

The Spread of Islam in the Ottoman Balkans: Revisiting Bulliet's Method on Religious Conversion

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When, in 1979, Richard W. Bulliet's study *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* was published,¹ it was appraised as being "... innovative, speculative and intriguing, with highly plausible, attractive and tidy results." It was also pointed out that "Bulliet suggests by word and example how to use quantitative methods in studying religious and ideological conversion and seeks by his findings and interpretations to stimulate further experimentation with those methods in social history research... His work is important for its methodology and exciting in its challenges to accepted interpretations." Islamic history experts also emphasized that "... with more caution, R. W. Bulliet's technique no doubt has a part to play in supplementing our all-too-scanty evidence on a crucial issue."²

Scientific critiques have favorably accepted Bulliet's research methods when applied to Islamic diffusion in Iran, but have remained skeptical of its abilities to study ethno-religious processes in other parts of the Muslim world.³ Thus, this method's application has remained limited; researchers have refrained from using it due to the lack of suitable sources, or because they have certain reservations concerning its reliability.

Recently, Anton Minkov attempted to apply Bulliet's method to a study on diffusion of Islam in the Balkans.⁴ This author suffered criticism in relation to the source base and research methods, similar to those addressed to Bulliet. Minkov analyzed the conversion process during the Ottoman epoch through "conversion petitions" (in Ottoman Turkish, *kisve bahası arzuhalleri*). Those sources attracted the attention of historians in 1991, when some of them were published by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.⁵ I agree that the critique is justified in respect of Minkov's source base. The 636 conversion petitions he studied cover a period of 64 years and are concerned with the whole of the Balkan Peninsula; he claims that the "six hundred and thirty-six petitions represent a statistically significant amount in terms of historical records."⁶ Minkov is convinced that the Ottoman administrative service produced many more documents of this kind but that only a small portion of them have survived. This claim seems questionable. Rather, the opposite interpretation should be seriously considered – i.e. that the sources in question show a particular type of conversion but, from the point of view of a quantitative measurement (the statistical processing of a mass of source material) of the process and its geography, it is undoubtedly not the

most common way. Conversion petitions do not reveal the process in its geographic entirety and they show the conversion of only specific social groups. They provide an example of conversions to Islam in the capital, Istanbul, in the presence of the central administration and even, at times, the Sultan himself. As these sources are unable to provide information regarding the dynamics of conversion among Balkan Christians in such important parts of the peninsula's religious geography as Bosnia, Albania, the Rhodope Mountains, Macedonia, Upper Thrace, Deliorman, etc., Minkov's critics maintain that the use of Bulliet's model when working with such sources makes his own work appear to be flimsy and untenable.⁷

Interestingly, conversion to Islam in the Ottoman Balkans took place at different times in different parts of the peninsula, being subject to various locale-specific reasons. It could, therefore, be said that not one but several conversion processes took place: along the Aegean littoral, in Macedonia and the Rhodope Mountains, in Albania, Bosnia and in Northeastern Bulgaria and Dobrudja. I recently came across a long series of Ottoman cadastral surveys which have great significance regarding conversions to Islam in the Balkans, specifically in the Western Rhodope Mountains. This area attracts the attention of contemporary researchers, having a predominantly Slavic-speaking Muslim population, also known as the Pomaks. Numerous exotic theories are in circulation regarding their ethnic origin, but Ottoman sources definitely reveal their Slavic ties. Historians have yet to determine, however, the process and manner of the diffusion of Islam among these people. Few academics continue to feel that a forced conversion to Islam occurred, designed and implemented by the Ottoman rulers of the conquered Christian territories.⁸ Outside the small circle of professional historians, however, views differ. The largest strata of Christian public opinion in the Balkans is far from ready to accept the idea that for centuries individuals and groups of Balkan Christians converted to Islam by choice, so it is still too early to say that historians have provided a reasonable and widely accepted explanation of this phenomenon.

In the following pages I discuss the issue of conversion to Islam in the Ottoman Balkans in the light of what Bulliet calls "social conversion." First, however, let us briefly recall the essential points of his methodology. For Bulliet, conversion as the profession of another faith is not as significant as "social conversion," namely, "conversion involving movement from one religiously defined social community to another." Emphasizing the pre-eminence of religiously defined social identification in the immediate pre-Islamic period in the Middle East, Bulliet formulates two axioms of religious conversion: 1) "The convert's expectations of his new religion will parallel his expectations of his old religion" and 2) "Leaving aside ecstatic converts, no one willingly converts from one religion to another if by virtue of conversion he markedly lowers his social status."⁹

Bulliet's research technique ingeniously combines a quantitative analysis with an analysis of the results from the point of view of sociology, linguistics and cultural and political history. No less interesting are Bulliet's sources themselves. The data for his study are derived from biographical dictionaries. He uses the structural

specifics of the mediaeval Arabic naming system to determine information about the birth places and ethnic origins of Muslims in the dictionaries. Thus, Bulliet manages to determine the average statistical percentage of first-generation converts to Islam, dividing his sample in consecutive 25-year periods. This method enables him to present graphically the dynamics of conversion to Islam in the territories subject to his study. Borrowing terminology and ideas from sociology and, more specifically, from the theory of the diffusion of innovations, he presents the chronology of religious conversion through means of five groups: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards.

Bulliet linked the study of the separate groups with observations on the converts' naming system and he found that at every stage of the conversion process the new Muslims demonstrated preferences for names from certain onomastic groups: pre-Islamic Arabic names, the five distinctively Muslim names (Muhammad, Ahmad, Ali, al-Hasan and al-Husain) and Biblical/Quranic names. Apart from establishing the relationship between the development of conversion and the frequency with which the names of the above three groups are found in the sources, Bulliet makes a parallel analysis of the political events and cultural processes accompanying the diffusion of Islam in the Middle Ages. Therefore, the most interesting feature is not the mathematical aspect of Bulliet's method, but how the data obtained through quantitative analysis can be discussed from various and useful angles.

Although Bulliet's technique was evaluated by some as reliable and applicable to future studies of ethno-religious processes in the Muslim world, a number of researchers voiced objections, mainly with respect to the type and quantity of sources used. For example: "Having established a model based on the Iranian experience, Bulliet looks at the experience in Iraq, Egypt and Tunisia, Syria and Spain. In these other areas the available data is not as clear or complete as in the Iranian case."¹⁰ "Bulliet's data is relevant to an urban well-educated male elite only, and may not be representative of the rest of the population."¹¹ Or: "Bulliet's method was conceived above all as food for thought, its conclusions being reliable, if at all, primarily with respect to medieval Iran only, due to the great limitations of his source base."¹²

I do not agree with the statement that Bulliet's model cannot be applied to other historical contexts. It is "predicated upon the notion that there is a direct and fundamental relationship between conversion to Islam and the development of what may be called an Islamic society."¹³ In this context, the conversion to Islam in Anatolia and the Balkans during the Ottoman epoch is closely related to the development of Islamic society and the institutions of the Muslim state there. The rest is a case of working with the appropriate sources. I will try to convince the reader specifically in relation to this point.

The Region of Rhodope Mountains

The Rhodope Mountains is an area in the Balkans known for its massive number of conversions to Islam, comparable in scale only to Albania and Bosnia. My observations reveal something important: the intensive conversion of Balkan Christians to Islam began in this mountainous area before anywhere else; in the 1460s whole villages in this area had completely converted to Islam,¹⁴ while in Albania and Bosnia this process was only just beginning.

The Rhodopes occupy a special place in historiography regarding conversion to Islam. This region is connected with the well-known historiographic myth of massacres and monstrous coercions planned and carried out by Ottoman authorities for the purpose of forced conversion.¹⁵ This myth was formulated in Balkan historiography with a romantic and nationalistic bias as the “Ottoman policy of mass forced Mohammedanization.” Although the idea of forced conversion to Islam during the Ottoman epoch is rejected by the new generation of researchers, it still finds support among “old guard” historians. During the second half of the 20th century this issue went beyond academic debate to become the subject of political manipulations in some Balkan countries. At the end of the 1980s, for example, the anti-Turkish and anti-Muslim campaigns of the Communist regime in Bulgaria led to the expulsion of more than 350,000 ethnic Turks and Pomaks from that country.

The Sources

The sources I use cover the area of the Western Rhodope Mountains that encompasses the town of Nevrekob.¹⁶ This is a vast territory which, according to the Ottoman cadastre, included more than 130 settlements. Today this area is shared between Bulgaria and Greece. In the Bulgarian part the majority of the population is Slavic-speaking Muslims (Pomaks), while in the Greek part the Pomaks have scattered to different areas of the country. In order to establish the dynamics of the ethno-religious processes in this area during the Ottoman epoch, I tracked a long series of registers in the Ottoman archives in Istanbul and Sofia, covering the period from the mid-15th century to the 1830s. The registers (detailed and synoptic) are of the *tapu tahrir*, *cizye* and *avariz* types.¹⁷ In my observations on conversion as a social process I use also *fatwas* (opinions of the Ottoman *Sheikh al-Islams* on a point of law) and the so-called conversion petitions.

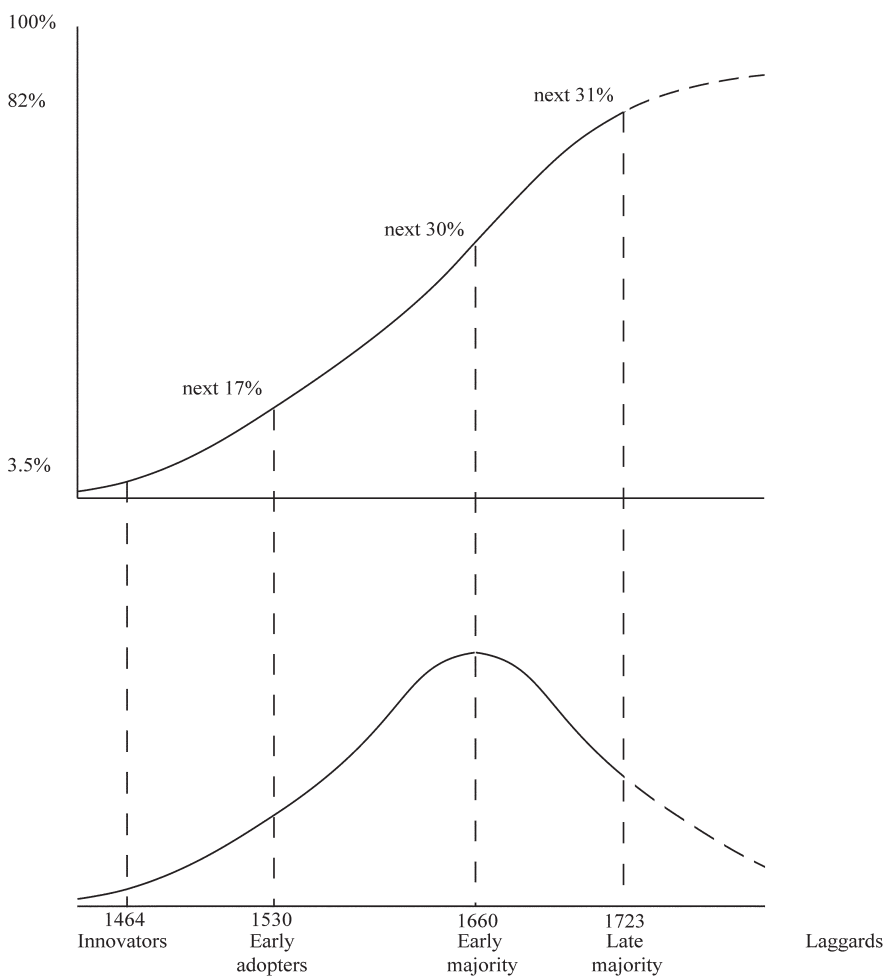
Bulliet’s Framework and Ottoman Sources Concerning the Rhodope Mountains

I use two research techniques, both suggested by Bulliet:

- 1) The curve of conversion with its five groups: innovators, early adopters, early

- majority, late majority and laggards.
- 2) The idea that conversion as the profession of another faith is not as significant as “social conversion,” namely, conversion involving the movement from one religiously defined social community to another.

The curve and its elements, which occur as a result of interpreting the Ottoman source material according to Bulliet's method, I call “stages of social conversion.” A similar reconstruction of the conversion process could be performed for any area of the Balkans characterized by intensive ethno-religious processes, as long as there is sufficient source material. Thus, for each area in Bosnia, Albania, Crete, etc., the respective curves of conversion could be obtained, but with different timetables, depending on the local socio-economic and political conditions in which the process



took place.

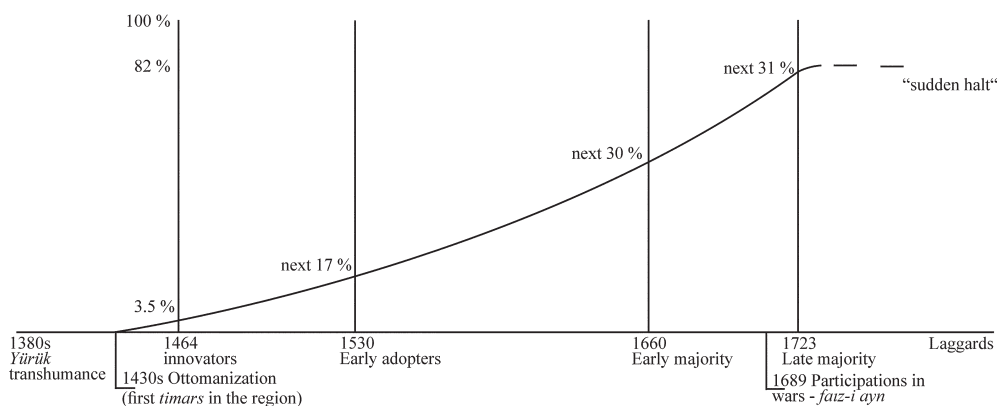
The curve of social conversion in the Rhodopes is built on data from thousands of cases of voluntary individual conversions to Islam taken from the Ottoman cadastral surveys.¹⁸ This information does not represent a statistical average result of the development of the conversion process, but its real numerical expression. This means that behind the percentage of the curve is an exact number of Muslim converts, representing the stages in the process throughout the area. Because I have determined the specific number of new followers of Islam at every stage of the process, the percentage on my graph shows a slight deviation from the drawn percentage for the individual groups of Bulliet's investigation. For example, the innovators in his research comprise 2.5%, while in mine they comprise 3.5%; I have data from Ottoman registers concerning 42 persons who initially converted to Islam in 24 villages in the Western Rhodopes, which represents 3.5% of the population. Because we can determine the exact number of converts, the curve reflects the development of the process, not according to "hypothetical chronological periods," as in Bulliet's case, but according to the real increase in the number of converts between registrations. As the diffusion of Islam in this area was mainly due to self conversion among the local Slavic population and not because of any influx of Turkish Muslims, the graphics also reflect reproduction among converts, which is an important factor in determining the size of the religious conversion at any particular time. It also becomes clear that the Theory of Diffusion of Innovations used by Bulliet in his investigation can also be applied to conducting research into conversion to Islam in the Ottoman Balkans.¹⁹ The similar results between this researcher's theoretically drawn model and the curve of conversion that I obtained when using a sufficient quantity of numerical data, prove that Bulliet's research method is applicable and reliable in investigating the diffusion of Islam in the broadest chronological and territorial scope.

When working with Ottoman sources, new converts are identified through their new Muslim names. Bulliet follows this method in his investigation, analyzing the patterns of name giving in mediaeval Islam. He is convinced that changes in the name patterns accurately reflect the general course of religious conversion.²⁰ In our research, however, no special observation and analyses of this type are necessary. According to Ottoman practice from the 15th century onwards, new converts were registered with their new Muslim name and their father's Christian name, for example, "Mustafa, son of Peter." By the end of that century, that practice was changed and the father's Christian name was replaced by *bin Abdullah* ("son of God's servant"). So, in order to establish the exact number of new Muslims in a certain area, the researcher needs only count the people recorded as *bin Abdullah* in cadastral surveys.

Bulliet points out two important circumstances directly related to conversion to Islam. The first: creating the Muslim institutional order in the newly conquered territories was a slow historical process. Building and imposing normative order in relations between Muslims and non-Muslims was necessary, as was the establishment

of a differential taxation system based upon religion, with factors such as financial advantages and rewards for converts to give an initial impetus to the conversion process and influence its further course.²¹ In the context of the Balkan territory conquered by the Ottomans, this development could be called “Ottomanization of space” (this should not be mistaken with “Turkization,” which is an ethnic process and corresponds to the notion of “colonization”).

Bulliet's second circumstance related to conversion is “access to information.” This circumstance studies the innovators and is concerned with the question “How did it all begin?” In my study, for example, I had to establish who carried the initial information about Islam and Muslim power to the Rhodopes. After solving this problem it was easier to determine the beginning of the conversion process and the next stages of its development. Balkan historiography assumes that nomadic stock-breeders (*yürüks*), whose arrival in the Rhodopes can be traced to the end of the 14th century, played a decisive role in the diffusion of Islam and gave the initial impetus to the conversion process in the Rhodopes and in many other places in the Balkans.²² *Yürüks* undoubtedly contributed to the diffusion of Islam in the Balkans, but their role in the conversion process does not seem to be of major importance.



This graph shows that the conversion to Islam of Rhodopean Christians did not follow the arrival of the nomadic stock-breeders, but began much later, when the Ottoman institutional order penetrated the mountain region. This means that the process we are interested in is related not so much to the *yürüks*' transhumance but more to Ottomanization, which, for reasons of geography, lagged in that mountainous territory. The process of Ottomanization imposed a new socio-economic and political model that changed the lives of successive generations. Apart from adding new content in the “government–subjects” relationship, Ottomanization placed the cultural and religious development of Balkan Christians in a new context, part of

which was the process of conversion to Islam.²³

According to Bulliet, the decrease in religious conversions in a certain area stemmed from the slow assimilation of the two latter groups of converts – the late majority and the laggards – into the established Muslim community. Bulliet also notes that a conversion process may be considered complete even if 10–20% of the local population remains outside Islam.²⁴ Such a situation is seen everywhere in the Balkans, where some small Christian enclaves are scattered among a Muslim majority. My study of the Western Rhodopes showed the same picture: by the beginning of the 18th century Christians remained in approximately 20 out of 120 villages, some of which included Muslim converts.²⁵ Those two last stages of the development of conversion are characterized by the exhaustion of the process' demographic potential, combined with the effects of socio-economic and political factors specific to that period.

Bulliet explained that in the initial stages of social conversion, Islam posed more of a socio-political challenge than a spiritual one. In later periods actual faith became more important and resistance to conversion increased. The massive early wave of conversions tapered off and the remnant communities were more successful in fending off the Muslims who challenged them with their sermons than they had been in resisting the attractions of social assimilation to a ruling class that had made few demands at the faith level.²⁶ However, Minkov, who applies Bulliet's method in his monograph, is surprised by developments during the final stage of conversion to Islam in the Balkans: "Instead of continuing into the period of 'late majority' according to Bulliet's scheme, the Islamization process came to a sudden halt in most of the Balkan lands in the second quarter of the 18th century. Such a break with the usual pattern of Islamization may rightly be considered a surprise."²⁷

Actually there is no surprise here. As far as the intensive process of conversion in the 15th, and particularly in the 16th century, is concerned, it could be said that during this period Islam "became fashionable" among Balkan Christians,²⁸ largely as a result of the overwhelming Ottoman military successes and the subjugation of the Orthodox world in Southeastern Europe. This was no longer true by the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries. To be a Muslim in the Balkans was no longer an attractive social perspective and, in fact, had started to become dangerous. The arduous military program of the Ottoman state during that period had a negative impact on the state economy and finances, and the worsening economic situation did not differentiate between true believers and infidels. For the first time, European enemies of the Ottomans invaded deep into their Balkan domains and took over large parts of their territory. The war with "The Holy League" (1683–99) radicalized Balkan Christians and several major revolts broke out. For its part, the central government decreed in 1689 that the participation of Muslim subjects in wars with "the infidels" was now deemed *farz-i ayn* – an irrevocable personal obligation of every true believer.²⁹ In such an atmosphere of confrontation, inter-confessional relations were strained, particularly in areas characterized by massive conversions to

Islam. Although ethnically not different from non-Muslims, the religious otherness of the converts was sufficient for them to be viewed by their Christian neighbors as belonging to the enemy's side, i.e. to the enemies of Christianity. At the same time, the growing pressure from European powers in the second half of the 17th century contributed to an intensification of religious fundamentalism in the Ottoman ruling classes. They consistently raised the requirements for converts to demonstrate more motivation and enthusiasm in performing their religious obligations and to provide a clear distinction between their former co-religionists and their religious communities. It was in those conditions, in the 1730s and 1740s, that the potential for and advantages of social conversion to Islam became exhausted and the process was to gradually slow down and eventually cease.

Conversion to Islam in the Balkans as a Social Process

I will now discuss conversions to Islam during the Ottoman epoch in the light of Bulliet's social conversion model, i.e. the movement from one religiously defined social community to another. Ottoman cadastral surveys provide much information about numerous Balkan Christians who converted to Islam. But why should this process be defined as social conversion? Why should we not assume that the Muslim state, for its own reasons, exerted various forms of pressure and even armed coercion to Islamize its Orthodox Christian subjects?

Ottoman sources provide no information in support of either the theory of forced Islamization or of spiritually motivated conversion. The sources do, however, provide sufficient direct and indirect information about voluntary conversions due to socio-economic reasons. In such cases, an analysis of the available sources is necessary in order to discover the nature of the religious transformation from Christianity to Islam.

Researchers in the field of ethno-religious processes in the Balkans during the Ottoman epoch may well observe the initial diffusion of Islam in territories conquered by the Turks in cadastral surveys. Soon after a Muslim administration had been established in the towns and the first Turkish colonists had arrived, a small or large group of locals converted to Islam. In the villages, where there was effectively no Turkish colonization, the initial representation of Islam occurred by means of a small number of those who individually converted to the new religion. Researchers have most frequently focused on towns and usually reach the conclusion that the genesis of the urban Muslim population in the Balkans is largely related to the intensive conversion of local Christian town dwellers. In the villages, however, where "mediaeval peasantry had long ago worked out stereotypes of their attitude towards the town and to the administrative centre,"³⁰ a model of religious behavior characteristic of townships started spreading – a religious apostasy.³¹

It should be noted that some researchers do not feel that cadastral surveys can reveal the character of religious apostasy among Christians, because they mainly

reveal “the economic argument for conversion to Islam.” Even such a staunch critic of historiographic myths about conversion to Islam as M. Kiel finds it necessary to note that there must have been reasons for conversion apart from the intentions of people to improve their material state and social status.³² Research practice, however, shows that it is particularly difficult to substantiate theories for spiritual change; information in Islamic sources is almost nonexistent.

The Ottoman cadastre of the second half of the 15th century does provide some insights that reveal the spiritual environment in which early conversion to Islam in the Balkans took place. According to some Ottoman cadastral surveys, even in settlements with a large population of Muslim converts, there was a lack of Islamic shrines and servants of the religion. The situation remained as such until the mid-16th century,³³ and therefore it can be assumed that during the initial establishment of Muslim communities the religious life of at least two to three generations of converts hovered between Christianity and their newly adopted religion of Islam.

A survey of data obtained from the periodic registrations of the population is unable to provide us with any rewards apart from an increase in speculation. Another type of source, however, provides information on the daily lives of the new followers of Islam. Collections of decisions on judicial and religious cases (*fatawa* – plural of *fatwa*) provide records of how *Sheikh al-Islam*, Grand *Mufti* (representative of the religious and legal order) of the Ottoman state, ruled on various issues concerning the religiousness of the converts:

“Question [to the Sheikh al-Islam]: All infidels in one village converted to Islam. Their church has been empty for 40 years because nobody cared for it. Then, with the Sultan’s edict, it was transformed into a mosque. What action should be taken according to the law, against a Muslim who addresses infidels passing the church with the words: “Bow to the church!”?”

Answer: He who prefers infidelity to Islam is an infidel. Severe discretion and renovation of faith and marriage.

Question: On Easter a Muslim took his wife to the house of his relatives – infidels. There he started drinking wine and singing songs. What is due to such a person according to the Sharia?

Answer: Prohibition of wine drinking and severe discretion. If he did so believing that it was permissible by the Sharia – renovation of faith and marriage.

Question: An infidel converted to Islam but he continued to perform their infidel customs and during infidel holidays he ate and drank with the infidels and even took part in their degenerate religious customs. What is due to such person?

Answer: Severe discretion and renovation of faith and marriage.”³⁴

Ottoman *fatawa* collections offer many similar texts. Some Balkan historians claim that they reveal “the difficult process of breaking the ties with the old Christian festive and ritual system...”³⁵ Seen from a different angle, however, those sources also reveal that the new Muslims were far from being enthusiastic

followers of Islam. While there are no signs of Christians being the object of a determined and purposeful missionary activity, i.e. what Balkan historiographies usually refer to as “religious propaganda,” it is otherwise difficult to explain how the new Muslims remained tied to the Christian festivals and rites to such an extent as to offend the traditional Muslim community. But such a reaction, which resulted in the notification of the *Sheikh al-Islam* in Istanbul, could arise only in those places where Islam was represented by crowded Turkish-Muslim communities equipped with religious institutions and servants. In other words, dissatisfaction with the religiousness of the new Muslims had to reach a level of opinion strong enough to provoke a public Muslim reaction.

In the Central and Western Rhodopes conversion to Islam did not include the ethnic assimilation of the local Slavic population. Group isolation, which was inherent in the life of this mountainous area, to a large extent contributed to the preservation of the ethnic features of the Islamic converts. The fact that observers of the late Ottoman era and modern ethnological studies find traditional (i.e. pre-Islamic Christian) features preserved in the lives of Rhodope Slavic Muslims is of particular importance; it negates any claim that the Ottomans exerted pressure or force to convert the population to Islam. It is obvious in the *fatawa* quoted above that what hindered the converts to fully identify with their new co-religionists was the continued existence of Christian traditions and the covert ties with their former religious community. However, with the statement “whoever prefers infidelity to Islam is an infidel,” we see what the *Sheikh al-Islam* had to say about such cases.

In addition to religious traditions and everyday customs we should also consider one more distinguishing feature, witnessed in both the traditional Muslim community and among the converts: the language spoken by newly converted Muslims. Although the language of Islam is Arabic, the Turkish language of the Muslim conquerors of Asia Minor and the Balkans became the dominant language of the faithful. The converts however, such as the Pomaks of the Central and Western Rhodopes, as well as the Albanians and Bosnians, kept their own language. It could be said that as, over time, Christianity and the traditions related to it gradually yielded to the new religious framework, the only remaining sign of the affiliation of those Muslims to the Christian ethos was their language: Bulgarian in the Rhodopes, Albanian, Greek and Serbian in other places in the Balkans.

We learn from *fatawa* that the Turkish-Muslim community was not indifferent to the issue of language. The analysis of the Ottoman texts, given below, shows that as a whole it remained powerless before the “infidel” languages: obviously nobody could be forced to communicate in a language that they did not know or did not want to learn. The *Sheikh al-Islam* did not recommend the severe levels of punishment that might have been expected for those who persisted in maintaining “infidel” traditions; while such a threat would likely have been sufficient to restrain a new Muslim from taking part in Christian religious feasts, it would not have enabled him to speak Turkish if he did not know it. Indeed, as indicated below, converts lived in compact groups without any representative Turkish ethnic presence among

them. The sources reveal the situation in this way:

“Question: If the Muslim Zeyd³⁶ starts speaking in the language of the infidels without having any sound reasons for that, what is due to such a person?

Answer: Discretionary punishment.”

“Question: Zeyd is a mufti in a settlement. If he speaks to Muslims who joined the community in the language of the infidels, what is due to Zeyd and to those Muslims, according to the law?

Answer: Discretionary punishment and prohibition to speak in the language of the infidels.”

The above question continues thus:

“If the governor of the same settlement asked Zeyd and the said Muslims: ‘Why do you speak in the language of the infidels? It is a sin to do so!’, and Zeyd and the Muslims replied: ‘This is the language of our forefathers and we are doing no sin speaking it.’, what is due to Zeyd and to those Muslims, according to the law?

Answer: Discretionary punishment and penitence and purification of language.”³⁷

Perhaps the most interesting thing here is that the *mufti* himself is a convert to Islam and of the first or second generation, at most. Cases of a the *mufti* not keeping to the proscribed rules are not an exception. The following case is no less interesting:

“Question: If Zeyd is Imam and during his sermon he says that the infidel feast of the red eggs³⁸ is better than the Muslim Bayram, what is due to such a Muslim?

Answer: Renovation of faith and marriage and to be ousted from the position of Imam.”³⁹

The Central and the Western Rhodopes, Albania, Bosnia, along with the island of Crete were the areas within the Ottoman Empire that saw the largest occurrence of the issuance of such *fatawa*. These texts are the only Ottoman sources that reveal the meaning of cultural-religious changes in the process of conversion. Religious restrictions of social relations enhance a feeling of otherness; this ultimately becomes the predominant feature of communication between Christians and Muslims in the Ottoman state. *Fatawa*, however, reveal that during a certain stage of the conversion process the complete incorporation of converts into the Muslim community was hindered by the ethnic and religious differences that the converts preserved from their former lives. Most of those features – language, folk customs, traditional garments – played the role of ethnic determinants and maintained the converts’ bond with their former ethno-religious community. In what way, then, during that period (call it the transitional period) did the new converts identify themselves with Islam in front of the authorities with whom they were required to communicate? As a matter of fact, the conversion acquired meaning only when the new religious identity was called upon to reveal

the advantages of being a Muslim.

The act of conversion changed the social status of the individual. He turned from an infidel taxpayer into a Muslim taxpayer, which meant he paid fewer taxes. Interestingly, an analysis of the *fatawa* from the second half of the 17th and early 18th centuries raises doubts about the sincerity of the devotion of new converts to the Islamic way of life. More specifically, their religious behavior often wavered between Christianity and Islam.⁴⁰ It could thus be assumed that the feature that legitimized the new Muslim in society and in front of the authorities was nothing more than his Muslim name.⁴¹

Following the act of religious conversion, the convert immediately became part of the Islamic community, but this did not mean that his spiritual universe had changed. The change of religion did not appear to result in any motivation to gain a new spiritual experience. And the routine practices of conversion to Islam more readily expressed the incorporation of the individual into a different social environment rather than the opening up to him of new spiritual horizons. Technically, in order to become a Muslim one needs only to say the following sacral phrase (testification): “*Eşhedü en la ilahe illallah ve eşhedü enne Muhammeden abduhu ve Resuluhu,*” which declares “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is God’s messenger.” Other simplified variations of conversion were also sanctioned by *fatawa*. For example, a person of a different faith could join in the prayers of a group of Muslims, imitate their actions, and from the moment he openly demonstrated his preference to the Muslim community he belonged to Islam. The same happened if one changed one’s external appearance by adding a characteristically Muslim piece of clothing, declaring that from that day on he deemed himself a true believer. Here are some representative examples from the *fatawa*:

“Question: If the infidel Zeyd says ‘I became a Muslim’, can he be deemed such?

Answer: Yes.”

“Question: If the Christian Zeyd, who disparaged the Prophet (S.A.V.), says ‘There is no other God but Allah and Mohammad is His Prophet’, but he doesn’t seem sufficiently convincing, can he be deemed Muslim according to the Sharia?

Answer: Yes.”

“Question: One night the infidels Zeyd, Amr and Bakr⁴² went to the sacred Mosque and, imitating the Imam Beşr,⁴³ prayed the evening prayer together with the other Muslims. Can it be deemed that they converted to Islam?

Answer: Yes.”

“Question: If the infidel Zeyd coiled a white turban on his head and said ‘From now on I am a Muslim’, can it be deemed that he converted to Islam?

Answer: Yes.”

“Question: If the infidel Zeyd wrapped a white turban on his head and dressed up like Islamic people do, and Amr and Bakr asked him, ‘What are you?’, and he answered ‘I am a Muslim’, can it be deemed that Zeyd converted to Islam?

Answer: Yes.”⁴⁴

The uncomplicated rituality relating to conversion was sufficient to give an initial, external form of religiousness, which had the capacity to legitimize the individual in the Muslim social sphere. Actually, this is the meaning of conversion, given that the converts' ontological environment remained unchanged, with the preservation of the native language and the elements of Christian life and religious tradition. Ottoman documentation allows us to determine the nature of conversion only through its formal features, thus the possibility remains that the external signs of Islamic religiosity by former Christians are the result of a forced conversion. Marxist historiography, for example, cites forced conversion, but the conversion petitions mentioned earlier in this paper reveal another perspective.

The petitions are bureaucratic records designed to note the procedure of granting Islamic garments, or their monetary equivalent, to converts. Some Balkan historiographies see this money as proof of indirect coercion of conversion to Islam, a form of economic pressure on the Christian population in the context of "the Ottoman policy about Mohammedanization."⁴⁵ But an unbiased analysis reveals a remarkable fact: for the Ottoman administration, conversion from Christianity to Islam was a problem not so much of a religious nature, but of a social one.

The scanty narrative texts concerning conversion tell us that the ritual was accompanied by ostentatious ceremonialism, which came to mark Islam's victory over the "fallacy" of Christianity. In the early 15th century Hans Schiltberger described this Ottoman ritual as follows:

"When a Christian wishes to become a true believer, he must raise a finger before all men, and say the words: 'God is omnipotent and Mohammad is His real Prophet.' When he says this, the true believers take him to their highest priest and he must repeat the above said words and then renounce his Christian faith. When he does this, he is dressed into new Muslim clothes and the priest wraps a white piece of cloth around his head, so that everybody could see that he is a true believer, because all true believers wrap white pieces of cloth around their heads, while the conquered Christians wrap blue ones and the Jews yellow... And when the people gather, the head priest mounts on a horse the one who became a true believer. Common people must ride or walk ahead of him, while the priests behind him... After they have taken him around the town, they take him to the Temple and circumcise him. If he is poor, they collect many presents for him..."⁴⁶

As described above, conversion began with the person renouncing "the old God" and pledging his word of honor to "the new one" – this is the ecclesiastical aspect. The ritual continued with the aligning of the external form to the new content: the convert was dressed in Muslim clothes and circumcised. With the conversion petitions, which came into being considerably later,⁴⁷ those elements were present as part of religious tradition but with one essential nuance: giving clothes or their monetary equivalent was no longer a reflection of the religious enthusiasm of the

Muslim community, but a responsibility of the State Treasury.

One should not assume that the administrative takeover of the conversion process reveals any Islamizing aspiration on the part of the Ottoman rulers. Let us, prior to making any assumptions, answer the following question: Would institutions, in an historical state where religious values predominated, remain indifferent to proselytism and to the possibility of expanding their ecclesiastical space through an influx of new believers? Obviously not. In this most precise interpretation, conversion petitions express the state's intentions to react in administrative terms to a phenomenon of a religious nature that had a secular consequence: after each act of conversion the new Muslims joined a lower tax bracket. The converts' legal status with regards to proprietary-judicial, hereditary and marital relations was changed according to Islamic law; along with conversion there occurred the opportunity to achieve a higher social status, and the new Muslims openly put claims before the authorities for a social re-categorization. Such facts made the involvement of the Muslim state inevitable – it could not avoid administering the process. The ceremonial practices (the donation of Muslim clothes, circumcision) remained intact in the spirit of the tradition, but now involved the financial resources of the Treasury. This is how it looked in two of the numerous cases:

“Your Majesty, Honorable and Merciful, my Sultan, may you be healthy! I, your humble servant, am one of the enlightened and learned people. I had the honor to convert to the Holy Islam in your presence and I beg of you, my Lord, the following: as I so far have not been given any clothes, nor am I circumcised, please have the kindness to advise me as to a suitable place for performing my circumcision, following which to enlist me into your high and glorious entourage. The rest is left to the decree of my Honorable and Compassionate Sultan. Your servant: the new Muslim, [former] priest.

[Resolution of the Grand Vizier]: Correct! According to the statement, the value of a full set of clothes for one person is to be paid. Order! 20 Rebi'ul evvel 1133 [19.01.1721].

[Resolution of the Baş Defterdar⁴⁸]: An excerpt of the cash value of a full set of clothes is to be made!

[An excerpt from the registers of the Ministry of Finance]: Cash value of a full set of clothes for 1129 [16.12.1716 – 04. 12.1717] – 16 guruş; cash value of a full set of clothes for 1132 [14.11.1719 – 01.11.1720] – 25 guruş; cash value of a full set of clothes for 1133 [02.11.1720 – 21.11.1721] – 64 guruş.

[Second resolution of the Baş Defterdar]: To be paid the cash value of a full set of clothes, as paid in 1132 [14.11.1719 – 01.11. 1720]. A Treasury Bill is to be issued!

[A note from the Ministry of Finance]: Treasury Bill was issued on 15 Rebi'ul ahir 1133 [13.02.1721].⁴⁹

And more:

“Your Majesty, Honorable and Merciful, my Sultan, may you be healthy! We are

two poor strangers and until recently we lived in profound infidel ignorance. With God's help we decided to convert to the true faith and we came to rub our faces into your blissful Sultan's foot, but one of your humble servants told us: 'Go first to get circumcised and then come back.' Three days later we were circumcised and with God's help we converted to Islam. Then we again came to ask mercy and condescension before your blissful foot. Rubbing our faces before you, we beg of you to please, have the kindness to give us our due clothes. The order belongs to our Honorable and Merciful Sultan. Your servants: Abdullah and Osman – the new Muslims.

[Reference from the Grand Vizier's office]: Osman and Abdullah came to the Lord's gates to convert to Islam. Firstly they were circumcised and then given the honor to become Muslims. It is Your Majesty's order – the felicitous, honorable and compassionate Sultan.

[Resolution of the Grand Vizier]: To be paid the cash value of clothes for two people, as per the law. Order! 29 Safar 1135 [9. XII. 1722].

[Resolution of the Baş Defterdar]: A Treasury Bill is to be issued.

[Note from the Ministry of Finance]: The Treasury Bill was issued on 4 Rebi'ul evvel 1135 [13.12.1722].⁵⁰

There appear to be sufficient reasons to conclude that conversion was loaded with a deep social meaning for both the state and for the new Muslim. The procedure, despite the government's involvement, proceeds according to tradition and furnishes the convert with the formal features of identity – dress, Muslim name and circumcision, which immediately makes him part of Muslim society. In its spiritual aspect, however, the situation is not so categorically clear; the *fatava* showed how the "infidel's" beliefs and traditions could be concealed under the Islamic veil even for generations, and could require the exercise of religious fervency on the part of the traditional Muslim community for a long time. Social improvement is arguably the motivation behind conversion. The induction of converts into Muslim society provided immediate positive results for them: the monetary burden was reduced, religious and cultural limitations disappeared and opportunities for social re-categorization occurred.

The conversion petitions show that the new Muslims frequently stated their claims to a position in the service of the state (mainly in the Janissary Corps),⁵¹ and asked for the cash equivalent of the Muslim clothes. Some time ago, when the long series of conversion petitions was discovered and brought to light the Muslim clothes vs. cash value phenomenon, I decided to find out what a new Muslim could buy when he received the corresponding amount from the Treasury – most often 10 *guruş* per person at the beginning of the 18th century. Here are some then-current prices for goods during that period: a cow – about five *guruş*; a calf – about two-and-a-half *guruş*; a team of oxen – 12 *guruş*; a small country house without a yard – about 10 *guruş*. It turns out then, that with the money granted by the Treasury after converting to Islam, a family could establish a proper farm.⁵²

As a Muslim appearance could be acquired cheaply – a white turban wrapped

around the head was sufficient – it could be assumed that by providing the cash equivalent of the Muslim clothes the administration was adhering to the Islamic tradition of endowing the new Muslims (comp. Hans Schiltberger). And to diffuse the assertion that the authorities, driven by the desire to stimulate conversion to Islam,⁵³ used financial bait, let us take into account the following fact: conversions to Islam by means of the petitions took place only in the capital city and therefore had a ceremonial character.⁵⁴ Such conversions, accompanied by the granting of money and often an appointment to the public service, demonstrated the Sultan's imperial charity and humility before the face of God – conversion of “infidels” to Islam is deemed one of the worthy deeds of the true believer. So, if the worthy deeds of the Sultan – the state's number one Muslim – were to be undertaken for the faith, the Treasury would need to be willing to dole out the necessary sums for the cash value of clothes for several hundred converts per annum.⁵⁵

Conversion to Islam outside the capital had nothing to do with the ceremonialism above, but a “provincial convert” was not deprived of any social acquisitions due to him as a result of his/her conversion. For the state authorities the differentiation between Muslims and “infidels” was important mainly for financial and administrative reasons. The only way to prove an individual's Islamic identity was through his Muslim name, recorded in the tax registers. This meant that once a convert was entered onto the fiscal record, he belonged to the social community of the Muslim taxpayers (*reaya*), with its more favorable tax regime. Indisputably, the most remarkable feature of this circumstance is that it reveals the great importance of the economic argument for conversion to Islam. So, it was not the Muslim sermons and attendance at mosques (and in many places there were no mosques) nor the external attributes of dress that identified the individual as part of Islam; what immediately transformed the former “infidel” into a Muslim was his new position before the tax authorities and the local administration

In the conversion to Islam through petitions the economic argument was effected through a cash sum, which the new Muslims received immediately. From here on it depended on them as to how they would socialize in the new environment. In the provinces and particularly in rural areas this argument had a different meaning. Here the economic benefit did not consist of a lump sum of money, but of the long-term benefits of a more favorable fiscal regime. The convert was exempted from paying the *cizye* tax, which was usually equal to one golden piece. This exemption grew with the number of family members/taxpayers who converted to Islam. Muslims usually paid lower land taxes than Christians, depending on how much property they owned.⁵⁶ Produce was tithed at 1/8 of the crops for Muslims and 1/7 for “infidels.”

These differences provided a powerful impetus for conversion to Islam, which R. Bulliet calls “social.” In the course of this process the convert immediately acquired features of external identification with the new religion and this seemed sufficient for him to be accepted into the Muslim community. Changes of a spiritual nature, i.e. the establishment of the individual as a *homo religiosus* of Islam, took place

over time, which also covered his descendants. This reminds us that forming a new religious identity requires time. Here, the socio-economic argument for conversion to Islam comes to the fore; it was a specific feature in the Ottoman Balkans, as revealed through the available archival sources.

So far, I have attempted to show through the results of my research that Bulliet's quantitative model and timetable of conversion to Islam are valid and applicable to the investigation of the dynamics of ethno-religious processes in the Ottoman Balkans. In closing, I would like to emphasize the following: It could be argued that Bulliet's approach brings forth a simplified (profane) notion of a process based on the religious experiences of people in the mediaeval period. I argue, however, that at this current time research practice is capable of doing nothing more than exhausting the possibilities for an analysis of the available sources. Taking into consideration the fact that all possible phenomena of that epoch developed in a world predominated by religious values, I still maintain that the socio-economic reasons were, to a large extent, the motivating factor behind conversion in the Ottoman Balkans. This argument is not the latest attempt of atheistic skepticism to challenge the notions of the sacred, rather, it puts forth some characteristic features of the Balkan people's religiosity in order to shed additional light onto the process of conversion to Islam during the Ottoman epoch.

Notes

- ¹ Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*.
- ² Michael G. Morony, "The Age of Conversions: A Reassessment," 138; J. Waltz, "Review," 360; Ira M. Lapidus, "Review," 187–188.
- ³ Ira M. Lapidus, "Review," 187; Hugh Kennedy, "Review," 251.
- ⁴ Anton Minkov, *Conversion to Islam in the Balkans. Kisve Bahası Petitions and Ottoman Social Life, 1670–1730*.
- ⁵ Maria Kalitzin, and Asparuh Velkov, and Evgeni Radushev, ed., *Sources ottomanes sur le processus d'Islamisation aux Balkans XVI^e – XIX^e s.*
- ⁶ Anton Minkov, *Conversion to Islam in the Balkans*, 149.
- ⁷ Nikolay Antov, "Review."
- ⁸ Until recently, Balkan, and particularly, Bulgarian, historiography maintained that the diffusion of Islam in territories conquered by the Ottomans was the result of a purposeful and consistent policy of the Muslim state. One popular version holds that Ottoman rulers aimed, over time, to change the religious identity of the conquered Christian territories, and for that reason they periodically carried out forced conversions of Christians to Islam. On the Balkan historiography about conversion to Islam, see Anton Minkov, *Conversion to Islam in the Balkans*, 1–8, 64–108.
- ⁹ Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period*, 35–41.
- ¹⁰ John O. Voll, "Review," 523.
- ¹¹ Michael G. Morony, "The Age of Conversions: A Reassessment," 138.
- ¹² Nikolay Antov, "Review."
- ¹³ Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period*, 1.
- ¹⁴ Evgeni Radushev, *Pomatsite*, vol. 1, 282–287.
- ¹⁵ See Evgeni Radushev, "Meaning of the Historiographic Myths about Conversion to Islam,"

205–248.

- ¹⁶ The ancient town of Nicopolis ad Nestum (Ott. Nevrekob), today Gotze Delchev in Southwestern Bulgaria.
- ¹⁷ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA), MAD 525. Summary register of the Pasha sancak from 1444, pp. 1–21; BOA, TD 3. Detailed register of the Pasha sancak from 1468, pp. 1–153, 422–490; BOA, TD 7. Detailed register of the Pasha sancak from 1478–1479, pp. 352–510; BOA, TD 70. Summary register of the Pasha sancak from 1519, pp. 4–77; BOA, TD 403. Detailed register of Pasha sancak from 1530, pp. 193–606; BOA, TD 167. Summary register of the Pasha sancak from 1530, pp. 47–56; BOA, Mevkufat kalemi 2873. Detailed register of *avariz* taxpayers in the *kaza* of Nevrekob from 1723, pp. 1–109. See also Bulgarian translation of the sources above by E. Radushev, *Pomatsite* [The Pomaks], vol. II; BOA, ML. VRD. CMH.210. Detailed register of *cizye* taxpayers in the *kaza* of Nevrekob from 1843. “St. St. Cyril and Methodius” National Library, Oriental Department (CMNLOD), B1 3/5. Summary register of *cizye* taxpayers in the *kaza* of Nevrekob from 1623–1625; CMNLOD, F. 126, a.u. 4. Summary register of *cizye* taxpayers in the *kaza* of Nevrekob from 1636, fol. 2a–2b; CMNLOD, F. 126A, a.u. 9. Summary register of *cizye* taxpayers in the *kaza* of Nevrekob from 13. 03. 1660, fol. 1a–1b; CMNLOD, F. 126A, a.u. 5. Summary register of *cizye* taxpayers in the *kaza* of Nevrekob from 22. 05 1660, fol. 1b–2a.
- ¹⁸ Compare Evgeni Radushev, *Pomatsite*, vol. I, 258–402.
- ¹⁹ Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period*, 19–27, 30.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 28–31.
- ²² Tayyib Gökbilgin, *Rumeli'de Yürükler, Tatarlar ve Evlâd-i Fâtihan*, 9–29.
- ²³ See Evgeni Radushev, “Demographische und ethnographische Prozesse in den Westrhodopen im XV – XVIII Jh.” 3–49.
- ²⁴ Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period*, 47–52.
- ²⁵ Evgeni Radushev, *Pomatsite*, vol. I, 387–392.
- ²⁶ Richard W. Bulliet, “Conversion Stories in Early Islam,” 132.
- ²⁷ Anton Minkov, *Conversion to Islam in the Balkans*, 193.
- ²⁸ Compare Machiel Kiel, “Razprostranenie na islyama v bulgarskoto selo prez osmanskata epoha (15 – 18 vek): kolonizaciya i islyamizaciya,” 74–76.
- ²⁹ See Evgeni Radushev, *Pomatsite*, vol. I, 380–381.
- ³⁰ Hristo Gandev, *Bulgarskata narodnost prez 15 vek. Demografsko i etnografsko izsledvane*, 114, 162.
- ³¹ See a criticism of this approach in Evgeni Radushev, “Demographische und ethnographische Prozesse in den Westrhodopen,” 24–25.
- ³² Machiel Kiel, “Razprostranenie na islyama v bulgarskoto selo prez osmanskata epoha,” 74–76.
- ³³ Evgeni Radushev, *Pomatsite*, vol. I, 348–368.
- ³⁴ CMNLOD, Fatawa-i Abdurrahim Efendi, 87, no. 3; 89, no. 9; 97, no. 2.
- ³⁵ Strashimir Dimitrov, “Some Aspects of Ethnic Development, Islamization and Assimilation in Bulgarian Lands in the 15th–16th Centuries,” 46; See also Strashimir Dimitrov, “Fetvi za izkorenyavane na bulgarskata mirogledna sistema sred pomohamedanchenite bulgari” [*Fetwas* for Uprooting the Bulgarian Outlook of Islamized Bulgarians].
- ³⁶ Conventional name.
- ³⁷ CMNLOD, Fatawa-i Abdurrahim Efendi, p. 116, no. 8–10.
- ³⁸ Easter.
- ³⁹ CMNLOD, Fatawa-i Abdurrahim Efendi, p. 97, no. 6.
- ⁴⁰ Comp. Stavro Scendi, “Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under the Ottomans,” 227–246.
- ⁴¹ “Question: A Muslim said to a non-Muslim ‘You, infidel!’. The other one replied: ‘Why do

- you say that? I am now a Muslim and my name is Muslim – Ibrahim’. Can it be accepted that the man has converted to Islam? Answer: Yes.” CMNLOD, Fatawa-i Abdurrahim Efendi, p. 73, no. 9.
- ⁴² Conventional names.
- ⁴³ Conventional name.
- ⁴⁴ CMNLOD, Fatawa-i Abdurrahim Efendi, p. 162, no. 3–4; p. 163, no. 2; p. 72, no. 4; p. 73, no. 6.
- ⁴⁵ Cf. Asparuh Velkov, and Evgeni Radushev, “Osmanski arhivni darjavni dokumenti za islyamizaciionite procesi na Balkanite 16–19 vek;” Str. Dimitrov, “Avant-propos,” 30; A. Jelazkova, *Razprostranenie na Islama v zapadnobalkanskite zemi pod osmanska vlast*, 182–186.
- ⁴⁶ Hans Schiltberger, *Patepis*, 129–130.
- ⁴⁷ It is difficult to establish when conversion, through petitions, became subject to bureaucracy. This change is probably a consequence of the increase of religious apostasy among Balkan Christians from the end of the 16th century onwards; the earliest known financial records of the State Treasury date from that time.
- ⁴⁸ Chief accountant of the Ottoman state, i.e. Minister of Finance.
- ⁴⁹ CMNLOD, F. 1A, a.e. 6808, fol. 1.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, F. 1, a.e. 11053, fol. 1.
- ⁵¹ Evgeni Radushev, “Peasant Janissaries?,” 452–453.
- ⁵² See Asparuh Velkov, and Maria Kalicin, and Evgeni Radushev, eds., *Sources ottomanes sur le processus d’Islamisation*, doc. 16, 61, 96, 138, 139. Compare CMNLOD, S 41.
- ⁵³ See Marc D. Baer, *Honored by the Glory of Islam*.
- ⁵⁴ Occasionally individual or group conversions occurred in front of the sultan when he was on a campaign or engaged in the chase. See CMNLOD, F 1, a. e. 10817, fol. 3–25.
- ⁵⁵ For example, in the fiscal year 1679–1680, the State Treasury granted money as “clothes’ cash value” to 379 new Muslims. See CMNLOD, F 1, a. e. 10817, fol. 1b–2b.
- ⁵⁶ Muslims paid a land tax (*resm-i çifti*) with differentiations in payment, depending on the proprietary and marital status of the taxpayer: 22 *akçes* from a married peasant who held farm land workable by a pair of oxen, 11 *akçes* from the single and poor and 6 *akçes* from widows. All non-Muslims who possessed land, whether married, single or poor, needed to pay 25 *akçes*. Thus a Muslim and his two single sons would pay 22+11+11=44 *akçes*. A non-Muslim in the same position would pay 25+25+25=75 *akçes*.

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Western Rhodopes in the 16th and 17th Centuries

