“There Is No Compulsion in Religion”: On Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire: 1839–1856

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There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is henceforth distinct from error. And he who rejecteth false deities and believeth in Allah hath grasped a firm handhold which will never break. Allah is Hearer, Knower.

—The Holy Koran II:256.

SOME GENERAL QUESTIONS

This essay is a preliminary attempt to place nineteenth century Ottoman conversion policies in a comparative context in relation to both earlier Ottoman centuries and other imperial polities, viz.: the Spanish and Russian. The present study has three aims. First, to ask some practical questions about the fact and nature of the conversion process. Second, to try to ascertain whether there is some pattern to the various cases occurring in the archival documentation for the turbulent years between the declaration of the Tanzimat in 1839 and the Reform Edict of 1856. And third, to put the late Ottoman attitude to conversion and apostasy into a broader comparative framework than has hitherto been attempted.

To convert is to change worlds. This can be done voluntarily or involuntarily. In the spectrum ranging from the proverbial “conversion at the point of the sword,” to the completely sincere and intellectually committed act, the gradations of conviction and motivation are almost infinite. They range from the conscious act of a Polish aristocrat who took refuge in the Ottoman Empire and accepted Ottoman service in the 1830s, to those Christians in Damascus who converted to save their lives during the riots of 1860. But there is also that grey area, the small insults of everyday life: being referred to as mürd rather than merhum when you die, not being allowed to wear certain colours or clothes, not being allowed to ride certain animals. These little barbs, endured on a daily basis, these must have been the basic reason for many a conversion to Islam.

There are also cases which verge on the comic, such as the French doctor who converted to escape his gambling debts.
For the ruling elite, conversion to Islam was simply a way to qualify for a certain station in life: that of the ruling class. It would appear that for most of the ruling class’s history, the sincerity of the conversion did not unduly occupy the Ottomans. The Ottoman attitude was distinctly pragmatic, particularly when it was a matter of employing skilled technicians (gun founders, shipwrights, military men, etc.): “go through the motions and you are accepted.”

What Richard Bulliet has contended for conversions in early Arabian Islam largely holds true for the Ottoman Empire: “[The] initial decision to join the religious community of the rulers had more to do with the attainment or maintenance of status than it did with religious belief.” Despite what is often cited as “Ottoman tolerance” of non-Muslim creeds, there is no doubt that the Muslims in the Ottoman Empire were the ruling class. As elegantly put by Maria Todorova:

For all the objections to romanticized heartbreaking assessments of Christian plight under the infidel Turk, a tendency that has been long and rightly criticized, the Ottoman Empire was, first and foremost, an Islamic state with a strict religious hierarchy where the non-Muslims occupied, without any doubt, the back seats. The strict division on religious lines prevented integration of the population, except in cases of conversion.

Also the conversion issue raises several basic questions. Is it easier for the higher classes to convert rather than the lower classes? The fact that the former group is so accustomed to command and be obeyed, as a vital way of life, may make conversion a price which they can afford to pay. The fact of tax exemptions for converts, and the gradually decreasing number of Christian timar holders in the sixteenth-century Balkans, may well have been the result of a desire to maintain a position of local wealth and power. It is worth speculating that conversion may well have occurred among the lower aristocracy or the merchant strata, whose ambition may have been stronger than their religious conviction. Kemal Karpat’s assertion is that once the uppermost strata of the Balkan ruling classes were wiped out, many of the relatively lower “feudal groups . . . served the Sultan in order to keep their own socio-economic privileges. Many eventually converted to Islam.” One could also argue that people in the uppermost echelons of the Catholic or Orthodox nobility may have had closer, organic links (a younger brother as archbishop, etc.) with the church, making them resistant to conversion. Yet the reverse may also hold true, as pointed out by Victor Menage, there was a tendency in the early Ottoman period for the Balkan aristocracy to hedge their bets by ensuring that one son converted to Islam: “an action which, whatever its motive, would have had the effect of helping to deprive (sic) the whole family from expropriation, from insults by neighbors, and from high-handed treatment by the local authorities.” The case of the elite Ottoman troops, the Janissary Corps, being based on a child levy from the Christian population is obviously one case of institutionalized forced conversion.

A recent study on Islam notes, quite correctly, that religion was for many people, “what is socially appropriate as well as what is transcendentally true.”
Thus, a change of creed and ritual, grave as it was, was not necessarily a terri-
bly intellectual or cerebral choice.11

Factors of time and place must also be considered. Are people more likely to
convert in times of transition and crisis, or does a stable and prosperous order
hold more attractions for the potential convert? Research has shown that in the
stable Balkans of the time of Süleyman the Magnificent (r. 1496–1566) the pro-
portion of converts among the urban population was high, (seventy-six house-
holds out of a Muslim population of 231 households in Tîrânovî in 1500, or
thirty-three percent, twenty-five percent of the Muslim population of Bitola in
1545).12 Maria Todorova has pointed out that conversions in the Balkans be-
gan immediately after the arrival of the Ottomans and continued until the nine-
teenth century, with a crucial period in the seventeenth century. She asserts that
although there were “obvious cases” of forced conversion, “[M]ost were non-
enforced. These often euphemistically called ‘voluntary’ were the result of eco-

demic and social, but not administrative pressure.”13 Halil İnalcık’s pioneering
work on the spread of Islam in the Balkans draws attention to the fact that mass
immediate forced conversion to Islam was hardly ever practiced among the
Albanian, Serbian, or Bulgarian aristocracies after the Ottoman conquest. Is-

lamization was a gradual process among these classes, which lasted from the
mid-fourteenth to the sixteenth century. Christian timar holders were common
even during the reign of Beyazid II (r. 1481–1512). By the mid-sixteenth cen-
tury, the Ottoman tahrîr registers show hardly any Christian timar holders, as
the leading Balkan families were assimilated into the Ottoman scheme of
things.14 However, among the population at large, İnalcık has also pointed out
that sustained pressure, exerted in forms such as the poll tax, was responsible
for “mass conversions” in the Balkans in the later centuries.15

Are frontier zones more likely settings for conversion, in the unsettled con-
ditions of the marches? There are references in the literature to rather peculiar
practices in Ottoman Algiers, where Christian converts were made to spit on
the cross and then trample it. Also in Algiers, in the 1640s, if a Jew wanted to
convert to Islam, he was first obliged to convert to Christianity: “Only then is
he permitted to move into the ranks of the True Believers. A singular require-
ment this, which makes him twice over a renegade.”16 The renegade society of
North Africa is indeed singular, as it seems to represent the ultimate frontier
zone where renegados could and did convert to Islam and rise to positions of
supreme power.17 In North Africa there are also claims or cases of apostasy
from Islam to Christianity, such as the case of Sidi Mohammed, a corsair cap-
tain who was captured by the Knights of Malta in 1654. Sidi Mohammed later
became a priest, and in 1663, in Genoa, “converted hundreds of galley slaves
to Christianity.”18

The question is: who was the “Ottoman?” Was he Sadık Pasha, née Michael
Izador Czaykowski, a Polish count who entered Ottoman service in the 1830s,
converted to Islam, and went on to pursue a distinguished military career?19 Or
was he Amir Bashir Shihab, a Christian Lebanese who in the early 1820s, “practiced Sunni Islam in public and Christianity in private, [and] allowed a Maronite priest to take charge of his spiritual life?”20 Or was he the Druze and Alewi chieftain in the Lebanese mountains who practiced taqiyya (dissimulation), while “by centuries old tradition” taking his disputes to Ottoman Sunni Sharia courts?21 Or was he Grand Vizier Mehmed Sokollu (Sokolović, 1505–1579), whose brother, the monk Makarios ruled as the Patriarch of the Serbian church at Peć?22

Stephen Humphreys has claimed that, “Indeed, we might argue that the study of conversion to Islam is one of the most effective ways of reconstructing the specific characteristics of each of the constituent societies.”23 Another vital question concerns the position of the forced convert in Islamic society.24 Furthermore, conversion was not a one way street. Some converts to Islam could and did return to their original faiths by seeking and receiving Papal dispensations.25

The Issue of Apostasy from Islam

The issue of apostasy from Islam (irtidad) is a particularly thorny one. The commonly accepted belief among Muslims is that the apostate (mürtedi) is liable to execution according to the sharia.26 The highly respected Şeyhülislam of the sixteenth century, Ebu’s Su’ud Efendi, was unequivocal in his fetva on this matter: “Question: What is the Şer’i ruling for a dhimmi who reverts to infidelity after having accepted Islam? Answer: He is recalled to Islam, if he does not return he is killed.”27 A major recent study on Ebu’s Su’ud has also drawn the picture in rather stark lines: “The penalty for the male apostate is death. Before the execution . . . jurists grant a three day delay. If, during this period, the apostate repents and accepts Islam he is reprieved. . . . An apostate, in fact lives in a legal twilight. If he migrates and a judge rules that he has reached the realm of war, he becomes legally dead.”28 This ruling is also the basis of what some authors have called “neo-martyrdom.” The “neo-martyrs” are men and women who “turned Turk” for various reasons, but then repented and publicly declared themselves Christians. “The Turkish law was explicit and their doom, if they persisted, was certain.”29

The degree of persistence, in some cases mentioned by Michel Balivet, was really exceptional, particularly in the cases of men who actively sought martyrdom. Such was the case of the monk Damascinos at the end of the eighteenth century, who, after apostasizing and becoming a monk on Mount Athos, was brought before the local kadi to allow him the opportunity to repent: “[The kadi] offered him coffee which he proceeded to throw into the official’s face and started declaiming against Islam as a false religion. He seemed to want to attract the worst punishments the Turks could inflict upon him. But he was taken for a madman and simply given a severe beating.” Yet he kept trying, and only after publicly insulting Islam three times in front of Turkish soldiers was he executed.30
It has been pointed out often that this is the reason for the paucity of Muslim converts to Christianity: “If it were as easy and safe to revert from Islam as from Protestantism, we should doubtless find fewer Moslems in Turkey at the present day.”31 Surprisingly late in history, in October 1843, we come across the last case of a formal, official, execution of an apostate in Istanbul. The American missionary, Cyrus Hamlin, noted in his memoirs that the issue caused severe divisions in Ottoman ruling circles: “The old Mussulman party had triumphed in the most disgraceful manner. The act divided Turkish sentiment and feeling; the old Turks commending it, the young Turkish party, already forming, cursing it as a needless insult to Europe and a supreme folly of old fools.”32 In fact, in the years leading up to and immediately after the Reform Edict of 1856 it became state policy to look the other way when Muslims who claimed to be crypto-Christians openly declared loyalty to their old faith.33 Ilber Ortaylı has actually pointed out that when it came to some crypto-Christians and other heterodox groups, “the State pretended not to know their beliefs.”34 Just as conversion to Islam can be seen as a sort of litmus test of specific historical conditions, we might stand the question on its head, and enquire if the issue of apostasy from Islam is also a window into the soul of a particular people in time and place. What determined the attitude of the powerholders to those who left the fold? Although the accepted belief was that execution was religiously permitted, indeed ordained, the historical record shows that this dictum was very often deliberately disregarded. Was it simply a matter of the degree of effectiveness of state power? Did the Ottomans after 1856 systematically try to avoid the execution of apostates because they were wary of the reaction of the Great Powers? Or was there an increasingly prevalent notion that “this was not the done thing anymore”?

**CONVERSION IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE: A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW**

The Ottoman attitude to conversion is nowhere near as clear as that of the Spanish and Portuguese in South America, or the Russians in their expansion southwards into the Don-Volga region. The “saving of souls” was not an integral part of Ottoman Imperial policy, as it was in the Christian empires. The very basis of the Spanish *reconquista* was to expel Islam from the Iberian peninsula, and there was to be no formal Spanish equivalent of *dhimmi* (non-Muslim subject) status for the conquered Muslims. Although the terms of the surrender of Granada in 1491 specified that the Moors would not be forcibly converted, after the arrival on the scene in 1499 of the zealot Archbishop Cisneros of Toledo, there ensued a policy of forcible baptism and forced conversion.35 For Spain, expansion and conquest of the “New World” came to be synonymous with the “conquest of souls” of the native American population: “fifteenth and sixteenth-century Spain, which had come to conquer, colonize, and evangelize the recently discovered continent, felt that it was elected by Providence for this mission.”36 The *reconquista* of Granada was transformed into a moti-
vating motif for the *conquista* of Indian souls in village festivals in the 1550s: “Village fiestas included dance-dramas such as the one known as ‘Moors and Christians’ which re-enacts the Spanish conquest of the Moors in Granada in 1491. The Indians reinterpreted this Spanish drama as a portrayal of the conquest of Mexico and added Hernan Cortes to its cast of characters.”37 The emphasis on religious conversion could even take precedence over the economic considerations of Spanish colonialism, as shown in the case of the Spanish conquest of the Philippine islands. Although his officials told Philip II that the Philippines were not economically worth the vast expense, “it was the religious motive of retaining the islands for the Catholic faith that influenced Philip II.”38

It must be noted, however, that among some of the Spanish clergy, mercy and charity were the preferred methods of conversion. A particularly distinguished example was Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566), a Dominican friar who later became Bishop of Chiapas in Guatemala. Las Casas became a fervent champion of the Indians, and is best remembered for his *Brief Report On the Destruction of the Indians, or Tears of the Indians*. In this work Las Casas argued that the “[Gospel] should be preached with enticements, gentleness, and all meekness, and pagans to be led to the truth not by armed forces but by holy examples, Christian conduct and the word of God . . .”39 Yet even Las Casas was in no way questioning the basic requirement of conversion, and in many instances he met with strong opposition from within the clergy for preaching lenience towards the Indians. The theologian Juan Ginés de Sepulveda, “for whom the Aristotelian doctrine of natural slavery was entirely applicable to the Indians on the grounds of their inferiority,” was to be one of his most fervent critics.40

Russia was a relative latecomer to state-supported conversion policies, and it was only after Peter the Great that converting non-Christians became a matter of state policy.41 Although Russian conversion campaigns were as much targeted against pagans as Muslims, the post-Petrine state acquired something of a crusading character as it expanded into the Tatar and other Muslim zones. This trend reached its peak with the creation of The Agency of Convert Affairs, which functioned from 1740 to 1760. The intense policy of forcible conversion carried out by this agency was, however, a failure: “The excessive force used by the Agency of Convert Affairs, the mutual complaints of the church officials and the converts, and the large but nominal character of conversion made it clear that missionary work in Russia in the middle of the eighteenth century was flawed.”42 The official conversion policy was also very brutal, particularly after the appointment of Archbishop Luka Konasevic in 1738: “Methods of extreme brutality were brought to bear: massive destruction of mosques, the kidnapping of Muslim children baptised by force and shut up in schools for converts, even the forced baptism of adults . . . the death penalty for Muslim missionaries.”43

From this time onwards, there was to be a large crypto-Muslim population
in the Volga region. When state pressure lifted, these people would periodically apostasize and return to Islam. In periods of relative liberalism, such as that of Catherine the Great, emphasis on voluntary conversion became the state policy. However, the period of relative liberalism under Catherine was followed by a new crackdown in the nineteenth century. In 1827, several thousand converted Tatars petitioned the Tsar to allow them to return to Islam in what was “the first massive wave of apostasy.”

It is instructive to compare the Russian and Ottoman cases because in some ways the methods used by the two regimes are tantalizingly familiar, yet there are striking differences. In both polities, at various dates, conversion could lead to an amnesty for previous “crimes.” In both, the “carrot method” included exemption from taxation and military service, and gifts of money and clothing. In both polities the physical displacement of new converts was practiced as a means of distancing them from their previous communities. In both Russia and in the Ottoman Empire the conversion of the previous aristocracies was a gradual process, which took place over several generations. In Russia, a wide range of nobles, including “Chinggisid princes from Siberia to the Crimea, non-Chinggisid Tatar nobles of the Kazan region, Kabardian nobles and the Imeritian ruling dynasty from the Caucasus, Nogay and Kalmyk chiefs from the Volga steppes—all at different times and for different reasons—chose to convert to Christianity . . . Assimilation was complete when a dynasty entered the Genealogical Book of the Russian nobility.” Thus, both polities showed a remarkable capacity for integrating previous elites in which “conversion meant a fast track to assimilation.” In Russia, the spread of Orthodoxy remained a state project: “The single most striking feature of Russian missionary activity remains the unusual degree of government involvement. In a country in which the church was firmly wedded to the state, religious conversion was seen and used by the government as a tool of state colonial policies.”

In both post-Petrine Russia, with the creation of the Holy Synod in 1721, and the post Mahmudian Ottoman Empire (from 1839 onwards) with the incorporation of the Şeyhülislam into the government machinery—(this position eventually becoming a Cabinet post)—the highest of religious offices became entirely subordinate to temporal power. In both polities, therefore, it is possible to refer to an “institutionalizing [of] piety.” Yet it is here that the major difference comes out. In matters of conversion (forced or voluntary), mass conversion was never an official policy of the Ottoman state for the population at large. Although large-scale Islamization did take place in some areas of the Balkans in the centuries following the Ottoman conquest, it proceeded slowly, and until the tightening of the borders between the millets—due to the influence of nationalism in the nineteenth century—the convert often kept contact with his/her previous community. As Michel Balivet succinctly put it, “As to Islamization ‘a la ottomane,’ it is certainly not a case of religious or even cultural uniformity, most of the converts kept a part of their past heritage.”

The
recent major study by Ahmet Yaşar Ocak on heresy in the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries is also very clear on this point: “The Ottoman Empire never considered the official religion as a belief that was to be imposed on its non-Muslim subjects, and it never carried out any activity in this regard.”

In other words, the Ottoman Empire never had a “Propaganda Fide,” or an “Agency for Convert Affairs,” nor did it have any press which was used by the Propaganda Fide to such good effect. It is only late in the Hamidian period (1876–1909) and the subsequent Young Turk period that this picture begins to change.

Conversion in the Early Ottoman Period

Cemal Kafadar’s recent work has cast new light on the hitherto-accepted wisdom about the *gazi*, “the Muslim warrior for the faith,” which held that part of his job was to convert infidels. Even in the case of the legendary companion-in-arms of Sultan Osman I, Köse Mihal (Mikhalis the Beardless), who is supposed to be one of the first Greek converts and a notable early *gazi*, it appears that not only did he convert rather later than thought, but that he took part in early Ottoman raids and took his share of the booty as a Christian. Kafadar also points out that many things that were written about the *gazi* obligation to convert Christians were later additions, made by writers bemoaning the passing of the *gazi* tradition. Even the famous dervish-chronicler Aşıkpaşazade, in his panegyric relating the exploits of Sultan Murat II (r. 1421–1451), was indulging in nostalgia and venturing an indirect criticism of Mehmed II’s (1451–1481) more settled policies, which seemed to undermine the *gazi* tradition. Kafadar seems to incline towards the former: “It was rarely if ever the ulema and the courtiers of Bagdad and Konya who set themselves the task of actively gaining converts. It was rather the largely unorthodox dervishes of the marches in southwestern Asia and southern Europe who did so.” Legendary *gazis* were often dervishes who were reputed to, “speak seventy two languages,” who were “holy figures trained for such cross-cultural exercises.” Speros Vryonis in his classic work on the Islamization of Greek Anatolia also notes, “Others were prepared for assimilation by the preaching of dervishes and ulemas, and by the religious syncretism that tended to equate Islamic practices and saints with those of the Christians.”

Ömer Lütfü Barkan, in one of his seminal articles on early Ottoman settlement in the Balkans drew a very detailed picture of the role of “colonizing
dervishes” in this process. The picture he presents is a somewhat stylized image, in which dervishes sporting exemplary pious devotion “spiritually conquered the [infidel] in campaigns even preceding the arrival of the conquering armies” (karsı tarafı daha evvel manen fethetmiş). Moreover, Barkan’s point is that most of the converts made were the servants of the dervish lodges, and “could not but come under the spell of the mysterious and intense religious rituals practiced therein.” So the “colonizing” nature of the “colonizing dervishes” is mostly confined to providing hospitality and security in “remote empty places.” As to mass conversion, Barkan is unequivocal: “In truth in Ottoman history, until the conquest of Istanbul we cannot speak of mass Islamization or the cosmopoliticization of the state.” Therefore, even in his article specifically dealing with “colonizing dervishes” the main emphasis is on their function as builders of hospices and providers of security on the roads. Their function as Islamicizers is clearly secondary, and they proceed to convert through good example and intensity of faith, rather than through a militant confrontation with the indigenous faith, as in the case of the Franciscan Friars. In other words, the “colonizing dervishes” are also “bridge people” in the early years of Ottoman expansion, as seen in Vryonis’ treatment of the Bektaşi. Nor is this process confined to the early period of Ottoman expansion. William Hasluck, writing at the turn of the nineteenth century, claimed that some villages in the Albanian region of Koritza, “are said to have been converted within the last hundred years to Islam, or rather to Bektashism.”

Heroes of epics such as the Danışmendname (late thirteenth century), Saltuk-name (1480), and the Book of Dede Korkut all incline towards latitudinarianism and syncretism. The attitude is by no means necessarily “Islam or the sword.” but a gradual insinuation into the lives of the “others,” in which an important element is empathy with Christianity, together with an invitation to be included in the advantages of belonging to Islam. Thus, the legendary Sarı Saltuk could fight the Byzantines, but could also bring tears to their eyes by reciting the Bible at the altar. Nor was this empathy necessarily cynical and calculating. There may well have been genuine affection on both sides.

The obsession with Sunni orthodoxy did not arise until the emergence of Sunni Ottoman rivalry with the Shi’ite Safavids of Iran in the sixteenth century, “which was essentially a political, not a religious struggle.” Colin Imber draws attention to the same point: “The Sultan’s role as defender of the faith obliged his government to identify and eliminate heretics. This task was not easy since the variety of beliefs and practices in the Ottoman Empire was as heterogeneous as the Muslim population itself.”

The question that comes to mind at this point is the following: was the story of Ottoman Islam that of a dialectic between tolerance/latitudinarianism/syncretism on the one hand, and the imposition or desired imposition of orthodoxy on the other? Even in nineteenth-century documents the term is “daire-i İslamiyete davet,” to be invited into the fold of Islam. Yet, this coexists with
phrases such as the “correction of their beliefs” (tashih-i akaid) and the fight against dalalet, or heresy. My contention in this study is that conversion to Islam in the Ottoman Empire was always a much more ad hoc, a more pragmatic than dogmatic/canonical process than it was in Christian empires, and that it only acquired full state rigour and official backing in the nineteenth century as a reaction to foreign pressure, and the official recognition that apostasy from Islam was now legally possible.

FROM THE TANZIMAT TO THE REFORM EDICT: FOREIGN INTERVENTION IN RELIGIOUS MATTERS

The Tanzimat Edict of 1839 was intended to guarantee equality before the law to all subjects of the Ottoman Empire, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. The Reform Edict of 1856 was designed to carry out the promises made in the Tanzimat. The Reform Edict is much more detailed and much longer, as well as being more specific about religious freedom, stating that “As all forms of religion are and shall be freely professed in my dominions, no subject of my empire shall be hindered in the exercise of the religion that he professes, nor shall he be in any way annoyed on this account. No one shall be compelled to change their religion.” Although the belief among some contemporary observers was that the 1856 Edict specifically abolished the law ordaining the execution of apostates, there is no specific mention of apostasy anywhere in that document. Given that the 1856 Edict was so detailed regarding the position of non-Muslims, it is actually possible to see it as the outcome of a period of religious restlessness that followed the Edict of 1839. Indeed, in the years leading up to the edict of 1856 we come across a certain “liveliness” in the religious life of the Empire. There appears to be a shifting of the sands, not only from Christianity to Islam and vice-versa, but also among the other religions of Ottoman society. The official position was always the same: that the state would not tolerate the use of force or any sort of compulsion in the matter of conversion to Islam, and that the legal execution of apostates from Islam was not allowed.

Yet there is also an unmistakable undercurrent. The feel of the documents leads one to the impression that there was continuous pressure on non-Muslims to convert, and a continuing danger that apostates would be put to death. The sheer repetition of the order that compulsion was not to be permitted hints very strongly that a great deal of compulsion was being brought into play. How much of this was local and how much was state-approved is a moot point. What is clear is that for the Ottoman ruling elite, “freedom of religion” meant “freedom to defend their religion.” Indeed, the wording of the Reform Edict is entirely open to this interpretation.

The Ottoman Ambassador to London was instructed to ask Earl Russell the following questions:

Can it be supposed that whilst condemning religious persecutions, the Sublime Porte has consented to permit offence and insult to any creed whatever? That at the same time she
was proclaiming liberty to all non-Mussulman creeds, she had given them arms against Islamism? That she had, in fine, destroyed at the same stroke the guarantees with which she surrounded the liberty of religious convictions?\textsuperscript{70}

During the years leading up to the Reform Edict, there is a rising tide of documentation which implies ever-increasing sensitivity to this issue. Sensitivity to outside pressure, as well as to domestic reaction meant that Istanbul had to walk a tightrope of reiterated orders to the provinces, repeatedly assuring the foreign envoys that it was keeping its house in order and, by clear implication, that it did not need their help.

This was precisely the gist of a conversation between the Ottoman Ambassador to London, Ahmed Muhtar Paşa, and the “Great Elchi,” the long-time British Ambassador to the Sublime Porte, Sir Stratford Canning, who was on leave in London. In a conversation over dinner at the Ottoman Embassy, which the Ottoman Ambassador reported on 31 January 1844, the matter of conversion and apostasy came up. Canning brought up the matter of “the recent events in Bilecik where an apostate was executed, this causing very strong feelings among the Powers.”\textsuperscript{71} Canning then went on at some length about the promises made by the Porte in this regard. At this point Ahmed Muhtar Paşa replied:

I explained to His Excellency in the calmest manner the religious obligations incumbent on all Muslims in these cases (bir mecburiyet-i diniyye keyfiyeti). I also pointed out that the fact that commitments had been made in Istanbul did not mean that such events would not take place in some locality. All we could hope to accomplish would be to try to prevent the occurrence of conditions which would bring into force such obligations.\textsuperscript{72}

The Ottoman Ambassador further pointed out to Canning that, “our religious obligations like our nationally established laws are very clear on this matter.” He went on: “Like Britain and France, the Sublime State and its subjects are most desirous of being quit of this vexing question.”\textsuperscript{73} The message behind the diplomatic wording was very clear: do not push us too far in a direction we want to go in anyway. Nonetheless, the Ottoman Ambassador made a point of telling Canning that there were “religious obligations” to execute apostates, which the Porte was doing its best to circumvent.

Another very clear indication that the Sublime State did not need outside interference in matters relating to the religious freedom of its subjects is the official declaration made in 1851 that the privileges granted to non-Muslim subjects in 1453 by Mehmet the Conqueror, the conqueror of Istanbul, were still in force. It was clearly stated in the 1851 declaration that such a confirmation was going to be officially issued as an Imperial Edict (Hat-ı Hümayun) to the Greek and Armenian Patriarchates, as well as the Chief Rabbi and the head of the Protestant community: “The full application of such privileges is a manifestation of the Sublime State’s great affection for its subjects, and its determination not to admit any interference or meddling by any other party.”\textsuperscript{74} It is interesting that the Porte should have hit upon the stratagem of using some four hundred-year-old historical precedent to ward off outside pressure, and indeed
the *Hat* of 1856 specifically mentioned Fatih Sultan Mehmed by name.\(^{75}\) This is all the more remarkable as there has always been some doubt about the veracity of the granting of these privileges.\(^{76}\) Halil İnalcık has confirmed that although Sultan Mehmet II did indeed grant the Greek Patriarch Gennadius a *be-rat*, or letter of patent, no actual document has ever been found.\(^{77}\)

A most striking case very evocatively illustrating the problems of foreign involvement comes up on 27 January 1852 in the *sancak* of Lazistan, on the eastern Black Sea coast bordering Russia. The local Ottoman authorities reported that “recently some three or four Georgian children about thirteen to fourteen years of age, have presented themselves at the frontier post at Çürüksu, and have immediately converted to Islam of their own free will.”\(^{78}\) When the representative of the Georgian headman (*Tavat*) came to see them in the barracks where they were being kept and attempted to dissuade them, they reportedly told him, “we came here with the desire to become Muslims, we will on no account go back.” The sancak officials pointed out that the usual procedure in these matters called for the presence of a consular official if the converts were Russian subjects. On the other hand, if they were Ottoman subjects, the officials said, then procedure simply called for the presence of the local Metropolitan or his representative, the *kocabas*\(^{\mathsf{a}}\). It was also determined by international agreement that to and fro movement of peoples across the border was to be regulated by passports, but the Georgian children had no passports. Thus, it was implied, the Russian Consul could not claim them. Another interesting sideline was the statement at the beginning of the report that “because the sancak of Lazistan is adjacent to the Russian border there has never been any shortage of people who come over and claim to become Muslim or people who cross over to the other side and accept other religions.”\(^{79}\) Another distinct possibility is that the children in question were either kidnapped or otherwise enslaved. The enslavement of Georgians and Circassians was widespread during these years in this frontier zone, and was a major bone of contention between the Porte and Stratford Canning.\(^{80}\)

Foreign interference seems to have been very much the order of the day, with many Ottoman non-Muslims claiming to be protected by some foreign power.\(^{81}\) On 13 September 1852 the Governor of Ioannina (in Epirus, Greece) was ordered to look into the death of the servant of a high ranking Ottoman official. The Defterdar, or Head Accountant, a certain Gato Anendiri, had reported that his servant had died soon after converting to Islam. However, the death had occurred in somewhat suspicious circumstances and the Austrian Embassy had intervened, claiming that the deceased had been an Austrian subject. The Embassy was claiming that, according to established practice, an Austrian official had to be present when an Austrian subject converted to Islam. No such official had been present at this conversion, however; therefore the deceased had died an Austrian subject. Moreover, the circumstances of the death were such that foul play was suspected. The implication from the Austrian side was that the
convert had been beaten or otherwise abused while being pressured to convert. It was therefore duly arranged that a team of doctors from the Ottoman and Austrian sides should be present as the body was exhumed and an autopsy performed.82

Many of the cases in the Balkans in the years leading up to the Reform Edict of 1856 involved the protection of so-called “Austrian subjects.” In 1853 it was reported from Işkodra (Scutari) in Albania that a certain George and his cousin, a young girl named Antonia, had been pressured into accepting Islam. George had escaped from the fortress where he was being kept prisoner and had swum the across river to the Austrian side. Antonia, it was reported, was being held in the house of Beşir Galib, “in chains and under the most terrible pressure.” George had told the Austrians that he wanted to return, but also wanted a guarantee that he would not be pressured to accept Islam. The Porte wrote to the Mutasarrıf of Scutari that “no Christian subject is ever to be pressured or forced in any way to accept Islam.” It is worth noting that the Porte added, “such events will have a very bad effect in that area these days.” The local authorities were told that they were to secure the safe conduct of both of the victims.83

The thread running through the documentation is that the Ottomans constantly felt the consulates and embassies were looking over their shoulder in matters relating to conversion. Such was the story of Katerina, a Greek woman who was orphaned and left in the care of Talip Agha in Ioannina, who “virtually imprisoned her and applied all manner of threats and promises for her to convert.” The British Consul in Preveza then became involved, claiming Katerina as a British subject, and therefore demanding that a British official should be present at the moment of conversion. The Ottoman government instructed the governor of Ioannina to ascertain whether Katerina had converted voluntarily, and whether she was in fact a British subject. It was clearly stated that no consular representative was needed if she was not.84 As in the cases above of persons claiming Austrian protection, there seems to have been a recognized procedure, whereby foreign representatives were to witness that a conversion was indeed voluntary. A measure of how strongly the Ottomans felt about this is the fact that after the 1860 anti-Christian riots in Damascus, the Ottoman authorities demanded that the five hundred or so Christians who had been forced to embrace Islam be obliged to return to their original faith.85

**Cases of Conversion and Apostasy**

In the documentation of the period one finds frequent references to cases of conversion and subsequent apostasy. The orders from the center are always in the same vein: no force or compulsion is admissible in matters of conversion. Although this author has been unable to find such a document as a “Regulation for Conversions,” there is frequent reference to conversion being carried out “according to the proper procedure” (usul ve nizamına tevfiken). According to these regulations, the highest-ranking religious authority available in the com-
munity of the convert had to be present at the conversion. Together with him, the convert’s parents or next of kin should be in attendance. The documents testifying to the act of legitimate conversion were to be signed and sealed by Muslim and Christian officials alike. The procedure should not be hurried, and if a few days delay was required for the priest or the next of kin to arrive, the conversion was to be postponed. Only those children who had reached the age of puberty were allowed to convert. Also, in the case of girls who came to the ceremony veiled, the veil had to be lifted to ascertain identity.86

This emphasis on bureaucratic regularity is also very evident in a study of cases of conversion in the Ottoman province of Bursa. In post-Tanzimat Bursa, the registers of the religious courts (the sicils) show that the procedure involved numerous stages. First, the convert or intended convert had to make their desire known to the local administrative council of the province (Meclis-i Idare-i Vilayet). Second, the administrative council carried out the “official questioning” of the person, ascertaining their religion, community affiliation, and the fact that they were “free, sane, and adult” (hüür, akil ve balig). At this point the “candidate” was asked if he/she had been “tricked, forced or coerced” (cebr, igfal, tergib) into conversion. Next, the person was asked by the council to repeat the sacred formula in the presence of the council and the governor or his representative. At this point representatives of the former community of the convert were to be present as well as representatives of the foreign powers, in the case of a convert claiming protected status. Third, the case was then referred to the kadı court, where the same procedure was carried out again. At the end of all this the convert was accepted as a Muslim and registered as such, being given a “certificate of conversion”(ihtida ilamı).87

This stickling for procedure did not escape the notice of the better-informed foreign observers: “The whole procedure that is prescribed in cases of conversion to Mohammedanism from any form of religion is judicious, moderate, and calculated to distinguish between real and forced conversion, and to give the former co-religionists of the convert every opportunity of satisfying themselves that the conversion is voluntary.”88

On 5 May 1844, a case was reported from Akka (Acre) whereby a young Christian girl purportedly converted to Islam, but the conversion was challenged by her parents and relatives. When summoned before the Shar´ia court she recanted, saying that she had been forced into the act. The court duly ordered that as she was a minor she should be given back to her parents.89 The orders state in no uncertain terms that: “No subject of the Sublime State shall be forced by anyone to convert to Islam against their wishes.” It had come to the Foreign Ministry’s attention that:

There are many cases reported where the said person is a child who has been importuned by an insistence to accept Islam . . . . In no way is this to be admitted as it is entirely in contravention of current laws and regulations as set down in the letters of patent (berat) given to the various Archbishoprics.90
The pattern is usually the same. A Christian converts to Islam, the community intervenes, claiming some irregularity in the conversion process, the victim is called before the Kadi’s court, and the court, no doubt under instructions from Istanbul, finds some sort of face-saving solution. All this is a far cry from officially sanctioned execution of apostates. At least in one instance, the official policy of the state was stated very clearly in terms which can only be described as “you are instructed to look the other way.” On 30 October 1844, the Muşir of the Army of Rumelia, Reşid Paşa, was given instructions regarding his request for instructions on what to do with the apostates in the region of Noveberde. He was told in no uncertain terms that: “In offensive matters (madde-i mekruhe) such as these, [the offenders] should be sent to Istanbul, without being officially referred to the local Kadi court.” It was deemed essential that the apostates be removed from their locality with the minimum of fanfare as, “if the case is announced in the court, then they are shipped off to Istanbul, the matter will still come to the attention of the foreign embassies and cause useless loose talk.” Therefore, “the abovementioned (apostates) should be put in prison, and then after some time, when the affair had quieted down, they should be made to appear to have escaped from jail and speedily sent on their way” (habis-haneden firar edmesinesi hakimane def‘lerine). As a second option they were to set out on their exile to Istanbul under escort, but “be made to appear to have escaped during the journey” (esnayı rahda bir tarafа savusturulmak).

When the case of conversion involved a priest, matters could become even more entangled. On 31 October 1852 it was reported that an Armenian priest had converted to Islam in a village near Van in eastern Anatolia. Not only had he converted, but he had set about demolishing the village church, “in an act of wanton enmity against the local population.” Understandably, this had “caused much suffering and discomfort for the population.” Acting on a complaint from the Armenian Patriarchate, the Porte ordered that since there were no other Muslims in the village the priest should be warned to behave himself, but if he persisted he would be removed to a nearby Muslim village.

Here, as in the cases above, pragmatism and expediency seem to have determined the official response, rather than doctrinal rigour. Yet here, too, the questions of why the priest converted in the first place, and why he felt so strongly about his new faith remain unanswered.

Another thorny and ambivalent issue was the question of what defined voluntary or forced conversion. In all the documents claiming that the victim had been forced, the turn of phrase is invariably: “although nothing can be said against those who genuinely accept Islam, the use of force is against the Sultan’s wishes and against the rulings of the Sharia.”

In August 1844 a Christian girl was abducted by a Muslim Albanian while working in a field in the region of Leskofca near Niş. The man intended to rape her; in order to save her life and honour, the girl declared that she was willing to convert. Later, upon being questioned by the Kadi’s court, she recanted and
told the court that she had only converted to save her life and honour, and she was still a Christian. She was then kept in confinement in a Muslim household while her parents complained to the Metropolitan at Niš, who in turn forwarded the complaint to the Orthodox Archbishop in Istanbul. The parents of the girl continued to complain that she was being pressured in the Muslim household where she was confined. The Porte dealt with the matter and ordered the Kaimakam to determine whether the conversion was forced or sincere. A similar case was reported in Thessaloniki in the same year. A ten-year-old Armenian girl, having secured her father’s permission, was taken to the local bath-house by a Muslim woman. When she did not return home at the appointed hour, her parents went to the Muslim home, only to be told that their daughter had converted to Islam and that they should go away. The girl’s parents, after failing to secure justice locally, had arrived in Istanbul to lodge a formal complaint with the Patriarchate stating that the girl was underage and that duress was used. The Porte, using the formula above, “although nothing can be said . . . ,” ordered that the local authorities determine the sincerity of the conversion, the age of the girl, and stated very clearly that: “if the illegal use of force has occurred, this is very damaging for the confidence of the population and can cause disruption of the order of the state . . .” (insilab-ı emniyet-i reayayı mucib ve ihlal-i nizam-i memleketi müstevcib). On 16 July 1853, it was reported that in the small town of Bandırma in the Marmara region, a Greek girl named Despina had announced that she had converted to Islam. She did so “as a fully conscious adult person and not as the result of threats or fear of anybody.” This she freely declared in the administrative council of the kazas of Bandırma. The community then warned her family that she was about to be sent to Istanbul, and somehow arranged for her mother to smuggle her out of the Muslim household where she was being kept. The representative of the local Metropolitan was summoned, and the “town was searched high and low” with no result. Two things stand out here. First, the Christian population could openly appeal to justice and claim that the conversion had been carried out in contravention of the accepted norms. Second, as in the cases above, the person in question somehow “disappears,” thus ceasing to be a problem for all concerned.

A case occurring in the kazas of Golos in Albania is very interesting, as it gives us some rare insights into the actual process and procedure of conversion, and indeed apostasy. A report signed by all of the members of the administrative council of Golos (Kaza İdare Meclisi) and dated 23 June 1852 dealt with a miner named Aleksi, who had converted to Islam about one year previously. The conversion, it was stated, “had been carried out according to the proper procedure, the convert appeared before the council where all the leaders of the religious communities (rüesayt millet) were present. The council then delayed deliberations and he was asked repeatedly if he was acting of his own free will.” Aleksi replied in the affirmative and took the name of Ahmed. One year lat-
er, Ahmed/Aleksi once again appeared before the Council, declaring that he had reverted to Christianity. When questioned by the Council he declared, “I had then become a Muslim, but I remained hungry and naked, and could find no bread, now I want to go back to my old religion.” The council repeatedly tried to convince him that what he was doing was a bad idea:

We tried several times to convince him, but he insisted I am Christian not Muslim. The ruling of the Sharia for such cases is well known. However, in order to avoid loose talk, the Imperial order of 16 Şevval has specified that all those Christians converting to Islam should be questioned first in their localities and then by the kaza councils. We beg to be informed if there is a similar regulation dealing with those who first accept Islam then become apostates.97

Several points stand out. First, Aleksi hoped to improve his lot in life by converting, and was disillusioned, deciding that if he were to be poor he would prefer to be a poor Christian. Second, the council admitted that the Sharia ruled in favour of execution, but was also aware that this was not really feasible or desirable, hence the call for instructions which could provide a way out of their dilemma. Third, the document specified that the conversion procedure was to be carried out in accordance with specific government regulations. Fourth, the reference to “loose talk,” or more specifically “the wagging of tongues” (kil-u kal), refers almost certainly to meddling foreigners.

Sometimes people converted from somewhat pedestrian motivations. This was the case for a French doctor, Monsieur Merlot, who converted and took the name of Murad Efendi in 1852. Having incurred rather large gambling debts while serving as an Ottoman government doctor in Erzurum in eastern Anatolia, he presented himself in Istanbul, declaring that he had become a Muslim. The Porte was somewhat embarrassed because his creditors, who were French citizens, were applying pressure through the French Embassy. In the end it was decided that Monsieur Merlot be accepted as a Muslim and given another posting, the caveat being that a certain percentage of his salary was to be withheld at source and handed over to the French consulate in Erzurum.98 A similar case was that of Agob, an Armenian medical student who expressed the desire to convert. The directorate of the Imperial Medical School was directed to ascertain whether Agob had any debts.99

Straightforward material gain is given as the motive for conversion of a Jew, a certain Hidayet, who appears in the memoirs of a well-known Young Turk, Eşref Kuşcubaşı. Kuşcubaşı, while he was a prisoner of war in Egypt in 1917, met Hidayet, a medical orderly in British service. His account of the encounter is worth quoting at length:

According to my detailed investigations, this truant from the synagogue [havra kaçgımı] was originally a Gelibolu Jew who entered the service of someone from the Palace and converted at the age of fifteen or sixteen. He then studied at the veterinary school in Istanbul. Meanwhile Freedom was declared. [This is a reference to the Young Turk Revolution of 1908—S. D.]. At this point Hidayet interpreted national freedom as religious
freedom and unsuccessfully tried to reconvert back to Judaism. At some point Hidayet decided that his conversion was sincere. No doubt bearing in mind the possibilities of promotion and profit, but maybe also as a result of his uneasy conscience over his treachery to Moses as well as his treason to Muhammed, (Hz. Musa’ya kançıklık ve Hz. Muhammed’e kahpelik) as well as a desire for God’s forgiveness, or even simply a desire to clean up his filth before the public, he went on the haj, ascended Ararat and prayed at the Prophet’s tomb. But even in the Holy Places he was unable to repress his true nature, buying rugs and other goods from needy pilgrims at scandalously low prices.100

Just what was the procedure involved in the process of conversion and in the event of apostasy? We derive some idea of the details from a case in Edremid, on the Anatolian Aegean coast. A “Kirman son of Yanko,” actually an inhabitant of the island of Mytilini who was a guest in the town of Edremit, claimed to have converted to Islam:

When questioned in the Kadi’s court the said convert pronounced the sacred formula and declared, “yes I am leaving the false religion (din-i batıl) and accepting the True Faith, amen.” He was given the name of Mehmed. However, some eight days later he appeared again before us declaring, “yes I had then pronounced those words, but I spoke them in jest as a joke (latife ve ma şukaten). He was given ample opportunity to repent, but insisted in his apostasy.

The court pointed out that, “in accordance with the rulings of the Sharia, the abovementioned apostate was imprisoned, and sent off to Istanbul.”101

What is worth noting in this case is the pronouncement “I spoke in jest,” which, together with a plea of temporary insanity, was a standard formula employed when apostates strove to escape the consequences of their acts. The other interesting aspect of this episode is that the Sharia court’s ruling ordered nothing worse than the imprisonment of the culprit. The court also pointed out that they had been ordered to send the offender to Istanbul. As in other similar cases by this date, the chances are that Kirman would “get lost” or “escape” somewhere along the line.

In some of the cases it seems that a veritable “tug-of-war” took place over the religious loyalties of converts/apostates. On 8 March 1853 it was reported from the kaza of Tekirdag in Thrace that a certain young woman named Agasi had accepted Islam and been taken into the household of the Kadi’s deputy (naib). The woman’s husband, together with other Christians, contested the conversion and had Agasi brought before the local council, where she denied having converted, claiming she was abducted. She was then given into the charge of the representative of the Greek Metropolitan, and for some twenty days she was kept in the house of the local Greek headman (kocabaşı). This time, however, the Muslim population abducted her and placed her with a Muslim household. The matter went up as high as the Patriarchate in Istanbul, who requested that the girl be brought to Istanbul for questioning.102

CONCLUSION

Nehemiah Levtzion has stated that “Success was Islam’s advertisement.” The peaceful incentive for conversion in various societies was that Islam appeared
as the religion of the powerful, the warrior, prosperous trader, or numinous di-
vine. In Africa, as Robin Horton has noted, Islam served as a “catalyst” for changes which “were in the air anyway,” and once people appeared to go through the motions, Islam was quite happy to accept its role as a “catalyst” and “not nag excessively at those who lie toward the pagan end of the continu-
um.” The same can be said to be true for Ottoman Islam in the heyday of Ot-
toman power. But what happened when Ottoman Islam was manifestly unsuc-
cessful, such as in the nineteenth century, when Islam was on the defensive, and Muslims feared losses in their ranks? We may posit that as a context in which shifting internal religious balances, foreign pressure, and a sincere desire to “catch up with the world” caused the subsequent transformation in late Ottoman society.

On the one hand, the state sincerely sought to prevent the killing of apostates, yet on the other, it was desperate to safeguard its flock against foreign (missionary/diplomatic) incursions. This became manifest when the Porte cracked down on Protestant missionary work in 1864: “The Ottoman authori-
ties, in typical form, struck with force that which they had left unchecked.” Many of the fifty or so Turkish converts were seized, others disappeared, the books of the Bible Society were confiscated and missionaries were put out of their dwellings. “The Turkish Government demonstrated that, regardless of its firmans, conversion from Islam was not permitted.”

It may well be the case also that the center sent mixed messages to the provinces, on the one hand telling them to prevent forced conversions and sub-
sequent apostasy, but on the other, urging them to stand firm against foreign pressure, as certainly happened in the subsequent Hamidian period. As Vry-
onis has very aptly put it in reference to an earlier period: “With the collapse or weakening of . . . centralized states or at times when they felt threatened by the real or potential power of Christians (either internally or externally) then the legal status and protection of the non-Muslims lapsed in some form or anoth-
er.”

Particularly after the Reform Edict of 1856, fear mounted among the Mus-
lims. The general ambiance even found its way into contemporary fiction. Ed-
win Pears cites a novel published in 1864, in which the protagonist, a Muslim Turk from Salonica, arrives in Damascus and witnesses two Christians being physically and verbally abused in the market place and asks a shopkeeper:

But have you not always had Christians among you? What have they done lately to ex-
cite your anger? [The shopkeeper screams] What have they done? They have year by year been invading our privileges. When I was a boy they were humble rayahs; no Chris-
tian durst mount a horse, or take the wall of a Moslem, or dress in handsome clothes; now they are richer than ourselves and seek protection of foreign consuls . . . I have even seen one or two bear arms. May God Curse them. Wait until the firman comes to Da-
mascus, and we will make short work of it.

The hero then protests that this is wrong and inhuman, only to be accused of being an infidel kafir: “He calls himself a Moslem and talks like a Christian.
What is he? A Turk surely . . . Na’am, yes indeed, he is one of the Stamboulis who come to govern us.”

The cases cited in the archival material above are representative of the general pattern in these matters and the examples can be multiplied. The fact that something fundamental had changed in the relationship between the state and its non-Muslim subjects is brought out by phrases like “damaging for the confidence of the population,” “no-one shall be importuned by pressure to accept Islam,” or “the prevention of loose talk.” It was increasingly taken for granted, by the rulers and the ruled, that the populace was not a faceless mass of infinitely reducible particles, but an aggregate of individuals, who could, and did, demand justice. The documentation shows also that people became traceable. If an apostate were to be killed or otherwise disappear in transit while being displaced, the chances are that his or her family could and did demand an explanation. Moreover, perhaps unlike earlier periods in Ottoman history, access to “proper channels” for the seeking of such justice was, at least ostensibly, more easily available to non-Muslims. Also, it may well be the case that, as the empire became more centralised, the state permeated levels of society which it had not reached before. This would mean that disputes over religious affiliation, citizenship and the like would be treated publicly, as opposed to being informally resolved at the community level.

Yet, even in official documents, with their “proper” guarded wording, one senses an undercurrent of distrust and fear. One thing that immediately stands out in all of the cases is the oft-repeated formula in instructions from the center: “force should not be used in a case of conversion.” Yet the fact that the order is repeated in so many cases leads one to think that coercion was indeed prevalent. The emphasis on bureaucratic regularity, and the desire to prove, time and again, to the foreign powers that a conversion was voluntary, points in the same direction. This does in fact lead one to speculate whether, in the days between the Tanzimat Edict of 1839 and the Reform Edict of 1856, the new atmosphere of religious freedom for Christians caused a panic among Muslims, who felt that their hitherto dominant position was threatened, making them more prone to force Christians to convert. The obvious difficulty for the local authorities in such cases was that they were being told to pass judgement over something that was so relative as to be nearly impossible to quantify, that is, sincerity.

Another matter which should be taken into consideration is that of communication between the center and the provinces. It must be remembered that at the time of the cases mentioned above, the telegraph had not yet reached the provinces; the first limited network of cables was put up only in 1854. The room for manoeuvre allowed by the vagaries of communication with the provinces was to be considerably constrained after the arrival of the telegraph.

The gist of all of these documents is that justice had to be seen to be done. More often than not, the concern was to find some sort of face-saving solution.
that would satisfy all sides. However this was very difficult, as the decision had
to satisfy the Porte, the foreign powers, the non-Muslim community, and the lo-
cal population. Yet, this is not to buy into the Eastern Question notion that “The
Turks are only setting up a smoke screen” of promised reforms. The desire and
perceived need for reform were genuine enough, it was just that for the “Turks”
saving face was a vital matter—one that the foreigners chose to ignore.

Even more strikingly, it becomes apparent from most of the documentation
that what was at issue was not religion at all, but sovereignty. The Greek man
claiming Austrian protection, the Georgians being claimed by the Russians, the
Greek woman being claimed by the British consul at Preveze, the Jew conver-
ting to Protestantism and claiming British protection, even the dead body of a
convert, all became areas of contestation between rival claims of sovereignty.

Why should the Austrian Empire become involved in the death of an obscure
servant? Why should as senior a statesman as Sir Stratford Canning take it upon
himself to personally pursue the cases of obscure converts and/or apostates?
One can only surmise that the issue was not the apostates themselves but na-
tional prestige, in an age when prestige was everything. One recalls drawings
in the illustrated British press like the one of a lone, apparently unarmed “white
man” being carried on the shoulders of “native bearers,” as he nonchalantly
reads his newspaper in a street thronged by “natives.” The caption reads: “By
prestige alone.”

The convert or apostate became the bone of contention in an international
prestige war, in which the Great Powers sought to impose their will on the last
remaining non-Christian Great Power, that aberration which ruled millions of
Christians as a Muslim empire. In a world context where Britain was emerging
as the leading world power, followed by others also imbued with their versions
of the mission civilizatrice, conversion to Islam seemed a refusal of the very
norms of civilization. For Western Orientalists and statesmen alike, conversion
to Islam was seen as “somewhat aberrant behaviour, a business of exchanging
a patently superior creed (i.e., Christianity or Judaism) for one which was both
alien and relatively primitive,” whereas conversion back to Christianity
seemed a reaffirmation of Western superiority. The Ottoman fallback position
in all these cases was to argue that the concern was first and foremost their con-
cern. If there was something untoward surrounding the death of a person, it was
“part of the justice seeking nature of the Sublime State” to order an autopsy. If
there were privileges of non-Muslims which needed protecting, why, it had al-
ways been the historic tradition to do precisely that. For both the Ottomans and
the Western Powers the issue of prestige was nothing less than a matter of con-
tested sovereignty.

It has been the contention of this study that mass conversion of non-Mus-
lims was never official policy in the Ottoman Empire, as it was in the Spanish
and Russian empires. Only when confronted with a massive missionary in-
cursion in the nineteenth century, and after it became legal for a Muslim to
change his/her religion, did the Ottoman authorities seek ways to protect their Muslim population. Whether or not this protection included complicity of the center with radical measures taken against apostates in the provinces is a moot point. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak has stated unequivocally: “The Ottoman center never used Islam as a weapon for the conversion of non-Muslims, in fact it deliberately avoided doing so. [However] Sunni Islam was used, as an ideology of suppression, in the most unremitting fashion, against deviants or heretics that sprang from among their own ranks.” Therefore, in earlier periods official Islam and its enforcers were much more concerned with “deviant” belief systems such as Shi’ism or other forms of Islamic religious syncretism, rather than with enforcing mass conversion among non-Muslims. It is thus at the level of official state involvement in the conversion process that the Ottoman position across the centuries remains ambivalent. In earlier periods such as the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, when the borders between orthodoxy and heresy were somewhat vague, particularly in frontier zones such as Anatolia, the religious borderlines, so to speak, remained vague and fluid. In later periods, particularly as the state expanded and modernised after the Tanzimat, it became necessary to define who belonged and who did not. This concern was to overlap with the new legal infrastructure, as exemplified by the Citizenship Regulation (Tabiyet Nizamnamesi) passed in 1869. In the late nineteenth century, when the empire was very much on the defensive, indeed, was fighting for its life, it became a matter of vital interest that there should be no defection from its ranks.

NOTES

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2. This paper is the first fruit of a larger project that will examine conversion and apostasy in the late Ottoman Empire from the Tanzimat era through to the end of the Empire in 1918.

3. The definition of mürd in the Redhouse Turkish English Lexicon is: “Dead, (Not said of Muslims).” Şemseddin Sami’s Kamus-u Türkî is more outspoken: “Croaked, kicked the bucket, used for animals” (Gebermiş, Hayvanat için kullanılır). Merhum is defined in Redhouse as “Deceased and admitted into God’s mercy.” My thanks to Professor Michael Rogers for bringing this distinction to my attention.

in early Islam. This attitude must be attributed . . . not only to the Ottoman largesse d’esprit and tolerance but also to the need of the ruling bureaucratic order to allow capable elements to join its ranks.” The quote, “Go through the motions . . . etc.” is my own formulation.


10. On Jannisaries or the devşirme, see Halil Inalcık, The Ottoman Empire. Classical Age (London: 1973).


14. Halil Inalcık, “Ottoman Methods of Conquest,” Studia Islamica II (1954), 103–29. The timar was the Ottoman military fief held by a member of the military class, the askeri, in return for military service on the part of the timar holder and a specified number of men-at-arms. Inalcık points out that many members of the Balkan aristocracy had been holders of similar positions (pronoia) in the Byzantine system. The tahrir registers were registers of taxable population and revenue in newly conquered territories, which were periodically updated.

15. Halil Inalcık, An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, (Cambridge 1994), 69. It is interesting to note that Levtzion fundamentally diverges from Inalcık and Todorova in arguing that the lack of nomadic insurgency in the Balkans in the earlier Ottoman period meant minimal Islamization and “Turkicization.” See N. Levtzion, “Toward a Comparative Study of Islamization,” in Levtzion, ed., Conversion to Islam, 1–23.

16. This practice of dishonouring the cross is mentioned specifically in two sources. See Houari Touati, Entre Dieu et les Hommes. Lettrés saints et sorciers au Maghreb (17e siècle) (Paris: 1994), 171: “Sometimes the convert would be obliged to perform a rite of execration like spitting on the cross or trampling it, to show the sincerity of his conversion” (my translation). Touati makes clear, however, that this practice is by no means doctrinally justified. On the somewhat unorthodox practices of conversion in a corsair society, see Peter Lamborn Wilson, Pirate Utopias. Moorish Corsairs and European Renegades (New York: 1995), 90, 133, 138. Wilson does, however, point out that many of the Christian renegades and corsairs in Algiers and Salé who converted, forcibly or voluntarily, became loyal Muslims. On the issue of Jews first converting to Christianity, see John K Cooley, Baal, Christ and Mohammed. Religion and Revolution in North Africa (New York 1965), 175.

17. Wilson, Pirate Utopias, 35–62.

18. Cooley, Baal, Christ and Mohammed, 159.

19. Engin Akarli, The Long Peace. Ottoman Lebanon 1861–1920, (Berkeley: 1993) 197. He renamed his sons Adam and Ladislas as Enver and Muzaffer, although they remained Roman Catholic. Sadik Paşa, after fighting in the Crimean War on the Ottoman side, returned to Poland and converted to Orthodox Christianity.
20. Ibid., 21.
26. Yet apostasy was very common in the early days of Islamic expansion. Some Islamic sources actually claimed that the Moroccan Berber tribesmen apostasized twelve times before finally settling into Islam. On this, see Levitzon, “Toward a Comparative Study of Islamization,” 1–23.
28. Colin Imber, *Ebu’s Su’ud. The Islamic Legal Tradition* (Stanford: 1997), 70–71. This work is now accepted as the modern standard among Ottomanists. However, there are also references to Ebu’s Su’ud as a moderate jurist. See for example: J. H. Kramers, “Shaikh al Islam,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (London: 1934), 277:

“The decline of the Ottoman Empire has sometimes been attributed to the reactionary spirit of the Shaikh al-Islamat; it should be noted, however, that in many cases the muftis have shown themselves less reactionary than the majority of the clergy and through their intervention they were able to prevent fanatical and arbitrary acts, (e.g., Abu’l Su’ud’s opposition to the forced conversion of all Christians).”
30. Michel Balivet, *Romanie Byzantine et Pays de Rum Turc. Histoire d’un espace d’imbrication gréco-turque* (Istanbul: 1994), 187. Balivet mentions a similar case at the end of the seventeenth century when the apostate, Gédéon of Karakallou (again a monk from Mount Athos) went about Istanbul where he proceeded, in public places, to exhort the population to reject Islam. He was not taken seriously and treated as a madman, until finally, after having been sent off several times with a beating, he got his wish and was beheaded. In both these cases it would be fairly safe to assume that the apostates were either recent converts or perhaps forced converts.
31. Ibid., 155. For the views of a committed evangelist, see Samuel Zwemer, *The Law of Apostasy in Islam. Answering the Question why there are so few Moslem Converts, and giving examples of their Moral Courage and Martyrdom* (London: 1924).
36. Eva Alexandra Uchmany, “Religious Changes in the Conquest of Mexico,” in


42. Ibid., 287.


44. Ibid., 397. In fact, the term krjaseny (convert) became synonymous with crypto-Muslim.

45. Khodarkovsky “‘Not by Word Alone,’” 275.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 291.


54. Ibid., 56–57, 146. Aşıkpaşazade particularly criticized Mehmed’s discontinuation of the practice of the Sultan rising when he heard martial music as a sign of his readiness for ghaza. Compare this with, Aşıkpaşazade Ahmed Aşığı, *Tevarih-i Al-i Osman*, Nihal Atısiz, ed. (Istanbul: 1947), 173:

[When Salonica was conquered by the Ottomans] The great warrior for the faith, Sultan Murad Khan said onto the ghazis: ‘O ghazis! This is the greatest of blessings! Beloved are those ghazis who raid the fortress and force these infidels into Islam. I now love these ghazis dearly. God Willing from now on I will join them in their ghaza.

55. Ibid., 71, 73.


58. Ibid., 282. It must however be noted that Barkan has an axe to grind, in that the major point on his agenda is to “prove” that the Ottoman state was “essentially Turkish” and not made up of Islamized Christians, as claimed by some historians, such as Herbert A. Gibbons in his The Foundation of the Ottoman Empire (Oxford: 1916).

59. The Bektası were one of the earliest dervish lodges to settle and spread in Anatolia. They were renowned for their syncretism, which enabled them to relate much easier to Christians. The seminal work on the Bektası order is J. K Birge, The Bektashi Order of Dervishes (London: 1937).

60. Hasluck, Christianity and Islam Under the Sultans, 436. On the aspects of the Bektası order which most appealed to Christians, see what is still the seminal study: John K. Birge, The Bektashi Order of Dervishes (London: 1937).

61. Kafadar, Between Two Worlds, 71, 72, 73.


64. See Deringil, The Well Protected Domains, esp. Chapter 3.

65. Düstur (Register of Ottoman Laws) Tertib-i Evvel (İstanbul Matbaa-i Amire: 1329), 4–7. The actual wording states: “As there is nothing more precious in the world than security of life and honour, even a person who may not be naturally inclined towards sedition will doubtless seek other ways if these are threatened” (my translation). For the standard English translation of the Tanzimat Edict, see J. C. Hurewitz, Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East, Vol. 1 (Toronto: 1956), 113–16.

66. Hurewitz, Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East, 151.

67. M. M. A. Ubicini, Etat Présent de L’Empire Ottoman (Paris: 1876), 5–6: “Among the provisions of the Edict relating to religious matters one must note the abolition of the law, very rarely brought to bear, it is true, of the execution of apostates” (my translation).

68. For the case of nineteenth-century Nablus, see Beshara Doumani, Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900 (Berkeley: 1995), 23: “[In Nablus in the early nineteenth century] most of the Christians were Greek Orthodox. The rest became Protestants around the mid-nineteenth century in response to the evangelical activities of . . . the Church Missionary Society.” Another major aspect of conversion was conversion within Islam, from Shia to Sunni or vice-versa. That aspect of the conversion process is being deliberately excluded here. On that issue, see Selim Deringil, “The Struggle against Shi’ism in Hamidian Iraq,” Die Welt des Islams 30 (1990): 45–62.

69. See Düstur, 10. Also see Ismail Hakkı Danişmend, İzahlı Osmanlı Tarihi Kronolojisi, Vol. 4 (Ankara: 1955), 175. In fact the Edict of 1856 was received by the Christian communities with mixed feelings because it brought mixed blessings, such as military service for non-Muslims, the payment of regular salaries to religious functionaries, making it illegal for them to “milk” their communities, the presence of laymen on millet councils, and so on. On this aspect, see Danişmend, İzahlı Osmanlı Tarihi Kronolojisi, 176.


71. Başbakanlık Arşivi (Prime Ministry Archives), Istanbul. Hereafter cited as (BBA). Hariciye Mektubi, Foreign Ministry Correspondence (hereafter HR.MKT), 1/53 10 Muharrem 1260/31 January 1844. The archival citations and abbreviations used are the official catalogue entries as published in the Archive Catalogue, the Başbakanlık Osmanlı
Because of the nature of the archival catalogues (lack of indexing, etc.) it is difficult to give precise figures on the number of cases dealing with conversion and/or apostasy in the late nineteenth century. My feeling is that they run into the hundreds. It will become more possible to give figures as the research progresses.

72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. BBA HR.MKT 49/95. The only date is 1268 (1851).
75. Düstur, 8–9.
77. Halil İnalcık, “The Status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch under the Ottomans,” *TURCICA* (1991): 409, 415, 416. İnalcık leaves no doubt however, that “The Ottomans favored the Greek Orthodox Church,” and “recognized it as part of the Ottoman state” (415, 416).
78. BBA HR.MKT 42/7; 4 Rebiyulahir 1268/27 January 1852. Mutasarrıf of the sançak of Lazistan Abdüllatif Bey to Sublime Porte. The gender of the children is not specified, the chances are that they were boys.
79. Ibid. In fact, they made reference to an incident in the past when some one hundred people from the town of Arhavi had crossed over to Russia and not returned. On just how porous the borders in the region were, see Thomas M. Barret, “Lines of Uncertainty: The Frontiers of the Northern Caucasus,” in Burbank and Ransel, eds., *Imperial Russia*, 148–73.
82. BBA HR.MKT 49/36; 13 Eylül 1852/28 Zilkağde 1268. Ministry of Interior to Vali of Ioannina.
83. BBA HR.MKT 54/42; 30 Rebiyulevel 1269/12 January 1853. Sublime Porte to the Mutasarrıf of Işkodra.
84. BBA HR.MKT 47/81; 26 Sevval 1268/13 August 1852. Sublime Porte to the Vali of Yanina.
86. BBA Dahiliye Nezareti Hukuk Müsavirliği (DH-HMŞ) 13/47; 23 Haziran 1320/6 July 1904. General no: 244. File Number 62570. (Ministry of the Interior. Legal Advisors Bureau). In the catalogue of the documents of the Ministry of the Interior Legal Advisors Bureau there is a special category entitled ihtida (conversion). Although the regulations cited above date from 1904, they are the updated formulations of earlier practices.
89. BBA HR.MKT 3/65; 16 Rebiyulahir 1260/5 May 1840. Foreign Ministry to Commanders of Akka and Sayda.
90. Ibid. The phrase used is “arz-ı İslamiyet’in ibram ve ilhah.”
91. BBA Irade Dahiliye 4627 17 Şevval 1260/30 October 1844.
92. BBA HR.MKT 53/7; Selh-i Muharrem 1269/31 October 1852. Enclosing letter from Armenian Patriarch.
93. BBA HR.MKT 6/48; 6 Şaban 1260/21 August 1844. Instructions to the Kaimakam of Niş.

94. BBA HR.MKT; 4/10; Gurre-i Cemaziyelahir 1260/18 June 1844. Sublime Porte to the Muşir of Thessaloniki.

95. BBA HR.MKT 63/96; 9 Şevval 1269/17 July 1853. Memorandum of the Administrative Council of the Kaza of Bandırma.

96. BBA HR.MKT 41/93; 5 Ramazan 1268/23 June 1852. Administrative Council of the kaza of Golos to Sublime Porte.

97. Ibid.


99. BBA HR.MKT 54/56; 30 Rebiyulevvel 1269/12 January 1853. Sublime Porte to Director of Imperial Medical School.

100. Esref Kuşçubaşı, Hayberde Türk Cengi (Istanbul: 1997), 123. Esref Kuşçubaşı was a notorious hit man of the Committee of Union and Progress (fedaîî), and one of the founders of the Young Turk Intelligence Organization, the Teşkilatı Mahsusa. His account strongly reflects the anti-Semitic prejudices common among some of these men. Hidayet is a name often indicating that the person is a convert, meaning “the right way or the way to Islam.”

101. BBA HR.MKT 50/63; 8 Zilhicce 1269/12 September 1853. Memorandum from Kadi Court of Edremid, signed and sealed by all those present.

102. BBA HR.MKT 56/65; 26 Cemaziyelavvel 1269/8 March 1853. Request from the Greek Patriarchate.

103. Levtzion, Conversion to Islam, 12.


105. On the tension between the Porte and the Protestant missionaries, see Salt, Imperialism, Evangelism and the Ottoman Armenians.

106. Lyle L. Vander Werff, Christian Missions to Muslims. The Record. Anglican and Reformed Approaches in India and the Near East, 1800–1938 (New York: 1942), 162–63. Similarly, Cyrus Hamlin was to bemoan the fact that “England’s flag of religious liberty in Turkey had been struck, and her influence since then has been weak and wavering.” See Among the Turks, 92.


109. Edwin Pears, Turkey and Its People (London: 1911), 370–71. It should be noted that Sir Edwin Pears was no lover of Turkey or Turks, and the novel he is citing is The Hakim Bashi, written by a Dr. Humphry Sandwith. Nonetheless, it is illustrative, as it appears in a section in Pears’ book called “Signs of Improvement in Turkey,” and the hero is projected as a positive figure.

110. I am grateful to Dr. Müge Göçek for bringing this latter possibility to my attention.

111. Stanford Shaw, History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey, Vol. 2, (Cambridge, UK: 1977)120. The installation of the telegraph lines began during the Crimean war. The furthest extent of telegraphic service was to be in the 1890s, when there was a widespread network of cables. My thanks to the anonymous outside reader
for drawing my attention to this, and for reminding me that the telegraph spread over much of North America at the same time.


113. R. S. Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 274.

114. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Zindiklar ve Mülhidler* (Istanbul: 1997), 95. This is a path-breaking work which stands to become the seminal reference volume on this issue.