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978-1-107-00455-9 - Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire

Selim Deringil

Excerpt

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Introduction

A Bosnian or a Herzegovinian Turk is a Turk by law, but as far as language and kinship are concerned, whatever his grandfathers were so will the last of his descendants be: Bosnians and Herzegovinians, until God decrees the end of the world. They are called Turks while the Turks rule the land; and when the real Turks return to their homeland where they came from, the Bosnians will remain Bosnians, and will be like their ancestors were.¹

THE SPECIFIC NATURE OF CONVERSION AND APOSTASY IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY OTTOMAN STATE: NATIONALISM AND DE-NATIONALISATION.

Nationalism is like mercury. You put a drop in your palm, it has mass, weight, and colour; yet when you try to seize it, it seeps out between your fingers, and you know that it will kill you if you swallow it.

The basic question to be asked in this book is: how were nineteenth-century cases of conversion and apostasy in the Ottoman Empire different compared to earlier cases of conversion and apostasy? Why would people join a faith that was on the retreat? Why was the conversion of a goatherd in Macedonia in, say, 1657 very different from the conversion of a goatherd in the same geographic area in 1876? What makes conversion and apostasy different in the nineteenth-century Ottoman context is that they overlap with the rise of ethnic nationalism and the age of National Revival

¹ Dositej Obradović, “Letter to Haralampije”, in Balázs Trencsényi and Michael Kopeček (eds.), *Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe: Texts and Commentaries* (Budapest and New York, 2006), Vol. 1, p. 128. Dositej Obradović (ca. 1740–1811), “Orthodox monk, writer, teacher and politician ... is considered the most prominent figure of the Enlightenment in Serbia”.

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MAP 1. The Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire, circa 1870. (Map courtesy of Ömer Emre)

movements that swept across Europe. Everyone felt special; moreover, everyone felt more special than his or her neighbour. Let us hear the voice of Joakim Vukić, a Serbian educator, writer, and theatre impresario: “During my stay in Serbia I also observed some other folk superstitions and customs which were taken over by the Serbs from the Turkish people, for they had lived with the Turks continuously for a period of 437 years; and the Turks are up to their ears in their superstition and nonsense.”²

I believe that nationalism is primarily a product of the last two centuries. Together with Benedict Anderson, I believe it to be a “cultural construct”. Like Eric Hobsbawm, I find that it “invents traditions”; and I agree with John Breuilly that it is “primarily political”.³

Conversion and/or apostasy were seen as particularly dangerous in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire because they were perceived as

² Joakim Vukić, “Characteristics of the Serbian People (1828)”, *In Discourses of Collective Identity*, p. 116.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, England, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, England, 1990); Selim Deringil, “Invented Tradition as Public Image in the Ottoman Empire 1808–1908”, *CSSH* 35 (1993), 3–29; John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester, 1993).

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de-nationalisation. Although almost all the literature on nationalism, and on that even more slippery concept, national identity, is focused on how they are *acquired*, whether they are “perennial”, “invented”, “imagined”, or “ancient”, much less attention has been lavished on the implications of and fear caused by their actual or potential *loss*. The fear of and hatred for the apostate in this context is quite important in understanding the process of a potential loss of national identity or the loss of a member of the flock or *ethnie*. The fear that the apostate evokes because “he knows our secrets” or the hatred of which he or she becomes the object is focused on the apostate/convert because they establish a *precedent*; they are potential *unravellers*. The nationalist canon usually focuses on the good examples, the role models for emulative purposes, the hero, the martyr; but nobody wants to talk about the bad apple, the turncoat, the quisling. When they do have to be talked about, it is only by way of focusing emotive hatred that, again, works to bond the healthy apples ever more firmly together.

What do I mean by “de-nationalisation”? I take this to mean the loss of a soul and a body from an increasingly “nationally imagined” community. This loss was also seen as a symbolic rape of the community’s honour if the convert/apostate was a woman or a child. As such, the negative symbolism of the convert/apostate can be seen as a transgression of what Smith refers to as the “symbolic realm” of the community, or, by extension, the violation of the “inner world” of the ethnic community or nation.⁴

Benedict Anderson states that it is the power to convert and assimilate that gives the Old World religions their extraordinary force and validity, particularly through what he calls “becoming adepts in the truth language”. He goes on to explain:

And, as truth languages imbued with an impulse largely foreign to nationalism, the impulse towards conversion. By conversion I mean not so much the acceptance of particular religious tenets, but alchemic absorption. The barbarian becomes ‘Middle Kingdom’ the Rif Muslim the Ilongo Christian. The whole nature of man’s being is sacrally malleable. . . . It was after all, this possibility of conversion through the sacred language that made it possible for an ‘Englishman’ to become Pope and a ‘Manchu’ Son of Heaven.⁵

It is at this point that I disagree with Anderson; conversion was by no means “largely foreign to nationalism”. When one studies religious conversion in

⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Anthony Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (Abingdon and New York, 2009), pp. 55, 64.

⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 15.

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the Ottoman Empire over time, one finds a very different evolution. Religion does not fade away with the advance of nationalism, but rather becomes yoked to it through the process of conversion and apostasy. In the earlier centuries, the sixteenth, seventeenth, and even the eighteenth, conversion was seen as an undesirable development. Priests and other members of the community or congregation saw it as a bad thing because it reduced their numbers and demoralized them. Yet when we come to the nineteenth century, religious identity is linked to national identity to such an extent that conversion to Islam and, after 1844, potential conversion from Islam to Christianity were seen as a loss of identity, a harbinger of greater catastrophe, that is, potential de-nationalization. It was perceived not as an individually reprehensible act, but as an affront to the whole (more or less amorphously imagined) community, a deadly threat and an insult to a self-conscious group.

In his seminal article on the concept of “imagined communities” in a Balkan context, Paschalis Kitromilides points to the vital role of national churches in the process of “nation-building” in the Balkans, a process begun by the unilateral declaration of autonomy from the Istanbul Patriarchate of the Greek National Church in 1833, which “spearheaded all nationalist initiatives in the latter part of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century”.⁶ Fikret Adanır concurs: “[T]he dominance of ethnic nationalism should not lead us to underrate the importance of religion. More often than not religion dominated all other elements in Balkan nationalism. The wars of liberation during the nineteenth century were at the same time wars of religion”.⁷

Similarly, Mark Mazower underlines the fact that with the advent of nationalism, “Religion became a marker of national identity in ways not known in the past, and therefore more sharply marked off from neighboring religions”.⁸

In such a context, in which religion and nationality were so entangled, the apostate from a given religious community could be seen as a traitor (if the apostasy was ostensibly voluntary), as a martyr to the national cause (if he or she was subsequently killed by the other side), or as national

⁶ Paschalis Kitromilides, “‘Imagined Communities’ and the Origins of the National Question in the Balkans”, in Paschalis Kitromilides, *Enlightenment, Nationalism, Orthodoxy: Studies in the Culture and Political Thought of South-Eastern Europe* (Aldershot, 1994), pp. 149–152.

⁷ Fikret Adanır, “The Formation of a ‘Muslim’ Nation in Bosnia-Herzegovina: A Historiographic Discussion”, in Fikret Adanır and Suraiya Faroghi (eds.), *The Ottomans and the Balkans: A Discussion of Historiography* (London, Boston, and Köln, 2002), p. 303.

⁸ Mark Mazower, *The Balkans* (London, 2001) p. 76.

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symbolic terrain to be re-conquered (in the case of actual or supposed abduction of women). As put by Irvin Cemil Schick: “As a *metaphor*, however, sexual violence also provides a symbolically dense representation of territorial appropriation and of the inability of men to defend their territory and their manhood”.⁹ In a historical conjuncture of almost continuous tension and upheaval, half-understood nationalist slogans, and abundant rumour presaging this or that impending disaster, the occurrence of something as minor as the conversion of an obscure peasant could achieve international dimensions.

Fear of de-nationalisation did not have to be articulated as such; very often it was not. Usually the people who took to the streets or went after each other with stones and knives had only a hazy awareness of the broader political implications. Sometimes, by word of mouth, rumour, or even the occasional newspaper, they had more precise information about real or imagined dangers.

The extent to which conversion and/or apostasy was seen as de-nationalisation is admirably examined in an article by Zoran Milutinović in which he discusses the works of four writers of Slovene, Croatian, Serbian, and Bosnian literature during the period of National Revival in the early nineteenth century.¹⁰ In all four works, the enemy “Other” is not a foreign conqueror but an apostate who collaborates with the conqueror by adopting his faith.¹¹ In Milutinović’s own words: “[The] culprit is never the Other, it is always an apostate, a renegade, someone ambiguously placed between us and them, by being one of us, but siding with them nevertheless”.¹²

⁹ Irvin Cemil Schick, “Christian Maidens, Turkish Ravishers: The Sexualization of National Conflict in the Late Ottoman Period”, in Amila Baturović and Irvin Cemil Schick (eds.), *Women in the Ottoman Balkans: Gender, Culture, and History* (New York, 2007), pp. 274–304. Emphasis in original. It is hard to disagree with David Nirenberg when he claims that “competition for women and competition for converts are related”. David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1996), pp. 128, 185.

¹⁰ Zoran Milutinović, “Sword, Priest and Conversion: On Religion and Apostasy in South Slav Literature in the Period of National Revival”, *Central Europe* 6 (2008), 17–46. My thanks to Fernando Veliz for bringing this reference to my attention.

¹¹ *Ibid.* The works in question are: the poem of the Croat writer, poet, and statesman Ivan Mazuranić, *Smrt Smail-agea Čengića* (Smail-agea Cengić’s death) (1846); the Slovene poet France Prešern and his epic *Krst pri Savici* (Baptism on the Savica) (1836); the prince-bishop of Montenegro Petar II Petrović Njegoš’s epic poem *Gorski vijenaj* (The Mountain Wreath) (1847); and the Bosnian statesman and president of the Diet of Bosnia Safvet Bey Basagić and his play *Abdullah Pasa* (1900).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

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In an insightful recent study of Serbian historiography, Bojan Aleksov points out that the issue of conversion to Islam by Serbs has always been at the crux of Serbian nationalism. He mentions the term “religious nationalism”, whereby “In the minds of the ordinary people, every neighbour who professed a different religion belonged to the ‘enemy’ civilization.”¹³ In the early nineteenth century, religion and nation were so closely linked in nationalist Serbian history that one historian, Georgije Magarašević, actually declared in 1827 that “Islamised Serbs, blinded by fanaticism, are much worse than the Turks”.¹⁴ Another Serbian historian, Jaša Ignjatović, writing in the late nineteenth century, very clearly identified conversion with de-nationalisation: “A Serb without religious rites and customs is not considered a Serb. A dissident from the faith is considered by the people as a lost son, as one who has lost the sense of the importance of Serbhood. Religious ideas are still more important than nation-building ideas”.¹⁵

A similar situation prevailed in Bulgaria, where, Maria Todorova tells us, “Conversion to Islam as a historiographical trope can be interpreted as serving a particular internal social and political function”. This function served as the legitimation for the forcible name-changing campaign enforced on the Bulgarian Muslims in the late 1980s.¹⁶ It is interesting that the basic function of the discipline of history, and within that discipline, the study of conversion, remained virtually the same from the early nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century. In the case of socialist Bulgaria, what Carsten Riis observes to be the function of historiography, “the formation and maintenance of national consciousness”, would also have held true in the early days of Bulgarian nationalism.¹⁷

When religion in the Balkans was parcelled out among various national churches, questions of the acquisition, loss, or betrayal of nationality were ultimately played out in the secular national arena even if the struggle was expressed in religious terms. A paradoxical result of this, as far as the Ottoman government was concerned, was what I will call the

¹³ Bojan Aleksov, “Adamant and Treacherous: Serbian Historians on Religious Conversions”, in Pal Kolstø (ed.), *Myths and Boundaries in South-Eastern Europe* (London, 2005), pp. 158–190. Aleksov points out that the term “religious nationalism” itself was coined by Milorad Ekmečić, *Stvaranje Jugoslavije 1790–1818* (Belgrade, 1989).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹⁶ Maria Todorova, “Conversion to Islam as a trope in Bulgarian Historiography, Fiction and Film”, in Maria Todorova (ed.), *Balkan Identities* (London, 2004), pp. 129–157.

¹⁷ Carsten Riis, *Religion, Politics, and Historiography in Bulgaria* (New York, 2002), p. 22.

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bureaucratization and ultimate secularization of the conversion process as part of the Tanzimat reforms.

Another specific aspect of the nineteenth century was the fact that the non-Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire who were involved in conversion and apostasy disputes could claim the protection of one or the other of the Great Powers, beginning with the Russian claim to protect the Orthodox subjects of the empire, supposedly granted by the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca of 1774.¹⁸ For the Muslims, on the other hand, as the dominant *ethnie*, the apostasy of a Muslim, already a mortal offence by religious law, now became a double insult because it flew in the face of centuries of assumed superiority. If the offender in question was backed by a foreign power, the representatives of that power could also become the targets of the Muslims' vengeance. The social and political tensions caused by conversion and apostasy cases led ultimately to their being perceived as an "Imperial Headache".

The nineteenth century saw what can only be described as the "cracking of the shell" of the traditional religious structure in the Ottoman Empire as schism followed schism and the state tried to regularize and regulate. In many ways the dates speak for themselves. In 1830 the Armenian Catholics were recognized as a separate community or *millet*. In 1831 the Armenian Patriarch excommunicated the Armenian Protestants, yet the Protestants were formally recognized as a separate *millet* in 1846. In 1833 the Greek kingdom was recognized as an independent state, and in the same year the National Greek Church was established. In 1839 the Tanzimat Edict was declared. In 1844 the Sultan Abdülmecid I promised to ban the legal execution of apostates from Islam, theoretically (or so the missionaries thought) opening the way for Muslims converting to Christianity. In 1849 there was an influx of Hungarian and Polish asylum seekers and their (in most cases) highly dubious conversions to Islam. In 1856 the Reform Edict officially declared the freedom of religion. In 1870 the Bulgarian Exharchate was created, and Bulgarian Orthodoxy broke away from the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarchate of Istanbul. In 1876 the Ottoman Constitution was declared, and religious freedom was guaranteed. This is the process that Lucette Valensi traced in Jerusalem, Damascus, and Aleppo: "These back and forth movements expressed a powerful religious agitation. . . . The nineteenth century inaugurated a new

¹⁸ J. C. Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East: A Documentary Record 1535–1914* (Toronto, London, and New York 1956), Vol. 1, p. 54. This claim was based on "a liberal (and questionable) interpretation of Articles 7 and 14 of the 1774 instrument".

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competition between diverse religious groups who attempted to reform their methods and to improve the training of their clergy to better resist the pressures of missionaries from all orders”.¹⁹

COMPARISONS WITH EARLIER PERIODS

This historic specificity of nineteenth-century conversion and apostasy is better understood when contrasted with earlier periods. It is interesting to compare the conversion process at the time when the Ottoman Empire was at the apex of its power in the sixteenth century, on the one hand, and the situation in the nineteenth century when Ottoman power was at its nadir, on the other. Tijana Kristić’s brilliant study of high-profile converts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has shown us that the careers of figures such as the Hungarian convert Murad b. Abdullah (c. 1509–86) unfolded at a time when Sultan Süleyman was “engaged in an acute struggle with both the Habsburg Emperor Charles V and the Safavid Shah İsmail for the title of the prophesied messianic Last Emperor (*sahib-kıran*)”.²⁰ It was in this context that Murad wrote his polemical treatise *The Guide for One’s Turning towards God*, attacking Christianity and upholding Islam as the one true faith. Kristić points out that in the intense political competition among Ottoman, Austrian, and Persian rulers, the conversion of a learned Orthodox priest such as Mehmed b. Abdullah constituted a “symbolic victory”. Such symbolic victories are notably absent in the nineteenth century. The conversions of General Joseph Bem and General Ladislas Czartoryski at mid-century were hardly touted as symbolic victories over the Austrians or Russians. In some ways they were almost an embarrassment, and their usefulness as military experts had to be weighed against the diplomatic cost of protecting them. Similarly, the conversion of the Armenian Bishop Harutyun was kept very low-profile, and he was set to work translating Armenian newspapers.²¹

In her study of the last Ottoman conquest, that of Crete in 1669, Molly Greene pointed out that most of the island’s Muslims were Greeks who had converted during the protracted campaign and joined the Ottoman

¹⁹ Lucette Valensi, “Inter-Communal Relations and Changes in Religious Affiliation in the Middle East, Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39 (1997), 268, 269.

²⁰ Tijana Kristić, “Illuminated by the Light of Islam and the Glory of the Ottoman Sultanate: Self-Narratives of Conversion to Islam in the Age of Confessionalisation”. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51 (2009), 35–63. See Chapters 3 and 4 of this volume.

²¹ See Chapter 4 of this volume.

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janissary corps: “Conversion in Crete did not automatically create a fierce and brutal divide between the two communities”.²² It is actually possible that “conversion was part of the mechanism that maintained connections between groups and kept the network of intergroup relations well oiled.”²³

Mixed marriages were quite common in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Crete. Nuri Adıyeke, working on the basis of the court records (*sicils*) of Crete, found that there were many instances of a Muslim father leaving his children in the care of his still-Christian wife and her family when he went away on campaign, sometimes never to return. Evidently, the administrators became concerned that the religious faith of these children would become perverted as a result of being brought up in a Christian household. As a result, on two occasions, in 1707 and 1727, they ordered that these children be registered and brought to Candia and placed temporarily with pious Muslims. There were also frequent complaints, registered by the court, that a certain person, ostensibly a Muslim, had been seen going to church. Another issue was circumcision. In 1658, it was brought to the courts’ attention that most of the men who had converted were not circumcised. The *kadis* were ordered to ensure that all new converts be circumcised. Adıyeke concludes:

In conclusion many people . . . converted to Islam in Crete from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. In this context . . . certain problems . . . directly arising from conversion were experienced. . . . However it should be noted that these complications did not produce a social trauma caused by conversion. . . . Problems arising from conversion to Islam did not give rise to greater social conflicts in Crete where social transformation problems were experienced rather as daily problems which were to be resolved by legal means.²⁴

Considering what a flashpoint of nationalist agitation Crete became in the nineteenth century, the relative containment of tensions related to conversion and apostasy is remarkable. In fact, this apparent containment had to be explained away by Greek nationalist historiography in the nineteenth century. One way of doing this was to claim that the numerous early converts in the seventeenth century had not been Greeks at all, but Venetians who had converted in order to save their property. Yet

²² Molly Greene, *A Shared World: Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, 2000), p. 107.

²³ Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge and New York, 2008), p. 128.

²⁴ Nuri Adıyeke, “Multi-Dimensional Complications of Conversion to Islam in Ottoman Crete”, in Antonis Anastopoulos (ed.), *Crete and the Eastern Mediterranean 1645–1840* (Rethymno, 2008), pp. 203–209.

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when it came to those who had ostensibly remained crypto-Christians, declared their Christianity during the Greek War of Independence of 1820, and been executed, they were declared glorious national martyrs: “[Thus] while the historiographers do not regard the locals converting to Islam as Greeks, those who apostatize during the [war] are announced as martyrs”.²⁵

Marc Baer’s important book on conversion during the reign of Mehmed IV (r. 1648–87) sheds further light on the specificity of conversions in the later period. Examining the revival of piety spearheaded by the Kadızadeli movement and the influence wielded by the charismatic Vani Mehmed Efendi on the sultan, his mother Turhan Sultan, and his Grand Vizier Fazıl Ahmed Paşa, Baer notes that this was the high point of Ottoman power, when “The broadest circle of conversion reached deep into central Europe and the Mediterranean accompanying the greatest extension of Ottoman boundaries”. Mehmet IV himself was depicted in the sources of the time “as a warrior of the faith against the infidels”.²⁶ The sultan actively sought to convert people during his hunting expeditions, and his mother made a point of demolishing the Jewish commercial quarter and converting it into the sacred Muslim space that was to become the massive Yeni Cami complex in the centre of the old city.²⁷

The glaring contrast between the period depicted as a time of triumphant and triumphalist Islam, when the sultan himself was, in Baer’s words, an active “convert maker”, and the nineteenth century is indeed striking. In the time frame of this book the Ottoman Empire is very much on the defensive; it is in fact fighting for survival. When reading the documents from the Tanzimat State period, it seems unclear whether the Ottomans even *wanted* conversions at all.

Johann Strauss, in his textual analysis of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Greek chronicles of the Ottoman period, points out that “the basic antagonism between ‘Christians’ on the one hand and ‘Turks’ on the other runs throughout the chronicles”. However, relating to the controversial issue of conversion, he notes that “The subject plays an important role. . . . It should be stressed however, that in these texts conversion is seen mainly as a problem of faith, of apostasy, and not as

²⁵ Nükhet and Nuri Adıyeke, “Myths and Realities on Ottoman Crete”, paper presented at the conference *The Mediterranean of Myths, the Myths of the Mediterranean*, 3–4 June 2010, Istanbul. Cited with permission of the authors.

²⁶ Marc Baer, *Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 10–11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 81–104.