

Tijana Krstić. *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*.

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Tijana Krstić's study offers a fascinating perspective on conversions of Christians to Islam in the territory of Rumeli, today known as the Balkans. In this area, conversions became more frequent after the territory was integrated into

the Ottoman Empire in the fourteenth century. The author emphasizes how important it is to study issues related to conversion to Islam in a broader Mediterranean context. Consequently, she proposes to use the concepts of confessionalization and empire building as heuristic devices in order to study the connected histories of the Ottoman Empire, European powers, and the Safavid Empire from the 1450s to the 1690s. A further central and innovative element in the author's analytical framework is the rejection of the notion of Islam as a homogeneous religious tradition. Instead, Krstić approaches Islam in the Ottoman Empire as "a historically emergent field of practice and debate" (19). By taking into account a large variety of narrative and archival sources in Ottoman Turkish, Latin, Italian, German, Serbian, Bulgarian, and French, she is able to analyze the early modern debates about conversions to Islam on a transcommunal and transimperial level.

In the first chapter, Krstić analyzes catechetical works, hagiographies of holy men, and dogmatic literature written in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with a focus on the phenomenon of Islamization. Through the dissemination of these didactic texts, young and novice Muslims were instructed on how to become pious Muslims. As regards the diffusion of didactic texts, Sufi scholars were particularly active brokers. Krstić concludes the first chapter by underlining that until the sixteenth century groups from different socioeconomic backgrounds vied for recognition as the one interpretative authority of Muslim faith in the Ottoman Empire.

In the second chapter, the author examines how the Ottoman Rumi identity emerged. The mixing of Muslims and Christians in the conquered territories of Rumeli led to forms of syncretism that could be expressions of politicized difference and of contact and reconciliation. In the narratives of the fifteenth-century converts to Islam, Christian warriors, nuns, and priests were very prominent figures. By combining narrative and archival sources, Krstić shows that forms of syncretism and anti-syncretism were social strategies.

In the third chapter, Krstić focuses on the struggle for universal rule between the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Safavid Empires. This struggle was enhanced by a "millenarian conjunction" (76) at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century. The narratives produced by Christian converts to Islam dealt predominantly with issues related to the true religion, the identity of the messiah and the Day of Judgment. One central argument in the polemical narratives of Christian converts was that Islam was a purified version of Christianity and, as a consequence, that a true Christian was a Muslim.

In chapter 4, Krstić presents five self-narratives of conversion to Islam. Whereas there are only a few such narratives in premodern Islamic history, the number of self-narrations in Ottoman Turkish grew considerably in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The authors of the narratives were literate men who had been educated in theology and Christian polemical tradition. They used this knowledge in their narratives in order to claim the superiority of Islam and to postulate allegiance to the Ottoman sultan.

The concluding chapters 5 and 6 focus on different aspects of martyrdom as an important element of confessional contestations between Muslims and Christians of different denominations. Narratives of martyrdom were promoted and diffused by members of the Orthodox Church as examples of opposition against conversion to Islam. Krstić shows that during the “age of confessionalization,” tolerance and coexistence in the Ottoman Empire were continuously negotiated and modified in a complex interplay of communal, imperial, and international conditions.

Tijana Krstić accomplishes her task of contextualizing and historicizing the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in a broader Mediterranean context in a most impressive manner. Her extraordinary language skills enable her to crisscross European and Ottoman sources, and thus to have a broad perspective on conversion narratives. Only the application of controversial concepts such as confessionalization and social disciplining could have been discussed in more depth. Nevertheless, Tijana Krstić’s book is an important contribution to the research of conversions to Islam.

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