In the Balkans, religion seems to have played a much more important role in the process of nation building than language. Speakers of Serbo-Croat fell apart in three nationalities, partly on the basis of religion. Thus emerged the Bosniak nation, which identifies itself with Islam and clearly distinguishes itself from the Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs. The establishment of the national states in the Balkans was accompanied, from the beginning of the 19th century, by attempts to restore the pre-Ottoman Christian religious and historical language, intended to demonstrate the ‘oneness’ of the Yugoslav or South Slav nation vis-à-vis its many enemies (Germans, Hungarians, Turks).

In the same period, however, within the community of speakers of Serbo-Croat, national identities began developing on the basis of religion, or rather, national communities emerged, coinciding greatly with religious communities. Catholics speaking Serbo-Croat in the Habsburg Empire identified themselves as Croats, whereas the Orthodox speakers of Serbo-Croat, living in the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empires and in their own principality of Serbia, considered themselves Serbs. The development of a Bosnian national conscience, including the Muslim speakers of Serbo-Croat was slightly retarded, due to the Serbs’ and Croats’ attempts to incorporate the Muslim community into their own respective national communities as Serb or Croat Muslims, and to the fact that belonging to the Muslim community in the sense of the modern Muslim nation was far more important to the Bosnians than belonging to one or another national community. The Yugoslav nationalists, endeavouring to create a single Yugoslav nation, tended to minimize the religious differences among Bosnians, Croats and Serbs, as they thwarted the process of South Slavic unification.

In the 20th century, however, especially after the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929), as a result of the Serbs monopolizing political and military power in the new state, Croats started distancing themselves from the idea of a single, South Slavic nation and state and developed the Muslim identity, emphasizing the particularities of the Croat language and the Catholic faith as distinctive features of the Croat nation vis-à-vis the Serbs. After an abortive and rather compromising attempt to establish an independent Croat state under Nazi protection during the Second World War, Croatia was re-integrated into Yugoslavia, which had become a communist federal state in 1944. The Croats finally achieved their aim in 1991, when the Republic of Croatia was internationally recognized.

Bosnian nationalism

In post-war Yugoslavia, the formation of a Bosnian national consciousness was finally completed. The official recognition of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1969 – under the clumsy denomination ‘Muslims in the ethnic sense of the word’ – resulted mainly from the need for a more developed state, as a result of the Byzantine legacy of ‘national’ churches. Nation, state, religious community and ecclesiastical organization are supposed to be congruent. The Bulgarian Constitution states that Orthodox Christianity is the traditional religion of the Bulgarian people, the Greek minority: the Slavic Catholics and Ritiots, which are an integral part of the Bosnian national identity. To be sure, in the Balkans, religion in general has little to do with devotions. Forty years of communist rule dramatically reduced church and mosque attendance. The religious revival of the last decade is mainly the result of the people’s desire to express their belonging to an ethnic or national community. As religion is the basic component of national identity, church and mosque attendance appears to be a demonstration of national awareness. Of course, the clergy (be it Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim) has seized the opportunity to strengthen its position in society and to acquire a more or less official ‘national’ status. This may – and often does – threaten the secular character of the state granted by the Constitution. It has, however, less to do with religious fanaticism than with nationalistic fanaticism. This goes for Bosnians, Croats and Serbs alike.

National and religious identity

The identification of national and religious identity is the strongest with the Orthodox nations in the Balkans – Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbs and Croats – and comes as a result of the Ottoman conquest. There was no place for Albanian and Turkish Muslims in the restored Christian Balkan states. As the double barrier of ethnic and religious ‘otherness’ made it impossible to reconstruct their national identity in a way to make them – albeit conceptually – disappear into the majority, more radical ways to eliminate them had to be resorted to. All independence wars in the Balkans (the Serb Uprising in 1804-30, the Greek War of Independence in 1921-30, and the Russian-Ottoman War in 1877-78) were accompanied by massacring and expelling not only the Ottoman officials and military, but also the Muslim Turkish population. During the First Balkan War in 1912, not only Turks but also Albanians fell victim. The ethnic cleansing of Bosnians in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo is a resumption of this ‘method’ of nation building in the late 20th century. Having lost most of its non-Muslim and non-Muslim populations, the late Ottoman Empire and the subsequent Turkish Republic resorted to similar practices in order to ultimately create a homogeneous Turkish state. The treatment of the Armenians, Greeks and Kurds in Anatolia is the most notorious of these measures. However, the identification of national and religious affiliation is less apparent in the official documents than it was before the ‘otherness’ made it impossible to reconstruct their national identity than it is in the Christian Balkan countries.