Conversion to Islam in the Ottoman Empire

Part I—Periods of Conversion

Part II—Forms, factors and motives of conversion to Islam

Part I—Periods of Conversion: Outline

- Bulliet’s theory of conversion
- Demographic statistics as sources
- The process of conversion in the Balkans
  - Demographic changes and periods of Islamization
  - Colonization and Conversion
  - Conversion in Urban and Rural Areas
- Conclusion

Bulliet’s theory of conversion

- The social conversion
  - conversion involving movement from one religiously defined social community to another
- The two axioms of social conversion
  - The convert’s expectations of his new religion will parallel his expectations of his old religion
  - No one willingly converts from one religion to another if by virtue of conversion he markedly lowers his social status
- The periods of conversion and social history
  - “innovators” (the first 2.5%)
  - “early adopters” (the next 13.5%)- anti-Muslim uprisings
  - “early majority,” (the next 34 %)- weakening of central government
  - “late majority” (the next 34 %)- independent Muslim dynasties
  - “laggards” (the final 16 %)- conflicts of interest between population groups converted at different periods

Demographic statistics as Sources

- Extensive general tax surveys conducted
- Hundreds of district tax registers (15-19th c.) and some general preserved until today (15-16th c.)
- Problems
  - Tax unit “household” (hane) very elusive (different taxes correspond to different “hane” sizes, villages switched between districts
  - Don’t include non-taxable population (status can be revoked any time)
- Nevertheless great potential for demographic changes
  - Ethno-religious changes (conversion and Islamization process)
- Historical demography almost an independent branch of Ottoman historical studies
  - Barkan, Inalcik, Gokbilgin, Karpat, Stoyanoski, Sokoloski, Lukac, Djurdjev, Handzic, Todorov, Dimitrov, Ratushev

Demographic situation in the Balkans-15th c

- Cizye—paying non-Muslim population and new Muslims in 1488-91
There was a 3.0% increase over the three years in the non-Muslim population (comparable with the spectacular general population increase observed in the sixteenth century).

This confirms the non-disruptive impact of the Ottoman conquest on the Balkans.

The conversion rates of 0.01 to 0.03% per year are indicative of the conversion process having been in its very beginnings. Only in Bosnia and Herzegovina can one observe relatively higher levels, despite the recent conquest of the two regions.

Conversion to Islam in the fifteenth-century Balkans was still in a “period of innovators,” i.e., that no more than 3.5% of the population had converted to Islam by the end of the century.

Demographic situation in the Balkans-16th c

- **Balkan population in 1520-1535**
  - non-Muslim population increased over the period 1491-1520 by a total of 132,782 *hane*
    (average rate of 0.65 percent per year)
  - slower rate of growth when compared to the overall population increase of 1.0% per year in the period 1520-1570, and to that of the non-Muslim population at the end of the 15th century
  - explanation = the rate of conversion affected the overall growth of the non-Muslim population
  - Muslim population - more than 20.0%
    - Muslim immigrants or converts to Islam?
    - Muslim immigrants and their descendants as high as 7-8%
    - 15-16% converts and descendents of converts to Islam
  - middle of 16th century, period of “early adopters” completed
  - regional variations - access to information theory (Bosnia-40%, Eubea-2%)

Colonization and Conversion in the Balkans

- **Barkan – colonization**
  - numerous references in Ottoman chronicles to the migration of nomadic tribes from Asia Minor to the Balkans
  - Murad I (1360-1389), beg. of 15th c.
  - not reliable figures, the chronicles give 30,000 to 50,000 mounted soldiers

- **Todorov - conversion**
  - small number of Muslim nomads present in the Balkans
  - In 1543, 1305 nomadic units (*ocaks*) x 10 to 40 people each ~ 37,435 *hane* (15% of Muslim population and 3.5% of total population)

- **Migration of sedentary Muslim population**
  - Dervishes - granted abandoned lands as *vakifs* and tax privileges
  - tradesmen and craftsmen, members of the *akhi* organizations in the urban centers of Asia Minor

Conversion in Urban and Rural Areas

- Islamization more widespread in urban centers
  - In 8 out of 12 major Balkan towns majority are Muslims
  - In surrounding district's population, non-Muslims are majority

- How many of the Muslims in these towns were local converts to Islam?

- **Case study—new Muslims in Macedonia, 1569-83**
  - 67% of municipalities—new Muslims 2-3 times more in urban than in rural areas
  - 22% of municipalities—ratio approximately the same
  - 11% of municipalities—new Muslims more in rural than in urban areas
  - The bigger the urban area, the more are the new Muslims
  - municipalities without urban population—ratio still high
Demographic situation in the Balkans—17th c
- Conversion in its third period—“early majority”
- Sources less accurate than in the 16th c.—cizye registers
- Changes in non-Muslim population in 79 eastern Balkan vilayets (tax district)—E. Grozdanova
  - non-Muslim population decreases 33.7%
  - decrease more pronounced in the second half of the century -decline in some areas reaching as high as 70%
- Possible explanations
  - Epidemics, emigration to other countries, physical destruction as a result of repression
  - greater rate of conversion to Islam
- Dynamics of the conversion process reversed
  - 92.4 percent living in rural and only 7.6 in urban areas
- Limitations of 17th c. cizye registers as sources

Demographic situation in the Balkans—18th c
- Sources—cizye registers
  - eighteenth-century cizye registers more reliable
- Cizye-paying non-Muslim Balkan population, 1700-1815
  - Non-Muslim population increases by almost 50 percent
  - Epidemics and famine caused decline in 17th century? But:
    - In the NW zone - 23 outbreaks of plague lasting 59 years while the SW zone suffered the least from the plague
- My explanation
  - the process of Islamization had either stopped or was about to stop in most of the Balkans by the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century
  - It continued in some peripheral and isolated areas, such as Albania and Dobrudja, until the end of the century – not representative of the demographic development of the Balkans as a whole (combined 7 % share of total non-Muslim population)
- NW zone – (Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia and W. Bulgaria) - spectacular growth
  - northward migration from the other zones (Albania)
  - natural increase
  - earlier completion of the process of conversion
- NE zone (E. Bulgaria and E. European Turkey)
  - initial decrease (7.2%) until 1720 - conversion continues
  - subsequent rebound (25 %) to 1815 – halt of conversion
- FNE zone – (Dobrudja) insignificant growth
  - continuing process of Islamization
  - devastation of the region during the 1771-74 Russian war
- SW zone (Albania and the Morea) - negative growth
  - continuing process of Islamization among Albanians
  - extensive emigration to the north-west zone
  - devastation of the Morea by Albanian irregulars in the 1770s
- SE zone (Greece, W. European Turkey) - modest growth
  - completion, or significant slowdown, of the Islamization process
  - instead of immigration, limited emigration northwards

Demographic situation in the Balkans—19th c
• Individual conversions continued
• Ethno-religious balance on a standstill after 1825
• Migrations play now the major role in the demographic shaping of the Balkans
• Population of Ottoman Balkans in 1831
• The process of Islamization in the Balkans differed markedly from elsewhere in the Muslim world in pre-Ottoman times
  – process of conversion in the Balkans came to a halt just before reaching the halfway mark
  – several non-Muslim communities achieved independence
  – Ottoman government’s control over the provinces restored

Conclusion- Demographic changes
• Conversion to Islam associated with the conquest was minimal
• Certain degree of Muslim colonization, consisting of nomads and sedentary population, took place
• Muslim colonization played an important role in the spread of Islam in the early centuries
• The periods “innovators” and “early adopters” were completed by the 1530s, i.e., after one century and a half
  – more rapid pace of conversion in urban as compared to rural areas
• Second half of the 16th c. - “early majority” period begins
  – conversion among rural population
  – pace of conversion increased especially in the 1640s
  – significant decrease of non-Muslim population
  – other factors, such as epidemics
• By the second quarter of the 18th c. the process of conversion came to a sudden halt in most of the Balkans
• Conversion continued only in some peripheral areas until the end of the century
• Those developments in the process of conversion left their mark on the historical evolution of the peninsula
• Instead of the emergence of independent Muslim dynasties, several non-Muslim communities succeeded in gaining independence in the 19th century
• In the 19th century, conversion to Islam in the Balkans was sporadic
• The demographic image of the peninsula was influenced only by migration of Muslims from one area to another

Part II—Forms, factors and motives of conversion to Islam:
Outline
• The coercion theory
• Methods of conversion to Islam
  – Slavery
  – Devshirme/voluntary devshirme
  – Punitive actions
  – Neo-martyrdom
  – Marriage
  – Economic pressure
• Factors
The “coercion theory”
- Population’s affiliation to the Orthodox faith = vehicle of their national consciousness
- Conversions to Islam = loss of national consciousness
- Historical justification for the conversion
  - “aggressive nature” of the religion of Islam (Jihad)
  - compulsion—whether direct or indirect
  - the national pride of those who had remained Christians saved
- Ottoman state portrayed as a repressive force
  - goal - to de-nationalize the region by converting the native population
- Zelyazkova
  - “Direct” coercion – (e.g. slavery, devshirme) under the control and with the participation of the central government
  - “Indirect” or “economic” coercion – voluntary on the surface … but still coercion
    - forced integration of the conquered people into the structure of the imperial mechanism

Slavery as a Method of Conversion to Islam
- Zelyazkova
  - characteristic of the initial stages of Ottoman expansion
  - practice among pious Muslims of freeing slaves upon their conversion
  - extensive Ottoman slave trade in later times
- Inconsistency
  - Ottoman conquest of the Balkans relatively peaceful
  - enslavement on a scale capable unlikely
  - actions of pious Muslims taken as effected by the Muslim state
  - Ottoman slave-trade - not with people from inside the Ottoman state
- Conversion factor - becoming a member of another social group—that of the freed slave (atýk, azadlu)

The Devshirme as a Method of Conversion
- “Coercion theory” seems to be correct
  - Estimates of number of converts to Islam through devºirme at 200,000
- However, question of the forceful nature of the devºirme is not that clear-cut
  - formative period (end of 14th-middle of 15th c.)
    - devºirme most likely aroused negative feelings in the affected population as well as within the Muslim community and especially in the Muslim landed aristocracy
  - “devºirmes domination” period (middle of 15th-end of 16th c.)
    - devºirme evolved to being the foundation of the Ottoman ruling elite
    - means of acquiring prestige, power and money
    - mixed feelings among non-Muslims and Muslims
  - devºirmes’ total monopoly” of power (1622-middle of 18th c.)
    - influence of the devºirmes spread to the economic sphere – iltizam system
    - fierce competition between Muslim, non-Muslim reaya and sons of devºirmes for admission to the Janissary corps
    - institution no longer widely regarded as an institution of forcible removal and conversion

“Voluntary devshirme”
• Non-Muslims converting to Islam on a voluntary basis for purpose of entering the Janissary corps
• Tax register of 1723 for the kaza of Nevrokop
  – Significant number of Janissaries in the villages
  – Muslim names of their fathers – not compelled to join
  – possessing agricultural land – not sent to serve in the province
  – voluntarily accepted Islam and enrolled in the Janissary corps only to stay in their villages and continue to cultivate the land, Janissary wages supplementing income from low fertility land
  – peasants with an askeri status?
• “Voluntary devºirme” not interested in pursuing a military or political career but only in prestige and tax privileges
• Devºirme nomenklatura increasingly challenged by members of military households and provincial elite

Punitive Actions as a Method of Conversion to Islam
• No other myth has a greater role in shaping the Balkan peoples’ perception of Ottoman rule
• According to several chronicles - two waves of coercion
  – under Selim I (1512-1520) – Nevrokop, Drama, Dospat (Macedonia)
  – under Mehmed IV (1648-1687) – Chepino region (Rhodopes)
• Controversies
  – inconsistencies between names of the rulers and the events
  – no evidence for the events described or for any forced conversions en masse exists in Muslim sources
  – Sources appeared at a time of intense anti-Greek and anti-Turkish national sentiment
  – nobody except the authors has ever seen the originals
  – linguistic analysis concluded that sources are from the first half of 19th c.
  – chronicles were most probably fabricated for the purpose of lifting the nationalist spirit

Region of Nevrokop and Selim I
• Archival evidence
  – 1530s - 13 % of the population had accepted Islam
  – 1560 - 29 %
  – 17th century - still a sizeable Christian population
  – 18th century - 10 villages with non-Muslim inhabitants, 24 with mixed population and 74 entirely Muslim
• Village of Krupnik
  – in 1572 when the entire region is supposed to be Muslim - only 23 Muslim households, compared to 87 Christian
• Contemporary Greek chronicles
  – depict Selim I as a ruler who demonstrated respect towards the Orthodox Church
  – this contrasts strongly with the image depicted of him in the chronicles

Second wave - Chepino
• Conversion supposed to have taken place over three months in 1666
  – 1516 – 4%
  – 1528 – 5%
  – 1570 – 26%
  – 1595 – 31%
  – 1633 – 599 Christian households
  – 1641 – 479 Christian households
  – 1696 – 207
  – 1712 – 96 Christian h. (11%) vs. 798 Muslim h. (89%)
  – Cizye registers don’t list priest with the name Metodi Draginov,
  – records of the Orthodox Church show a bishop with the name Gavril
Phenomenon of Neo-Martyrdom

- According to the annals of the Orthodox Church, many Christians were executed for refusing to surrender their Christian faith and accept Islam
  - fifteenth century – 1; sixteenth – 15; sixteenth – 31; eighteenth – 39; nineteenth – 9
- Vitas composed for those who died most heroically
  - e.g., the Vita of Georgi Novi Sofiiski (d. 1515) by the priest Pejo and the Vita of Nokola Novi Sofiiski (d. 1555) by Matei the Grammarian
  - Literary sources - written for the sole purpose of showing the virtuousness of remaining a faithful Christian and inferiority of Muslims and Islam
  - moral examples to reinforce Christian values
- Neo-martyrdom - a weapon to fight the spread of Islam?
- The increase in the number - result of the increased pace of conversions or result of the need of the Church for neo-martyrs to resist Islamization?
  - the Church actually prepared some of the martyrs as sort of religious “kamikazes”
  - youths taken into monasteries, where they were prepared for years for the mission of dying for the faith
  - the plan was to have someone ready to convert to Islam in the first place, with the sole intention of apostatizing later
  - in Christianity apostasy is not punishable by death but… generally held that the guilt of apostasy could only be absolved by martyrdom
- Coercion theory: neo-martyrdom - an indication of “the burst of Muslim fanaticism during the accomplishment of the mass Islamization”

Neo-martyrdom in the eighteenth century

- Chapter on religious offences committed by new Muslims in early 18th c. fetwa collections
  - Apostasy
  - continuing to show respect for Christian symbols
  - drinking wine or following Christian customs
  - Coercion theory: proof of the violent nature of the conversion to Islam by the Muslim “clergy” and the systematic efforts of Ottoman authorities to sever the connection of new Muslims with their former community
- Explanation - Bulliet’s first axiom of conversion
  - 1) life in the Muslim community did not meet the expectations of the new converts
  - 2) prior to the eighteenth century, the lifestyles of Muslims and Christians were similar and reflected the syncretism prevailing in the religious life of the two communities
  - by the beginning of the 18th c. Ottoman society had become increasingly conservative and syncretism was no longer tolerated

Marriage as a Method of Conversion to Islam

- Intermarriage played a significant part in the conversion process in both Asia Minor and the Balkans
  - Islamic law allowed mixed marriages
  - The law did not obligate the wife to convert to Islam but this was often the result
  - Children born to such a marriage were raised as Muslims
- Coercion theory: involuntary, had the same disastrous consequences as the deüsırme institution
- The two parameters in woman’s conversion to Islam
- Incentives for conversion
  - greater property rights
  - the bride-price paid by the husband in Muslim marriages
  - stage of conversion – intermarriages socially acceptable (17th c.)
  - 17th c. - institution of concubinage (kepin)
Economic Pressure and Taxation as Methods of Conversion

- Exemption from *cizye* - the economic motivation for Balkan non-Muslims to accept Islam?
  - 15th c. – 50 akçe; 16th c. – 80-85; beg. 17th c. – 170-230; mid 17th c. – 300-350; end of 17th – 400
  - Plus salaries of the officials collecting it (*gulamiye*)
  - Plus frequent tax abuses
  - Plus ecclesiastical taxes to the Orthodox Church

- Problems – inflation (Venetian ducat versus the *akçe*)
  - 1584, 1: 60
  - 1600, 1:125 (108% increase); *cizye* - 113%
  - 1659, 1:190 (217%); *cizye* - 275
  - 1669, 1:250 (317%); *cizye* - 338%
  - 1691, 1:350 (483%); *cizye* - 400%
  - 18th c. *cizye* continued to rise but conversion stope
  - Tax burden was equal for all non-Muslims
    - why conversion to Islam was more widespread in some regions and not in others?
    - poor local economy and Islamization (Nevrokop)
    - how do we explain the spread of Islam in prosperous areas?

- The case study of Kostandovo (Chepino region), 1570
  - 113 households, 49 of them (43%) Muslim – advanced stage of Islamization
  - Taxes:
    - 3200 akçe tax on sheep = 6400 sheep, 57 per household
    - More than sufficient to sustain a household
    - 1 sheep = 25-30 akçe; 1700-2000 worth of livestock per household
  - Agricultural produce:
    - 25 mudds of wheat and 30 mudds of mixed cereals (10%)
    - 1 mudd = 513.16 kg
    - Average household - 2500 kg of grain
    - subsistence level per person per annum at 230-275
    - 50 percent surplus in agricultural production

Social Factors

- Members of the local aristocracy - first to accept Islam
  - Balkan rulers often contributed troops to and even participated personally in Ottoman campaigns
  - association of the Christian Balkan and Ottoman military elites
  - Upon full annexation, some of the nobility converted to Islam in order to maintain their membership in this elite
  - However, conversion to Islam was not necessary for membership in the Ottoman military elite
  - Thus, phenomenon still rather limited in the period immediately following the conquest
  - Christian military offices accommodated by being granted *timars* or simply permitted to retain in their former fiefs with the status of *sipahis*

Christian Sipahis

- Fourteenth century – limited information
- Fifteenth century - first half
  - Sub-district of Braničevo – 50%
  - Bosnia (1469) - 111 Christian sipahis out of a total of 135
  - Sancak of Smederevo - 85, out of 149
sancak of Arvanid (1432) - 60 out of 335
Situation similar in all territories except some regions in modern Greece – elite of Latin origin fled
Designation of “old sipahi” = former military officers
- Fifteenth century - second half – Islamization
- End of the 15th century - process of conversion of the Balkan aristocracy essentially completed
- Christian sipahis as late as 1592, 1614 and 1633

Religious-Cultural Factors
- Similarities between Popular Christian and Muslim Religious Beliefs
  - Muslim and Christian masses shared many common ways of apprehending religion, which stemmed from their not-too-distant pagan or former Christian past
- Ottoman conquest – interaction inevitable
- Medium of interaction - “cult of saints” (Islam) and hagiolatry (Christianity)
  - Islamic mystical orders usually founded their convents around the grave of a pious person (soon proclaimed as a saint)
  - used local cult of a saint to promote a new one, whose miracles were made to resemble those of the superseded holy person
  - creation of a common ritual site for both faiths
  - popular beliefs and traditions become nearby interchangeable and transition to Islam almost a seamless process

Evidence of religious syncretism
- Among the Pomaks
  - old magical practices associated with harvesting and sowing
  - Kukeri dances—associated with the Dionystic fertility rites
- Bosnia, Serbia and Macedonia
  - observed Easter by dyeing eggs
  - sought the blessing of a priest on feast days
  - kept church books and icons in their houses
  - continued to perform animal sacrifices in the yards of certain churches and monasteries
- Albania
  - visits to churches and baptism of Muslim children
- Conversion, at least until the end of the sixteenth century, did not involve a radical break from the convert’s previous religious beliefs or lifestyle

The Bogomil Heresy
- Adaptation of dualistic Paulician and Manichean beliefs with a distinctive Slavic flavor
- Not a deviation from Orthodoxy on certain particular points of ethics, but a wholesale denial of the Church as such
  - rejected the official Church institution with all its characteristics—priesthood, formal places of worship, liturgy, and rituals such as baptism, communion, confession and even symbols such as crosses and icons
- Two aspects
  - doctrinal—its dualistic cosmology
  - ethical—a desire to reform the Church and to return to the purity and simplicity of the apostolic age
    - they claimed the exclusive right to call themselves Christian
Bogomilism and conversion

- Shaped popular religious culture in some regions and at the same time made conversion to Islam easier
- Doctrinal aspect
  - Manichaeism - influenced the general development of the Islamic mystical orders as well
  - Zoroastrian Iran converted to Islam significantly faster than the Christianized areas of the Middle East and Africa
- Ethical aspect
  - formal structure of the Orthodox Church was next to non-existent
  - no organized ecclesiastical opposition to the spread of Islam could be offered
- Influence greater in Bosnia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Rhodopes
  - The name torbeshi, served to designate Bogomils, still applied to the Pomaks in the Rhodopes and to Muslims in Macedonia in the subdistricts of Debar, Skopje, Kichevo and the Shar Mountain

Summary

- Fifteenth century - minimal conversion
  - mainly affected the former Balkan military elite who saw in conversion a way of preserving its privileged position in the society
  - Most of the Balkan population saw its standard of living rise in this period, and thus, conversion, if chosen, represented acceptance of Ottoman rule rather than recognition of the superiority of Islamic religion or coercion
  - coercion was only pronounced in the case of boys collected through the system of devşirme
- Sixteenth century - more widespread phenomenon
  - urban population converted in large numbers because of market pressure and greater exposure to the Islamic way of life
  - The devşirme institution was no longer associated with forced conversion
- Seventeenth century - Balkan “age of conversions”
  - Rural population began to embrace Islam extensively
  - Islamization, nevertheless, was a gradual process rather than a mass phenomenon
  - continuing economic difficulties
  - religious syncretism
  - inability on the part of the Orthodox Church to offer spiritual guidance in regions with past affiliation to Bogomilism
  - The immense prestige of the devşirme cadres, on the one hand, and the abrogation of the levies in the later part of the century, on the other, encouraged the common people to look at voluntary conversion as the prerequisite to membership in the corps