and frequently debated problems in the study of Alevism and Bektashism concerns whether the Shi'ite components in their belief and ritual system make them qualify as part of the larger Shi'a tradition vis-à-vis traditional and modern forms of Twelver and Sevener Shi'a Islam in the Middle East (and their diasporas), from the pre-Ottoman, Ottoman and post-Ottoman periods. An early and still authoritative approach to this problem views Bektashism as being essentially Shi'a, though at least partially beneath a Sunni veneer,⁴⁵ recognizing at the same time traces of Shi'ite-related *ghulât* trends in Alevism. According to an alternative approach to the Shi'ite elements in Alevism and Bektashism, both groups comprise traits of heterodox and syncretistic forms of Islam (developed in the Middle East and Anatolia) and eventually incorporated Shi'ite ideas in their teachings and practices,⁴⁶ which still do not suffice to categorize them as Shi'a groups.⁴⁷ Indeed anthropologists working among Alevi communities have periodically encountered their unwillingness to be associated with the modern Twelver Shi'a tradition of post-1979 Iran.⁴⁸ Such association also can be partially

⁴³ See the analysis of this discourse in Clayer, 'God in the "Land of the Mercedes"', 419-420; Clayer, 'Saints and Sufis', 40.

⁴⁴ See the discussion of the new religious movement of Eleonora Bregu (and its claims for a Bektashi pedigree) in Clayer, 'God in the "Land of the Mercedes"', 429-430.

⁴⁵ The influential definition of Bektashism as 'essentially Shi'i', with Sunni Islam being only its external cloak, as formulated by Birge, *Bektashi Order*, 213, has been reiterated by, among others, J. Spencer Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 80-83, and Norris, *Islam in the Balkans*, 89.

⁴⁶ For a useful discussion of the parallels and differences between Bektashism and what is considered normative Twelver Shi'ism in the sphere of ritual and belief, see Norton, 'The Bektashis in the Balkans', 176-177; for arguments that the Shi'ite elements in Bektashism and Alevism were not part of the Anatolian heretodox milieus in which these two movements arose and do not predate the Safavid proselytism in the area, see, for instance, the arguments in Ocak, 'Un aperçu général', 198; Irène Mélikoff, *Hadji Bektach: un mythe et ses avatars: genèse et évolution du soufisme populaire en Turquie* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 47-55.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Karin Vorhoff, 'Let's reclaim our history and culture!' — Imagining Alevi community in contemporary Turkey", *Welt des Islams* 38 (1998): 220-252, at 237, n. 46; Clayer, 'Islam, State and Society', 315, n. 3.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., David Shankland, *Islam and Society in Turkey* (Hemingford Grey, Cambridgeshire: Eothen Press, 1999), 139-141; David Shankland, *The Alevi in Turkey: The Emergence of a Secular Islamic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2003), 24, 85.

seen as contradicting the characteristic communal esoteric salvationism of Alevi groups who cultivated a Gnostic-like self-definition, perceiving themselves as 'those who attained redemption'.⁴⁹

Such and similar attitudes and self-conceptions, associated among other things with the patterns of the personal and initiatory transmission of knowledge and ritual deemed to be esoteric, inevitably faced the challenge of the unfolding public affirmation of collective Alevi identity since the late 1980s and the related politics of claims and recognition. The transformations of modern Alevism and Bektashism thus represent one of the intriguing facets of the process which Martin van Bruinessen aptly defined as 'restructuring of heterodoxy in the Middle East and Southeast Asia'.⁵⁰ The analogies between these processes of restructuring within Alevism and Bektashism in the post-Ottoman Balkans on the one hand, and within other heterodox religious groups in the post-Ottoman Middle East on the other, seem meaningful in a variety of contexts and certainly warrant further investigation. The rivalry over competing definitions of the 'true' nature and actual religious affinities which has evolved within the heterodox communities in the post-Ottoman Balkans or the Middle East has been stimulated to some extent by the hitherto unprecedented circulation in the public sphere and publication of doctrinal and devotional traditions of such communities, along with the drive to foster a historical and theological higher learning comparable to that already established among Sunni and (Twelver and Sevener) Shi'a religious and intellectual elites. Concurrent with these developments runs the trend towards scripturalization and standardization of doctrinal and ritual traditions, as manifested in modern Alevism but also in some other Middle Eastern heterodox groups, which transforms the regulation of socio-religious life in the community and breaks the monopoly of the oral transmission of knowledge, seen in most cases as a preserve of hereditary elites. Along with the related attempts to 'modernize' Alevi/Bektashi theology, this represents a process that finds its parallels in similar developments among other heterodox religious groups in the Middle East such as the Ahl-e Haqq.⁵¹

Consequently, both in the post-Ottoman Balkans and the Middle East, scripturalization has led to the emergence of currents seeking reconciliation with the normative religious mainstream. It is thus likely that Sunni-leaning Alevi circles will be fully or partially assimilated into Sunnism, whereas the Twelver Shi'ite-inclined trend in Albanian Bektashism will move further in the direction

⁴⁹ See the characteristic Kızılbaş religious hymn (recorded in the north-east Balkans and containing this self-definition) quoted verbatim in Gramatikova, 'Changing Fates', 584-585.

⁵⁰ Martin van Bruinessen, 'Muslims, Minorities and Modernity: The Restructuring of Heterodoxy in the Middle East and Southeast Asia', inaugural lecture, Utrecht University, 21 November 2000, available at: <http://www.let.uu.nl/~martin.vanbruinessen/personal/publications/Oratie%20korte%20versie.htm>.

⁵¹ For observations on such similar contemporary developments among the Ahl-e Haqq, see Tord Olsson, 'Epilogue: The Scripturalization of Ali-Oriented Religions', in *Alevi Identity*, ed., Olsson, Özdalga and Raudvere, 201-202; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 'Breaking the Seal: The New Face of the Ahl-i Haqq', in *Syncretistic Religious Communities*, ed., Kehl-Bodrogi, Kellner-Heinkele and Otter-Beaujean, 175-195.

of Twelver Shi'a orthodoxy, reproducing the characteristic development which occurred among the Ahl-e Haqq in the early 1960s. At the same time, rising interest in world religions (for instance, among Alevi, Bektashi, Ahl-a Haqq etc. activist-intellectuals) has generated discourses in these communities' Western diasporas which can discover in their respective religiosities a convergence of Sufi and humanistic ideals and downplay the Islamic context, thereby enabling these diasporas to portray their systems on the fashionable model of a world religious philosophy with universal spiritual features and appeal.⁵²

Furthermore, while the impact of the Twelver Shi'a-related groups in Turkey seems limited, the Balkan scene has already attracted Iranian Shi'ite proselytism which sometimes is succeeding in bringing the Shi'a component in these groups' belief system to the fore of the religious and cultural reinterpretations accompanying their current ethno-religious self-re-identification. In the case of the Balkans, where currently Iranian Shi'ism is in a position to exercise an influence for the first time since Kızılbaş groups were deported to the region, this process is in its early stages and has already caused debates and divisions. But it is clear that it will evolve not in the framework of religious isolationism, as was the case during the interwar post-Ottoman and communist periods, but will be closely interlinked with religious and political developments in the greater world of modern Twelver and Sevener Shi'a Islam and the ongoing, often interrelated, restructuring of Balkan, Turkish and Middle Eastern heterodox communities in their local and trans-national diaspora milieus.

⁵² See, e.g., Dressler, 'Religio-Secular Metamorphoses', 292-293, 304-305; Vorhoff, 'Discourses on the Alevis', 101.

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