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Hidden Believers, Hidden Apostates:
The Phenomenon of Crypto-Jews and
Crypto-Christians in the Middle-East

HIDDEN BELIEVERS, HIDDEN APOSTATES: THE PHENOMENON OF CRYPTO-JEWS AND CRYPTO-CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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INTRODUCTION

The term "crypto-religious" is meant to designate the status of people whose real religious views and practices are not in accordance with their official religious affiliation and who frequently may seek to hide this fact from the larger public. "Crypto-Jewish" and "crypto-Christian" groups have been observed in most different periods and regions of the Islamic world. They appeared in Egypt in the early 11th century (as a result of the wave of oppression by the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim) and North West Africa in the 12th century. Cases of Crypto-Judaism were reported for the Yemen of the 12th century and Iran of the 17th and 19th centuries. In the Ottoman Empire, crypto-Christians were spotted on Cyprus and Crete, in Albania and Kosovo, Macedonia and North East Anatolia. We also hear of crypto-Christians in the Aegean island group of the Dodecanes, in Bulgaria and Bosnia. In the city of Bukhara in Central Asia crypto-Jews were to be found in the 18th and 19th centuries. One may also be familiar with the Jewish 'Messias' Sabbatai Zvi in the 17th century, whose crypto-Jewish followers still form today in Turkey the group of the so-called *Sabbateans*.¹

Crypto-religiosity is not reserved to the Islamic realm. By far the most notorious case of a crypto-religious group is located in the Spain after the Reconquista. Crypto-Jews (*Marranos*) and Crypto-Muslims (*Moriscos*) had converted under pressure to Christianity, but continued to practice their former religions in hiding. Nonetheless, attempts to conceal one's true faith have been common within the Muslim community itself. The vast majority of Islamic states – as a prominent example we may mention the Ottoman Empire – were bound to the Sunni tradition.² The

¹ See also the article by Marc Baer in this volume that is devoted to the prominent role of the Sabbateans in Salonica around 1900.

² The word *sunna* which is the origin of the term "Sunnite" means the way the

Shia, the major opponent of the Sunna, allowed every Shiite to use the technique of pretense (*taqiyya*), i.e. a version of *reservatio mentalis*,³ as protection from persecution by the Sunni state. We might therefore talk here of 'Crypto-Shiites'. My essay, however, will focus on the existence and representation of crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians in the Muslim Middle East.

The phenomenon of crypto-religious groups in the Middle East is not related either to a peculiar character of Islamdom in its function as the predominant religion in a state or society,⁴ nor to Judaism and Christianity which are here cast into the role of a minority religion.⁵ We know that the Jews in the Islamic medieval world and the early modern age had mostly a better life than their fellow believers in Christian Europe.⁶ One should, however, resist the temptation to compare the status of crypto-religious groups in the Christian realm with that in the Muslim world and take it as a 'proof' of the moral superiority of either Islam or Christianity.⁷ For Christian Europe, there are at all events only a few

Prophet acted, i.e. his statements and actions which were exalted to legally binding cases of precedent. *Sunna* means ultimately the claim to represent orthodox Islam. See here, as for all other Islamic key terms and concepts, *Encyclopædia of Islam*, 2nd edition, Leiden 1979–2002 (further on given as *EI*²).

³ Ignaz Goldziher, "Das Prinzip der takija im Islam," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 60 (1906): pp. 213–226; Etan Kohlberg, "Taqiyya in Shi'i Islam," in *Secrecy and Concealment. Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, eds. Hans G. Kippenberg, Guy G. Stroumsa (Leiden, New York, Cologne: Brill 1995), pp. 345–380.

⁴ One may look, for example, at the status of crypto-Christians in Japan in the 19th century. See Thomas W. Burkman, "The Urakami Incidents and the Struggle for Religious Toleration in Early Meiji Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 1 (Nagoya 1974): pp. 143–216; Abe Joshiya, "From Prohibition to Toleration. Japanese Government Views Regarding Christianity 1854–1873," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 5 (Nagoya 1978): pp. 107–137. See also Malcolm Burr, "The Code of Stephen Dušan, Tsar and Autocrat of the Serbs and Greeks," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 28 (1949–1950): pp. 198–217, 514–539, here p. 200, where article 9 of the code from the year 1349 is devoted to the problem of "half-believers".

⁵ The Zoroastrian religion managed to hold on in Islamicized Iran for quite some time, particularly at the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, by, amongst other means, feigned conversion to Islam. See Bertold Spuler, *Iran in frühislamischer Zeit. Politik, Kultur, Verwaltung und öffentliches Leben zwischen der arabischen und der seldschukischen Eroberung 633 bis 1055* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1952), p. 195. On Crypto-Hindus in Islamic India see J. Bentley, *Old World Encounters. Cross Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 1993), p. 119.

⁶ This question is dealt with by Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross. The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994). On pp. 3–14 he describes in detail the development of the historiographical debate over the fate of the Jewish community in Islam.

⁷ See here for prominent voices amongst others Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and*

hints to crypto-Christian groups; For example Jews in Italy at the end of the 13th century converted at least formally to Christianity in order to save their lives. These *neofiti*, being newly christened, or *mercanti*, so called because of their mercantile activities, were apparently extorted for another two centuries as a clearly recognizable group clinging to its original religion.⁸ Another example is provided by the forced conversion policy in Tsarist Russia in the 18th and 19th centuries, which caused the emergence of what one might call 'crypto-Muslim' groups.⁹

As we will see, the term crypto-religious may not be used thoughtlessly as a self-evident concept. Studying crypto-religious groups (or whatever the true nature of groups labelled as crypto-religious may be) we are confronted with two fundamental heuristic predicaments.

First, we will never know as much about the crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians in the Muslim world as about the Marranos and the Moriscos, since we have nothing in the Islamic world to equal the protocols of the Christian Inquisition that was so immensely (and almost pathologically) interested in these issues.¹⁰ Since crypto-believers sought not to

Religious History of the Jews, vol. III VIII: High Middle Ages, 500–1200: vol. III: Heirs of Rome and Persia (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 121; a fuller assessment may be found in Shlomo Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza. Vol. II: The Community* (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 1971), p. 289: "In conclusion we may say that the position of the Christians and Jews under Islam during the period and within the area considered here was both safeguarded and precarious."; Claude Cahen, s.v. 'dhimma', *EF* 1983, pp. 227–231, here p. 230: "Islam has, in spite of many upsets, shown more toleration than Europe towards the Jews who remained in Muslim lands." William M. Brinner, "Karaites of Christendom – Karaites of Islam," in *The Islamic World. From Classical to Modern Times. Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis*, eds. C.E. Bosworth et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1989), pp. 63–69, Brinner explains the completely different development of the Karaites in the Near East and in Eastern Europe by the different status of Jews, being respected in Islam on the one hand and suppressed as a marginal group in Christian Europe on the other.

⁸ Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, s.v. 'anusim', in: *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. III, Jerusalem 1972, col. 170–174, here col. 171. The term *anus* (a Jew who is forced to convert) is, in its extended meaning, close to the term 'crypto-Jew'.

⁹ Michael Khodarkovsky, "'Not by Word Alone': Missionary Policies and Religious Conversion in Early Modern Russia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (Cambridge 1996): pp. 267–293, pp. 281, 283 and passim Khodarkovsky does not use terms such as 'Crypto-Muslim', but from his exposition it becomes clear that at least forms of a crypto-Islam might have come into being amongst the forced converts to Orthodox Christianity.

¹⁰ T.W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam. A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (London, 1935), pp. 9, 69, 93, 179. Contrary to the available large corpus in the Christian sphere on conversion, Muslim writing on Muslim preaching and conversion activities is meagre. The invisibility of the expansion of Muslim religion probably

be noticed and to shield off themselves and their communities, their existence, or at least the size and the length of time of their presence, may only be guessed at. Therefore such groups are often mentioned in written accounts *en passant*,¹¹ or what is told about them is based on shaky oral tradition.¹² Historical sources are silent about the phenomenon of crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians. For the organs of Muslim states crypto-religious groups simply did not exist. The overwhelming majority of reports on crypto-religious groups in the Middle East stem from European outsiders to the societies of the Middle East. Is a crypto-Jew or a crypto-Christian thus merely the product of the European Orientalist mind? Is the concept of the crypto-Jew and crypto-Christian another one of Europe's obsessions with Islam and the Middle East?

Second, when studying the phenomenon of crypto-religious groups, cases of crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians are represented as individual and single phenomena. For example, we have a rich body of historical writing, primarily in Greek, on the crypto-Christians of the Ottoman Empire (particularly in Anatolia), though these groups are described as a purely idiosyncratic phenomenon.¹³ One will detect a similar approach in the historiography of the Jewish diasporas of the Muslim Middle East. Bojan Aleksov shows in his contribution to this volume how in Serb historiography of the 19th and 20th centuries the discussion on Islamization is deeply penetrated by nationalist paradigms.

In all three cases a national approach is the guiding principle of the research work; and indeed, in popular and academic historical

owes to the innate relationship of Islam and trade, see J. Bentley, *Old World Encounters* (1993), pp. 125–129.

¹¹ Crypto-Jew and crypto-Christian as a concept are rare in scholarly works. One example is to be found in the cumulative index of S.D. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. VI, 1993.

¹² F.W. Hasluck, "The Crypto-Christians of Trebizond," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 41 (London, 1921): pp. 199–202. See in particular footnote 15. Hasluck reports on a community of 400 crypto-Christians between Hagia Sophia and the Serail Wall in Istanbul. Shlomo Deshen, 'Community Life in Nineteenth-Century Moroccan Jewry', in Shlomo Deshen, Walter P. Zenner (edd.), *Jews among Muslims. Communities in the Precolonial Middle East* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 98–108. Stavro Skendi, "Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under the Ottomans," *Slavic Review. American Quarterly of Soviet and East European Studies* 26.2 (New York, 1967): pp. 227–246.

¹³ For literature on this topic see the *Türkologischer Anzeiger*, published since 1975 and available in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlands*, since no. 10 (1984) as a separate issue. For a bibliographical introduction to the history of the Jews in Islam see Mark R. Cohen, "The Jews Under Islam from the Rise of Islam to Sabbatai Zevi: A Bibliographical Essay," in *Sephardic Studies in the University*, ed. Jane S. Gerber (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995), pp. 43–119.

writing there has never been an attempt to describe crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians in a comparative perspective – a venture that will be undertaken in this essay. My aim is to raise the question as to whether a pattern of comparable political, social or religious motivations or conditions might emerge from the analysis of these various crypto-religious groups.

WHAT IS A CRYPTO-JEW, WHAT IS A CRYPTO-CHRISTIAN?

The most general definition a crypto-Jew or a crypto-Christian in Islam is a Jew or a Christian who has converted to Islam, or whose ancestors have converted to Islam, but who continues to secretly adhere to his original religion, whether in a rather unconscious continuation of religious practices or in the form of a conscious loyalty to the familiar religion.¹⁴ The recognition of the religion of Islam could be more than a purely external shell, but Islam certainly did not hold the exclusive loyalty of the converts. When we talk of crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians in Islam, Islam may contain two meanings. First, the conception Muslims have of their religion and the things they do in this context,¹⁵ and second, as a collective term for a wide variety of historical formations which share the characteristic that Islam or an expression of Islam was the dominant religion of the respective communities and was in that sense supported by the state.

Gauri Viswanathan has rightly argued that “to engage in discussion about belief, conviction, or religious identity in a secular age of post-modern scepticism is already fraught with infinite hazards, not least of which is the absence of an adequate vocabulary or language.”¹⁶

¹⁴ For other terms apart from crypto-Jew or crypto-Christian, see Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart. Aus den Quellen neu bearbeitet*. Vol. VI: *Geschichte der Juden vom Aufblühen der jüdisch-spanischen Kultur (1027) bis Maimunis Tod* (Berlin: Arani, 1996 (reprint of Leipzig: Leiner 1896)), p. 157 and p. 269, footnote 3; Georg Jacob, *Die Bektaschijje in ihrem Verhältnis zu verwandten Erscheinungen* (Abhandlungen der Philosophisch-Philologischen Klasse der Königlich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften) Munich 1909, p. 29 ff; and Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

¹⁵ Roy P. Mottahedeh, “Toward an Islamic Theology of Toleration,” in *Islamic Law Reform and Human Rights*, eds. Tore Lindholm, Kari Vogt (Proceedings of the Seminar on Human Rights and the Modern Application of Islamic Law, Oslo 14–15 February 1992) (Copenhagen et al.: Nordic Human Rights Publications, 1993), pp. 25–36.

¹⁶ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold. Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. XIV.

Pondering the question what to think about and what to do with the term 'crypto-religious' enables us to understand the blurredness and multifariousness of some central concepts related to conversion.

(1) In the case of crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians we are faced with a double formal conversion—from the original religion to Islam, from Islam back to the original religion. Each religion would view the other as defectors who, after committing apostasy, have returned to the true faith. In the eyes of the Muslim community the meritorious act of conversion to Islam is obliterated by the falling back to the original religion. Conversion and apostasy are intricately linked to each other. Incomplete conversion or intermediateness between two religions might also be interpreted as the superficial conversion without true conviction, and thus no real conversion at all.

(2) The existence of crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians is linked in many cases to a blurring of boundaries between the religions. Crypto-Jewish and crypto-Christian groups appear to have done particularly well in syncretistic surroundings where many religious practices, such as pilgrimages to holy shrines, could be shared by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. However, syncretism can only be observed when religious or state authorities define what shall be regarded as orthodox. Therefore, syncretism must be defined by external authorities. Although caution is indispensable when using the term syncretism,¹⁷ it cannot be easily replaced. As in the case of conversion vs. apostasy, orthodoxy vs. syncretism are opposites yet closely bound together and dependent on each other.

(3) Why did Muslim rulers tolerate the existence of crypto-Christian or crypto-Jewish groups, after they had—as it is reported for many cases—forced them to convert to Islam?¹⁸ From the viewpoint of any religion which holds a dominant position in a state or community, crypto-religious groups are objectionable and even abominable. In Europe the combination of 'crypto' and a confessional denomination was used as a kind of battle cry. Lutheran states saw the politically

¹⁷ J.H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters* (1993), pp. viii, 15 f., 19, 62, 76, 100. Bentley stresses with great justification the importance of syncretism in the conversion process, but by explaining all conversion processes that are not intelligible as syncretism he turns the word into a kind of all-purpose explicator.

¹⁸ Nehemia Levtzion, "Toward a Comparative Study of Islamization," in *Conversion to Islam*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion (New York, London: Holmes & Meier, 1979), pp. 1–23. Here p. 11: "Although it is difficult to assess the relative importance of forced conversions in the general process of Islamization, they seem to have weighed less than is implied in non-Muslim sources and more than is admitted by Muslims."

and culturally active minority of the Calvinists as a threat and acted with brute force against so-called crypto-Calvinists.¹⁹ Is the relatively frequent occurrence of crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians in Islam thus to be seen as the result of compulsion or of toleration?

Crypto-religious groups with their manifold paradoxical features represent a particularly good starting point for critically reviewing well-accepted terms such as conversion, apostasy, syncretism, or toleration. In the following discussion of the three pairs of opposites—conversion vs. apostasy, syncretism vs. orthodoxy and compulsion vs. toleration—cases of crypto-Jews or crypto-Christians are presented in greater detail.

CONVERSION VS. APOSTASY

A prominent feature of Qur'anic regulations concerning non-Muslims is the acceptance of the "people of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*), that is the Jews and Christians (and to a lesser extent the Sabians and Zoroastrians). Directives in the Qur'an for the behaviour towards non-Muslims are equivocal, but positive assessments predominate. In some passages faith is represented as a kind of natural religion, which is inborn to all people, and which shows that mankind is inherently good.²⁰ Some passages in the Qur'an recognise other religious groups and permit their further existence; the exhortation to tolerate other monotheistic religions is most prominent in the phrase "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256). Jews and Christians were granted in the newly established Islamic state the status of a protected but also subjugated group (this status being called *ḍimma*). In return for toleration and protection, the non-Muslims had to pay a special tax, the *jizya*.²¹ Conversion to Islam may have in the first Islamic century appeared less attractive because becoming Muslim as a non-Arab meant to be relegated to the secondary status of a client (*mawla*).²² Sometimes, during the course of Islamic history, conversion may have been barred by the state out of fiscal

¹⁹ Heinrich Lutz, *Reformation und Gegenreformation* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1982), p. 67.

²⁰ R. Mottahedeh, *Theology of Toleration* (1993), pp. 27 f., 32. Mottahedeh refers to the Qur'anic verses: 6:108, 10:99, 16:125, 30:30.

²¹ This obligation was grounded on Qur'an 9:29: "Fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the latter day, nor do they prohibit what Allah and His Apostle have prohibited, nor follow the religion of truth, out of those who have been given the Book, until they pay the tax in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection."

²² Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period. An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 41, 68.

considerations,²³ but in the long run financial (lower taxes), economic (more entrepreneurial freedom), social (becoming a fully acknowledged citizen and gaining access to the new elites) and cultural (participating at the global and thriving culture of Islam) incentives would provide a climate encouraging conversion to Islam.

In the Qur'an, besides the threat of eternal condemnation, no indication what the worldly punishment for apostasy from Islam should be is given. In the following centuries theoreticians and practitioners of the evolving Islamic community came to the consensus that apostates (*murtadd*) should be brought from life to death after giving them a short period of time to repent and to retract their decision. In light of these provisions, crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians quite naturally should have been considered apostates; they had confessed to be Muslims, and had then fallen away from Islam. How then does historical reality relate to theological dogma?

A prominent reported case of a state-enforced mass conversion is the Almohads of the 12th century. The Almohads (a Spanish corruption of the Arabic *al-muwahhidun*, "those who profess the unity of God"), were founded as a reform movement in the region of present-day Morocco by Muhammad ibn Tumart (died 1130). His successor, 'Abdalmu'min (1130–1163), forced Jews and Christians in North West Africa to convert to Islam. Since it was beyond the capabilities of the Almohad authorities to control the implementation of the conversion of thousands of Jews and Christians, they had to content themselves with mere confessions of faith by the newly converted. The mass conversions did not lead, as had been intended, to a rapid amalgamation with the Muslim majority, but created groups stuck in between their former and their new religion.

The Jewish communities sought guidance in their predicament. Both the Jewish teachers Maimon b. Joseph (died c. 1165–1170) and his son Maimonides (1135–1204), wrote epistles to the Jewish communities. Maimonides recommended in his letter that, in principle, Jews should move to a country where they could enjoy religious freedom, but if they stayed in the Almohad realm they would not be expected to make extraordinary effort to resist enforced conversion or to exhibit the moral

²³ T. Arnold, *Preaching of Islam* (1935), pp. 59, 83. Arnold sees financial considerations as secondary in the conversion processes, and stresses ideological factors such as the deep intellectual uncertainty about the true religion in the Oriental Christian churches.

strength required to become potentially a martyr. Maimonides consoled the Jewish community by pointing out that the Almohad authorities demanded in no way that Jews give up their faith, but that they rather expected a simple and outward confession of the Islamic creed: "We in no way commit idolatry by this act, but we simply utter an empty formula, and the Muslims themselves know that we mean nothing serious by it, but only wish to fool the fanatical rulers".²⁴

The case of the Jewish community converting under the Almohads rule comes close to the interpretation of conversion vs. apostasy given above. Since conversion was not sincerely meant and was thus invalid right from the beginning, apostasy could not follow—at least in the eyes of the semi-converted. And indeed, Jewish rabbis accepted in principle any Jew back into their community who had converted to another religion under compulsion, quite contrary to the painstaking process which Christians returning from Islamic lands had to undergo.²⁵ The return of forced converts back to the Jewish faith was, however, no longer a matter-of-course in the nationalist age. At the beginning of the 1950s representatives of the crypto-Jewish community of Meshhed were urgently requesting the organization of their emigration to Israel. The immigration office of the Jewish Agency was only willing to undertake this task after the Ashkenazi and Sephardic High Rabbinate in Israel had confirmed that the supplicants still belonged to the Jewish fold.²⁶

Conversion to Islam was based on rather formal criteria. To become a Muslim it was sufficient to utter the statement of belief (known as *shahāda*) in the presence of Muslim witnesses. However, the integration into the community of Muslims was confirmed not only by the conferral

²⁴ Quoted after H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, VI, 1996, p. 272. The epistle written by Maimon ben Joseph *Iggeret ha-nehamah* (Letter of Comfort) is dated about 1160. Moses Maimonides and his *Iggeret ha-shemad* ("Letter on forced conversion") or *Ma'mar qiddush ha-shem* ("Discussion of the Sanctification of the Name", i.e. of the Lord) were written in c. 1160–1164.—For a comparable letter of Maimonides to the Jewish community in Yemen see Moses Maimonides, *Der Brief in den Jemen. Texte zum Messias*. Herausgegeben, übersetzt und kommentiert von Sylvia Powels-Niami unter Mitwirkung von Helen Thein. Mit einem Vorwort von Friedrich Niewöhner. Berlin: Parerga 2002.

²⁵ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. 'apostasy', vol. 3 (Jerusalem, 1972), pp. 199–217.

²⁶ The Ashkenazi High Rabbi, R. Yitzhak Halevi Herzog expressed, in spite of his general recognition of Meshhed's crypto-Jews as Jews, his doubts that a part of this group may have sprung from mixed or illicit descent (e.g. born to parents from which one party had been divorced before by a Muslim judge). These persons would have to reconvert formally to the Jewish faith. See Raphael Patai, *Jadid al-Islam. The Jewish 'New Muslims' of Meshhed* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), pp. 110 f.

of new clothes of Muslim-Middle Eastern style (thus making a decisive change for those coming from European lands) and the performance of an ablution, but also by the decisive act of circumcision.²⁷ That some converts to Islam could continue to practice their former religion in secret or semi-secret may be also related to the formal criteria that the Islamic community deemed to be sufficient for belonging to the Muslim community. At least during the first centuries, Islamic law differentiated between true believers (*mu'min*) and those who had only formally joined the Islamic community (*muslim*).²⁸ Often the instruments of worldly powers were not available to implement a rapid and unopposed conversion of the population to Islam (in the first two centuries of Islam, the Muslims had the status of a minority in almost all the regions they had conquered), and thus a distinctive tradition of orthopraxy in the Muslim polity can be discerned that did not demand belief at any cost, but only formal recognition.²⁹

Crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians are not mentioned in Muslim historical sources, neither chronicles nor official correspondence. And even if Muslim officials must have been aware of their existence, they did not officially register them. For example, with the Ottomans, who defined people on the basis of their confessional affiliation, crypto-Jews or crypto-Christians did not appear in spite of the Ottomans' elaborate bureaucracy and bookkeeping.³⁰ It was only in connection with the Ottoman reform edicts in the 19th century, the policy of equal citizenship rights and increasing European dominance that crypto-Christian groups stepped forward and declared that they wished to return to Christian-

²⁷ Islam set very minimal conditions for conversion. See Ahmad Syed Barakat, "Conversion from Islam," in *Islamic World* (C.E. Bosworth, 1989), pp. 3–25. Bartolomé Bennassar, "Conversion ou reniement? Modalités d'une adhésion ambiguë des chrétiens à l'islam (XVI^e–XVII^e siècles)," *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 6 (Paris, 1988): pp. 1349–1366, particularly p. 1351.

²⁸ For the distinction between *mu'min* as the true believer and *muslim* as one who only declares his allegiance to Islam, see Qur'an 49:14 "The dwellers of the desert say: We believe. Say: You do not believe but say, We submit; and faith has not yet entered into your hearts." For a discussion of *muslim* vs. *mu'min* see Frank Griffel, *Apostasie und Toleranz im Islam. Die Entwicklung zu al-Gazalis Urteil gegen die Philosophie und die Reaktionen der Philosophen* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 36–43.

²⁹ On the heuristic value of the term *orthopraxy* see Judith A. Berling, s.v. "orthopraxy," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 11, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 129–132.

³⁰ İber Ortaylı, "Ottoman Modernisation and Sabetaism," in *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, eds. Tord Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga, Catharina Raudvere (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), pp. 97–104.

ity.³¹ Even now the Ottoman state reacted by deliberately looking the other way and would only define an extreme case as apostasy. The commandment to punish apostates by executing the death penalty was applied by the Ottoman authorities only when the apostate from Islam attacked his former religion repeatedly, maliciously and in public.³²

These examples suggest how conversion and apostasy, which appear to be opposite in meaning, show various forms of entanglement. The multiple forms of becoming a Muslim deviate—sometimes in ingenious ways—from the normatively set Islamic propositions on how to turn into a new and true believer.

SYNCRETISM VS. ORTHODOXY

Members of crypto-religious groups were evidently people who neither held on completely to their old religion nor completely accepted the new faith. The double-faced character of the secret Jews and Christians must have been in many cases resented by their former fellow believers. In Albania hidden Christians were known as *laramane*, “dappled”.³³ The Sabbateans were named by their former Jewish fellow believers *sazanikos*, a fish that changes its colour to suit its surroundings.³⁴ The crypto-Christians of Cyprus were ridiculed as *linovamvakoi* (literally “linen and cotton”).³⁵ Muslim observers, when they took the pains to do so, did not fail to notice how incomplete or superficial the conversion to Islam frequently was. They might speak rather neutrally of “new Muslims” (*jadid al-Islām*) or in a more doubtful tone of *muslimani* (to

³¹ F. Hasluck, *Crypto-Christians* (1921), p. 199; Anthony Bryer, “The Crypto-Christians of the Pontos and Consul William Gifford Palgrave of Trebizond,” *Deltio Kentru Mikrasiatikon Spudon* 4 (1983): pp. 13–68.

³² Selim Deringil, “‘There is No Compulsion in Religion’: On Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire: 1839–1856,” *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 42 (Cambridge, 2000): pp. 547–575. On the question of Albanian crypto-Christians in the last centuries of the Ottoman rule, see Selçuk Akşin Somel, “The Problem of Crypto-Christianity in Albania during the Hamidian Period,” in *South East Europe in History: The Past, the Present and the Problems of Balkanology* (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi, 1999), pp. 117–125.

³³ Peter Bartl, “Kryptochristentum und Formen des religiösen Synkretismus in Albanien,” in *Grazer und Münchener balkanologische Studien*, Vol. 1 (Munich: Trofenik, 1967), pp. 117–127.

³⁴ İ. Ortaylı, *Sabetaism* (1998), p. 97.

³⁵ R.M. Dawkins, “The Crypto-Christians of Turkey,” *Byzantion: revue internationale des études byzantines* 8 (Brussels, 1933): pp. 247–275.

be translated as "Muslimizing" or more explicitly as "behaving as if one were a Muslim").³⁶

Certain regions of Albania and Kosovo show from the 17th through the 20th century a prominent occurrence of crypto-Christian groups. Their existence can also be related to the historical conditions of that region. In order to shake off Ottoman rule Albanian leaders forged frequent alliances with European powers—with Venice in the middle of the 17th century,³⁷ and from the late 17th century onwards with Austria and Russia. Ottoman authorities responded in certain strategically sensitive regions by transferring populations and laying greater emphasis on conversion. Steadily increasing tax obligations, due to the financial malaise of the Ottoman state, may have added to the pressure to convert.³⁸ The greater part of conversions in that region seems to have taken place for anything but reasons of conviction. A crypto-Christian (or to be more precise: Crypto-Catholic) culture developed in parts of the Albanian lands. Crypto-Christians had double names, Christian names in their domestic circles, Muslim names in public; they went both to church (mostly in their villages) and to the mosque (when visiting the cities); they had their children christened and confirmed, but also circumcised; they got married using both the Christian and the Muslim rites; they observed Christian fasts, but also went to the Mosque during the Muslim month of fasting (Ramadan); they asked for the last rites and anointment by a Catholic priest, but were buried in a Muslim graveyard. In some villages the Ottoman tax collector encountered only Muslims (since they had to pay less taxes than Christians), but a commission seeking to levy in the same village recruits for the Ottoman army would meet only Christians (since they did not have to serve in the Ottoman army).³⁹ One's religion could also change accord-

³⁶ See the remarkably similar case of India where higher class Muslims saw themselves as descendants from Arab stock and adopted titles such as sheikh, whereas "the lower castes, who were often converts, had to be content with the title 'Nau-Muslim', or 'New Muslim.'" Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, p. 162.

³⁷ Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo. A Short History* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 118.

³⁸ N. Malcolm, pp. 118, 126, 131, 165. The Greek-Orthodox clergy was repeatedly authorized by the Ottoman state to collect church taxes from the Catholic population as well.

³⁹ This anecdote is so popular that it may be found in several works such as R. Dawkins, *Crypto-Christians* 1933, p. 271; and Bardhyl Graceni, "Le cryptochristianisme dans la région du Shpat au cours de la dernière période de la domination ottomane," *Studia Albanica* 26.2 (1989): pp. 92–102. The principle source for these reports seems to be Edith Durham, *The Burden of the Balkans* (London: Nelson, 1905).

ing to altitude. During their stay in the plains in the winter months the crypto-Christians were Muslims, but in the summer on the mountain meadows, out of reach of the state, they were Christians.⁴⁰

Christian and Islamic practices were accessible to both religious groups and easily imitated. Christening, which was seen as a magical protection against spirits, sorcerers, wolves and the like, was used not only by Christians, but also by Muslims.⁴¹ Catholic priests in the northern Albanian mountains enjoyed great respect with Muslims.⁴² Pilgrimage sites and holy graves were shared by Christians and Muslims.⁴³ Islamic dervish sites, in Albania primarily maintained by the Sufi order of the Bektashis, were important for the Islamization of the Balkans and Anatolia, since they integrated old Christian pilgrimage sites into the Muslim cosmos. Christians were not kept away from these places of pilgrimage; the Bektashi holy sites seem even have to been made deliberately compatible to Christian pilgrims.⁴⁴

How is this relatively high concentration of crypto-Christians in the Albanian lands to be explained? It would seem that the people of Albania were somehow prepared by their previous historical experiences for crypto-religious strategies. With the frequent shifting of this region between Catholic powers and the Greek-Orthodox Byzantine empire the local Albanian notables and population may have, already in pre-Ottoman (and thus pre-Islamic) times, acquired the experience of changing their affiliation to opposing confessions according to the given situation.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, on her journey in 1717 through the Balkans to Istanbul, met Albanians and expressed a kind of benevolent surprise at their lack of decisiveness in questions of religion:

⁴⁰ A. Bryer, *Crypto-Christians* (1983), p. 22.

⁴¹ Speros Vryonis, "Religious Change and Continuity in the Balkans and Anatolia from the Fourteenth through the Sixteenth Century," in *Islam and Cultural Change in the Middle Ages*, ed. Speros Vryonis (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), pp. 127–140; N. Malcolm, *Kosovo*, pp. 129, 132; Isa Blumi, *Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire. A Comparative Social and Political History of Albania and Yemen 1878–1918* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2003), p. 146.

⁴² P. Bartl, *Kryptochristentum* (1967), p. 125.

⁴³ Ger Duijzings, "Pilgrimage, Politics and Ethnicity: Joint Pilgrimages of Muslims and Christians and Conflicts over Ambiguous Sanctuaries in Former Yugoslavia and Albania," in *Power and Prayer. Religious and Political Processes in Past and Present*, eds. Mart Bax, Adrianus Koster (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993), pp. 80–91.

⁴⁴ G. Duijzings, *Joint Pilgrimages*, pp. 85, 88.

But of all the Religions I have seen, the Arnounts [i.e. the Albanians] seem to me the most particular. (...) These people, living between Christians and Mahometans and not being skill'd in controversie, declare that they are utterly unable to judge which Religion is best; but to be certain of not entirely rejecting the Truth, they very prudently follow both, and go to the Mosque on Fridays and the Church on Sundays, saying for their excuse, that at the day of Judgement they are sure of protection from the True Prophet, which they are not able to determine in this World.⁴⁵

Of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the last one may have had the most relaxed attitude towards shared practices such as the veneration of saints and pilgrimages to holy sites. Muslim jurists interpreted these practices not as heresy, but as a violation of the principle of *khalifuhum*, i.e. the prescription that Muslims should keep a certain distance from non-Muslims.⁴⁶

The Greek Orthodox Church had learnt to live with impure forms of belief. Being closely linked to the Byzantine State, it experienced a dramatic collapse during the Islamization of Asia Minor, but was able to recuperate the position of the privileged Christian community in Ottoman times. Because its institutions and believers lived for the most part under Muslim rule, the Greek-Orthodox church was willing to accept the realities on the ground, recognizing crypto-Christians as still being part of the community.⁴⁷ On the contrary, the Catholic Church, with its centres of power outside the Muslim world, took a rigid stance.⁴⁸ In the 17th and 18th centuries the higher clergy in Albania, with the support of Rome, took the view that crypto-Christians should no longer be permitted to receive the sacraments, unless they publicly rejected Islam.⁴⁹

Christians in South East Europe and Anatolia sought to ensure for themselves the material and spiritual gains offered by conversion to Islam and at the same time did not want to give up the promise of salvation offered by the Christian Church. However, spiritual ambivalence and indistinct boundaries between religions were characteristic for Muslims too. Cemal Kafadar has described the state of mind of Muslims in Anatolia and South East Europe from the 11th to the 15th centuries as metadoxy: "a state of being beyond doxies, a combination of being

⁴⁵ *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, Compiled by Robert Halsband, vol. 1: 1708–1720 (Oxford, 1965), p. 319.

⁴⁶ Mark R. Cohen, *Crescent and Cross* (1994), p. 171.

⁴⁷ V. Ménage, "Islamization of Anatolia," in *Conversion to Islam*, p. 65.

⁴⁸ S. Skendi, *Crypto-Christianity*, p. 238.

⁴⁹ See for more details P. Bartl, *Kryptochristentum*, p. 118 f.

doxy-naïve and not being doxy-minded, as well as the absence of a state that was interested in rigorously defining and strictly enforcing an orthodoxy".⁵⁰ In such a situation syncretism and syncretistic practices acted to facilitate the conversion process, though we should be careful not to confuse syncretism with that process.

COMPULSION AND TOLERATION

In the conversion process, social pressure, material motives, religious syncretism, and even sheer indifference are closely bound together. The diversity of the crypto-religious groups in Islamdom does not show a clear pattern that would allow the assumption that state compulsion and forced conversion were indispensable for the formation of crypto-religious groups. The factors for their existence run a gamut from state-orchestrated compulsory mass conversions down to internally conditioned motifs. The following four examples will elucidate the variety of conditions and motifs.

Even in cases showing a distinctively compulsory character, state authorities frequently revised their orders when they realized that forced conversion led to an incomplete adoption of Islam. The forced converts might then return to their original religion, as for example in the Safavid Iran of the 1660s. In Iran, where the Shia had been established at the beginning of the 16th century as the official religion of the state and population, the relationship towards non-Muslims was burdened by a concept specific to the Shiites, namely, that non-Muslims carried with them a fundamental ritual impurity (*najasa*).⁵¹ Whereas in the 16th century the Jewish community of Iran showed strong demographic growth (to a considerable extent due to immigration) its status rapidly worsened in the first decades of the 17th century. Under the rule of 'Abbas II (reigned 1642–1666) an edict was issued in 1656, ordering the forced conversion of all Jews to Islam. The enforced mass conversion turned out to be unsuccessful in two respects. Many Jews held on

⁵⁰ Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds. The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 76.

⁵¹ Walter J. Fischel, "The Jews in Medieval Iran from the 16th to the 18th Centuries: Political, Economic, and Communal Aspects," in *Irano-Judaica: Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture Throughout the Ages*, ed. Shaul Shaked (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1982), pp. 265–291. Laurence Loeb, "Dhimmi Status and Jewish Roles in Iranian Society," in *Jews among Muslims*, S. Deshen, W. Zenner, pp. 247–260.

to their old faith in secret; and a considerable drop in tax income (the Jews now officially being Muslims) persuaded the Shiite clerics and the Safavid state in 1661 to allow the official return of the Jews to their faith, albeit under the condition that the obligatory tax for non-Muslims should be paid additionally for the entire time when the Jews had formally confessed the faith of Islam.⁵²

In Ottoman Cyprus, factors other than state-orchestrated conversion seem to have effected the development of crypto-Christian groups. After the Ottoman conquest of Cyprus in 1571, a crypto-Christian population came into being that was probably recruited from the Catholics rather than the majority Orthodox. The Catholics were identified by the overwhelmingly Orthodox population with the previous Catholic rulers and their policy of heavy tax burden and deprivation of rights. The remaining Catholics on the island were thus put under pressure from the side of the Orthodox population and not the Ottoman conquerors.⁵³

Although the whole of Anatolia showed a Muslim population of over 90% at the beginning of the 16th century, a strong minority of about 30% Christians was to be found in North-East Anatolia.⁵⁴ However, two large waves of conversion actively orchestrated by the Ottoman state in connection with increased military threats—one at the end of the 16th and the other at the end of the 17th century—changed the confessional composition of the region. At the same time, crypto-Christian groups came into being in the regions of Trabzon, Sivas and Ankara,⁵⁵ and during the 18th and 19th centuries their populations reached an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 people.⁵⁶ However, some of these groups, such as the Kurumlı (named after a valley called Krum near Gümüşhane)⁵⁷ do not fit so easily into this picture of enforced

⁵² W. Fischel, *Jews in Medieval Iran*, pp. 275–281.

⁵³ S. Skendi, *Crypto-Christianity* (1967), p. 229; Costas P. Kyrris, “Modes de survivance, de transformation et d’adaptation du régime colonial latin de Chypre après la conquête ottomane,” in *Etat et colonisation au Moyen Age et à la Renaissance*, ed. Michel Balard (Paris, 1989), pp. 153–165.

⁵⁴ S. Vryonis, *Religious Change*, p. 130 f.; the references are based on Ottoman tax registers.

⁵⁵ F. Hasluck, *Crypto-Christians*, p. 200.

⁵⁶ F. Hasluck, *Crypto-Christians* (1921), p. 199; R. Dawkins, *Crypto-Christians* (1933), p. 257.

⁵⁷ William Gifford Palgrave (1826–1888), consul in Trabzon in the 1860s and 1870s, saw in the Kurumlı the descendant of Xenophon’s Ten Thousand; see A. Bryer, *Crypto-Christians*, p. 28.

conversions. Anthony Bryer offers a convincing explanation for the emergence of the crypto-religious Kurumli. Most had been Christians working in the local mines who, in return for their expertise as miners, were exempt from the tax for non-Muslims. When the deposits were exhausted in the 1820s, some of the miners moved on to other mining areas in Turkey, while those who remained did not want to lose their traditional privileges and so formally converted to Islam.⁵⁸ In the Young Turk era, from 1908 onwards, the Kurumli could then openly confess their Christian faith. But concomitant to the religious liberalization, the traditional exemption from military service for Christians (one of the greatest advantages of being a non-Muslim in the previous centuries) was abrogated. Precisely at the time of proclaimed confessional freedom, men from Kurumli fled in a mass emigration to evade recruitment into the Ottoman army.⁵⁹

Sabbatai Zvi, who was born in Izmir in 1625, began to show messianic inclinations as early as the 1640s.⁶⁰ In 1665 he was proclaimed to be the Messiah. One year later he travelled to Istanbul to convert the Ottoman Sultan to Judaism and to take the throne himself. Faced with such an assault on their legitimacy, Ottoman authorities forced Sabbatai Zvi, but none of his adepts, to convert to Islam. Only several years after his death in 1676, his son-in-law, Jacob Querido, convinced about one thousand of Sabbatai's followers to convert freely to Islam. The voluntary conversion of the Sabbateans to Islam is to be understood less as an acceptance of Islam as a religion than as an internally motivated movement against the leaders of the Jewish community and the ordinances of the *halakhah*.⁶¹ Since the followers of the teachings of Sabbatai made themselves crypto-Jews by choice, they may have relied on the spiritual heritage of the Spanish Sephardi Jews. Léon Poliakov speaks therefore of the "rise of a sect of voluntary Marranos".⁶² Known

⁵⁸ A. Bryer, *Crypto-Christians*, pp. 31 ff.

⁵⁹ R. Dawkins, *Crypto-Christians*, p. 260 f.

⁶⁰ Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi; the Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676*, Trans. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), is still the standard work on Sabbatai Zvi and the Sabbateans. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). Idel rejects Scholem's theses that the Sabbatean movement was a form of proto-Zionism and see its primary goal as a desire to reform the spiritual life of the Jews.

⁶¹ Avrum Ehrlich, "Sabbatean Messianism as Proto-Secularism: Examples in Modern Turkey and Zionism," in, *Turkish-Jewish Encounters. Studies on Turkish-Jewish Relations Through the Ages*, Mehmet Tütüncü (Haarlem: SOTA 2001), pp. 273–306.

⁶² Léon Poliakov, *Geschichte des Antisemitismus*, vol. IV: *Die Marranen im Schatten der Inquisition* (Worms: Heintz, 1981), p. 129.

as *Sabetaycı* ('Sabbatean') or *Selanikli* ('someone from Salonika'),⁶³ *dönme* or *avdeti* (both with the sense of 'converts'), the Sabbateans called themselves *maaminim* ('believers') and certainly would never have designated themselves as 'crypto-Jews'. The Sabbateans are an exception in two regards: They have existed as a stable group for more than 300 years, following their idiosyncratic religious practices; and they have left or published statements on their own group.⁶⁴ In their own perception they never did understand themselves as a group that had emerged as a result of compulsion. The large elite class (known as *İzmirim*, *kapancı* or *cavalleros*) of the Sabbateans became not only particularly well integrated into the Ottoman state,⁶⁵ but, as Marc Baer's essay shows, they were also heavily represented in the 19th century among the best educated and most progressive parts of Salonica's Ottoman society.

Only with the emergence of the Turkish Republic and its nationalist paradigm did the Sabbateans come under suspicion. The fact that Sabbateans were such active proponents of a new society, and that some of them held important political positions in Turkish politics in the first decades of the 20th century, led Turkish and Arab apologists who had absorbed the motifs of European anti-Semitism to assign the Sabbateans a prominent role in their conspiracy theories of a European-Zionist-Young Turk-Masonic-Sabbatean intrigue to found a Jewish state in Palestine.⁶⁶

As different as these four examples of crypto-religious groups may seem, we are, even in the first case of the Jews in Iran, confronted again with a common paradox; we cannot speak about compulsion without mentioning toleration. Raphael Patai, in his book on the crypto-Jewish community of Meshhed, explains the sudden adoption of Islam by

⁶³ Saloniki was for several centuries one of the most important centres of Judaism. For an enthusiastic evaluation of the significance of Saloniki in Jewish history see Benjamin Braude, "Myths and Realities of Turkish-Jewish Encounters," in *Turkish-Jewish Encounters*, M. Tütüncü (2001), pp. 15–28.

⁶⁴ Marc Baer, "Revealing a Hidden Community: İlğaz Zorlu and the Debate in Turkey over the Dönme/Sabbateans," *The Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 23.1 (1999), pp. 68–75.

⁶⁵ On the social classes of the Sabbateans, see A. Ehrlich, *Sabbatean Messianism*, p. 278.

⁶⁶ For the ubiquity of the conspiracy paradigm in popular Arab and Turkish historical writing see Maurus Reinkowski, "Late Ottoman Rule over Palestine: Its Evaluation in Arab, Turkish and Israeli Histories, 1970–1990," *Middle Eastern Studies* 35.1 (London, 1999): pp. 66–97, here pp. 72–75.

the whole of the Jewish community in 1839 as a result of pogrom-like attacks and the religious fanaticism of the Shiite population. On the other hand he notes that both the Muslim population and authorities were fully aware of the fact that the Islamicized Jews of Meshhed held on in the following decades to their Jewish life and practices in their private environment.⁶⁷ Images of Muslim fanaticism and Muslim indolence stand before us, unconnected and unexplained.⁶⁸ How can we understand this contradiction? What possibly made a pre-modern Islamic state force non-Muslims to convert and then tolerate the existence of large half-converted groups? One reason must have been that the pre-modern state was not powerful enough to have supervised the complete transition of the converted and established the appropriate spiritual and educational establishments. If crypto-religious groups followed Islamic practices in public and limited their secret religion to their homes, they did not cause any offence and did not give the authorities any reason to act. Most of the state authorities in the Muslim polities seem to have had a historical perspective rather than legal or formal regulations in mind; In the long run, all crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians would become Muslims anyway.

This liberality toward those who held different beliefs or to semi-believers was, however, not fed by the scepticism toward the notion that there could be one truth that excluded all other truths. Rather it was engendered by the self-confidence of the Muslims that they were in possession of the one and only truth. Islam understood itself as the final substitute for Judaism and Christianity, two lesser and corrupt forms of religions, and the historical development of Islam's first centuries confirmed this view.

THE PERSISTENCE OF CRYPTO-RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Having to rely on short glimpses and casual remarks on crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians, mostly handed down by European missionaries or travellers, we are often ignorant of what happened to these groups afterwards. They disappear in the darkness of an invisibly completed conversion process, or they simply disperse as groups too small to be

⁶⁷ Raphael Patai, *Jewish New Muslims* (1997), pp. 54, 71, 83 f., 91.

⁶⁸ S. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, II (1971), p. 404.

able to persist.⁶⁹ In some cases, however, we possess rather detailed information on their fate.

Crypto-Jewish groups existed in Iran until the second half of the 20th century. In Shiraz, after a forced mass conversion around 1830, the Jews could return to their religion, while the above-mentioned Jews of Meshhed, turned Muslims under compulsion in 1839, remained 'new Muslims' practicing Jewish rituals only in the seclusion of their private homes.⁷⁰ In the 1940s the crypto-Jewish community of Meshhed still counted 3000 people, of which the greater part was to emigrate to Israel in the following decades. With the Islamic revolution of 1979 all New Muslims, a last dozen families, left Meshhed.⁷¹

The crypto-Jewish communities in Meshhed or Bukhara,⁷² being acutely aware of and clinging tenaciously to their Jewish religion, stand out as cases of an urban and clearly circumscribed crypto-religious group. Other Jewish communities obviously regarded the *jadīd al-Islām* as fellow believers passing through a difficult period in their diaspora. But in other cases, such as the Balkans, crypto-religious groups lived in a rural environment and were scattered over large areas. When observers, coming from outside, described certain parts of the rural population as crypto-religious, they may have delivered to us simply snapshots of the middle stage in a long and drawn-out transition to complete Islamization. The only difference between an incomplete process of conversion and the existence of a crypto-religious group

⁶⁹ Dispersed crypto-religious groups may in some cases reappear after several centuries. In 1917 a Polish engineer detected small groups of Marranos in the interior of Portugal. See David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews* (Philadelphia, Jerusalem, 1996), p. 47.

⁷⁰ L. Loeb, *Dhimmi Status*, p. 259, endnote 4.

⁷¹ R. Patai, *Jewish New Muslims*, pp. 101, 106, 111.

⁷² I.M. Babakhanov, "K voprosu o proisxoždenii gruppy evreev-musul'man v Buxare [On the question of the origins of the Judeo-Muslims in Bukhara]," *Sovetskaja etnografija* 3 (1951): pp. 162–163; D. Iofan, "Naučnoe issledovanie istorii tuzemnyx evreev Buxary i Turkestana 'čely' i časti gornyx tadčikov [Scientific investigation into the history of the secret Jews of Bukhara and Turkestan, [i.e.] the čala and a part of the mountain Tadžiks]," *Novyj vostok* 1 (1922), pp. 480–481 (this article is mentioned by S. Skendi, *Crypto-Christianity* (1967), p. 228, footnote 2). See also the more recent work of A. Kaganovič, "O evrejax-musul'manax, proživajuščix v Turkestanskom kraje. Po arxivnim materialam [On the Judeo-Muslims in the border region of Turkestan (according to archival materials)]," in *Evrej v Srednej Azii—prošloe i nastojaščee. Ekspedicii, issledovanija, publikacii* [The Jews in Central Asia, past and present. Expeditions, studies, publications], ed. T. Vyšenskaja (Saint Petersburg: Peterburgskij evrejskij universitet, 1995), pp. 116–132, and Michael Zand, s.v. "Bukhara, VII. Bukharan Jews," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (London, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1990), pp. 530b–545a.

would then be that in the one case we are cognizant of the result only, that is, the state of completed conversion, while in other cases certain stages of transition are historically visible, so that we speak of crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians. Two historians of the Balkans, Georg Stadtmüller and Stavro Skendi, have even gone so far as to claim that one would have been able to find crypto-religious groups everywhere in the Balkans where conversion to Islam took place.⁷³ In opposition to this sweeping judgement, Ger Duijzings puts forward the strong argument that crypto-religious groups cannot persist over long periods. Kosovo's crypto-Catholics in the 19th century completely lost their knowledge of Christian dogmas and any consciousness of having been originally Christians due to the lack of a church infrastructure. Emissaries of the Vatican missionary institution *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, which intensified its activities in the 19th century, maintained that these groups had persisted as crypto-Christians continuously from the 17th century onwards. But indeed, only after these crypto-Catholics had been discovered by European emissaries, travelers and missionaries, did these people begin to perceive themselves in these terms.⁷⁴ In the beginning it was thus not the indigenous state, but the various agents and representatives of imperial Europe who would no longer allow people in the Middle East to belong to more than one nation or one religion.⁷⁵ Gauri Viswanathan points in this context to the deeply entrenched European perception of conversion processes.

A missionary-centered focus prevails overwhelmingly in the existing anthropological and historical literature on conversion, which is primarily concerned with how conversions take place, whether or not they are successful, and what further kinds of changes are triggered in the culture by way of a chain reaction from the original 'transformation'.⁷⁶

Bojan Aleksov shows in his contribution to this volume how Serbian nationalist historiography resorted to such notions as religious syncretism and crypto-Christianity to prove the Serbian origin and real nature of

⁷³ Georg Stadtmüller, "Die Islamisierung bei den Albanern," *Jahrbücher für die Geschichte Osteuropas* 3 (Munich, 1955), pp. 404–429; S. Skendi, *Crypto-Christianity* (1967), pp. 227–246.

⁷⁴ Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo* (London: Hurst, 2000), pp. 87, 92, 103.

⁷⁵ On a comparable development in the setting of British colonial rule in India in the nineteenth century see Peter Van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters. Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 33.

⁷⁶ Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, p. 42.

the converts, whereas in reality most of these practices were the result of a rich non-orthodox folk culture.

The wholesale dismissal of the concept of crypto-Christian or crypto-Jew nonetheless overlooks the fact that in regions where churches and priests were hardly to be found, parts of the population managed to cling to the Christian religion for extended periods. It is quite possible, then, that crypto-religious groups may have been able to do so as well. That hidden believers could not (and probably would not) differentiate between an external' and false and an interior and right religion does not mean that they were not informed about the characteristics of the two religions concerned and were not aware of their own in-betweenness. Duijzings himself argues that in the ethnic shatter zone of Kosovo people came to understand in the course of centuries that identities are not immutable, and that they may even serve as a disguise.⁷⁷ In societies that were highly heterogeneous in ethnic and confessional terms, self-interpretation and self-representation as a member of a crypto-religious group may have involved advantages that those concerned did not wish to let go.

Indeed, manipulation of identities by the pseudo-converters and (to much lesser extent) by the pseudo-converted may have had a hand in the rise of crypto-religious groups. One elucidating example for that kind of social engineering is the Jewish neo-Muslims in Bukhara in the 18th and 19th century. Jewish court musicians were forcibly converted to Islam in order to allow their presence in the Sultan's entourage, but at the same time confining them and keeping them apart as a distinct group was necessary since as musicians they were supposed to be recruited from an abject social class.⁷⁸ Particularly in urban contexts the status in between two (or more) worlds made members of crypto-religious groups useful mediators. They could move around in the majority society, but were segregated from it and considered inferior. Iran's Jews must have been in such a position. Professions and trades (such as prostitution, sales of liquor, peddling and so on) that were debased but gave access to an extended communicative network were mostly assigned to Jews. The logic of this social attribution seems clear (be it a conscious calculation, or the result of social process). Jews as a despised social and

⁷⁷ Duijzings, *Kosovo*, pp. 10–15.

⁷⁸ I am grateful to Professor Bert Fagner (Vienna) for this information given in May 2002.

confessional group were misused in order to separate various parts and layers of the Shii-Iranian society from each other, making the society on the whole easier to control.⁷⁹

CONCLUSION

Although individuals will have reacted in quite different ways to the conditions of living between two religions, two types stand out clearly amongst the large variety of crypto-religious groups. The first, an urban type, comes into existence at a precise date, in a precise locale and clear-cut circumstances (mostly as a result of compulsory conversion affecting the whole community). Their consciousness of belonging fundamentally to the original religion is very strong. Urban Jewish communities in the Iranian world are representative of that type. The second type, exemplified by the crypto-Christians of the Albanian lands, is to be found in a non-urban setting. A strong syncretic background with many overlapping religious practices is typical; the process of conversion is diffuse and drawn-out and affects only parts of the whole confessional group. Although we do not have, with the exception of the Sabbateans, any self-representations handed down to us that speak directly to us from within these groups, we can assume that members of the first type of group understood and would have described themselves as victims. It is less likely that members of the second type conceived themselves as suffering from their fate, since their religious conversion went hand in hand with a cultural conversion. Against the impression that Jewish groups, half-converted to Islam, would always retain their consciousness as being Jews stands the strong acculturation of the Middle East's Jewry to the Muslim-Arab culture in the Middle Ages. While the Ashkenazi Jews in Europe considered martyrdom as an ideal and the conversion to Christianity a severe offence, Judaism in Islam, encouraged by its adaptation to the Arab culture, had a more relaxed attitude to the issue of conversion. The Rabbis conceived of conversion to Islam as more acceptable, since Islam was a religion acknowledging the one God, as Maimon ben Joseph and Maimonides argued in their letters to the Jewish communities under Almohad rule.

⁷⁹ L. Loeb, *Dhimmi Status*, pp. 252 f.

Taking Arthur Darby Nock's differentiation between *conversion* as a conscious and final decision for another religion and *adhesion* as a gradual adaptation to a dominant religion and culture,⁸⁰ we may see in the existence of crypto-religious groups the result of a bargaining process between the converters and the converted. Complete conversion was demanded, but the price could be lowered to adhesion. Gauri Viswanathan rightly exhorts us to understand the subversive and indeterminate character of conversion and its "intersubjective, transitional, and transactional mode of negotiation between two otherwise irreconcilable world-views."⁸¹

Reports on crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians in modern times have been left to us to an utterly overwhelming degree from outsiders to crypto-religious groups and to the Muslim realm at large, the overwhelming majority of these outsiders being Europeans. We might therefore say that crypto-Jews and crypto-Christians of the 18th through the 20th centuries are part of the Middle East's modernities. Europeans, be they diplomats, missionaries, or travellers, had from the 18th century onwards access to regions that had been closed to them before. Groups that before had been left to their own devices were now affected directly by the European presence in terms of both material conditions and their self-perception, through which they began to understand themselves as crypto-religious. To be defined from the outside as crypto-religious was a constitutive element in the phenomenon of crypto-religious groups from the late 18th century onwards.

Muslim states, may have always had second thoughts about their territorial, ethnic, religious and social peripheries, but were content as long as minimal requirements of obedience were guaranteed. In contrast, the emerging nation-states of the late 19th and early 20th century demanded unambiguous confessions of loyalty. And indeed, Europeans, when describing crypto-religious groups in purely confessional terms, talked very much along the lines of a nationalist argument. Forced by adverse circumstances, fellow believers had to retreat in hiding to be awakened again. These fellow believers and fellow compatriots might have converted voluntarily to another religion, but how incomplete that

⁸⁰ Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion. The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933), p. 6.

⁸¹ Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, p. 175. See also the important work of Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

conversion may ever have been was rather deliberately ignored. Conversion as a process was rejected since "the indeterminacy of conversion poses a radical threat to the trajectory of nationhood."⁸² With the rise of the nation state and the ethnic unmixing in South-East Europe and the Middle East from the late 19th century onwards, crypto-religious groups disappear more or less rapidly. Various forms of crypto-religiosity may have existed in the whole of Islamic history, but the *hausse* of crypto-religious groups in the modern Muslim Middle East depends upon a time frame that was opened when the Middle East was drawn more and more into the European orbit, and then closed by the dominance of the nationalist paradigm in the 20th century.

⁸² Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, p. 16.