Turning "Rumi"

Conversion to Islam, Fashioning of the Ottoman Imperial Ideology, and Interconfessional Relations in the Early Modern Mediterranean Context

In a letter sent to the Ottoman grand vezir Rüstem Paşa around 1555, a group of elite Ottoman imperial infantrymen (janissaries) complained that their recently appointed head officer (*ağa*) was an unjust, ignorant "Hungarian infidel who converted to Islam only yesterday and whose breath still reeks of pork."[1] Although the authors of this letter were themselves converts to Islam, recruited through child levy (*devşirme*) among Ottoman Christian subjects in the Balkans and Anatolia, they apparently did not find it problematic to bring up the charge of their *ağa*'s recent embrace of Islam and his supposed ignorance of Muslim faith as a disqualifier for his successful service. Echoes of a similar sensibility toward conversion are also found in a polemical treatise on Islam and first-person account penned in 1556–57 by a Hungarian convert to Islam named Murad b. Abdullah.[2] Perhaps in order to preempt a similar charge as the one leveled at this janissary *ağa*, in his treatise Murad recounts how he was inspired to embrace Islam through learning and reading about Muslim faith. This, he implies, endowed him with great moral capital to criticize what he perceived as lack of piety in Ottoman society.[3]

It is by now commonplace to assert that the early modern Ottoman Empire was remarkably integrationist toward converts in comparison to its Christian contemporaries—there were no "purity of blood" (Sp. *limpieza de sangre*) laws or Inquisition in the Ottoman domains. Converts were integrated into Ottoman society through a variety of patronage mechanisms, given opportunities for upward social mobility, and in the period

between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries were preferred to born Muslims for positions in the Ottoman government. However, that does not mean that conversion to Islam did not pose a challenge to Ottoman Muslim society's constantly evolving sense of community and orthopraxy. The examples given are just two among many Ottoman sources authored by born Muslims and converts to Islam in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that use the notion of conversion to advance particular visions of what it meant to be a good Muslim in the age of growing polarization between Sunnis and Shi'ites and increasing complexity of social relations in a bureaucratizing and expanding Ottoman Empire.

Nor were Muslim authors the only ones within the Ottoman domains producing narratives about conversion that sought to define the boundaries of their confessional and political community at this time. In the 1560s, an Orthodox Christian monk from Sofia (today in Bulgaria) recorded a story about a certain local Orthodox Christian named Nikola who converted to Islam while drinking with his recently converted friends but later apostatized and was executed according to Ottoman Islamic law.[4] Nikola's story is one of many neomartyrologies—accounts of the suffering and death of Orthodox Christians who converted to Islam and later reneged, only to be executed by Ottoman authorities for apostasy or blasphemy—produced in the period between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. These narratives warned the Orthodox Christian flock against interaction with Muslims (even former friends) lest such relationships result in conversion. Neomartyrologies also instructed those who lapsed and converted in how to atone for their sin by volunteering for martyrdom, thus defying the long-standing Orthodox Christian tradition that frowned upon those who deliberately sought to "witness" for Christ. Besides encouraging resistance to conversion and thus setting firm boundaries between Christianity and Islam, the neomartyrs and narratives about them provided the Orthodox Christian Church with a powerful polemical argument against their Catholic and Protestant contemporaries who claimed that a good Christian could not live under Ottoman rule.

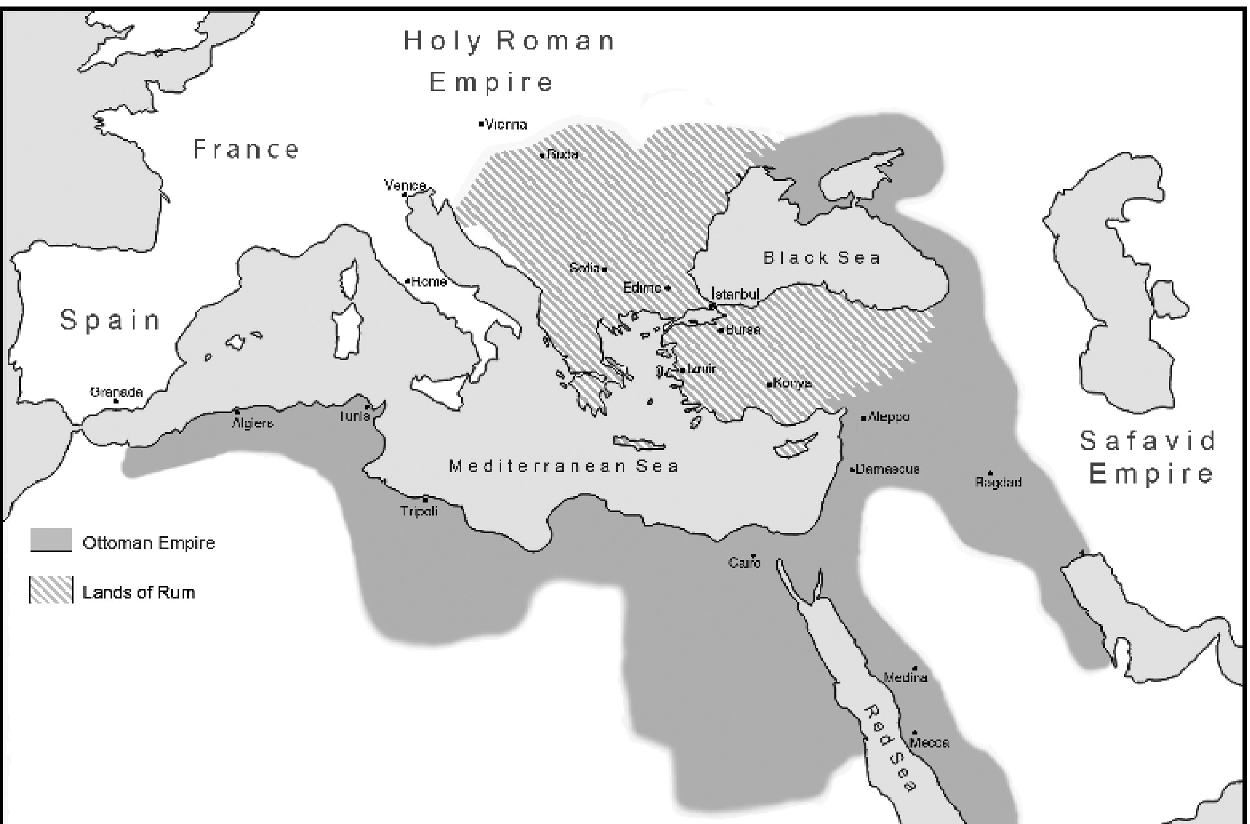
Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries Ottoman Muslim and Christian authors and institutions produced a rich corpus of narrative sources like these contesting the meaning and implications of conversion to Islam. These polemical narratives articulated different visions of imperial and communal religious politics, challenging and redefining in the process the boundaries of the authors' confessional entities. The present study explores these competing and constantly evolving concepts of conversion in the early modern Ottoman Empire by drawing on heretofore unknown Ottoman self-narratives of conversion to Islam, little-studied personal miscellanies of Ottoman literati (*mecmūʿa*),

"catechisms" of Muslim faith (*ʿilm-i ḥāl*), hagiographies of Muslim holy men (*menāḳıbnāme*, *vilāyetnāme*), Ottoman chronicles and histories, Christian captivity narratives, Orthodox Christian neomartyrologies, Western travelogues and ambassadorial accounts, and Jesuit missionary reports. These attempts to delineate what it meant to be a Muslim or a Christian in the Ottoman Empire transpired in the context of a broader, Mediterranean-wide age of empire building, confessional polarization, and interimperial rivalry between the 1450s and 1690s.

The debates on conversion and religious boundaries did not have the same intensity or overtones throughout the Ottoman domains, and they draw attention to the need for a more nuanced understanding of the empire's cultural geography in the period between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. The narratives to be discussed come for the most part from the Ottoman "Lands of Rum" and were produced by "Rumis." Although in early Islamic Arabic and Persian literature the term *Rūm* referred to the "Romans" (*Rūm* = Rome), especially Eastern Romans or Byzantines, and their lands, following the Turkish settlement in Asia Minor in the eleventh century the same term also began to be used for Muslims inhabiting the former Byzantine territories.[5] In the Ottoman context the term continued to evolve, and by the fifteenth century the Ottomans used the expression "Lands of Rum" (*diyār-ı Rūm*) to designate their domains in Anatolia and the province of Rumeli (*Rūm ili*; literally, the "Land of Rum") that was made up of the growing conquests in what is today the Balkans.

The term "Rumi" (*Rūmī*), however, did not refer only to the inhabitants of Rum but had already attained further cultural implications in pre-Ottoman times. More specifically, it came to denote a particular segment of society—"those who spoke Turkish (preferably a refined kind of Turkish, but not necessarily as their mother tongue) and acquired their social identity within or in proximity to urban settings, professions, institutions, education and cultural preferences." As a sociocultural category, "Rumis" differentiated themselves from the "Turks," a term that primarily had associations of "ethnicity-not-transcended and attachment to tribal ways and cultural codes."[6] Mustafa Ali (1541–1600)—one of the most prominent sixteenth-century Ottoman literati—eloquently sums up the development of "Rumi" as a cultural category different from but related to "Turk" in the Ottoman context. In his *Essence of History* (*Künhü'l-Ahbār*), Mustafa Ali writes:

> Those varied peoples and different types of Rumis living in the glorious days of the Ottoman dynasty, who are not [generically] separate from those tribes of Turks and Tatars . . . are a select community and pure, pleasing people, who, just as they are distinguished in the origins of their state, are singled out for their



The Ottoman Empire, ca. 1600

> piety, cleanliness, and faith. Apart from this, most of the inhabitants of Rum are of confused ethnic origins. Among its notables there are few whose lineage does not go back to a convert to Islam . . . either on their father's or their mother's side, the genealogy is traced to a filthy infidel. It is as if two different species of fruit-bearing tree mingled and mated, with the leaves and fruits; and the fruit of this union was large and filled with liquid, like a princely pear. The best qualities of the progenitors were then manifested and gave distinction, either in physical beauty, or spiritual wisdom.[7]

According to Mustafa Ali, Rumis embodied the history of the Ottoman territorial expansion, cultural diversity, and integration under the umbrella of Islam, with conversion playing a central role. Although official Ottoman documents did not use the term "Rumi" to refer to Ottoman Muslim subjects from the Lands of Rum, the latter (both converts and others) often identified themselves as "Rumi" (besides the more generic "Muslim") to people from other regions, and were in turn known as Rumis by other Muslims.[8] As Cemal Kafadar suggests, "Rumi" was a relational category shaped by society and evolved with the changing social and political conditions in the Ottoman Empire and around it.[9] As such, its meaning was wider than that of the more official term "Osmanlı" (Ottoman), which continues to confound historians of the Ottoman Empire because it is unclear to whom it can justifiably be applied beyond the members of the ruling dynasty and the military-administrative elite. However, both "Osmanlı" and "Rumi" had social and cultural implications surpassing "Türk" (Turk)—the term consistently used by Westerners to describe any Muslim from the Ottoman Empire. Although the meaning of "Türk" was not entirely negative—after all, even the language of the elite of the empire was called Turkish—or static, to an urban Muslim living in the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire the term tended to call to mind the nomadic tribes of Anatolia and invoke notions of boorishness.

Nevertheless, in the cultural usage the primary opposite of "Rumi" was above all "Acem" (*'Acem*), which most frequently referred to Iranians or Safavids but could also designate a foreigner (as in *'acemioğlan*, the official term for *devşirme* recruits who were "sons of foreigners" or non-Muslims), and at times "Arab" (*'Arab*), a term that could denote anybody from nomadic Bedouin to speakers of Arabic regardless of their ethnicity to other broad social categories.[10] Although in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the categories of "Rumi," "Acem," and "Arab" served mostly to mark cultural competition and affinity, by the late sixteenth and especially in the seventeenth century the sources began to register increasing tensions among them, particularly along the Rumi/Acem but also Rumi/Arab lines. These tensions stemmed from a variety

of sources, including the increasing religio-political polarization between Sunni Ottomans and Shiʿa Safavids and changing methods of recruitment for the Ottoman military and administrative ranks.[11] It is therefore important to reflect on the observations of the Venetian ambassador (*bailo*) Lorenzo Bernardo in his report (*relazione*) from 1592 (despite factual mistakes he makes about beliefs of the "Persians"). Bernardo writes:

> In former times, Serene Prince, all Turks held to a single religion. . . . But now the Turks have not a single religion, but three of them. The Persians are among the Turks like the heretics among us [Christians], because some of them hold the beliefs of Ali, and others those of Omar, both of whom were followers of Muhammad, but held different doctrines. Then there are the Arabs and Moors, who claim they alone preserve the true, uncorrupted religion and that the Turks from *Grecia* [Rumeli], as they call these in Constantinople, are bastard Turks with a corrupted religion, which they blame on their mostly being descended from Christian renegades who did not understand Muslim religion.[12]

This book explores how the process of conversion to Islam related to these and other aspects of gradual confessional and political polarization in Ottoman domains through texts from the Lands of Rum produced in the period between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this sense, I do not claim to provide an empirewide perspective but to reflect on the debates stemming from the areas of the empire most densely inhabited by both non-Muslims and new Muslims and most acutely affected by the ongoing process of conversion. For this reason, although it takes into consideration Anatolia, where the process of conversion to Islam reached back to the eleventh and began to ebb by the sixteenth century (most significantly shaped by factors predating the Ottomans), the book privileges Rumeli, where conversion became a new and important phenomenon in the fourteenth century with the appearance of the Ottomans.[13] That is not to say that throughout the period in question conversion to Islam did not occur in other parts of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the significant Christian population centers in the Levant. However, it was a phenomenon of limited proportions (compared to Rumeli); and in this context, conversion to various denominations of Christianity and encounters with the Catholic and Protestant missionaries become interesting topics of research, especially beginning in the seventeenth century.[14] Importantly, Rumeli was also the location of the seat of the Ottoman government where imperial policies were crafted in dialogue with information from other regions of the empire. The book will explore how the heavy presence of converts from Rumeli and the wider Mediterranean region in the Ottoman capital and among the ranks of the Ottoman government influenced the articulation of imperial policies, in relation to both the empire's western and eastern neighbors in the period under discussion.

Although not all parts of the Lands of Rum were located along the shores of the Mediterranean, I treat them as part of the larger Mediterranean zone—what Braudel called the "Mediterranean of the historian," which stretches far beyond the shores of the sea.[15] In a recent study, Adnan Husain reflects on Braudel's monumental work and suggests that "what renders the Mediterranean zone unique might be [the] *longue durée* of inter-religious contact, interchange, and even competition among the universal claims about history and confessional identity experienced consequentially by Muslims, Christians, and Jews during formative periods of their—far from static—late antique to early modern traditions."[16] It is my contention, drawing both on primary sources and recent research, that the nature of early modern Ottoman history or of the phenomenon of conversion cannot be understood without paying attention to the ongoing dialogue of Ottoman cultural discourse with the Mediterranean heritage of the Lands of Rum, in all its religious, linguistic, political, and cultural complexity.[17] As Ottoman geographic literature suggests, by the sixteenth century the Ottomans came to consider the Mediterranean—the geographic center of the ancient Roman Empire—as central to their imperial authority and legitimacy, particularly as the sultans' aspirations to join the two Romes (Rome and Constantinople) and establish a Universal Monarchy reached its zenith in the era of Sultan Süleyman (1520–66).[18] Although the dreams of an Ottoman-controlled Mediterranean recede after the late sixteenth century, as Evliya Çelebi's writings show, the sea continues to play an important role in Ottoman imperial ideology and cultural imagination throughout the seventeenth century. This ongoing fascination with the Mediterranean culminated in the Ottoman conquest of Crete from Venice in 1669, which gave a new boost to the Ottoman elites' aspirations to the glory of the empire of old, if only for a few years.[19]

Contact among the Religious Cultures of the Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean: A Framework for Inquiry

Recent post-Orientalist scholarship acknowledges that the sustained contact among religions in the Mediterranean zone has resulted in numerous mutual influences that shaped and continue to shape each of the confessional communities involved. However, contact among religions continues to be examined mostly within a framework that tends to dehistoricize the debate over dogma, or through the anthropological categories of religious practice such as holy places or sacred journeys that localize and schematize the issue of interconfessional contact.[20] In

this way, the larger shared conceptual frameworks that resulted from the long history of interaction and "mutually informing dialectics of Mediterranean religious cultures" are easily overlooked.[21] The reconstruction of these conceptual frameworks is a task that new scholarship aspiring to integrate the study of religion into historical inquiry will have to undertake. In the following chapters I initiate this inquiry by focusing on the period between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries when shared conceptual frameworks were woven at least partly out of expectations of the Last Days, concerns with the spiritual renewal and purification of religion, the language of Neoplatonism and human experience of the divine, and aspirations to a Universal Monarchy. Depending on the historical context and actors involved, these shared frameworks were at times deliberately constructed and maintained, but at times they also existed without the knowledge of those who operated within them.

For instance, the first interconfessional polemical encounter in the Ottoman context on record is the debate between Gregory Palamas (d. 1359), the bishop of Thessaloniki and a great Byzantine mystic who spent close to a year in Ottoman captivity in 1354–55, and the so-called *Chiones*, most probably Jewish converts to Islam who were members of the entourage of the second Ottoman ruler (*emīr*) Orhan (r. 1326–59).[22] The *Chiones* informed Palamas that they had "made themselves Turks" after learning that Turks also adhered to the Ten Commandments given to Moses.[23] They discussed with Palamas Christian concepts of divinity and the nature of Christ. The *Chiones* found the ideas that Christ was God although he was born a man and that God could be contained in the womb of a woman particularly contentious. Attending the discussion himself, *emīr* Orhan inquired why Christians do not accept and love Muhammad, despite the fact that Muslims love and honor Jesus (Tr. İsa) and his mother, to which Palamas responded that Jesus was the last prophet and that Christians cannot accept anyone who came after.[24] The same question was posed to Palamas by a Muslim learned man whom he encountered while roaming freely around Ottoman İznik (formerly Nicaea) and who asserted that Christians intentionally removed the evidence of Muhammad's coming from the Gospels. Palamas diplomatically concluded that it was important to reflect on what had been said, while another Muslim observed that the time would come when they would all be in accord.[25] Both parties understood what was implied—according to the eschatological tradition shared by Christians and Muslims, the crowning event of Jesus' Second Coming and of the Day of Judgment will be the conversion of infidels to one true faith that will unite the world. The question was, of course, which faith was the true faith that would guarantee salvation and entrance into paradise.

Palamas's letter to his congregation in Thessaloniki describing these encounters illustrates how easily he and his interlocutors found common points to discuss and contest. It also previews some of the key topics of religious polemics that will resurface in the Ottoman period: the validity and authenticity of the scriptures, the nature of Jesus, the relationship between Jesus and Muhammad, and the consequences of the Day of Judgment. Of course, many of these topics were tropes from Muslim and Christian polemical literature, already long established by the fourteenth century.[26] However, what makes Palamas's polemical letter to his congregation special is that it was based on a face-to-face encounter—a rare experience for a Byzantine polemicist based in or around Constantinople—that transpired in a remarkably respectful atmosphere in the Ottoman domains during the early stages of Ottoman expansion. In the fourteenth century, Byzantine anti-Muslim polemics, which had thrived since the seventh century, underwent a change as a result of particularly intense relations with the Ottomans, as both foes and allies.[27] Palamas's letter to his congregation in Thessaloniki and the record of his debate with the *Chiones* changed the tenor of the Byzantine anti-Muslim treatises into a more informed, if not more conciliatory, one.[28]

However, even more interesting than the common topics Palamas and his interlocutors did discuss are the topics that they did not touch upon but could have. Gregory Palamas was not just one of the most famous Byzantine theologians but also the foremost proponent of hesychasm—a time-honored eremitic style of Christianity based on the pursuit of inner quietude (*hesychia*) in which victory over passions allows the monk to contemplate and experience the divine.[29] Palamas followed in the tradition of Christian Neoplatonists, most important, Pseudo-Dionysius, but he shunned the latter's belief that God is unknowable and beyond sensory experience. Palamas's hesychast theology explored the limits of biblical anthropology by emphasizing the potential of man, who was created in the image of God, to physically experience divine "energies," which Palamas distinguished from divine "essence."[30] The experience of divine grace came to a hesychast through regulating breathing, fixing the eyes on one point, and repeating the uninterrupted monologic prayer in which one invokes Jesus and remembers God until spirit descends into the heart.[31] Those hesychasts who managed to see God within themselves reportedly saw him in the form of light, such as the light that appeared to the apostles on Mount Tabor, which denoted a prelude to the glory of Jesus in his Second Coming.[32] Hesychasm became popular in Byzantium in the late thirteenth century but attained the status of mainstream Orthodoxy through theological debates in the mid-fourteenth century.