CHRISTIAN CONVERTS TO ISLAM IN THE EARLY MODERN
MEDITERRANEAN WORLD

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It is very hard to calculate how many Christian captives and slaves were to be found at any one time in the Ottoman Empire in the early modern period, but a total of up to 100,000 seems a reasonable estimate, with perhaps 35,000 in the North African territories of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli. Those territories (which came under Ottoman suzerainty in the first half of the 16th century) are the best documented where the conditions of life of the slaves are concerned: we know about them from first-person narratives, from reports by Christian priests, and especially from interrogations by Inquisition tribunals of people who returned from North Africa, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.

Slavery was a pan-Mediterranean phenomenon, of course, and many aspects of it were the same in Christendom and the Islamic world. But there were some differences in the conditions of the slaves. The North African societies were more geared to the assimilation of their captives – especially young men who showed some talent. Many of the leading “Barbary” corsairs were themselves West European former slaves; and for such assimilation to take place, conversion to Islam was required. On the other hand, these societies were more tolerant of the practice of the “other” religion: Christian priests could minister to the slaves in the “bagno” (slave-prison), and could be involved in arranging their ransom. Above all, they could urge them to remain true to their Christian faith. The competing pressures on these captives from both sides were, therefore, rather greater than those that applied to their counterparts, the Muslim slaves held in Christendom.

Many Christian captives did not remain true to their faith. The Flemish priest Jean-Baptiste Gramaye, in Algiers in 1619, estimated that 200 converted to Islam every year. And the records of Inquisition tribunals in Italy, Spain and Malta record thousands of cases of people who, on their return to Christendom, were tried for apostasy. Over the last 40 years, a rich historical literature has developed, presenting and analysing these cases: especially valuable are studies by Lucia Rostagno (1983), Bartolomé and Lucile Bennassar (1989), Anita Gonzalez-Raymond (1992) and Isabel Mendes Drumond Braga (1998). Some general conclusions emerge from this rich body of evidence.

Most of the “renegades” claimed that they had converted under duress. We know that forced conversion was not in fact a general policy in the Ottoman world, and indeed some masters positively discouraged their slaves from converting, as it would lower their value in the market.

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Conversion did not bring freedom, but it precluded a subsequent sale to another Muslim owner. Nevertheless, there were some cases where pressure was applied. Consent to conversion was not regarded as necessary for children below the age of puberty. In North Africa there was a policy of trying to retain people with special skills (shipwrights, armourers etc.); and it was known that circumcision would render a European very suspect on his return to Europe. Also, a Christian captive accused of a serious crime – for example, having sex with a Muslim woman – could evade the death penalty by converting; this was not a case of direct pressure to become a Muslim but the effect was the same.

On the positive side, many slaves may have hoped to obtain better conditions of life by converting. A promising young man, once converted, might be freed and – since this was not a status-bound society – married to his master’s daughter. Beyond the ranks of the slaves, there were also Christians who went voluntarily to these territories in search of a better life: soldiers absconding from the Spanish presidios, for example, or Sicilian peasants who saw the non-feudal Ottoman world as a land of opportunity, rather as their late-19th-century descendants would look to America.

The Inquisition tribunals developed a whole series of standard questions in an attempt to find out how reluctant, or how positively motivated, the “renegades” had been in their acceptance of Islam and their later persistence in it. Most of these questions concentrated on what we would view as externalities: “did you dress in the Muslim way?”, “did you avoid eating pork?”, “did you attend prayers in the mosque?”, “did you eat meat on Fridays and Saturdays?”, and so on. This approach, so striking to modern eyes, seems to have matched the ordinary understanding of religion held by the great majority of these people.

And yet, at the same time, the Inquisition encouraged those whom they interrogated to make a distinction between external practice and inner belief. The most basic question asked by all the tribunals was: “did you adhere in your heart to Islam?”, or “did you believe in your heart that you could be saved in it?” Not surprisingly, most people answered “no”. And in some cases, their testimony gives a sufficiently detailed account of their attempts to lead a secretly Christian life beneath their newly-acquired veneer of Islam to suggest that they had indeed continued as crypto-Christians. Despite the increasing rigorism of the Catholic Church on the basic principle that internal belief should be embodied in external action, the priests who ministered in the North African territories did allow some compromises on this issue, with the hope of facilitating an eventual abjuration of Islam.

In a minority of cases, people admitted that they had indeed believed in Islam. This was more common, understandably enough, among those who had been converted when they were children. Some people, even if converted at a later age, told the Inquisitors not only that they were genuine Muslims, but that they had been born to Muslim parents. In some cases this may have been a deliberate (but risky) strategy: they hoped to be ransomed, and in any case they knew that a native Muslim did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition. But there were some who seem to have been assimilated so deeply by the society they had joined in North Africa that they could no longer identify themselves as Christians at all.
In Christian writings of this period we find two stereotypical views of “renegades”. One saw them as ultra-hostile to Christianity; Antonio de Sosa called them “much fiercer and more cruel enemies of the Christian faith than the proper Moors and Turks”. The other portrayed them as people of no religion at all, dissolute Epicureans who cared as little for their new faith as for their old one. There is, of course, some overlap between the two types. When the handbook for inquisitors by Eliseo Masini (1625) gives examples of things said by renegades, it quotes them as ridiculing holy water, making fun of religious images, and saying that Christians stupidly worship a bit of wood.

In the remarks of some renegades one finds an underlying sense of impatience with most of the apparatus of organised religion – an attitude closely related to the popular anti-clericalism that was part of Catholic culture at the grass-roots level. This could go with a kind of reductive scepticism about various aspects of Christian doctrine and practice. In some cases these attitudes propelled 16th-century Catholics towards Protestantism; but they could also be conducive to a more receptive attitude towards Islam, a notably less priest-ridden religion which also seemed to impose a simpler set of doctrinal requirements. And, in addition, we need to bear in mind the degree of sheer ignorance of Christian doctrine among the rural population (especially that large part of it that was illiterate).

When we talk about religious conversion today, we naturally think of it as a process involving a huge and momentous change. Yet there is a danger in applying such a model to mostly illiterate peasant farmers and fishermen of the 16th and 17th centuries. We need to ask ourselves: what were they converting from? And for some of these people, the answer must be: “not much”. This should affect the way in which we think about the whole process. The standard modern studies fail to see this; they talk as if Christianity and Islam were two great blocks, requiring a giant leap to be made between them. That implies that strong and special reasons were needed for making the leap – and that if some people fell down into a no-man’s-land of irreligion between the two, that was somehow a consequence of the extreme nature of the situation.

Such a picture was promoted by the Catholic Church at the time, for obvious reasons. The Church also used the language of exterior versus interior, to build up an idea of Christianity as essentially located in beliefs and spiritual commitment. Christians who thought like that did exist but they were not very typical. For many people, religion consisted almost entirely of externalities, and they just wanted fewer burdensome ones. For many, too, beliefs were limited, fragmentary, and already eroded by folk scepticism; there was little to be lost in abandoning these.

For some people – perhaps almost all of those who went voluntarily to North Africa, and quite a few of those who went involuntarily – converting meant not so much gaining a new religion as ratifying a religious attitude that they already held. They gained very little in terms of Islamic beliefs; but equally they did not lose a great amount of Christianity, as the quantity and quality of what they had was really very slight. Perhaps this explains the animus of some of the accounts of them by Christian priests. For when early-modern Catholic clerics looked at these “irreligious” renegades, what I think they saw, in a slightly distorting, lightly Islamicising mirror, was nothing other than the Caliban face of many of their ordinary Christian flock.