

Conversion to Islam as a Social Process (Reflections of a Bulgarian Historian)

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In the historical conscience of Christians in the contemporary Balkans there has been a deeply ingrained notion that the spread of Islam during the Ottoman epoch occurred through various and monstrous forms of violence, purposefully implemented by the Turkish conquerors of the Peninsula. This version is not alien to professional historians of the twentieth century. Bulgarian historiography, for example, until quite recently viewed the Balkan Christians' conversion to Islam almost solely as a consequence of the "Ottoman policy of forced conversion to Islam". Researchers obtained evidence from so-called domestic sources (chronicles, annals, and biographies of Christian origin) and through the interpretation of a limited number of Ottoman sources of socio-economic and financial character.¹ It was only recently that Bulgarian experts in Ottoman studies published previously unknown archival materials about conversion, which reveal the process in a different light.²

The new sources, however, cannot suddenly change existing research approaches and historiographical models. In the Bulgarian case, those invariably deviate in the direction of romantic nationalism. A characteristic of the research process of lagging behind modern achievements is also noticed, which is due to the methodological restrictions of the Marxist-Leninist ideological scheme, dominant in this country until recently, which did not allow and even punished any expression of a "bourgeois methodology". Over the last decade, this situation has gradually changed, but historians are still faced with giving a new meaning to the historical models concerning the spread of Islam, which were created according to antiquated and recanted ideological postulates.

In the next few pages, I draw attention to my thoughts about a prospective direction for studying the spread of Islam in the Balkans under Ottoman rule. My thoughts

¹ See Gandev, H. *Bulgarskata narodnost prez 15 vek. Demografsko i etnografsko izsledvane* [The Bulgarian Nation in the 15th Century. A Demographic and Ethnographic Survey]. Sofia, 1972; Petrov, P. *Asimilatorskata politika na turskite zavoevateli* [The Assimilation Policy of the Turkish Conquerors]. Sofia, 1962; Petrov, P. *Po sledite na naslieto* [On the Footsteps of Terror]. Sofia, 1972; Petrov, P. *Sadbonosni vekove za bulgarskata narodnost* [Crucial Centuries for the Bulgarian Nation]. Sofia, 1975.

² See Velkov, A., Kalicin, M., and E. Radushev, eds., *Sources Ottomanes sur les Processus d'Islamisation aux Balkans XVI^e-XIX^e s.* Sofia, 1990.

resulted from recent problems and achievements of Bulgarian Ottoman studies in examining this phenomenon. Although the conversion to Islam during the Ottoman epoch, in general, raises the same questions for historians, each national school seeks its own answers, whereas they do not always originate from scientific criteria. Yet Bulgarian historiography demonstrated in the second half of the twentieth century how the study of a purely scientific problem, such as the spread of Islam, can be placed in the service of political causes.

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It is difficult to define what Bulgarian historiography understands about the concept of Islamisation/Mohammedanisation.³ The broadest version is that of a state policy aimed at altering the religious identity of the Balkans under Ottoman rule. In this view, this concept most often expresses spontaneous or planned coercive actions for the mass “Mohammedanisation” of Christians. In another context, this was a process of adopting the foreign religion, caused and maintained over time by the extremely difficult social and economic conditions in which the Muslim conquerors deliberately kept the conquered Christian population. Or perhaps the Mohammedanisation of Christians consisted of all those things together?

During the years of Communist rule, Bulgarian historiography was forced to consider the regime’s notion of “coercive Mohammedanisation during the Turkish yoke,” which was at the bottom of the nationalistic propaganda and served as a political argument in the bilateral relations with neighbouring Turkey. In Ottoman studies – perhaps more than in any other branch of historiography – ruled the atmosphere of prohibitions, restrictions, and self-restrictions intrinsic to totalitarian societies. Apart from the prohibition to use research methods outside Marxism, working with any sources that questioned or refuted the official version of the “Turkish yoke” was not looked on favourably. (Under a more moderate option, the information from such sources had to be interpreted in a way acceptable to the regime.) At long last, after the democratic changes in 1989, opportunities occurred for independent research. For a number of Bulgarian historians, this meant catching up with world standards and reassessing the results achieved by preceding generations. In the field of Ottoman studies, such reassessment does not mean the complete rejection of recognized contributions or the repudiation of “historiographic memory”⁴ for the levels reached in the realization of specific problems. It is more about reassessing historiographic models, in which have been solidly embodied recent approaches to the problems of the conversion to Islam and the status of the Balkan Christians under Ottoman rule.⁵

³ Mohammedanisation – term with pejorative sense used in Bulgaria’s near communist past and even nowadays to express historians’ attitude to religious conversion in the Ottoman Balkans.

⁴ Todorova, M. “Conversion to Islam as a Trope in Bulgarian Historiography, Fiction and Film.” www.eurozine.com/articles/2003-11-04-todorova-en.html

⁵ Ibid. Cf. Radeschev, E. “Demographische und ethnographische Prozesse in den Westrhodopen im XV–XVIII Jh.” *Bulgarian Historical Review* (2002): 3–4.

Bulgarian Ottoman studies involve the problem of Islamisation/Mohammedanisation more than any other discipline in the Balkans. Nowhere else have researchers been so persistent in their investigations of the spread of Islam during the Ottoman epoch in such a wide perimeter – beginning with the role of the state institutions and ending with the numerous cases of the conversion of particular individuals. The motives for such interest are fascinating, but I would rather emphasise a circumstance that determines a certain bias of the research process. This is the character and the contents of the Ottoman archival sources. The Ottoman cadastre, which is most often used for observations and analyses of the development of the ethnic and religious processes, suggests much more about the social and economic nature of the conversion, but it provides nothing about its cultural-religious cause. Here is a small example in this sense: there is no question now about the fact that *dervishes* (members of ascetic religious orders) played a large role in spreading Islam in the Balkans. For a long time, however, historians knew much more about their *zaviyes* (central *dervish* lodges) as places for agricultural produce, rather than their essence as sacred Muslim places; at least this is how they seem to be described in the Ottoman registers.⁶ But a more thorough investigation of the cadastre also revealed that *dervishes* represented the earliest Turkish-Islamic colonising contingent in the new conquered lands.⁷ It is established that in the areas of *dervish* colonisation, local Christians – labourers in the *zaviyes*' farms – were the first converts to Islam.⁸ Thus, the idea that religious transformation from Christianity to Islam took place mainly in the social sphere (the common labour daily activities of the groups), rather than in the ecclesiastic sphere is logically set forth. And in such a case, we should not wonder why the social and economic nature of the Ottoman *zaviyes* was investigated with priority and why the Islamisation found there is interpreted as socially and economically motivated.

As far as the role of *dervishes* and mystical Islam in winning over new followers is concerned, much has been said, even in Bulgarian historiography. It is remarkable that this problem became a question of present interest only in the course of the forced change of Turkish and Muslim names of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria (1984–1989), when, for political and propaganda purposes, the religious syncretism of Islam had to be proved in the Bulgarian lands. In a way, this could be deemed the beginning (quite peculiar, really), of the study of the conversion to Islam according to its own modality⁹, i.e., on a religious

⁶ Long ago, Ö. L. Barkan, through Ottoman sources, revealed that the *dervish zaviyes* initially existed in the Balkans in the form of small agricultural farms. Faroqhi's investigations confirmed Barkan's observations. Cf. Barkan, Ö. L. "Osmanlı İmaratorluğu'nda Bir İskan ve Kolonizasyon Metodu Olarak Vakıflar ve Temlikler." *Vakıflar Dergisi* II (1942); Faroqhi, S. "Agricultural Activities in a Bektashi Center: The *tekke* of Kızıl Deli, 1750–1830." In *Peasants, Dervishes and Traders in the Ottoman Empire*, edited by S. Faroqhi, 1/69–96. London: Variorum Reprints, 1986.

⁷ Barkan, "Osmanlı," 295–304.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 345ff.

⁹ In those years, the Bulgarian contribution in this field was that of Str. Dimitrov. See Str. Dimitrov, "Some Aspects of Ethnic Development, Islamization and Assimilation in Bulgarian Lands in the 15th–16th Centuries." In *Aspects of the Development of the Bulgarian Nation*. Sofia, 1989.

scale. As far as the Ottoman cadastre is concerned, it could confidently be stated that this kind of source seems quite sufficient and appropriate for examining the social and economic nature of the conversion process. Still, is social conversion the only road to Islam?

It is difficult for anyone to imagine the ecstatic follower of Islam of the first generation, after a detailed study of Ottoman archival sources, which contain direct and indirect evidence of the dominant role of the social and economic motivations behind the conversion process. In principle, Bulgarian historiography denies the image of Bulgarians who were enthusiastic about Islam and who rejected Christianity by their own free will. The majority of the historians most often relate the conversion process with various forms of pressure (financial, administrative, ecclesiastic, etc.) or with the action of organised, armed violence. Interestingly, Ottoman archival sources do not support either the theory of a forced conversion to Islam or of large groups of people joining Islam on the basis of ecclesiastic motivation by the new religion. In such a case, concentrated study of archival sources is needed to discover the meaning of the information they contain.

Each researcher who studies the ethno-religious processes in the Balkans during the Ottoman epoch may examine, on the pages of the early detailed registers (the *tapu tahrir defterleri*) the initial spread of Islam in the conquered lands. Those sources generally suggest the following course of the ethno-religious dynamics: in the towns with the settling of the first Turkish colonists; not much later, the first larger or smaller group of local converts to Islam appears. In the rural areas where there was no effective colonisation, the initial representation of Islam was a matter of local people individually turning to the new religion. The analysis of those developments is most often concentrated on the towns and usually ends with the deduction that the genesis of the Muslim townspeople and producers is, to a large extent, related to the Islamisation of the urban Christians.¹⁰ In the rural areas, where “mediaeval Bulgarian peasantry had long since developed stereotypes of their relationships with the town and with the administrative centre”¹¹, apostasy, the model of religious behaviour, which was characteristic for the town, was enjoined.¹²

I approach with suspicion the idea that the conversion to Islam, which started in the Balkan towns, had catalyzed, at a later stage, into an identical process in the rural areas, too.¹³ Perhaps the only Bulgarian historian, who paid attention to the early conversion in the rural areas, is Strashimir Dimitrov. Examining the Ottoman cadastre and discovering how the first converts to Islam in the rural areas not only failed to increase

¹⁰ Ibid., 51.

¹¹ Gandev, *Bulgarskata*, 162, 114.

¹² For criticism of this approach, see Radushev, “Demographische,” 24–25.

¹³ In one of my last research projects, I attempted to prove that the initial spread of Islam in the rural areas was equal in intensity, if not greater than that in the towns. See Radushev, E. *The Pomaks*. Part 1, Sofia, 2005, 179–197.

in numbers, but in some places completely disappeared, he concluded that, in the initial period, the new Muslims had not succeeded in “creating a society” everywhere, i.e., a group, “which supported, encouraged each other and gained strength in numbers.” For this reason, Dimitrov concluded, there was a possibility that the isolated cases of conversion to Islam remained alienated and Islam could not “take root” in the rural areas.¹⁴

This precise observation indicates that, at least for now, there is no other way to clarify the development of the situations during the period of the early conversion process, but to study the Ottoman registration of lands and population. There are, however, some authors, who warn those Bulgarian researches who have become used to independent work, “that historians should be imbued with a greater degree of humbleness when they interpret motives, i.e., when they venture into the history of *mentalité* without the requisite types of sources (personal letters, diaries, confessions, etc.)”¹⁵. The same author directly addresses researchers who investigate the Ottoman period with the remark that “new sources of the type that are usually found in Ottoman archives (registers, government sources, judiciary sources) may allow us to make more plausible hypotheses, but it is also high time to become more critical of Ottoman archival fetishism”.¹⁶

It seems that such remarks should suggest that “Ottoman sources cannot enlighten us about the motives for conversion to Islam”¹⁷. This suggests that for a long time to come the so-called domestic sources for a mass and forced “Mohammedanisation” will be offered as one of the reliable explanations of the meaning of the ethno-religious changes in the Balkans.¹⁸

Actually this situation in Bulgarian historiography replaces the real research problem. The dispute about the authenticity of the “domestic sources” should have ended long ago, in favour of a thorough study of the stages in the development of the conversion process, in light of the numerous Ottoman archival sources. Then it would also become clear whether the research practice makes a fetish of the Ottoman sources or the opposite – until now, it has not utilised the materials available in the Ottoman archives.

Today’s suspicious attitude towards the Ottoman sources is probably rooted in the circumstance, that they disclose a primarily “economic argument for conversion to Islam”.¹⁹ Even such a staunch critic of the historiographic myths about conversion to

¹⁴ Str. Dimitrov, “Demografski otnosheniya i pronikvane na islama v Zapadnite Rodopi i dolinata na Mesta prez XV–XVII vek.” [Demographic Relations and Spread of Islam in Western Rhodope and the Valley of Mesta River in the 15th – 17th Centuries]. *Rodopski Sbornik* 1 (1965): 94.

¹⁵ Todorova, “Conversion,” 10/21

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10/21–10/22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, note 39.

¹⁸ Actually, Todorova herself notes in her work: “I am perfectly aware that I may be accused of ‘defending’ a past historiographical project, or at least some of its representatives.” See *ibid.*, 10/21.

¹⁹ Kiel, M. “Razprostranenie na islyama v bulgarskoto selo prez osmanskata epoha (15–18 vek):

Islam as Kiel finds it necessary to note that there should be other reasons for conversion to Islam, apart from the converts' intentions to improve their own material status through apostasy.²⁰ Recent experience, however, indicates that it is most difficult to substantiate the hypothetical reasons of ecclesiastic character – almost no information exists in the Ottoman sources about these types of cases.²¹ Thus, the danger of creating a historiographic myth exists if no sufficiently convincing evidence is provided that reveals the reasons and motives of ecclesiastic nature. Even without it the concept of Ottoman “religious propaganda, aimed at spreading Islam,” has already been deeply rooted in people’s historical notions.

I must repeat here that Bulgarian historiography usually indicates that *waqfs* were the instrument of the said propaganda.²² In this connection, however, one should note that recently, it was precisely the Ottoman archival documentation that revealed no relation between *waqfs* (together with the Muslim cultural institutions in a certain region, supported by them) and the development of the process of conversion to Islam.²³ It is the

kolonizacija i islyamizacija.” [The spread of Islam in the Bulgarian Rural Areas in the Ottoman Period (15th–18th Centuries): Colonisation and Islamisation]. In *Musulmanskata kultura po bulgarskite zemi. Izsledvaniya* [Muslim culture in the Bulgarian lands. Studies], edited by R. Gradeva and Sv. Ivanova, 74–76. Sofia, 1998.

²⁰ M. Todorova, who worries about the possibility that Ottoman sources may turn into a fetish for researchers, seems fully satisfied with Kiel’s doubts: “To his credit, Machiel Kiel stresses the fact that Ottoman sources cannot enlighten us about the motives for conversions or resistance to Islam.” Actually, Todorova should have paid attention to the fact that Kiel has some doubts about the sole emphasis on the socio-economic nature of the sources, which inevitably ensues from the fact that the character of the Ottoman archival sources is mostly financial and administrative in nature. Kiel does not seem to wish to rely only on the social-economic factor in the Islamisation process: he states, “the economic argument for conversion to Islam should be accepted with big reservations. It does not explain why a certain village in the Chepino Valley converted to Islam, while another one, which exists in the same conditions, the same laws, and the same tax burden – did not. Anyway, there were some other factors.” It is another matter that Kiel did not succeed in extracting from the Ottoman sources even one factor that could suggest some other context in the development of the conversion process, except the social-economic one. Cf. Todorova, “Conversion,” note 39. Compare Kiel, “Razprostranenie,” 76.

²¹ As a matter of fact, the *fetwas* (doctrinal solutions of issues of a religious-legal nature) offer texts that make obvious the Ottoman community’s readiness to use pressure to consolidate its position in the spiritual space of the conquered lands, particularly among the new converts. This is, however, more a matter of principle, which is difficult to implement in real life. How then, for example, was the Bulgarian language preserved among the Pomaks, when the *fetwas* envisage punishments for those converts to Islam who communicated in the “infidel” (mother) tongue? Pomaks also preserved elements of the Slavic anthroponomy; the local toponymy and the names of the villages also remained uninfluenced by Islam. Even now, in the sacral world of the Pomaks, there are traces of Christian rites and the Christian system of festivals. It is obvious, that in the *fetwas* can be seen a state of affairs desired by Islamic doctrine, which remains unrealised in the end. See “St. St. Cyril and Methodius.” National Library, Oriental Department (CMNL, O. D.), O II 431, Fetawa-i Abdurrahim Efendi; *ibid.*, O II 432, Fetawa-i Ali Efendi; *ibid.*, O II 360, Fetawa-i Dürri-zade Esseyid Mehmed Arif Efendi.

²² Cf. Grozdanova, E. *Bulgarskata narodnost prez 17 vek. Demografsko izsledvane* [The Bulgarian Nation in the 17th Century. A Demographic Study]. Sofia, 1989, 575–581.

²³ Compare one of the last contributions of O. Săbev on the issue: “Osmanskite medreseta v

opposite – in the settlements belonging to *waqfs*, the degree of conversion was particularly low. In the region of the central and western Rhodope mountains, for example, characterised by an extremely powerful spread of Islam, in the *waqf* villages there no conversion to Islam is observed at all.²⁴

It seems to me that each unbiased researcher would agree that the Ottoman sources reveal the conversion of the Balkan Christians to Islam as a process, conditioned first and foremost by social and economic motives. Thus, a concept is formed, that conversion to Islam in the Balkans was not so much a religious phenomenon as it was a social one. As a result of the Ottoman conquest, a socio-cultural environment was formed in the Peninsula, which was characterised by a differentiated approach towards the particular religious communities. The differences between Muslims, Christians, and Jews were most distinct in the fiscal sphere. A number of historians are inclined to emphasise the restrictions on the daily activities and religious affairs of “the infidel.” I am convinced, however, that tax assessment had the greatest influence – and most of all, the taxes *cizye* and *ispence*, paid only by the Christian taxpayers of the Sultan.²⁵ Recently, on the basis of Ottoman tax registers, I attempted to calculate the impact of those two taxes on the pockets of Christians. It turned out that levying the *cizye* and *ispence* lowered their standard of living at a ratio of 2:1, compared with Muslim taxpayers.²⁶ Therefore, I maintain that the construction of the Ottoman fiscal regime on the dichotomy “Muslims/infidel Christians” created a powerful aspiration for social re-categorisation in the foundations of the conversion process in the Balkans. Perhaps this situation is best seen in the initial penetration of Islam in the rural areas of the Balkans. The Ottoman inventories from the fifteenth century show the early converts as a small group, which had from one to several representatives in isolated settlements, here and there. Those were the harbingers of the future conversion process, which would flood vast territories of the Balkan Peninsula over the next century.

One more important nuance must be restated here: sources from the second half of the fifteenth century reveal a ubiquitous lack of Islamic sanctuaries and clergymen in those villages where the conversion process had already commenced. This situation remained unchanged until about the middle of the next century, although the number of converts to Islam in many settlements does not seem so small, and in some places they definitely predominate over their yesterday’s co-religionists.²⁷ In such a case, it could be assumed that during the initial building of a community of Islamic converts,

bulgarskite zemi v konteksta na konfesionalnite promeni, kraya na 14–17 vek.” [The Ottoman *Medreses* in Bulgarian Lands in the Context of the Confessional Changes, the End of 14th–17th Centuries]. *Izsledvaniya v chest na Prof. Str. Dimitrov*. Sofia, 2001, 227–250.

²⁴ See Radushev, *The Pomaks*, Part II, 135–265.

²⁵ Compare *ibid.*, Part I, 65–86.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 92–93.

²⁷ Such a situation is seen in the central and western Rhodope mountains, where during the first decades of the sixteenth century an intensive process of conversion to Islam began. See Radushev, *The Pomaks*, Part I, 319–374.

the religious life of at least two to three generations passed between Christianity and the newly adopted Islam.

Ottoman registers cannot provide anything more than reasons for assumptions in this direction. But some other sources give us a general notion of the conduct of the new converts in the Islamic social environment. Here is what the collections with decisions on judicial-religious cases (*fetwas*) offer on this issue:

Question [to *Şeyh ül-İslam*]: All infidels in one village converted to Islam. For 40 years their church had remained empty and nobody maintained it. Then with the Sultan's permission it was turned into a mosque. How, according to the law, should it be acted in respect of that Muslim who addresses the infidels passing by the church with the words: "Bow before the church!"?

Answer: Whoever prefers infidelity to Islam is an infidel. It is necessary for such a person to renew his faith and his marriage and to be punished with a severe bodily punishment.

Question: On Easter, one Muslim took his wife to the house of his relatives, who were infidel. He sat there, drank wine and sang songs. How should it be proceeded with such a person?

Answer: Prohibition to drink wine and a severe bodily punishment. If he had acted in such manner, thinking that it was admissible from the religious point of view – his faith and his marriage must be renewed.

Question: An infidel converted to Islam, but continued to practice the infidel traditions, and during the infidel festivals he ate and drank with the infidels and even took part in their renegade religious customs. How should it be proceeded with such a person?

Answer: A severe bodily punishment and renewal of his faith and his marriage.²⁸

We could continue with many more such *fetwas*, citing texts not only from the collection of *Şeyh ül-İslam* Abdurrahim efendi (early eighteenth century), but also from others of his colleagues. In fact, those sources have for a long time been the object of special attention on the part of Bulgarian historiography. It is thought that "the painful process of cutting ties with the traditional Bulgarian festive-ritualistic system" is seen in them.²⁹ Taken from a different angle, however, these texts also reveal, that the new Muslims are by far not ecstatic followers of the new religion. Nothing indicates that they have been subjected to a tenacious and staunch missionary activity, i.e., to what Bulgarian historiography usually calls "religious propaganda." Otherwise it is difficult to explain how the new Muslims remain related to the Christian festivals and rituals to such an extent that they cause the reaction of the traditional Muslim community. But a reaction, such as notifying the *Şeyh ül-İslam* in the capital, could arise only in those places where Islam is represented by mass Turkish-Muslim

²⁸ CMNL, O. D., O II 431, Fetawa-i Abdurrahim Efendi, p. 87, no. 3; p. 89, no. 9; p. 97, no. 2.

²⁹ Str. Dimitrov, "Some Aspects," p. 46. See also Str. Dimitrov, "Fetvi za izkorenyavane na bulgarskata mirogledna sistema sred pomohedanchenite bulgari" [*Fetwas* for Uprooting the Bulgarian Outlook of Islamized Bulgarians]. *Vekove* 2 (1987).

communities, equipped with the relevant religious institutions and clergymen. In other words, it was necessary to have a Muslim public opinion that found it worthwhile to react against the unsatisfactory piety of some of the new converts.

The Rhodope mountains are a specific part of the Ottoman religious geography. The initial – and, let me emphasise, effective in its result – religious conversion did not end with the ethnic assimilation of the local converts to Islam (the Pomaks), exactly because of the character of the Muslim community established in the area. Group isolation, which was inherent to the peasant existence in this mountainous region, to a large extent helped preserve the ethnic features of those Slavic-speaking Muslims. Of particular importance is the fact that contemporary ethnologic and folkloristic studies find many old (pre-Islamic) features that are preserved in the lives of those people. It gives us no reason to think that Ottoman Turks exerted deliberate religious pressure on the local Christian population – which is usually called the “Ottoman policy on Mohammedanisation and assimilation.” Notably, the *fetwas* reveal what actually stands in the way of the converts fully identifying themselves with the rest of the Muslims – the still-not-surmounted Christian tradition, where there still remained some subdued links with the former religion; “whoever prefers infidelity to Islam is infidel,” was what the *Şeyh ül-İslâm* said on such occasions.

But along with the religious and everyday traditions, there also existed another differentiating sign, of which both the traditional Muslim community and the converts were fully aware: the language in which the new converts communicated with each other. It could be said that in general, when Christianity and the folk customs related to it, gradually gave way to the new religious complex, the only positive sign of the converts’ former affiliation to the local Christianity that remained was their mother tongue: Bulgarian in the Rhodope mountains and Albanian, Greek, and Serbian in other places in the Balkans.

Conversion to Islam in the Ottoman Balkans is not necessarily related to adopting the Turkish language, and the best example of this are the Pomaks in the Central and Western Rhodopes. However, once again, *fetwas* can show that the traditional Muslim communities were certainly not indifferent to the language used by the new followers of Islam. And analysis of the Ottoman texts indicates that, as a whole, the Muslim society was powerless in respect to the “infidel” tongue: it was clear that nobody could be forced to communicate in a language they did not know and did not want to learn. When he must decide what to do in such a situation, *Şeyh ül-İslâm* does not recommend the severe punishments envisaged for following “the infidel” customs; the threat of a severe punishment might restrain an Islamic neophyte from participating in Christian religious festivals, but it would not make him/her start speaking a foreign language. Here are the texts themselves:

Question: If the Muslim *Zeyd*³⁰ starts speaking the tongue of the infidels, having no reasons for that, how should be proceeded with him?

³⁰ A conditional name.

Answer: He must be censured!

Question: Zeyd is *mufti* in one settlement. If he speaks to the Muslims, who have come to the community, in the tongue of the infidels, what, according to law, should be done with Zeyd and those Muslims?

Answer: They must be censured and must be prohibited to converse in the tongue of the infidels.

The above question continues, as follows:

If the judge in the same settlement asks Zeyd and the said Muslims: “Why do you speak the tongue of the infidels? It is wrong to do it!”, and Zeyd and the Muslims reply: “We speak the tongue of our forefathers and do not think that we are sinning,” what, according to law, should be done with Zeyd and those Muslims?

Answer: They must be censured, they must ask for forgiveness and their tongue must be purified.³¹

Perhaps the most impressive thing here is the fact, that the *mufti* – this representative of the Ottoman religious and judicial order, is a convert to Islam, and, as is obvious, he is a convert of the first or the second generation at the most. This case is not an astonishing exception. The following case is no less interesting:

Question: If Zeyd is *Imam* and during the sermon says that the infidel festival of the red eggs [Easter, my note] is better than the Muslim *Bayram*, what should be done with such a Muslim?

Answer: He must renew his faith and his marriage and he must be fired from the position of *Imam*.³²

These texts are very important for the current investigations, because they happen to be the only Ottoman sources capable of revealing the changes of cultural, religious, and everyday life in the context of religious conversion. The existence of division by religious traits and of the respective norms of coexistence in the daily round increases the degree of differentiation, and, finally, this becomes the predominant feature of the communication between Christians and Muslims. Those existing social differences and taboos became the demarcation line between the two religious communities.

Fetwas, however, reveal that the initial incorporation of the new converts into the Muslim community was hindered by the marks of ethnic and religious difference, which the converts preserved from being Christians. As a matter of fact, most of those signs – language, folk customs, garment, etc., played the role of determinant of ethnic diversity, and in practice, maintained the connection of the converts with their former ethno-religious community. In such a case, how did new converts identify themselves as Muslims to the authorities with whom they must have had contact during that tran-

³¹ CMNL, O. D., O II 431, Fetawa-i Abdurrahim Efendi, p. 116, nos. 8, 9, 10.

³² CMNL, O. D., O II 431, Fetawa-i Abdurrahim Efendi, p. 97, no. 6.

sitional period? This is exactly what gives meaning to the conversion, when the new religious identity is called on to reveal, in practice, the advantages of being a Muslim.

For the first generations of new Muslims in the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century, apostasy would hardly have had the meaning of transition from one culturally and religiously defined community to another. Indeed, new converts were still recognised as belonging to Islam. It is sufficient to look at the early Ottoman registrations to find the numerous “sons of Abdullah” (converts of the first generation) or people registered with their new Muslim given name and the Christian name of their fathers (of the type: Hassan, son of Ioan). Obviously, this is the most information provided by the sources about the early development of the conversion process. In addition, much later sources (*fetwas* from the beginning of the eighteenth century) inform of a repeated in time equivocal devotion of every new generation of converts to the Islamic way of living. We must assume therefore, that the sign, which unconditionally legitimised the new convert in his daily round and mainly before the authorities, was nothing else but his *Muslim name*.³³ This is why the religious conduct of the neophytes is distinguished by a characteristic wavering between the Christian traditions and the still-unassimilated principles of the Islamic way of living.

My idea here is that after the act of religious conversion, the new Muslim becomes immediately part of the Islamic community, which does not necessarily mean that his spiritual world has changed. It could even be deemed that this was not a change of the spiritual essence that motivated the individual to a new religious experience. Actually the routine practices of initiation to Islam express much more the incorporation of the novice into a different social environment than the revelation of new spiritual horizons for him. In principle, in order for a person to become Muslim, it was sufficient to say the sacral phrase “There is no other God but Allah, and Mohamed is his Prophet!” The daily practice also offered other simplified options of initiation, which were officially sanctioned with *fetwas* as admissible from the religious-judicial point of view. In some cases, the infidel joined the prayer of a group of Muslims, imitating their actions – from the moment when he openly demonstrated his preference to the Muslim community, he already belonged to Islam. The same happened when a person changed his appearance with a characteristic part of the Muslim clothes and declared that from that day onwards he deemed himself “a true believer.” Here are some representative examples from the *fetwas*:

Question: If Zeyd the infidel says “I became Muslim”, may he be deemed as such?

Answer: Yes.

³³ Here is a characteristic example of a *fetwa*: “Question: A Muslim said to someone, who was not a Muslim: “Hey, you, infidel!” The other one answered: ‘Why are you saying that? I am now a Muslim and even my name is Muslim – Ibrahim.’ Can it be accepted that that man has converted to Islam?” Answer: “Yes.” See CMNL, O. D., O II 431, Fetawa-i Abdurrahim Efendi, p. 73, no. 9.

Question: If Zeyd the Christian, who had completely and utterly denied the prophecy of His Holiness the Reverend Prophet – May God bless Him and greet Him – says “There is no other God but Allah and Mohamed is his Prophet!”, but he does not seem to be too convincing, may he be deemed Muslim according to the *Sheriat*?

Answer: Yes.

Question: If the infidels Zeyd, Amr, and Bakr went into the holy mosque in the evening and, imitating the *Imam* Beşr, did the evening prayer together with the other Muslims, can it be deemed, that the three have converted to Islam?

Answer: Yes.³⁴

Question: If Zeyd the infidel wound a white turban on his head and declared “From this day onwards I am Muslim”, can it be deemed that this man has converted to Islam?

Answer: Yes.

Question: If Zeyd the infidel wound a white turban on his head and got dressed as the Islamic people do, and Amr and Bakr asked him “What are you?” and the other one answered “I am Muslim”, can it be deemed that Zeyd has converted to Islam?

Answer: Yes!³⁵

This uncomplicated rituality about initiation is sufficient to communicate an initial, external form of religiousness, which should legitimise the individual in the Muslim public space. This is what conversion consists of, because how could we otherwise explain that at the same time the ontological environment remained unchanged, preserved in the mother tongue, in the elements of the Christian daily activities and religious traditions. Actually, in their larger part the Ottoman sources let us judge the essence and course of the conversion process only by formal features. Only the so-called *petitions for conversion to Islam* reveal another perspective for observations.

I remark that those documents reflect the administrative procedure related to providing Muslim clothes for the new converts or their monetary equivalent. It is not difficult to guess that the documents are not personal, but are made in the Ottoman offices on behalf of people who expressed their wish to become Muslims. This gave pretext to Bulgarian historiography to see in them unquestionable proof of an “indirect compulsion” to Islam in the form of an economic enticement, in the context of “the Ottoman policy on Mohammedanisation”.³⁶ But an unbiased analysis reveals a

³⁴ CMNL, O. D., O II 432. Fetawa-i Ali Efendi, p. 162, nos. 3, 4, p. 163, no. 2.

³⁵ Ibid., Fetawa-i Abdurrahim Efendi, p. 72, no. 4, p. 73, no. 6.

³⁶ Cf. Velkov, A., and E. Radushev. “Osmanski arhivni darjavni dokumenti za islyamizacionnite procesi na Balkanite 16–19 vek.” [Documents from the Ottoman State Archive on the Balkan Islamization Processes 16–19 Centuries]. In *Problemi na razvitiето na bulgarskata narodnost i naciya*, 61. Sofia,

remarkable fact: to the Ottoman administration, Islamisation was not as much of a religious as a social phenomenon.

From some narrative texts, it could be assumed that the ritual of conversion of infidels to Muslims was accompanied by ostentatious ceremony, which came to mark Islam's victory over religious delusion. Hans Schiltberger describes this Ottoman ritual in the early fifteenth century: "When a Christian wishes to become a heathen [i.e., a Muslim, my note], he must first raise one finger in front of all and say the words: 'La Illah Illallah, Mohammed is the true messenger of God!' When he says it, the heathens [Muslims] take him to their highest priest, and he must repeat the above said words before him and then denounce the Christian faith. Having done this, he is dressed in new [Muslim] clothes, and the priest wraps a white scarf on his head, so that everybody can see that he is heathen. Because all heathens wrap white scarves on their heads: Christians who were taken prisoners – blue ones, and Jews – yellow... And when the people gather, the high priest puts the one who has become heathen on a horse. The ordinary people must ride or walk ahead of him and the priests – behind him... When they take him all around the city, then they return him to the temple and circumcise him. If he is poor, they collect many presents for him..."³⁷

Evidently, everything begins with the denial of the old God and vowing to the new one – this is, so to say, the ecclesiastical aspect. Then the ritual should take an external form in compliance with the new religious content: the convert is dressed in Muslim clothes and circumcised. In the "conversion petitions," which occurred at a considerably later stage³⁸, those elements are present as part of the religious tradition, but with one essential nuance: bestowing with Muslim clothes or their monetary equivalent is not a matter of religious zeal and enthusiasm of the Muslim community, but a matter of the State Treasury (*Hazine-i âmire*).

Here, one should not rush to the conclusion that this is exactly what reveals the Ottoman rulers' aspirations for "Mohammedanisation". But let us answer whether in a historical type of a state where religious values ruled absolutely, institutions would remain indifferent to conversion and to the opportunity for their own religious space

1988; Str. Dimitrov, "Avant-propos." In *Sources*, edited by M. Kalitzin, A. Velkov, and E. Radushev, 30; Jelazkova, A. *Razprostranenię na Islama v zapadnobalkanskite zemi pod osmanska vlast* [The Spread of Islam in the Western Balkans Under Ottoman Rule 15th–16th c.]. Sofia, 1990, 182–186. Recently, A. Minkov attempted to examine these sources in a broader sense. He named them "*kisve bahası* petitions" (petitions for receiving the cost of Muslim clothes), thus directing attention towards the socio-economic nature of conversion reflected in those sources. Cf. Minkov, A. *Conversion to Islam in the Balkans. Kisve bahası petitions and Ottoman Social Life, 1670–1730*. Boston: Brill, Leiden, 2004, 145–192.

³⁷ Schiltberger, H. *Pâtepis* [Travel notes]. Translated by M. Kiselinceva. Sofia, 1971, 129–130.

³⁸ It is difficult to establish in the available sources when conversion to Islam became subject to administration through "conversion petitions." This is probably a consequence of the increase of conversion among the Balkan Christians from the beginning of the seventeenth century onwards. At least from that time, are the earliest known accounts of the State Treasury, related to the conversion of certain individuals to Islam. See also Minkov, *Conversion*, 220–230.

to be expanded by the influx of neophytes – obviously not. In this most precise meaning, the “conversion petitions” phenomenon expresses the state’s intentions to react administratively to an essentially religious phenomenon. With each act of conversion (a religious essence) before the state institutions, *social* problems immediately arise, which need to be solved:

– the new Muslims become a different category of taxpayers and no longer owe higher taxes in the form of the “infidel” *reaya* (in this meaning, every act of conversion to Islam inflicts damages on the Treasury);

– the converts’ proprietary-legal, hereditary, and marital status is changed;

– there occur real possibilities for a sharp change in the social status of the former “infidel” (they openly claim from the authorities to be socially re-categorised precisely because they are Muslims).

All this makes inevitable the State’s intervention in the conversion process, and it is not possible to avoid engaging in its administration. Still, ritual practices remain in the spirit of tradition (bestowing Muslim clothes, circumcision), but this now involves the financial resource of the state. This is how it looks in two of the numerous characteristic cases:

Your Majesty, my honourable and merciful Sultan, may Allah give You health! I, Your humble servant, am among the enlightened and learned people. I was vouchsafed to convert to Islam in Your presence, and I beg of You, My Lord, for the following: As I have so far not been given clothes, nor am I circumcised, please be so kind as to specify a suitable place for performing my circumcision and then to enlist me in Your glorious retinue. The order belongs to my honourable and merciful Sultan.

Your humble servant: the new Muslim, [former Christian] priest.

[Resolution of the Grand *Vizier*]: True! According to the statement, the cost of a full set of clothes for one person is to be issued. Order! 20 *Rebi el-evvel* 1133 [19.01.1721].

[Resolution of the Chief Treasurer]: An excerpt for the cost of a full set of clothes is to be made!

[Excerpt from the registers of the Chief Accountant’s Office]: Cost of a full set of clothes for 1129 [16.12.1716–4.12.1717] – 16 gurus; cost of a full set of clothes for 1132 [14.11.1719–1.11.1720] – 25 gurus; cost of a full set of clothes for 1133 [2.11.1720–21.11.1721] – 64 gurus.

[Second resolution of the Chief Treasurer]: the cost of a full set of clothes for one person is to be issued, as given in 1132 [14.11.1719–1.11.1720]. A Pay Order must be issued!

[Note from the Chief Accountant’s Office]: The Pay Order was issued on 15 *Rebi el-ahir* 1133 [13.02.1721].³⁹

³⁹ CMNL, O. D., fol. 1A, a.u. 6808, fol. 1.

And some more:

Your Majesty, my honourable and merciful Sultan, may Allah give You health! We are two poor strangers and until recently lived in a profound infidel ignorance. With God's help we decided to convert to the true faith and came to exult our faces before Your happy Sultan's foot, but one of Your humble servants told us: 'Go and have yourselves circumcised first, and then come again.' Three days later we had ourselves circumcised and with God's help we converted to Islam. Then we came [again] to beg for mercy and condescension before Your happy Sultan's foot. Exulting our faces before You, we beg of You to please give us the clothes, which are due to us. The order belongs to our honourable and merciful Sultan.

Your servants: Abdullah and Osman – the new Muslims.

[Reference from the Grand Vizier's Office]: Osman and Abdullah had arrived at the Lord's gates, in order to convert to Islam. They were first circumcised and then – granted the honour of becoming Muslims. The order belongs to Your Majesty, my happy, honourable, and merciful Sultan.

[Resolution of the Grand Vizier]: The cost of clothes for two persons is to be issued, as according to the law. Order! 29 *Safar* 1135 [9.12.1722].

[Resolution of the Chief Treasurer]: A Pay Order must be issued.

[Note from the Chief Accountant's Office]: The Pay Order was issued on 4 *Rebi el-evvel* 1135 [13.12.1722].⁴⁰

Obviously there are many reasons for drawing the conclusion that conversion was loaded with a deep social meaning for both the state and the converts. The procedure, which, despite the state's intervention, took the course of the tradition, furnished the new Muslims with the formal marks of identity – clothes, Muslim name, and circumcision – and they were immediately included in the Islamic society. In a spiritual aspect, however, the situation is not so categorically clear: it was seen in the examples with the *fetwas* how the "infidel" beliefs and traditions hide under the Islamic veil. Thus the changes in the spiritual core of the converts remained a problem for the future that will engage the religious zeal of the Muslim community for a long time.

All this gives reason to assert that conversion to Islam in the Balkans was a socially motivated process. The immediate inclusion of the converts in the Muslim society produced positive results: it reduced the fiscal burden; daily cultural restrictions were dropped; and, unthinkable in the recent "infidel" existence, possibilities for a social re-categorisation were revealed. We can follow this whole situation in a concentrated form in the "conversion petitions." And the most remarkable fact in those documents is that the new converts persistently strived for the cash equivalent of Muslim clothes or openly stated their claims for public service, mainly in the Janissaries ranks. As far as Janissary service is concerned, the unhidden strive for a social re-categorisation

⁴⁰ Ibid., fol. 1, a.u. 11053, fol. 1.

through religious conversion is clear. But how should we interpret the persistent desire to receive the cash equivalent of Muslim clothes?

Some time ago, when a long series of “conversion petitions” were discovered in the Ottoman Archive in Sofia, and they brought forward the phenomenon of a “cash equivalent of Muslim clothes”, I decided to find out what the new convert could purchase when he received from the Treasury the respective sum, which was most often 10 guruş per head in the early eighteenth century.⁴¹ Here are some of the current prices for that period: a cow, about 5 guruş; a calf, about 2.5 guruş; a team of oxen, 12 guruş; a small rural house without a yard, about 10 guruş. Thus, a family, after converting to Islam, could buy a decent farm with the money from the Treasury.⁴²

Actually, because a Muslim appearance could be acquired cheaply – a white turban around the head was sufficient (see the *fetwas*), it can be assumed that by giving the cash equivalent of Muslim clothes (*kisve bahası*), the administration supported in practice the religious tradition to give presents to the new converts (compare Schiltberger, *Patepis*). However, in order to avoid unnecessary suspicions towards the authorities that they encouraged the conversion to Islam by using financial bait, let us consider the following: Through those petitions, Islamisation was carried out exclusively in the capital, and therefore had a ceremonial character. The ostentatious conversions accompanied by giving money and often – by appointment to public service, was intended to demonstrate the Sultan’s Royal benevolence and humility before God since affiliation of “the infidel” to Islam was deemed as one of the most worthy deeds of Muslims. Thus it seems that the Treasury would pay the necessary sums for Muslim clothes or their cash equivalent for several hundred converts per annum⁴³, to secure the worthy acts on the road to the religion of the Sultan – the number-one Muslim in the state.

Outside the capital, conversion to Islam was far from such ceremonialism, the immediate monetary benefits from the “cash equivalent of Muslim clothes” were missing, too. This, however, does not mean that converts in the provinces were deprived of the social gains of the affiliation to Islam. In order to understand their social motivation, it is necessary to clarify the following problem: how were the first small groups of converts identified through their new religion during the initial stage of development of the conversion process? Specifically, who had to recognise them as Muslims and before whom were they to demonstrate their new religious affiliation?

In the social space of the Balkan towns and villages, the distinction between Muslims and “the infidel” was primarily useful to the fiscal authorities and local administration. There was no other way of evidencing one’s Islamic identity before the

⁴¹ See, for example, Velkov, A., Kalicin, M. and E. Radushev eds., *Sources Ottomanes*, doc. 16, 61, 96, 138, 139ff.

⁴² The current prices are excerpted from CMNL, O. D., S 41. Cf. Velkov and Radushev, “Osmanski”, p. 65.

⁴³ In 1679–1680 the State Treasury allotted a considerable amount of money as a “*kisve bahası*” to 379 new converts. See CMNL, O. D., fol. 1, a.u. 10817.

authorities, but with one's Muslim name, *entered into the tax registers*. This means that once entered into the fiscal registers with his new Muslim name, the convert already really belonged to the religiously determined social group of the Muslim *reaya* (Muslim taxpayers). Unquestionably, the most remarkable thing about this circumstance is the fact that it reveals the great importance of the economic argument for conversion to Islam. Therefore, it was not the Muslim sermon and visiting the mosques, nor the external attributes in the clothing, which in the end identified the individual as part of Muslim society. This once again reminds us that adoption of Islamic tradition and the building up of a new religious worldview (*Weltanschauung*), requires time – in the end, what made the former “infidel” feel a Muslim was his new position before the tax authorities and the local administration.

In the conversion through “petitions,” the economic argument acted through a monetary sum, which new Muslims received immediately. From then on, it depended on them personally, how they would socialise as Muslims. In the provinces and particularly in the rural areas, the meaning of this argument was different. Here, economic advantage did not consist of a single lump sum, but of the long-term prospect of a more favourable fiscal regime, designated for the Muslim *reaya*. In the beginning, it relieved the convert from the *Cizye* tax, which usually was 1 golden coin per taxpayer. This tax relief increased with the number of family members who converted to Islam. The amount of the land tax was smaller for Muslims, with differentiation of payments according to the proprietary state of the taxpayers; Christians not only paid more, but all Christians had to pay the same amount, whether rich or poor. The tax on agricultural produce was in the amount of 1/8 from the crop compared to 1/7 for “the infidels.” A number of restrictions of everyday life and of religious character, designated for the Sultan's Christian subjects, also fell away.

The unequal situation of the infidels in the Muslim state caused, under certain conditions, powerful impulses for conversion, which R. W. Bulliet called “social”, i.e., “conversion involving movement from one religiously defined social community to another”⁴⁴. In the course of this process, converts immediately acquired the marks of external identification with the new religion, and this seemed sufficient for them to be accepted in the Muslim community without reservation. The changes in the ecclesiastical essence, i.e., the building up of the individual as a *homo religiosus* of Islam, gradually took place at a later stage, which covered the offspring as well.⁴⁵ Thus, in the limelight, comes the social-economic causality of Islamisation.

⁴⁴ Bulliet, R. W. *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period. An Essay in Quantitative History*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1979, 33–34.

⁴⁵ The so-called domestic sources about forced Mohammedanisation reveal, in their own way, the acquisition of Islamic identity, and although their version is not confirmed by reliable sources, for many people it seems acceptable even today. The so-called chronicle stories about Mohammedanization in the Rhodope mountains report the incredible episode, according to which, in 1666, the local Bulgarians were forcibly converted to Islam within three months, and when “they became Muslims they started ruining monasteries and churches and ruined 218 churches and 32 monasteries. Those Pomaks did a lot of

One could dispute that such an approach brings forth a simplified notion of a process that is completely connected to the sacred and is based on the religious experience of the people of that epoch. It seems to me, however, that for the time being, the research practice is not capable of offering anything else, but exhausting the possibilities for analysis of the available Ottoman sources. This is not so unimportant, because in this way we approach the historical dimensions of the problem of conversion to Islam. Considering the fact that all possible plots of that epoch developed in a world burdened with religious values, I still dare to maintain that the social-economic argument, to a large extent, motivated the conduct of the converts. This should not look like the latest attempt of atheistic scepticism to challenge the notions of the sacred. Rather, this approach guides us towards a characteristic for Bulgarians and the Balkan people's state of religiousness, which, if considered, would shed additional light on the process of conversion to Islam during the Ottoman epoch.

damage." See. Nachov, N. "List ot hronika, nameren v selo Golyamo Belovo." [A Sheet of a Chronicle found in the Village of Golyamo Belovo]. *Bulgarski pregled* V, no. 2 (1898): 149–151. It is difficult to imagine how the Bulgarians, who had so quickly identified themselves with the new religion, employed such enthusiasm in the destructive element, ruining their former sacred places. Obviously such "source material" is good for nothing else but to leave us with the thought that a society is capable of permanently changing its religious identity only because a *yataghan* is pressed to its throat. Compare Eaton, R. M. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*. Los Angeles, London: Barkley, 1993, 114–115.