ISLAM IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

by
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The first Turkish peoples to convert en masse to Islam were the Bulhgar Turks of the middle Volga region and the Turks under the Karakhanid dynasty in the area between Kâshgar and Lake Balkash in Central Asia, in 921 and around 960 A.D. respectively. It was not a coincidence that these were the regions in the Turkish world where commerce and urban life were most developed, and Muslim caravan trade and merchant colonies had long flourished. As representatives of the then most civilized part of the world, these Muslim traders must have impressed the Turkish ruling class as conveyors not only of luxury goods but also of refined manners and high cultural values. What I am trying to say is that Turkish conversion to Islam was the result of a long process of acculturation before it took a definite and massive form with the formal decision of a ruler In 921 the ruler of the Bulghars asked the Caliph Muqtadir for 'ulamâ to teach the Bulghars Islam and for experts to build fortresses. The conversion decision of the Karakhanid ruler seems also to have had political implications since it entailed the conquest of Transoxiana from the Samanids who were known for their zeal in defending and expanding Islam among the steppe peoples beyond the Syr Darya river The Karakhanid and Bulghar kingdoms were to become the centers of the most sophisticated and orthodox forms of Islamic culture. As early as the eleventh century, important religious works in Arabic and literary works in Turkish were composed under the Karakhanids.

It was not, however, these Turks, Muslim Bulghars and Karakhanids who were destined to play a major role in the history of Islam, but the Oghuz-Turkmen tribes of the steppes beyond the Syr Darya and Khwarizm. These tribes were mostly Islamized through the ghaza activities of the Samanids and through religious propaganda from disciples of the Sufi orders. Like the Abbasid Caliphs before them the Samanids employed large numbers of Turks as mercenaries in their armies, and this practice became a most effective means of Islamization. Thus from the beginning, ghaza, holy war, and popular mysticism gave

Turkish Islam its original and permanent features. The employment of steppe Turks (as slave warriors or mercenaries) by the Caliphs and the Sultans from the ninth century accelerated with the changing historical circumstances of the eleventh century. The growing demand for their services gave rise to a mass migration of the Oghuz tribes into Eastern Iran. Now, organized under their own chiefs as mercenary or raiding units, many of these Oghuz groups began to pursue their own interests and at the same time to identify themselves increasingly with Islam. Eventually, one of them, Toghril Beg, son of Seljuk, was able to unite under his leadership large bodies of Oghuz and to supplant the Ghaznavid Sultanate of Eastern Iran, a state founded by a Turkish slave-mercenary group dedicated to ghaza expeditions into the Indian sub-continent.

By bringing under his control the easternmost provinces of the Caliphate and delivering the Caliph of Baghdad from the domination of the heterodox Buyids, Toghril could lay claim to being the temporal power of the Caliphate and the protector of the true Islam. Indeed, under the Seljukids, the independent nature of the Sultanate, the formal embodiment of temporal power, became a fact of political life, thus inaugurating Turkish political supremacy that was to endure in the Islamic heartlands down to the twentieth century. The initial Turkish role in Islamic history continued to aim at unifying and protecting Islam through continuous ghaza, holy war, against the initially successful counter-offensives of Christendom, both Byzantine and European, and at combating schismatic and heretical movements by organizing Islamic teaching in the madrasas and upholding universally adopted religious and cultural precepts. Most of the Turkish Muslim dynasties realized the neccessity of achieving these policies in order to maintain their own rule in the Islamic word. That is, they sought legitimization through the espousal of the "right" cause. It has also been suggested that with the reestablishment of stable political power and military vigor, the Islamic society under Turkish rule was enabled not only to survive but even to experience a regeneration.

What is historically ascertained is that the Turks introduced and superimposed a new concept of state and law based on the twin elements of strong, independent state-power and political action for the public good. The traditions and beliefs current in the Turkish Empires of Central Asia supported the view that the state subsisted through the maintenance of the **törü** or **yasa**, a code of law laid down directly by the founding Qaghan. They thus identified political with legislative power. In Islam the Turkish dynabties endeavored to create an independent public law in support of their absolute political power. To this end they received the cooperation of Muslim legists who reconciled the new concept of state

according to such Islamic principles as **maslaha**, public good, or **'urf**, custom. Under the Caliphate the same principles were invoked to accomodate the Caliph's administrative regulations, within Islamic law. Al-Mawardi, the famous Muslim jurist (died 1052) justified the necessity of secular power, **kuwwa al-saltana**, and the Sultan's authority to make **qanuns**, as a means of ensuring the public good and of implementing the **shari'a**, the Islamic religious law itself. Now, with the Turkish dynasties, the concept of independent state law was greatly strengthened. In the states founded by the Turks in Central Asia, Iran, Anatolia and India, decrees issued by the rulers on matters of state organization, military affairs, taxes, land tenure, and penal law created a rich corpus of state law entirely independent of the **shari'a**. In the same period the revival of the Iranian political traditions strengthened this trend. Since the first Turkish states in Islamic territory were founded in Iran, the native Iranian bureaucracy in Turkish service became instrumental in this. In fact this bureaucracy strove to revive the old Iranian traditions vis-a-vis the Caliphate and the **shari'a**. Subsequently in the states founded by the Turks in the Islamic world, the conflict between state law and the **shari'a** overlaid a politico-social struggle among the bureaucracy, the 'ulamâ and the ruling military class.

The Ottoman state, an offspring of the Seljukid empire, appears to have gone farther than any previous Islamic state in asserting the independence of state affairs and public law vis-a-vis the religious law. Mehmed the Conqueror, the true founder of the Ottoman empire and promoter of a centralized and absolutist imperial system, further strengthened the principle of the ruler's legislative authority. He was the first ruler in Islamic history to promulgate codes of law based exclusively on sultanic authority. A contemporary Ottoman historian, Tursun Beg, interpreted the "good order", **nizâm**, of this world as necessarily requiring the absolute coercive authority of the sultan and particularly the sultan's right to promulgate decress of his own single will. But the early years of his successor Bayezid II saw a strong reaction by the upholders of the **shari'a** against the Conqueror's untrammeled legislative activity. Although Suleyman the Lawgiver was inclined to assert the **shari'a's** control over state law, it preserved its independence under him.

The Sultan's independent decision affected even the field of religious law. It was a long established practice in Islam that in case of a serious dissention among the religious authorities on certain legal points the ruler might, in public interest, in order to avoid rifts within the community, decree that the precepts of one specific **madhhab** (school of Islamic law) be followed. Thus under the Seljukids and the Ottomans it

was made obligatory for the judges to the rules of the Hanafi school in their courts. Such a decision greatly affected the direction taken by later legal development and practice since the Hanafi school was characterized by its broader principles to allow the state to introduce measures to cope with newly arising problems. Let me give you an example. Abû Su'ûd, **Shaykh ul-Islam** of Suleyman the Lawgiver, regarded the use of money to establish a religious endowement entirely acceptable to the **shari'a,** whereas Mehmed Birgivi, his opponent, regarded it as utterly illegal on the basis of the opinions of other schools of law. Since the economic conditions encouraged money endowments and their abolition would destroy many already established charitable institutions, the state supported the Shaykh ul-Islam on his stand. Also it should be pointed out that reforms which proved to be of vital necessity for the existence of the Ottoman empire, and, by interpretation, for the good order of the Islamic community, were to be introduced only under broad principles of the Hanafi school by the decision of the ruler. Thus it was no wonder that major modernization reform in modern Islam started and found its most radical implementation in the Ottoman empire. Before taking up this point in more detail I would like to broach briefly on the rise of the ghaza movement and regeneration of the Caliphate with the foundation of the Ottoman empire.

With the rise of the Seljukid Empire in the Middle East (comprising Iran, Irak, Syria, and Palesine) a mass emigration of the Oghuz tribes from Central Asia into the Middle East started, an historic phenomenon of great importance entailing structural changes in the ethnic, social and political set-up of the region for subsequent centuries. Hastening to get rid of these nomads, the Seljukid administration drove them out to the borderland agaist the Byzantine Empire. As ghazis, warriors for Islam, on these frontiers they first penetrated inland as small raiding parties and then under able leaders, they were organized and conquered the whole of Asia Minor down to the Aegean Sea when in 1071 the Seljukid Sultan defeated a Byzantine imperial army at Mantzikert. Highly mobile, the Oghuz now poured in growing numbers into Asia Minor from the East, occupving pasture lands in the Central Plateau and mountain ranges and providing a high military potential for further expansion and conquest. The Crusaders found Turkish Asia Minor difficult to pass through hecause of the fierce resistance of these Oghuz tribes.

First, principalities had emerged under the leaders of the conquests and finally an ousted branch of the Seljukid dynasty had been able to create there a Sultanate on the model of the great Seljukid Empire in Iran. During the first decades of the 13th century, Seljukid Anatolia be

came a promised land in the Islamic world with its developig international trade, thriving cities, and highly sophisticated social and intellectual life. The greatest mystics of the Islamic world, Muhyiddin al-'Arabi and Djalaluddin Rumi found refuge i nthe Seljukid capital Konya. Now the warlike Oghuz Turkmen tribes were concentrated on the mountains of the frontier zone against surrounding Christian lands, When the Seljukid state in Anatolia was subdued by the Mongols in the middle of the thirteenth century these frontier Turkmens resisted them. Repressed in their struggle again and again by the Mongol forces they finally turned their efforts to conquer the Byzantine provinces in Western Anatolia. They eventually established with the aid of the miltary leaders and ulamâ who joined them from flourishing small states in this frontier zone, and dedicated themselves to continous ghaza activity in the Aegean and the Balkans. At the beginning the Ottoman state was simply one of these ghazi principalities. From the middle of the thirteenth century, the frontier Turkmens collaborated with the Mamluks of Egypt in a common effort to save Islam from the domination of the pagan Mongols. In actual fact it was the Mamluks and Turkmens of Anatolia which were to be considered in the Islamic world as representing the only military power capable to face the Mongol armies. Thus it was the Mongol threat, then definitely more dangerous than the Crusades, that prepared the rise of the typically military states of the Mamluks and the Ottomans, dominant powers in the subsequent period of Islamic history later on. The Ottomans annexed the Muslim states in the region, including the Mamluks to form a common front now in the face of growing challenge of Christian Europe. It was mainly their ability to adopt modern war technology and to become a sea power that enabled the Ottomans to assume this tremendous task. This new Muslim empire was in the last analysis an achievemnt which Islamic culture, in its creativeness and adaptability made possible. On the other hand the Ottoman supremacy in the Islamic world sought its legitimization in the revival of the idea of a universal caliphate under a new form.

Now let me give some details on the complicated subject of the Ottoman Caliphate. According to one tradition, at a ceremony held in the Aya Sofya Mosque in Istanbul, the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil officially transfered to Sultan Selim, upon Selim's conquest of Egypt in 1517, all rights to the Great Caliphate. In fact, however, there is no contemporary record of Selim's receiving or claiming to receive the Caliphate from al-Mutawakkil. It seems that in order to support certain political goals, the tradition originated much later in the 18th century. In reality, Selim or his son Suleyman must not have felt that his claim

to supremacy in the Islamic world required such a transfer of rights. However, what is historically established is that Selim then took the title of "servitor of the two Holy Sanctuaries" Mecca and Medina, the most exalted title at that time for a sultan claiming preeminence. In any case, the concept of the Caliphate at that time was different from what it was in classical Islam under the 'Abbasids.

In their studies on the Caliphate, Barthold and Arnold showed that the classical concept the Caliphate as formulated under the 'Abbasids of Baghdad, namely one **umma** (community) and the Caliph as commander of the faithful and as successor to the Prophet, radically changed in the 13th century, especially when the Mongol invasions left the Muslim world without a Caliph and partitioned, with an important part of the area ruled by pagan Mongol rulers. Subsequently some Sunni legists revised the theory of the Caliphate to say that the Caliphate had really only lasted for thirty years after the death of Muammad and that the Caliph need not be of the Quraysh, the Prophet's tribe. By the turn of the 14th century, Ibn Khaldun recognized that the function of Caliph could be assumed by the sultans of countries widely separated from one another. Thus the practice became widespread that any independent Muslim sovereign could assume the title **Khalifa** (Caliph). From the 14th century on the Ottoman Sultans, too, used the title **Khalifa** to signify an independent Muslim ruler. In the reign of Suleyman the Lawgiver, however, the question was posed as to whether it was licit for the Ottoman Sultans to use the titles of **imam** and of Caliph of all the Muslims, in the absence of any lineal descent from the Prophet's tribe. According to Lutfi Pasha, Suleyman, as the effective ruler, (with God's help) of all Muslim lands from Central Europe to the Yemen, "is the Imam of the Age in fulfilment of the relevant stipulation relating to the maintenance of the Faith and guardianship of the homeland of Islam". This is reminiscent of Selim's previous invitiation to the Shirvan-Shah to accept Selim's "Exalted Caliphate", **Khilafat-i 'Ulya** and to have his name mentioned in the Friday prayer in the Shirvan-Shah's lands on the grounds that Selim was the supreme Sultan who protected the pilgrimage routes and the holy places, Mecca and Medina. In other words, as the Ottoman Sultans considered it their task to defend the world of Islam and to protect the holy sanctuaries, both of which were matters of common Muslim concern, they claimed to hold the predominant position in Islam Although they did not descend from the Prophet's tribe, they maintained that God had chosen them for this task. In this fashion the new conception of the Caliphate came to be based on actual power and influence with God's support, and eventually served as a policy aimed at establishing Ottoman mastery over the world of Islam. The idea was obviously derived from the idea of holy war, the

cornerstone of the Ottoman state itself. In the decline period, when the Empire lost its actual power and ability to protect other Muslim lands, the Sultans relied more on the theoretical conception of the Caliphate stressing their rights over all Muslims as universal Caliphs. The idea of universal Caliphate was employed for the last time during the First World War when the Ottoman Sultan and Caliph called all the Muslims to **djihad,** holy war, against the Allied powers.

A few words should be added here about Islam in the Ottoman Empire, particular Ottoman religious policy, and the spread of Islam. As a ghazi state owing its success completely to its espousal of the role of guardian of Islam, the Ottoman state paid special attention to abiding by the stipulations of the religious law in all aspects of life. The state law too was considered as based on Islamic principles and in complete conformity with the religious law. Thus, in the first one and a half centuries of its history the vizirs ,in charge of state affairs and the organization of the newly conquered lands, were mostl yof 'ulamâ origin. **Kadis,** Muslim judges, could be promoted to become governors and vizirs during this period. The Sultans always showed great concern for justifying their conduct in terms of the **shari'a.** For example, in order to justify war against their Muslim rivals the Ottoman Sultans often demanded that **muftis** give **fetwas** (written opinions based on the religious authorities). The question was asked as to whether or not it was legal to fight Muslims who attacked the Ottomans and thereby prevented the ghazis from fulfilling their duty of holy war. In addition war against heretics was justified by religious authority. After the foundation of the Ottoman state with all the trappings of a typical Middle East state, the **Kizilbash,** Oghuz-Turkmen nomads or peasants who retained their own special organization and adhered to an extremist heretical order, remained on the Anatolian plateau and mountains as a large group alienated from the Ottoman state and society. When, in the 16th century, they gave their allegiance to the Safavid Shahs of Iran, they were held to be the most dangerous enemies of the Ottoman state and were mercilessly persecuted. On the basis of the religious law the Ottoman 'ulemâ approved their suppression and even enslavement although according to Islamic law no muslim can be enslaved. It was, indeed, the dangerous struggle against the Kizilbash sect on the one hand and the Ottomans' Caliphate's policies on the other that made the Ottoman Sultans, from Suleyman the Lawgiver onwards, increasingly concerned with the more stringent application of the religious law.

Parallel to these phenomena, popular fanaticism was heightened by a group of preachers, so called **faqihs** following to teachings of Mehmed Birgivi, who employed the teachings of the Hanbali school of Muslim

jurisprudence to attack the various innovations introduced into Islam since the death of the Prophet. The **faqîh** regarded such practices as holding ceremonies to commemorate the dead or visiting tombs to seek aid from the deceased as contrary to authentic Islam. In their belief, mysticism, all non-Islamic sciences, and even Islamic theology were forms of blasphemy. At the same time they attacked the luxury and extravagance of the ruling classes and railed against the injustices and lax morals of the age. In 1656 in a sheme to suppress all dervish hospices in Istanbul their efforts to strike religious heresy at its roots found considerable support among poor **medrese** students and humble tradesmen. At this point the high 'ulemâ and the bureaucratic class in general opposed them and claimed that they undermined state and society and sowed dissent among the people. Finally, Köprülü Mehmed was able to quiet them and prevent civil war only by exiling the **faqihs** from Istanbul. The theoretical basis of the dissent was the question o f"innovation", bia'a in Islam. Later on the contention would re-emerge first as a militant religious movement of the Wahhabis of Arabia in the 18th century and as an intellectual-religious movement called **Salafiyya** against the innovations which were invading the Islamic society in the 19th century as a result of the acceleration of westernization.

The Ottomans not only considerably extended the realm of Islam into the Balkans and Central Europe while maintaining their position in the Mediterranean, they also caused the spread of the Muslim religion in the Balkans. According to the estimates made in the middle of the nineteenth century the population of European Turkey, then including Serbia, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovima, Macedonia, Thessaly, Thrace, and the Islands was about 12 millions. One fourth of it, that is a population of three millions were Muslims, Anatolian Turks being 800.000 in this total. In 1878 when Turkey in Europe was reduced to Albania, Thessaly, Macedonia and Thrace there were 5 million and 355.000 indabitants. Two millions and 601.000 or hardly more than half were Muslims and in this total Muslim Turks were 834.500.

In fact the Ottoman state followed an Islamization policy no more than any other Muslim state always remaining scrupulously within the bounds of the Islamic **shari'a.** In their policy of rapid expansion, they readily granted the Islamic **aman,** amnesty to the submitted Christian populations, which guaranteed them (under the status of **dhimmis**) the protection of the Islamic state for their lives, property and freedom of cult. Only in case of open rebellion they exposed themselves once again to the harsh conditions which the **shari'a** stipulated for the enemies of Islam. Furthermore, desiring to make his capital the center of a universal

empire, Mehmed the Conqueror officially recognized the autonomous religious administration of the non-Muslim communities by establishing the Greek Patriarchate, Armenian Patriarchate, and Jewish Grand Rabbinate in Istanbul. No mass Islamization by force is recorded in Ottoman history since the religion does not approve of it. Indeed, according to the shari'a even a slave cannot be forced to convert to Islam. However, as a socio-cultural process Islamization was a continuous phenomenon in the Ottoman society. First of all it should be remembered that the non-Muslim **re'aya** always remained second-class citizens in the Islamic society in spite of the guarantees of **dhimma** status. Thus, in spite of the restrictions on dressing, riding etc. The non-Muslims sought to identify themselves with Muslims in their life style, in order to escape social discrimination. Of course Muslim-Ottoman culture also had an immense attraction and prestige among the subject nations, and even among Europeans who livedlong enough amidst the Ottomans conversions were not rare.

The Ottomans, of course, encouraged conversions. For example, money was granted to help the converts dress as Muslims from a special fund called **nev-Muslim akchasi,** the fund for new Muslims, at the imperial council. The new convert was led in ceremony on a horse along the streets of the city to receive the joyous congratulations of his fellow Muslims. The most widespread social factor leading to conversion was the marriage of Muslim men to non-Muslim women. In Islamic law there was no stipulation against marrying a non-Muslim female who, in fact, was permitted to continue the practice of her faith even though married to a Muslim. Murad II's wife, Mara Sultan, daughter of the Serbian despot, had her special place of worship in the Palace and remained a Christian until her death. The custom had found particular favor among the Ottomans since the time of the frontier ghazis. The **Kadi** records of the newly conquered lands bear testimony of its widespread practice frequently followed by the woman's conversion.

Enrollment in the military organizations and Palace services of Christian boys of the so-called **devshirme,** levy boys, was the principal state institution in which one can detect "forced" Islamization. It was argued that Christians converted after the descent of the Qoran were not entitled to the status of **dhimmis,** and that most of the **dhimmis** in the Balkans had been conquered by force, thus the levy of the Christian boys was held to be in conformity with Islamic law. An Ottoman historian, Sa'deddin, denied forced Islamization on the grounds that children were born with no religion, and levy boys became Muslim as a result of their contact with Muslims and not through force. At any rate the scrupulous Ottomans sought to justifh the levy on the basis of the religious law. But

we can assert that the **devshirme** was not, as Gibbons puts it, a device to convert Christian subjects. This does not, however, prevent Sa'deddin from stating that in 200 years over 200,000 Christians were converted to Islam merely through the **devshirme** process.

It has frequently been suggested that the strongest pressure leading to mass conversions to Islam was the aggravated tax burden on non-Muslims in the form of the **djizya,** Islamic capitation tax and dues imposed by the orthodax church. The **djizya** was imposed upon non-Muslims at the rate of one gold ducat generally throughout the Ottoman Empire, but it was considerably increased from the end of the sixteenth century. The Christian peasantry living in poverty stricken areas found it especially difficult to pay this cash tax, and it has been argued that mass conversions took place precisely in such mountainous, unprivileged regions as Albania, Bosnia, Rhodopes, and Crete, the four **principal regions where** converted Muslims speaking their native tongues formed the majority or a substantial part of the population by the first decades of the 19th century. If we take into consideration only the historical, social and cultural factors, the following observations can be made about the Islamization of native populations in the Balkans. First, conversions occured among members of the native military class, who were incorporated into the Ottoman provincial cavalry army as **sipahis** in possession of their lands as **timar** and of their privileges. Documentary evidence from the Ottoman state papers shows that Islamization among this group was at heart a socio-cultural process in some cases involving three or four generations. Individual converts among the **re'aya,** ordinary tax-paying subjects, are occasionally recorded in the Ottoman survey books particularly among townsfolk or groups performing some service for the state. Here, too, frequent social contact with Muslims apparently played a major part in these sporadic individual conversions. They are registered in the survey books as new Muslims. Also, groups of converts known as **Ahhariyan** most probably converted under the pressure of the frontier ghazis were to be found on the frontier zones in the early centuries of Ottoman expansion. They do not seem to have enjoyed, among the Muslims, the same esteem and privileges of true believers.

In the period of the Ottoman decline employment of Christian mercenary troops from Albania and Bosnia in the Ottoman army apparently became one of the main factors in the spread of Islam in these two areas. In Bosnia, Islam became the dominant religion of the native Slav population with Sarajevo as its cultural and commercial center by the 18th century. For the Islamization of Bosnia it has been suggested that the Bogumils persecuted by the Catholic Church under the Bosnian kings,

adopted Islam en masse upon the Ottoman conquest. On the evidence of the Ottoman survey books it is now demonstrable that Islam spread here gradually by several stages over a long time, as in Albania. In the early period of the conquest, many members of the lesser military class of the Bosnian kingdom and some aristocratic families were incorporated, under the Ottoman reconciliatory expansionist policy, into the Ottoman **timar** system. In 1489 there were, in the **sandjak** of Bosnia alone, about 4,500 Muslim households as against 25,000 Christian households. In the sixteenth century as cities and towns expanded they became centers of Islamic culture and further Islamization. In 1953 the population of the People's Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Yugoslavia was 2,847,790 out of which 911,191 were Muslims, that is over 32% of the whole population.

From the first decades of the 17th century on, the harmony and mutual trust that had existed between the Muslims and non-Muslims was upset partly because of heavier taxation and the widespread abuses of the local authorities, and partly because of the growing tendency among the Christian **re'aya** to cooperate with the crusading plans of Christendom. It is interesting to observe that while Muslims and non-Muslims used to belong to and work together in the same crafts in the earlier period, they now tended to have their own separate craft guilds. This is also the period in which the Catholic missions settled and extended their activities in the Ottoman Empire. In the 18th century growing commercial and cultural ties between Europe and the Christians of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of national movements in the Balkans in the following century threw the Islamic set-up of the Empire into disorder. Ottoman efforts to create a new kind of loyalty among the non-Muslim populations by furthering the idea of Ottomanism, that is equality before the law of all Ottoman subjects, as a kind of secularized state, did not take root. These developments, however, made a strong impact on the Muslim-Turkish society itself and prepared the way for the rise of the secular national state of Turkey in the twentieth century.

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