Tarih Okulu
Sonbahar 2009
Sayı V, 111-121.

CONVERSION AND APOSTASY IN THE "TANZIMAT STATE": CASE OF SELIM AĞA

M. Fatih ÇALIŞIR*

Özet

Din değiştirme konusu Tanzimat dönemi Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda bir mesele olarak ortaya çıkmış ve devletin sosyal ve siyasi duruşuna paralel şekilde değişiklik arz etmiştir. Bu kısa çalışmada Selanikli Selim Ağa'nın ailesiyle irtidatı ve akabinde gelişen olaylar ele alınmakta olup Tanzimat döneminde irtidat meselesi üzerine mevcut literatüre katkı sağlanmak amaçlanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Tanzimat dönemi Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, irtidat, Selanikli Selim Ağa*

Abstract

The issue of conversion and apostasy had emerged as a problem in the Ottoman Empire during the Tanzimat period and had taken a shape with the change in the political and social attitudes of the ruling elite. This short essay that focuses on the conversion of Selim Ağa from Salonica with his family aims to contribute to available literature on the conversion and apostasy problem in the Tanzimat period.

Key words: *The Ottoman Empire during the Tanzimat period, apostasy, Selim Ağa from Salonica.*

Population of the Ottoman Empire was divided into units according to their confessions in the classical Ottoman practice. In this division, which is traditionally known as *Millet* system, Muslims and non-Muslims (Christians and Jews) were under autonomous administrative, judicial, financial, and

* PhD Student, History Department, İstanbul University. mfatihcalisir@yahoo.com

spiritual governance of their religious leaders. It was this faith-based social structure that played significant role in the success of the Sunni-Muslim Ottoman rulers while governing the ethnically and the linguistically diverse population of the empire for centuries.[1]

However, defeats in battlefields, socio-political instability experienced in the capital, and financial incapability to fund imperial needs were all forced the Ottoman rulers to transform the classical organization of the empire in the 18th century, and to modernize it in accordance with the European model in the 19th century. Political and social structures of the empire, like most of the other non-European powers at that time, had undergone enormous changes. The declaration of Tanzimat Edict, known as *Gülhâne Hatt-ı Şerifi* (Noble Edict of the Rose Chamber), in the imperial garden on November 3, 1839 was the starting point of the reforms in the century. The aim in these reforms that characterized the period was not only to strength the imperial apparatus but also to prevent the political and military interventions of the European powers. Articles in the Tanzimat Edict of 1839 were promulgated to guarantee the life, honor and property of the subjects of the empire, Muslims and the non-Muslims alike, and gave them equality before the law.[2] On the other hand, the Hatt-ı Hümâyun (The Imperial Edict) issued on February 18, 1856, was a further step in this path by promising equality to all the Ottoman subjects in education, government appointments, and administration of justice regardless of their religions.[3] Both these reform edicts were introduced to the political scene of the empire during major international crises in the period; the edict of 1839 during the struggle of Ottomans with the Governor of Egypt Muhammad Ali and the 1856 edict when the Ottomans needed European support in the eve of the Crimean War (1853-56) against Russia. It is therefore difficult to understand the changes that these reform edicts had brought to the Ottoman political and social

[1] For a revisionist account on *Millet* system and an overview on the positions of the non-Muslims living in the empire see articles in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire, vol I: The Central Lands, vol. II: The Arabic-Speaking Lands.* Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds.), (New York and London: Holmes and Meier Inc., 1982). Another reference should be given here to a recent publication by M. Macit Kenanoğlu, *Osmanlı Millet Sistemi: Mit ve Gerçek* (İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2004).

[2] English translation of the articles in Tanzimat Edict was provided by J. C. Hurewitz in his *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East,* vol. I (Princeton: Nostrand, 1956), pp. 113-116.

[3] See, Hurewitz, pp. 149-153.

spheres without taking the influence of the international turmoil into the consideration.

During the Crimean War (1853-86) a crucial question was asked among both the ruling elite and the ruled ones: How an Islamic Empire could fight a Christian enemy with the support of two other Christian powers? It is true that the Ottomans sometimes made use of local Christian auxiliaries in their early wars in the Balkan Peninsula. They also involved in larger European struggles supporting or opposing the Christian powers. However, these collaborations with "enemy" had not had a serious effect on the traditional Ottoman perception as much as the Crimean War had.

Together with this dilemma in the religion and political argumentation of the empire, the interferences of European powers into the Ottoman politics led the "men of Tanzimat" to change the classical theories and practices towards non-Muslims and, more importantly for this study, towards converts. While the classical Ottoman/Islamic law puts a death sentence for the converts from Islam, the rulers in the Tanzimat period chose to stay silent when they confront such cases. They worked hard to "avoid the imperial headache", as Selim Deringil convincingly put it.[4] This short study, which analyzes the case of Selim Ağa of Salonica who converted from Islam to Protestantism due to the missionary activities before the eve of Reform Edict of 1856, will contribute available literature on the positions of the converts during the Tanzimat period.

The freedom granted by the reform edicts during the Tanzimat period provided striking vividness for the religious activities in the Ottoman Empire. Cyrus Hamlin, one of the leading names of the Protestant mission in Istanbul, once wrote: "There appears to be a shifting of the sands, not only from Christianity to Islam and vice-versa, but also among the other religions of Ottoman society."[5] It was in this period of change that the Ottoman government had not failed to take some preventing measures for the possible conflicts in the society. As İlber Ortaylı points out in his article "Tanzimat Döneminde Tanassur ve Din Değiştirme Olayları",on the conversion and apostasy in the Tanzimat period, the officials examined the conversion cases quite carefully in

[4] Selim Deringil, *Avoiding the Imperial Headache. Conversion, Apostasy and the Tanzimat State*, (unpublished work); for an earlier work of the same author, see, "`There Is No Compulsion in Religion`: On Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire: 1839-1856" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 42/3 (2000), pp. 547-575.

[5] Cyrus Hamlin, *Among the Turks* (New York: American Track Society, 1877), p. 85.

this period. Ortaylı brings an example from Mosul where a Muslim converted to Christianity in 1857. The officials in the city were ordered to relocate the apostate into a Christian-populated quarter of the city, which, a safer place for him.[6] It was a new policy, indeed, that the men of Tanzimat had brought to the practice. The case Ortaylı mentioned in his article was not unique in this period; many crypto-Christians publicly confessed their real faiths, when the missionaries succeeded to convert some twenty to fifty Muslims to Christianity.[7] Significantly, the traditional punishment of the apostasy, i.e., death for a Muslim who converted to another religion, was replaced with politically arranged tolerant attitude.

Following anecdote added to the report on the state of Turkey in the second volume of the *Journal of a Deputation Sent to the East by the Committee of the Malta Protestant College* published in 1855:

A deeply interesting circumstance occurred at Salonica, last year, in the conversion to Christianity of a respectable Moslem Merchant, with his wife, four children, and sister-in-law. He had for some years been reading a Bible given him by an Armenian convert to Protestantism, and holding Christian worship in his family. Feeling at last conscientiously bound publicly to avow, at all risks, his change of faith, he removed with his whole family to Constantinople, and applied to the American missionaries for baptism; the high fanatical excitement caused by the knowledge of his intention among the Moslem population of the city, endangering their lives, he removed to Malta, where he and his family were baptized, and two of his sons have been received as free pupils into the Malta Protestant College; the father, who is a man of good ability, is attending, also, several branches of the course of studies. This family may be considered the first-fruits reaped by Christianity, from the ranks of Islamism.[8]

---

[6] İlber Ortaylı"Tanzimat Döneminde Tanassur ve Din Değiştirme Olayları", in: *Tanzimat'ın 150. Yıldönümü Uluslararası Sempozyumu* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1994), pp. 481-487.

[7] This number is given by Cyrus Hamlin. See, *Among the Turks*, p. 91.

[8] *Journal of a Deputation Sent to the East by the Committee of the Malta Protestant College, in 1849: Containing an Account of the Present State of the Oriental Nations, Including Their Religion, Learning, Education, Customs, and Occupations* (London: James Nisbet and co., 1854), vol. II, p. 648.

A similar story about this conversion case was told by Cyrus Hamlin when he discussed the question of whether or not the Muslims in the Ottoman Empire had freedom to change their faiths. He introduced the hero of the story, however, not as a merchant but as an Ağa, and narrated the story as if it had happened in 1852:

The first noted test of this question occurred in 1852, in the conversion of Selim Ağa and his household. "Baron Bedros," a native helper in the evangelic work, had aroused his attention to the Christian Scriptures, and Dr. Schauffler had crowned the work. He was a resident of Salonica, the ancient Thessalonica. His conversion was well known. Some of his Moslem friends advised him to leave, lest the fanatical mob should do him injury; and there is hardly a more fanatical place in the empire, as the late murder of the two consuls shows (in 1876). He escaped, with his whole family, in 1853, to Malta, where he was baptized with the name of Edward Williams. His wife and children, and his wife's sister, were baptized with him. In 1855 he came, with all his household, to Constantinople, and entered with zeal and boldness, and yet with great discretion, into Christian work. He was everywhere known among the Mussulmans as an apostate; and had he taken a residence in a Muslim quarter, he would have suffered persecution in all probability from the mob. But, residing in a Christian quarter, he was undisturbed for years. [9]

There is an anonymous booklet published in 1860 in London on "a remarkable case of conversion from the Mohammedan to the Christian faith". In this 51-pages account entitled *The Ottoman Convert: a Narrative of Facts*[10] the story of a certain Selim is told in detail, essentially confirming the data provided by the aforementioned works.

The hero of this interesting conversion story in a politically upheaval condition in the empire was employed under the local government as Cassoum, a Turkish functionary responsible for superintending the property of orphans, within the city of Salonica.[11] He was married to a Turkish lady named Zeynep, had three sons, the eldest of them was fifteenth years old, and he lived in a

[9] Hamlin, *Among the Turks*, pp. 85-86.

[10] (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, and Hunt, 1860). A copy of the booklet can be found at the Oxford University Bodleian Library, no. 210. m. 318. Name of the author is inaccurately given as Edward Williams in the library catalogue. The work is digitalized by Google: http://books.google.com/books?id=PG4BAAAAQAAJ&hl=tr

[11] *The Ottoman Convert*, p. 8.

family property big house with the sister of Zeynep, named as Ayşe. In the story, Selim, a thinker who was in search of "truth", met with an Armenian-origin Protestant missionary and deeply influenced by the teachings of Jesus in the Bible written in Armeno-Turkish which the missionary gave him. He embraced Christianity and invited his family to accept this new faith. They immediately did so. Then, to increase his knowledge and strength his faith he went to Istanbul and contacted with the American missionaries working in the city. His story amazed the American missionaries and they convinced him to bring his family to Istanbul and to be baptized there. The family left Salonica and their property was confiscated by the state. Their house turned out to be the post-office. If Selim Ağa had stayed in Salonica he, most probably, would have been killed, the narrative says.

Selim and his family were under the protection of American missionary society in the capital. During this stay the family members wore western-styled clothes, visited Americans and learned some of the values of western life, e.g., home management. Selim began to preach about Christianity in the Muslim circles. However, due to the security reasons they had to leave the city after a while. The family went to Malta, the centre of Anglican missionary activity in the Mediterranean region, where they were all baptized in 1853. Selim took the name Edward Williams. His eldest son, Mustafa, renamed as John. Together with his brother they went to the Protestant College in the island and were educated there for three years to become missionaries. John, then, went to England to complete his education in the Church Missionary College at Islington.

In 1857, Edward returned to Istanbul and stayed in Dutch Palace at Pera as a guest of Dutch minister. It was during this stay that his youngest son, "the first Turkish baby born from Christian parents in Istanbul", was baptized in the first Protestant Church built in the city.[12] Edward became the pastor of the Church, and worked hard to spread Christian faith among Turks. He succeeded to convert sixty natives, and after these efforts 1000 people began to read Bible in the capital, according to the story. Edward died in 1865 and his obituary was published in the Board's Annual Report.[13]

---

[12] *The Ottoman Convert*, p. 41.

[13] Pieter Pikkert, *Protestant Missionaries to the Middle East: Ambassadors of Christ or Culture?* (University of South Africa: PhD Thesis at Missiology, 2006), pp. 99-100; The biography of Edward William also can be found in ABCFM (American Board of Commissioners for Foreign

Although the number indicating the converts and the possible ones was exaggerated[14], the story mostly seems to be compatible with the data provided by other accounts written in the period, particularly with data given by the missionaries' diaries. In his PhD work on the Protestant missionaries in the Middle East Pieter Pikkert points out that in 1857, when Edward returned to Istanbul, the government officials carefully examined his case of apostasy and gave him and his wife a certificate stating that they had become Christians with their free wills. Interestingly enough this significant data is missing in the narrative, thus, it made us to think that the narrator was not Edward but his eldest son, John, who was in England for missionary education during the publication of the work.

There is a significant part in Hamlin's account on the confused attitude of Ottoman governmental officials related with the conversion of Selim Ağa. Hamlin states that:

We were together in Bursa… While examining the Armenian school beneath the church, three Turkish officials appeared at the door, followed by an armed guard… The three persons were the governor of the province of Bithynia, the chief justice, and the collector of the revenues. There was no alternative, and we went in. The chief justice absorbed the conversation with Mr. Williams. Mr. Williams said: "You may well say that I speak Turkish like a Mussulman, for so I was till I was forty-five years old. Then I became a Christian, and I am now a preacher of the Gospel! The guard stepped forward. The chief justice's face reddened with sudden confusion… The governor looked straight into the air. … It was a moment of great and painful suspense. Would he be arrested and imprisoned? The judge asked about trinity and Mr. W. replied. Finally they passed him. However interpreted, it was a proof of progress. The ignorant multitude is still fanatical and bigoted, but the governing class has wonderfully changed.

Obviously, the conversion of Selim Ağa was a profitable event for the Protestant missionaries. As Pikkert argues, this event triggered the missionary

---

Mission), series number**:** ABCFM 77-Biographical collection, see, http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~hou01467

[14] Writing in 1859 Goodell mentions that some twenty "Mussulmans" had been baptized in Constantinople. See, Pieter Pikkert, *Protestant Missionaries to the Middle East*. p. 98; the number of the converts, as mentioned above, was around fifty according to by Hamlin.

activities in Turkey and the Protestant missionaries began to work particularly on Muslim population. However, "after the death of the most faithful Muslim convert, Selim Efendi, and the closing of the Church Missionary Society work in 1877, missionaries returned to concentrating on the nominal Christians" says Pikkert.[15]

Consequently, the conversion case of Selim Ağa has significant hints to have a closer understanding of relations between the "Tanzimat state" and its "Tanzimat subjects". As the narrative and other contemporary accounts showed, the ruling elite tried to find a middle way on such thorny issues that could be reasons for internal and external conflicts. On July 1, 1846, the Ottoman administration recognized the Protestants as millet in its realm[16], however, when the activities of missionaries produced unwanted results, i.e., the social unrest resulted by the conversion of some Turks, they did not hesitate to jail the converts and seal off the missionary bookstore in Bebek in 1854.[17] Thus, neither the state nor the subjects followed a single path in this period of turmoil and the cases like Selim Ağa can serve us as reminders to be aware of the complexity of writing the history of "Tanzimat".

[15] Pieter Pikkert, *Protestant Missionaries to the Middle East*, p. 83.
[16] "Protestant Milleti Nizamnamesi", *Düstur*, I. Tertib vol. 1, (İstanbul: Matbaa-i Amire, 1856), pp. 652-654.
[17] Edward D.G. Prime, *Forty Years in the Turkish Empire*: *Memoirs of William Goodell* (New York: Carter, 1877), pp. 426-430.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ABCFM (American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission), series number**:** ABCFM 77 - Biographical collection.

BRAUDE – LEWIS (1982): Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire, vol I: The Central Lands, vol. II: The Arabic-Speaking Lands.* (New York and London: Holmes and Meier Inc., 1982).

DERİNGİL (2000): Selim Deringil, "There Is No Compulsion in Religion`: On Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire: 1839-1856" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 42/3 (2000), pp. 547-575.

HAMLIN (1877): Cyrus Hamlin, *Among the Turks* (New York: American Track Society, 1877).

HUREWITZ (1956): J. C. Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East* (Princeton: Nostrand, 1956).

Journal of a Deputation Sent to the East by the Committee of the Malta Protestant College, in 1849: Containing an Account of the Present State of the Oriental Nations, Including Their Religion, Learning, Education, Customs, and Occupations (London: James Nisbet and co., 1854).

ORTAYLI (1994): İlber Ortaylı, "Tanzîmât Döneminde Tanassur ve Din Değiştirme Olayları", in: *Tanzîmât'ın 150. Yıldönümü Uluslararası Sempozyumu* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1994), pp. 481-487.

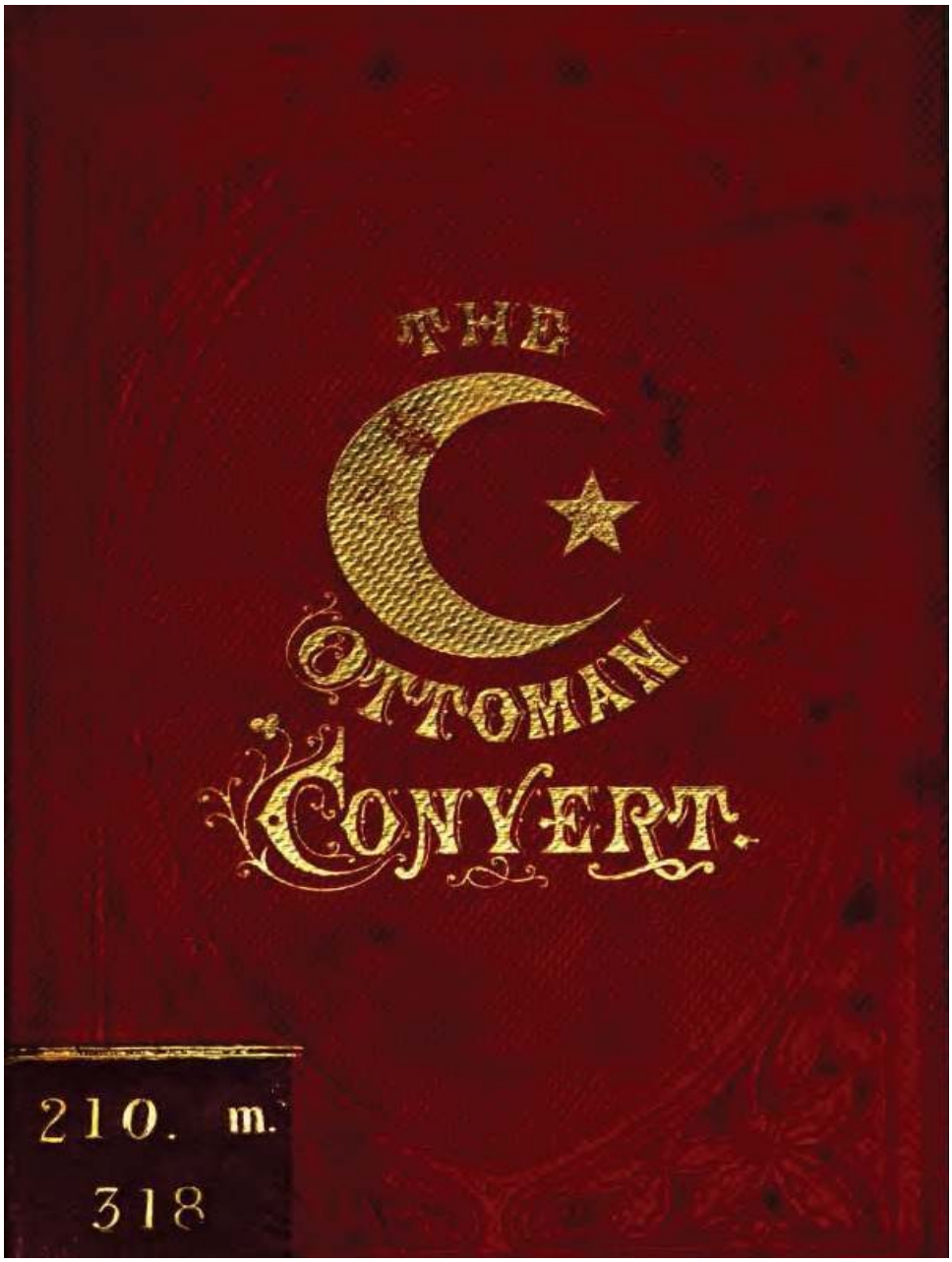
PIKKERT (2006): Pieter Pikkert, *Protestant Missionaries to the Middle East: Ambassadors of Christ or Culture?* (University of South Africa: PhD Thesis at Missiology, 2006).

PRIME (1877): Edward D.G. Prime, *Forty Years in the Turkish Empire*: *Memoirs of William Goodell* (New York: Carter, 1877).

"Protestant Milleti Nizamnâmesi", *Düstur*, I. Tertib vol. 1, (İstanbul: Matbaa-i Amire, 1856), pp. 652-654.

The Ottoman Convert (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, and Hunt, 1860).

APPENDIX



I. The Cover of *the Ottoman Convert.*

II. Selim Ağa and his family in *The Ottoman Convert*.