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CONFESSORS OR APOSTATES? THE CRYPTO-CHRISTIAN DILEMMA

by Mother Nectaria McLees

Christian apostasy, the abandoning of one's faith after baptism in order to join another religion or to embrace atheism, has long been considered an act by which an apostate cuts himself off from Christ and His Church. Although many Christians under the Turkish yoke did apostasize and embrace Islam, there were also thousands of conscious martyrs, and millions of other Christian victims, killed randomly without time to reflect or the opportunity to make a choice.[1] But what are we to think of those who – either lacking the courage to "resist unto death," or being responsible for families, parishes, or communities that, after their protector's martyrdom, might fall victim to slavery, concubinage, and forced conversion to Islam – took a third path, declaring themselves Muslim while continuing to secretly practice Christianity?

After the fall of Constantinople and a period of relative toleration, Ottoman pressure to convert escalated from coercion to violent persecution under sultans such as Selim I (1512-1520). In later periods, compulsion was more sporadic and localized, but with so little written evidence, it is impos-

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1 Although there are few reliable figures for earlier centuries, more than 1½ million Armenians, Syriac, and Orthodox Christians of Asia Minor and the southern reaches of the Ottoman Empire in Syria died in massacres and forced marches between 1815 and 1923. Over 350,000 Greek Pontic Christians died in the White Death marches after 1916. This does not include figures of Christian persecution in other parts of the Near and Middle East in the same period.

Opposite: Pontic Christians, woodcut from Pontic Men's Club, Kalamaria, Greece.

sible to fairly evaluate these pseudo-conversions to Islam and we are left with the assessments of their later crypto-Christian descendants.

The reasons for appearing publicly as a Muslim, while secretly maintaining and practicing Christianity, originated in a variety of motives: fear, as we have already said, of an imminent and torturous death (or hardly better, losing one's land and livelihood and facing starvation or slavery with kith and kin); the Ottoman "tribute of children" – forced conscription in Ottoman-controlled Europe of one out of five Christian boys over the age of ten as Janissaries[2]; and perhaps less excusably, a desire to escape the burdensome additional taxes levied on Christians or the loss of one's social identity and position, particularly in the case of Christian landowners and local rulers.

Pontic woman. Woodcut from Pontic Men's Club, Kalamaria, Greece.

There was a further element in the decision to adopt crypto-Christianity. When a change of regime or policy brought unbearable oppression to a Christian community or region that had hitherto been treated moderately, it would not have been unreasonable for Christians to hope that this was a passing phase, the tyranny of a single ruler or a temporary policy. Perhaps if they simply "rode it out," the situation would eventually normalize itself. At its inception, the masquerade may have seemed little more than the innocent deception of a cruel despot.

Crypto-Christianity under the Ottomans was not limited to Asia Minor (roughly the area of modern Turkey). There were also crypto-Christians in Armenia, Cyprus, Crete, Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, and Bulgaria. The earliest known Orthodox hierarchical response to Ottoman-induced crypto-Christianity occured seven years after Orhan's Turks conquered Nicaea, when many of the terrified Christian inhabitants embraced Islam. They afterwards repented, and in 1338 wrote to Patriarch John XIV Kalekas (1334-1347) asking if the Church would accept them back and if they might hope for salvation. The patriarch replied that if they publicly declared their Christian faith and

accepted the consequences, they would be considered martyrs. Aware, however, that not all are cut from this heroic cloth, he continued, "Those who, in fear of hell for themselves, wish to remain concealed and live the Christian faith, sharing and following the [traditions] in secret … will be saved. Only keep the will of God."

Although a necessary *economia*, the danger faced by the Church was that, often, to *act* Muslim was the first step to *becoming* Muslim, as many crypto-Christians eventually did through inter-marriage, or if a crypto-Christian community was deprived of its sacramental life by the loss of clergy. This may have been the reason for the unyielding reply of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to the Christians of 17th-century Crete when their island was conquered by the Turks: "*Whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father in heaven.*" The desperate Cretans then turned to the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Nektarios Pelopidas (1660-1669), himself from Crete, who allowed them a "superficial abjuration in the face of inescapable need." By 1730, of the 350,000 inhabitants of Crete, 200,000 were registered as Muslims.

From the 14th to the beginning of the 20th centuries, there were large numbers of secret Christians throughout Asia Minor and the Balkans[3] under the guidance of crypto-Christian priests who were generally accountable to openly professed Orthodox bishops. In rare cases, the bishops themselves were also crypto-Christian. In mixed crypto-Christian and Muslim villages in isolated areas of Anatolia, crypto-Christian priests sometimes played a dual role, also ministering in public as the local Muslim mullah.

An element that is often forgotten in looking at these larger crypto-Christian populations is that, although the original conversion may to some degree have been voluntary, the descendants of a crypto-Christian were bound by his decision for centuries, until the *Hatti Humayun* decree of 1856 granted an ambivalent religious freedom. Before 1856, the penalty for revealing one's Christian faith (in Muslim eyes, conversion) was death. Certainly, an individual might publicly proclaim his Christianity and suffer the consequences, as did some new martyrs, but if one was part of a family, clan, village, or a region of many crypto-Christians, the risk to others was too great to ignore.

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2 Janissaries: the Ottoman sultans' elite military corps made up entirely of conscripted Christians, whose young recruits underwent forced conversion to Islam. After a rigorous training, they often fought against Christian armies, and in some cases, were sent back to oppress their own Christian communities.

3 Because theirs was a secret, unchronicled existence, it is difficult to estimate the numbers of professed and crypto-Christians at any one time. In 1858, two years after the *Hatti Humayun* decree, Bishop Gervasios of Sebaste gave a figure of 25,000 revealed crypto-Christians throughout Asia Minor, but the final number would have been much higher as revelations of crypto-Christian villages, which had barely begun, went on until 1911. There are no figures for the many generations of crypto-Christians before the *Hatti Humayun*.

In his article, "Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under the Ottomans,"[4] Stavro Skendi reports that shortly before 1821, a chief of the Cretan Kourmouledes clan traveled to Jerusalem where he declared his crypto-Christianity to a bishop who told him that there was no salvation for those who did not openly profess their Christian faith. Returning home, he gathered thirty members of his clan who prepared themselves for a public declaration to the Ottoman governor, and were only prevented from doing so by the Metropolitan of Crete, who disagreed with the Jerusalem bishop and "impressed upon the chief the danger to others that was involved." The revelation almost certainly would not have ended with their own deaths, but would have led to the discovery of tens of thousands of crypto-Christians, who would have either faced martyrdom or been forced into full Islamization.

Indeed, Skendi continues, the stricter Roman Catholic response to crypto-Christianity in areas of Albania and Serbia reaped sad results. Around 1600, when the practice first emerged, the Catholic archbishop of Skopje instructed his priests to administer the sacraments and give the crypto-Christians all manner of spiritual support. This continued until 1701, when a provincial church council under the supervision of visiting hierarchs from Rome met in Lesh (Alessio), and decreed that crypto-Catholics were to profess their faith publicly, and that those who continued in secret could no longer receive the sacraments. Local bishops and priests were reluctant to impose this, and went on quietly succoring the region's hidden Christians until Pope Benedict XIV enforced the decree in 1744, adding that the children of crypto-Christians could only be baptized when they were about to die. This so infuriated the crypto-Catholics that they turned bitterly against Rome and persecuted the openly professed Catholics with even greater fury than did the Muslims. Many who lived near Orthodox regions undoubtedly converted, as Orthodox clergy gave the sacraments freely.

Regardless of the motives of those who publicly embraced Islam, their crypto-Christian descendants were often confessors for the faith and their lives as Christians were exemplary. Embracing a spiritual life that could only be followed in utmost secrecy, they fulfilled the Orthodox traditions and fasts with great faithfulness. They took labyrinthian measures to protect their daughters from Muslim marriages, and with equal readiness, they accepted (and converted) local Muslim girls as brides for their sons.

Unbroken lines of canonically ordained secret Orthodox clergy jeopardized their lives daily by their unseen ministry. One of the most remarkable crypto-Christian characteristics was their enduring willingness to risk exposure in order to protect the openly avowed Christians (who rarely knew their true identity), often taking Ottoman civic posts in which they could use their official prerogatives to support their spiritual compatriots.

In *Twice a Stranger: How Mass Expulsion Forged Modern Greece and Turkey*, Bruce Clark reports a 1997 interview with 101 year-old Spiros Yakoustides, a Greek Pontic refugee from Imera, whose family had been openly Christian:

> My uncle Christos was a builder who...took me around and taught me his trade. When I was a teenager he took me up to the monastery of Panayia Soumela... Some of the Turks living near there were crypto-Christians, and they protected the monastery. With my own eyes, I saw about ten or fifteen of them taking Holy Communion. There were many crypto-Christians and they protected us; if it hadn't been for them we'd have been slaughtered. For example, there were a lot of crypto-Christians in the police. During Holy Week, they used to put a guard on our churches, and refuse to allow any Turks in, just in case anybody tried to desecrate our ceremonies. At Easter itself, there was a crypto-Christian who would watch our church to make sure nobody would bother us.[5]

Perhaps the most remarkable thing of all is that in Pontus and Crete, the two crypto-Christian regions about which we have the most reliable information, in more than two centuries of crypto-Christianity practiced by eight to ten generations and hundreds of thousands of people, there was not a single instance of betrayal to the Ottoman authorities by another Christian. Given human nature and the vengeful passions aroused through quarrels and enmity, this is not only a staggering claim, but a supremely honorable one. Surely, the judgment of these people is best left to God. ✠

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4 Stavro Skendi, "Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under the Ottomans," Slavic Review, Vol. 26:2, June 1969, pp. 227-246.

5 Bruce Clark, *Twice a Stranger: How Mass Expulsion Forged Modern Greece and Turkey*, Granta Publications, 2/3 Hanover Yard, Noel Road, London N1 8BE (co-published in the U.S. by Harvard University Press, $29.95), pg. 120. Also available at www.Granta.com and www.Amazon.com.