

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

# WHEN FAITH BECOMES ANCESTRY: RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AND THE ETHNICIZATION OF BELONGING IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how religious institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina transform faith into ethnonational belonging by linking religion with ancestry. Focusing on the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community between 2015 and 2025, it argues that institutional religious discourse reframes religious identity as inherited rather than chosen. Drawing on constructivist and post-structuralist approaches, the study conceptualizes descent not as biological fact but as a narrative effect produced through language, symbolism, and repetition. Through comparative discourse analysis of sermons, epistles, and public statements, the article identifies three mechanisms: the construction of the community as a transgenerational moral organism, the sacralization of territory as inherited space, and the mobilization of narratives of suffering and martyrdom that bind present generations to ancestral obligation. These strategies naturalize ethnonational boundaries by embedding them in morally authoritative and emotionally resonant frameworks, making alternative forms of belonging more difficult to sustain. By foregrounding the role of religious institutions in the ethnicization of identity, the article contributes to debates on nationalism, religion, and the durability of ethnopolitical divisions in post-conflict societies.

**Keywords:** Bosnia and Herzegovina, religion and nationalism, discourse analysis, descent, Serbian Orthodox Church, Islamic Community



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## 1. Introduction

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, religion and ethnicity are deeply intertwined systems of meaning through which belonging is experienced, narrated, and defended. Ethnographic work has long shown how these identities are lived as overlapping and mutually reinforcing in everyday life in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bringa, 1995). More than two decades after the end of the 1992–1995 war, political life remains structured around ethnonational divisions, and religious institutions continue to occupy a central role in their symbolic reproduction. This centrality reflects the historical entanglement of religious institutions and national identity in the region (Perica, 2002). The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IZ BiH) are not only sites of worship or spiritual guidance, but key producers of narratives about who “we” are, where “we” come from, and what binds members of the community across time. In these narratives, religion rarely appears as an individual matter of belief. Instead, it is embedded within broader stories of ancestry, territory, and collective experience, making it difficult to disentangle faith from ethnicity in analytically clear terms.

This article examines how that entanglement is produced. It argues that religious institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina do not simply reflect ethnonational identities but actively construct them by recasting faith as a form of inherited belonging. Through sermons, epistles, commemorative speeches, and public statements, the SPC and IZ BiH frame religious identity as something transmitted across generations, rooted in the experiences of forefathers, and anchored in sacred landscapes. In doing so, they transform what might otherwise be understood as a matter of personal conviction into a structure of collective inheritance. The central claim is that religious discourse operates as a mechanism through which ethnonational identity is naturalized: by presenting belonging as received rather than chosen, it renders group boundaries more stable, morally compelling, and resistant to contestation.

The argument builds on and contributes to three strands of scholarship. First, constructivist approaches in International Relations have long emphasized that identities are socially produced through shared meanings and practices (Wendt, 1999). Second, post-structuralist scholarship has shown that these identities are constituted through

the repeated use of language, symbols, and narratives that define the boundaries of community and assign meaning to collective experience (Campbell, 1998; Hansen, 2006; Neumann, 1999). Third, studies of nationalism have demonstrated that narratives of ancestry, sacred territory, and collective memory are central to making nations appear natural and enduring (Anderson, 1983; Billig, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 1997). While these literatures provide powerful tools for understanding identity formation (e.g. Iveković, 2002; Juergensmeyer, 1993), less attention has been paid to how religious institutions actively fuse these elements in contemporary post-conflict settings.

Bosnia and Herzegovina provides a particularly revealing context for examining these dynamics. The post-Dayton political system formally recognizes three constituent peoples, Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats, each closely associated with a dominant religious tradition. While this arrangement codifies ethnonational categories, it does not explain how they acquire emotional depth and moral authority. Religious institutions play a key role in this process. Through everyday and commemorative forms of communication, they link present communities to ancestral pasts, interpret historical suffering as morally meaningful, and situate belonging within a sacred geography marked by memory and sacrifice. These narratives do not simply describe the nation but help produce it by shaping how individuals understand their place within a transgenerational collective.

This article focuses on the period from 2015 to 2025, a decade marked by renewed political tensions, debates over constitutional reform, and increased visibility of religious actors in public discourse. During this period, both the SPC and IZ BiH maintained a visible and active presence in public discourse through traditional sermons as well as digital and broadcast media, offering a rich corpus for analysis.

The article addresses the following research questions:

1. How do religious institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina discursively construct religious belonging as inherited rather than chosen?
2. Through what specific linguistic, symbolic, and narrative mechanisms is this transformation achieved?

3. How do these mechanisms vary between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

To answer this question, the study employs a comparative discourse analysis of approximately forty institutional communications from each organization, including sermons, epistles, speeches, and official statements. Rather than treating these texts as reflections of underlying identities, the analysis approaches them as sites where identity is actively produced. It focuses on recurring patterns of language, metaphor, and narrative structure that link religious identity with descent, territory, and collective experience. Through this approach, descent is conceptualized not as a biological or demographic fact but as a discursive effect: a way of narrating identity that makes it appear inherited, continuous, and anchored in the past.

The analysis identifies three mechanisms through which religious discourse transforms faith into ancestry: the construction of the community as a transgenerational lineage, the anchoring of belonging in ancestral space, and the binding of the living to the dead through narratives of suffering and obligation. Together, these processes produce a form of belonging that is not only collective but inherited, not only historical but affectively charged.

By foregrounding these mechanisms, the article contributes to broader debates on the relationship between religion and nationalism in three ways. First, it shows how religious discourse functions as a key site for the production of descent-based identity, extending constructivist and post-structuralist insights into the domain of institutional religion. Second, it highlights the importance of affective and symbolic dimensions of belonging, demonstrating how narratives of suffering, sacrifice, and sacred space make identity feel deeply rooted and morally binding. Third, it offers a comparative perspective on how different religious traditions within the same political context deploy related but unevenly developed strategies to produce ethnonational identity, shaped by distinct historical and theological repertoires.

The argument has broader implications beyond the Bosnian case. In many post-conflict and multiethnic societies, efforts to promote civic or cross-cutting forms of identity often encounter resistance that cannot be fully explained by institutional arrangements or material interests alone. By showing how religious discourse frames

belonging through inheritance, this article suggests that such resistance is also rooted in the symbolic and affective structures through which identity is experienced. Understanding these structures is therefore essential for rethinking the possibilities of political community in deeply divided societies.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on constructivist, post-structuralist, and nationalism literatures to conceptualize descent as a discursive phenomenon. The methodology section then details the corpus and analytical approach. The core of the article presents the empirical analysis. The final sections discuss the broader implications of the findings and conclude by reflecting on the role of religious institutions in shaping the boundaries of belonging in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## 2. Literature Review: Discourse, Descent, and the Naturalization of Identity

To conceptualize descent as a narrative that renders belonging as inherited rather than as a biological or demographic fact, the article draws on three complementary bodies of scholarship: constructivism, post-structuralist approaches to discourse, and theories of nationalism. Each offers a distinct analytical lens on how identities are produced and stabilized.

Constructivist approaches in International Relations start from the premise that identities are not fixed attributes of social groups but are constituted through shared meanings and social interaction. As Wendt (1999) argues, actors acquire identities through intersubjective processes that define who they are in relation to others. These identities emerge through historically situated practices that render certain forms of belonging natural and legitimate. Even categories often treated as primordial, such as ethnicity, nation, or descent, are socially produced (Brubaker, 2004). What is inherited, in this sense, is not a biological essence but a socially recognized narrative of inheritance. This insight is particularly relevant for understanding how religious institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina frame belonging as rooted in ancestry while actively reproducing it in the present.

While constructivism establishes that identities are socially constructed, it does not systematically specify the mechanisms through which this construction occurs. Post-structuralist

approaches address this by focusing on discourse as the primary site of identity production. For post-structuralist scholars, discourse is not simply language in use but a system of representation that structures meaning, delineates boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and constitutes subjects as intelligible social actors (Campbell, 1998; Hansen, 2006; Neumann, 1999). From this perspective, identity does not precede discourse but is continuously constituted through it.

A central implication of this approach is that identities are inherently relational, produced through difference and the drawing of boundaries between "self" and "other" (Barth, 1969; Hall, 1996). This boundary-making operates through the repetition of narratives that stabilize the community's internal coherence across time. This temporal stabilization resonates with Jan Assmann's (1995) concept of cultural memory, through which societies reproduce continuity by embedding the past in symbolic forms that remain present and authoritative. In this sense, discourse does more than define who belongs, as it situates belonging within a meaningful past and links it to expectations in the present. Religious discourse can be particularly powerful in this regard when it draws on symbolic repertoires, such as sacred history, moral authority, and ritual practice that lend its narratives a sense of continuity and legitimacy.

Within this framework, descent can be understood as a specific discursive strategy. Rather than referring to objective lineage, descent functions as a narrative device that connects present members of a community to an imagined chain of ancestors, thereby producing a sense of temporal continuity. By positioning individuals as inheritors of a collective past, descent-based narratives generate expectations about how people should act in the present. In this way, they transform identity from a category of classification into a structure of obligation.

Theories of nationalism further illuminate why descent, territory, and memory are particularly effective in producing this form of belonging. Anderson's (1983) concept of the nation as an imagined community highlights the role of shared narratives in generating a sense of collective identity among individuals who will never meet. This national imaginary enables members to see themselves as part of a continuous historical community, extending backward into the past and forward into the future. Billig's (1995) notion of banal

nationalism complements this insight by showing how such narratives are reproduced not only through major political events but through routine and often unnoticed practices of communication. Together, these perspectives suggest that the nation is sustained through the repeated circulation of symbols, stories, and linguistic cues that render belonging natural.

Yuval-Davis (1997) extends this line of argument by highlighting the importance of descent and boundary-making in the construction of national identity. She shows how nations are often imagined through familial metaphors, as communities bound by shared origin and continuity. Such narratives work to naturalize the boundaries of the community by presenting them as rooted in lineage or heritage rather than as contingent political arrangements. What matters, in this sense, is not biological continuity but the social recognition of descent as a meaningful category of belonging. Once established, these narratives can be mobilized to include or exclude individuals, to define the limits of the community, and to legitimize claims to territory or political authority.

Chandra's (2012) work on ethnic identity further clarifies this point by defining ethnic categories as identities based on descent rules, whose salience depends on institutional context. Rather than being permanently activated, such identities become politically relevant when institutions reinforce and reproduce them through discourse and practice. This insight is crucial for the present analysis, as it highlights the role of religious institutions as sites where descent is not only narrated but actively sustained. Through sermons, commemorations, and public statements, institutions such as the SPC and IZ BiH provide the interpretive frameworks through which ancestry becomes a meaningful and politically salient dimension of identity, contributing to the ethnicization of religious belonging.

Bringing these strands together, the article conceptualizes descent as a discursive mechanism through which identity is naturalized. Religious institutions enact this process by linking ancestry, territory, and affect. In doing so, they invoke ancestors as moral reference points, sacralize territory as a site of continuity, and mobilize narratives of suffering and sacrifice that generate emotional attachment to the community and its past.

The combination of these elements produces what can be described as the ethnicization of belonging: the transformation of religious identity into something that is experienced as inherited rather than chosen. This process is not unique to Bosnia and Herzegovina, but it takes on particular significance in post-conflict contexts where competing narratives of history and belonging remain politically charged. In such settings, the ability to present identity as natural and transhistorical provides a powerful resource for stabilizing group boundaries and legitimizing political claims.

By conceptualizing descent as a discursive effect, this article shifts attention away from questions of whether identities are “real” or “constructed” and toward the mechanisms through which they are made to appear real. It shows how religious discourse embeds identity within narratives that are simultaneously historical, moral, and affective. In doing so, it offers a framework for understanding both the reproduction of ethnonational identities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and their durability as lived forms of belonging.

### 3. Methodology

This article employs qualitative discourse analysis within a comparative research design to examine how religious institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina construct descent-based identity through language, symbolism, and narrative. The methodological approach is grounded in the post-structuralist understanding of discourse as a system of representation through which identities, boundaries, and meanings are actively produced (Campbell 1998; Hansen 2006). Rather than treating institutional texts as neutral descriptions of social reality, the analysis approaches them as sites where belonging is articulated, stabilized, and rendered meaningful.

#### 3.1. Corpus and Case Selection

The empirical analysis focuses on two central religious institutions: the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IZBiH). These institutions were selected because of their historical and contemporary significance in shaping Serb and Bosniak identity, as well as their sustained public engagement in political and social discourse. In both cases, religious life is predominantly organized through these institutions, which function as the principal

frameworks of religious authority and collective articulation within their respective communities. Both operate as authoritative producers of meaning, issuing regular communications that address not only religious matters but also questions of history, identity, and collective obligation.

The corpus consists of 80 institutional communications (40 per case), covering the period from 2015 to 2025. The sample includes a range of high-visibility and widely disseminated materials: Christmas and Easter epistles, hutbas (sermons) delivered during major religious and commemorative occasions, public speeches by senior religious figures, official statements, and selected audiovisual content published through institutional media platforms. The inclusion of audiovisual material reflects the increasing role of digital and broadcast media in extending the reach and influence of religious discourse beyond formal religious settings.

Texts were selected from the online archive of SPC and IZBiH using purposive sampling, based on their explicit engagement with themes of identity, history, memory, and collective belonging. Particular emphasis was placed on communications associated with key commemorative moments, such as Vidovdan in the case of the SPC and Srebrenica commemorations in the case of IZ BiH, where questions of ancestry, continuity, and moral obligation are most explicitly articulated. Routine administrative or purely doctrinal communications were excluded unless they contained relevant discursive elements.

The analysis was conducted on texts in Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian, with translations used where necessary for analytical clarity. The selected time frame captures a decade marked by renewed political contestation, debates over institutional reform, and heightened public engagement of religious actors, making it particularly suitable for examining contemporary patterns in the discursive construction of belonging.

#### 3.2. Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds through a combination of close reading and systematic comparison, with attention to recurring linguistic patterns, metaphors, and narrative structures. The analytical strategy thus combines interpretive close reading with systematic comparison across cases, allowing for the identification of recurring

discursive patterns while remaining sensitive to contextual variation. Rather than coding for predefined categories in a strictly quantitative sense, the approach is interpretive, focusing on how meaning is produced through the interaction of different discursive elements within and across texts (Fairclough, 1995). At the same time, the analysis remains systematic by identifying patterns that recur across texts and contexts, thereby distinguishing structural features of discourse from isolated rhetorical instances.

Descent is operationalized as a discursive phenomenon through two primary indicators. The first is the co-occurrence of ancestry-related language, such as references to forefathers, lineage, roots, blood, or inherited tradition, with explicitly religious vocabulary. The repeated co-occurrence within the same textual segments is treated as evidence of a structured discursive linkage between faith and ancestry. The second indicator is the presence of narratives that frame belonging as continuous across generations, positioning the present community as the inheritor of a morally significant past.

In addition to these lexical indicators, the analysis pays close attention to the symbolic and spatial dimensions of discourse. References to specific territories, sacred sites, and commemorative landscapes are examined as mechanisms through which descent is embedded in space. When land is described as inherited, sanctified by ancestors, or morally claimed through sacrifice, it functions as a material anchor for narratives of belonging. These spatial references are analyzed not as geographical descriptions but as symbolic constructions that link identity to territory in ways that appear natural and non-contingent.

A third analytical dimension concerns the role of affect. Following insights from affect theory, the study examines how narratives of suffering, martyrdom, and endurance are mobilized to create emotional attachments to the community and its past (Ahmed, 2004). These narratives are analyzed in terms of their sequencing. Attention is paid to how references to ancestors, trauma, and present obligations are arranged within texts to produce a sense of continuity and moral urgency. The goal is to identify how discourse structures feeling.

### 3.3. Comparative Design

The comparative design of the study allows for the identification of both convergences and divergences in how the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IZ BiH) construct descent-based identity. The analysis proceeds from the expectation that similar discursive logics may be expressed through distinct historical, theological, and symbolic repertoires. The comparison is structured around the analytical dimensions identified in the study, tracing how these logics operate across both cases. This enables a systematic assessment of how shared discursive patterns take shape within different institutional and cultural contexts.

At the same time, the framework is attentive to variation in the form, intensity, and temporal framing of these articulations. While both cases draw on narratives of ancestry, territory, and collective experience, the analysis examines how these elements are configured differently across contexts. This makes it possible to distinguish between the underlying logics through which descent is constructed and the specific narrative resources through which they are expressed.

Rather than treating the two cases as symmetrical, the analysis identifies convergence at the level of discursive mechanism and divergence at the level of narrative form. In doing so, it provides a framework for understanding how similar processes of identity construction operate across different institutional and cultural settings without assuming uniformity in their expression.

### 3.4. Limitations

As an interpretive analysis of institutional discourse, the study does not aim to establish causal relationships between religious communication and individual attitudes or political behavior. Instead, it focuses on the production of meaning at the institutional level. The findings therefore speak to the symbolic and discursive conditions under which identity is constructed.

Additionally, while the corpus is designed to capture a representative range of institutional communications, it does not encompass all forms of religious discourse, particularly informal or localized expressions. The analysis prioritizes official and widely disseminated texts in order to examine the institutional grammar of identity production,

but this necessarily leaves out more fragmented or alternative voices within each community.

Despite these limitations, the approach provides a robust framework for identifying how religious institutions systematically link faith with descent and for understanding the role of discourse in shaping ethnonational belonging in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina.

#### 4. Analysis and Results: Constructing Descent Through Religious Discourse

##### 4.1 Narrating the Community as Lineage

Across both the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IZ BiH), religious discourse consistently constructs the community not as a collection of contemporaneous believers but as a transgenerational lineage. In these institutional communications, belonging is framed less as a matter of personal conviction than as a condition of inheritance, situating individuals within a continuous chain that binds past, present, and future.

In SPC discourse, this transformation is most clearly visible in the recurrent use of familial and genealogical language. In the 2015 Christmas epistle, Patriarch Irinej addresses the faithful as “sons and daughters” (“sinovima i kćerima”), immediately placing the community within a lineage-based frame. While such forms of address can be read as expressions of pastoral closeness, their repeated use within broader narratives of ancestry and continuity situates individuals within a pre-existing structure of belonging. The community is thus articulated as a spiritual family whose coherence rests on inherited ties rather than voluntary affiliation. This logic is reinforced through references to ancestral hearths (“vekovna ognjišta”), which collapse familial, territorial, and religious dimensions into a single image of continuity. In this framing, identity appears less as something one adopts than as something one receives, tied to both lineage and place.

This pattern recurs across SPC communications, where Orthodoxy is consistently framed as transmitted across generations and intertwined with the historical trajectory of the Serbian people. References to forefathers, sacred sites, and inherited faith construct a narrative in which the present generation appears as the latest link in an unbroken chain. The Church is positioned

as the institution through which this continuity is maintained, reinforcing the idea that religious identity is both shared and passed down.

A structurally similar logic is evident in IZ BiH discourse, though articulated through a different vocabulary and historical framing. In a 2015 hutba delivered at the Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque, Reis-ul-ulema Husein Kavazović refers to “our Bosnian tradition that we Muslims have inherited here for centuries” (“naša bosanska tradicija, koju mi muslimani ovdje stoljećima baštinimo”). While such phrasing may be read as emphasizing continuity of practice, the verb “to inherit” (“baštiniti”) situates religious belonging within a framework of transmission across generations. It frames Islam in Bosnia less as a set of beliefs chosen by individuals than as a legacy carried forward over time. The emphasis on “centuries” (“stoljećima”) further reinforces the temporal depth of this inheritance, positioning the present community within a long historical continuum. In this way, continuity is not only described but organized as a form of inherited belonging.

This language of inheritance appears consistently in IZ BiH discourse, where identity is described as something “carried,” “preserved,” and “entrusted” to the present generation. The community is thus positioned as a custodian of a tradition that predates it, rather than as an association formed through shared belief alone. As in the SPC case, this produces a shift from choice to obligation: to belong is to inherit, and to inherit is to be responsible for continuity.

At the same time, it is important to note that such constructions of continuity are not unique to ethnonational discourse. Religious traditions frequently articulate belonging in transgenerational terms, whether through the Islamic concept of the ummah or the Christian notion of a continuous spiritual community. What distinguishes the cases examined here is not the presence of continuity as such, but the way it is linked to specific historical communities, territories, and collective experiences. In these contexts, religious inheritance is not articulated as a universal or abstract continuity, but as one tied to a particular people and place, thereby aligning religious belonging more closely with ethnonational forms of identity.

What emerges across both cases is the construction of a moral lineage. The community is not simply continuous across time but normatively

structured by that continuity: ancestors are invoked as sources of authority, and their actions define the standards by which the present is judged. In SPC discourse, this authority is often anchored in medieval figures and foundational events, while in IZ BiH discourse it is grounded in the continuity of Islamic life in Bosnia and the endurance of the community through historical challenges. Despite these differences, the underlying structure is similar: the past functions as prescription rather than mere reference.

This construction of lineage does not depend on biological descent. Rather than establishing genealogical links between individuals and specific ancestors, the discourse produces a shared sense of inheritance through repetition and symbolic association. By consistently invoking forefathers, tradition, and continuity, both institutions generate a narrative of descent that appears natural and self-evident, rendering identity experienced as given rather than constructed.

## 4.2 Anchoring Descent in Ancestral Space

The construction of descent is further stabilized through its anchoring in space. Religious discourse embeds temporal continuity within specific landscapes that are presented as inherited, sanctified, and inseparable from collective identity. Through this process, territory becomes a material expression of lineage.

In SPC discourse, Kosovo functions as the central anchor of this spatialized descent. It is mentioned in most sermons as an inherited space that embodies the historical continuity of the Serbian people. The 2018 Christmas epistle describes Kosovo and Metohija as “our Jerusalem” (“naš Jerusalim”), invoking a sacred geography that transcends ordinary political categories. The territory is thus presented as a repository of collective memory and ethno-religious identity.

The temporal dimension of this spatialization is critical. Kosovo is constructed as the site where the past is preserved and transmitted, where monasteries, sacred sites, and historical events function as markers of continuity. The frequent characterization of Kosovo as “covenantal land” (“zavetna zemlja”), reinforces this logic by framing the territory as something received through generations. The present generation is positioned as the inheritor of a space that carries the imprint of ancestral sacrifice.

In IZ BiH discourse, a comparable spatial anchoring occurs through references to Bosnia itself as a continuous space of Islamic presence and through specific sites such as Srebrenica. While the symbolic register differs from the covenantal language of the SPC, the underlying structure is similar. Bosnia is not simply described as a state or territory, but as a space in which the community has “for centuries” (“stoljećima”) lived, practiced, and preserved its tradition. This framing embeds identity within a landscape that appears historically continuous, linking present belonging to a long-standing presence.

Srebrenica, in particular, functions as a focal point of this spatialized descent. It is constructed as a site where the history of the community is materially inscribed through suffering and remembrance. The emphasis on memory transforms the location into a symbolic anchor of identity that connects the present to the experiences of previous generations. As with Kosovo in SPC discourse, the significance of Srebrenica lies not only in what happened there, but in how it is positioned within a broader narrative of continuity.

Still, the use of sacred geography does not in itself imply ethno-nationalization. Religious traditions often attach meaning to particular places without limiting belonging to a specific people, as seen in the broader Christian or Islamic conceptions of sacred space. What distinguishes the cases examined here is the way territorial references are linked to historically bounded communities. In these contexts, space is not simply sanctified but particularized, tied to the experience of a specific group and presented as integral to its identity. This coupling of territory with historically defined community gives spatialized belonging an ethnonational character.

This has important implications for how identity is understood. If the community is defined in relation to ancestral space, then alternative forms of belonging that are not anchored in that space appear less legitimate. Territory becomes an extension of lineage, and attachment to it is framed not as preference but as obligation.

## 4.3 Binding the Living to the Dead

The construction of descent reaches its most emotionally salient expression in narratives that bind present generations to ancestral suffering. Through references to sacrifice, endurance, and

memory, religious discourse transforms temporal continuity into moral obligation, positioning the living as inheritors of a past that demands preservation and fidelity.

In SPC discourse, this dynamic is articulated through the elevation of suffering into a meaningful and dignified form of sacrifice. Commemorative language consistently frames historical trauma as a defining feature of identity, linking it to ancestral continuity. References to “hearths” (“ognjišta”), “ancestral land” (“dedovina”) and the graves of forefathers construct loss as a rupture in a transgenerational bond, emphasizing the need to restore and maintain that bond in the present. The past is thus not simply remembered but actively reinserted into the present as a source of obligation.

This obligation is explicitly articulated in formulations such as “we forgive but not forget” (“praštamo, ali ne zaboravljamo”). While forgiveness is framed as a virtue, memory is presented as a duty that sustains the continuity of the community. Forgetting would break the chain of descent, severing the link between the living and the dead. Memory, therefore, becomes a mechanism through which descent is maintained.

The moral force of this inheritance is intensified through the construction of the martyr figure. In Vidovdan discourse, the Serbian martyr is described as a “conscious victim and a true hero” (“svesna žrtva i junak pravi”), who “stands upright” in the face of death. This framing transforms suffering into an act of will, deepening the obligation of the living. The present generation inherits the responsibility to uphold its meaning. This logic is reinforced through the construction of a continuous chain of suffering that links Kosovo with later historical traumas, creating a unified narrative of endurance across centuries.

In IZ BiH discourse, a similar binding of the living to the dead is articulated through the language of entrusted memory and collective responsibility. References to the 1990s war, particularly the Srebrenica genocide, consistently emphasize the duty to remember and preserve the meaning of past suffering. The community is described as one that “inherits” (“baštini”) its history and is obligated to carry memory forward. Such narratives resonate with analyses of how religious symbolism and memory were mobilized during the Bosnian war to frame violence in moral and civilizational terms (Sells, 1996).

Unlike the more epic martyrdom framing of SPC discourse, IZ BiH narratives tend to emphasize responsibility and preservation rather than heroic sacrifice. However, the underlying structure remains analogous. The past is not treated as concluded but as ongoing, its significance extending into the present. The victims of violence are positioned as moral reference points, and their legacy defines the expectations placed upon the living.

While the invocation of the dead is a common feature of religious discourse, the patterns observed here are more specific. The figures and events referenced are framed not so much as part of a universal religious community, but as belonging to historically bounded groups whose suffering defines the identity of the present. In SPC discourse, martyrdom is tied to the historical experience of the Serbian people, while in IZ BiH discourse, remembrance centers on the suffering of Bosniak communities, particularly in Srebrenica. In both cases, memory is particularized, linking religious belonging to the experience of a specific people. It is this particularization that gives these narratives an ethnonational character.

Across both cases, then, the narratives collapse temporal distance, bringing past and present into a shared moral framework. Rather than absent, the dead are present as figures whose experiences continue to shape the identity of the community. This produces a form of descent that is not only continuous but binding, transforming belonging into a moral condition structured by obligation to the past.

### 5. Discussion: Religion, Descent, and the Naturalization of Belonging

The analysis demonstrates that religious discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina does not merely reflect ethnonational identity but actively contributes to its naturalization by recasting it as inherited. By linking faith with lineage, territorial attachment, and the memory of the dead, both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina construct belonging as continuous, given, and morally binding. In this sense, descent operates as a discursive mechanism that renders identity experienced as prior to choice. Rather than simply demonstrating the overlap between religion and ethnicity, the analysis specifies the processes through which this overlap is produced by organizing belonging as inheritance.

First, the findings refine constructivist accounts of identity by specifying how socially constructed categories come to appear natural. Constructivism has long emphasized that identities are produced through intersubjective meanings, yet it often leaves underexplained how these meanings acquire durability. The concept of descent developed here provides one answer. By narrating identity as inherited, through lineage, territorial anchoring, and obligation to the dead, religious discourse embeds belonging within a transgenerational structure that makes it appear continuous and self-evident. Identity thus appears less as a contingent arrangement than as an extension of an already existing temporal order.

Second, the analysis extends post-structuralist approaches by foregrounding the temporal organization of discourse. Identity is not only produced through differentiation, but stabilized through the continuous linking of past, present, and future into a shared moral horizon. Through the construction of lineage, the anchoring of identity in specific territories, and the binding of the living to the dead, religious discourse collapses temporal distance and produces the community as a continuous subject. This temporalization is not incidental but constitutive, as identity acquires durability through these linkages.

Third, the article contributes to the study of nationalism by clarifying how descent functions as a discursive mechanism. While nationalism scholarship has long recognized the role of shared history and ancestry, it often treats descent as symbolic or descriptive. The findings here show that descent operates more precisely as a process that integrates temporal continuity, territorial attachment, and moral obligation into a single framework. In line with ethno-symbolist insights (Smith, 1999), such narratives draw on shared memories and sites of collective significance to generate a sense of continuity. However, the analysis further specifies this perspective by showing how these elements are assembled in discourse to produce identity as inherited and binding.

The analysis also addresses a potential alternative interpretation: that the patterns identified reflect general features of religious discourse rather than processes of ethno-nationalization. Religious traditions frequently articulate continuity across generations, whether through the Islamic concept of the ummah or the Christian notion of a transhistorical spiritual community. However, the cases examined

here exhibit a more specific configuration. Lineage, territory, and memory are consistently articulated in relation to historically bounded communities rather than universal religious collectives. The dead who are remembered, the land that is sacralized, and the past that is invoked are tied to particular peoples and their historical experiences. It is this particularization, rather than the mere presence of continuity, that transforms religious discourse into a vehicle of ethnonational identity.

The comparative dimension of the study further shows that this mechanism operates across different symbolic repertoires while producing distinct configurations. SPC discourse tends to articulate descent through highly genealogical and mythologized narratives extending deep into the historical past, generating a strong sense of long-duration continuity. IZ BiH discourse, by contrast, constructs descent through a more compressed temporal frame, emphasizing preservation, responsibility, and the moral weight of more recent historical experience. These differences indicate that while the structure of descent construction is shared, its temporal scope and affective intensity vary depending on the historical resources available to each community.

These findings have important implications for understanding the persistence of ethnonational divisions in post-conflict settings. Approaches that focus on institutional reform or strategic incentives often assume that identity can be reshaped through material incentives and changes in political arrangements. The analysis suggests that such efforts may encounter limits when identity is embedded in narratives that link individuals to a morally charged past, a specific territory, and the memory of collective suffering. In such contexts, belonging is experienced as inherited rather than negotiated, making it resistant to redefinition.

This does not imply that identities are fixed, but it does shift attention to the mechanisms through which they are reproduced. If descent-based belonging is sustained through the coupling of lineage, space, and memory, then transformation requires interventions at that level. This involves reinterpretation, contestation, or the introduction of alternative narratives that reframe the relationship between past and present.

Finally, the analysis highlights the distinctive role of religious institutions in this process. Their influence lies not only in organizational authority,

but in their capacity to integrate historical, spatial, and moral dimensions into coherent narratives. At the same time, this suggests that they are not only sites of reproduction, but potential sites of transformation, insofar as they possess the authority to reinterpret narratives upon which ethnic identity rests.

## 6. Conclusion

This article has examined how religious institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina contribute to the ethnicization of belonging by transforming faith into a form of ancestry. Through a comparative analysis of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it has shown that identity is constructed as inherited and morally binding through three interrelated mechanisms: the narration of the community as a transgenerational lineage, the anchoring of belonging in ancestral space, and the binding of the living to the dead through narratives of suffering and obligation.

Taken together, these mechanisms produce a discursive form of descent. Identity is rendered as lineage through language, symbolism, and repetition, generating a sense of continuity that makes ethnonational belonging appear natural and prior to choice. In this way, discourse stabilizes identity within a temporal and moral framework that is resistant to contestation.

The findings contribute to debates on nationalism by clarifying how socially constructed identities acquire the appearance of permanence. Rather than simply demonstrating the overlap between religion and ethnicity, the article specifies the mechanisms through which this overlap is produced. Descent operates as a process of naturalization: religious discourse contributes to conceptualizing identity as something that precedes individual agency and reinforces the durability of group boundaries. While religious traditions often articulate continuity across generations, here lineage, territory, and memory are consistently tied to historically bounded communities rather than universal religious collectives. It is this particularization that gives these narratives their ethnonational character.

These findings have important implications. Efforts to promote civic or cross-cutting forms of belonging may encounter limits when identity is experienced as inherited and tied to narratives

linking individuals to a specific past, territory, and community of the dead. Because these symbolic and affective structures are produced and reproduced through religious institutions, any attempt at transformation must engage their role in articulating and sustaining such narratives.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, as in many post-conflict societies, ethnic belonging is closely tied to inheritance. Religious discourse is a powerful modality of framing this identity as something received and carried forward. Understanding its operations is essential to explaining why and how interethnic divisions endure.

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