

FROM MUSLIM CITIZEN TO CHRISTIAN MINORITY: TOLERANCE,  
SECULARISM AND ARMENIAN RETURN CONVERSIONS IN TURKEY

by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## **Abstract**

### **FROM MUSLIM CITIZEN TO CHRISTIAN MINORITY: TOLERANCE, SECULARISM AND ARMENIAN RETURN CONVERSIONS IN TURKEY**

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This dissertation examines the manner in which Turkish secularism has come to delimit, define, and calibrate minority religious practices as well as citizenship policies by tracing different categories of the secular and the religious in Turkey. It is an ethnographic study of conversion from Islam to (Armenian) Christianity, among the converted Armenian community in Istanbul. Since early 1990s, hundreds of citizens claiming Armenian descent have submitted petitions to Turkey's secular legal authorities to change their existing name and religion in the public records. They trace their ancestry to Christian Ottoman Armenians who converted to Islam during the genocide of 1915. Given that the Turkish state refuses to recognize the genocide, the return conversion of Islamized Armenians points to the violence that is still largely unmentionable.

This project is a case study of the nature of secular tolerance, and the notions through which it is discussed in Turkey: justice, legal reform, and genocide recognition. It is also an ethnographic study of the descendents of the forcibly Islamized Armenians and their return conversions through an examination of accompanying court cases and conversion procedures, participant observation in several Armenian churches, interviews with converts and their lawyers, court officials and Armenian clergy of different ranks. I explore in detail the process of claiming Armenianness. These return conversions provide

a unique perspective for understanding the crisis of citizenship in the heart of Turkish secularism; simultaneously they illustrate the recent shifts in the identities of the citizens under the government of *Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* or AKP (Justice and Development Party) since the early 2000s.

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**Introduction:**  
**Becoming Armenian in Turkey**

**The Politics of Naming: Genocide and Conversion**

Since the early 1990s, hundreds of Muslim citizens started to claim Armenian descent in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Some tried to convert back to Armenianness and Christianity, others preferred to remain as Muslims –at least on the records. They are the descendants of Armenians of the Ottoman Empire who were forced to adopt Islam to avoid annihilation during the massacres against Armenians that culminated in the genocide of 1915.<sup>2</sup>

The Ottoman regime aimed to eliminate the Armenian population from the lands where they had live for centuries. On April 24, 1915, prominent artists, musicians, writers and intellectuals were taken from their homes in Istanbul, put on trains, almost all were never seen again. Using the World War I as an excuse, strong and able men were conscripted into the labor battalions, only to be drowned or killed. This left the women, children and elderly in the towns and villages. Next the governors were ordered to deport the remaining Armenians toward the desert between the Tigris and the Euphrates in Southeastern present Turkey and Northeastern Syria. Along the journey the vast majority of women and children died of starvation and exposure to the fierce sun. To escape rape, prostitution and terror, many young women jumped into the rivers for a quicker death. These strategies came to be called the Armenian the 1915 Genocide. The eradication of this population was premeditated. The goal was to get rid of a people deemed threatening to national unity (Akçam 2006; Dadrian 1995).

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<sup>1</sup> For the history of Armenian conversion to Islam before 1915, see next chapter.

<sup>2</sup> For an important contribution to the history of Armenian conversion to Islam before 1915, see Deringil 2009.

The elimination of the Armenian population was the pinnacle of other instances of demographic engineering, in which populations were seen as threatening to national unity (Üngör 2011a). The Turkish state silenced any talk about the genocide and deportations for years. When Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) started killing diplomats and planting explosives at airports between 1975 and the 1980s with the aim of forcing the Turkish government to recognize the Armenian massacres and deportations of 1915 as genocide, the Turkish regime developed an international campaign to discredit the Armenian narrative; basically they argued that there was a war, conflict erupted and people died on both sides (Göçek and Bloxham 2008). Terminology was crucial in the debates; to date the word genocide remains taboo in Turkey even though a growing number of citizens are aware of the violence that befell the Ottoman Armenians almost a century ago; including artists, writers, scholars who made public their acknowledged of the massacres.

Given that the Turkish state refuses to recognize the genocide, the return conversion of Islamized Armenians unmask the violence that is still largely unmentionable (Altınay and Çetin 2009; Altınay and Türkyılmaz 2011; Deringil 2000; 2009; Özuzun 2006). The numbers of return converts that were baptized by the Armenian Apostolic Church are small. Moreover, there is a sizable population of the descendants of the forcibly Islamized Armenians in Istanbul though only few families or individuals choose to leave their native villages and towns in the East to relocate in Istanbul. The cities of Adiyaman, Diyarbakir, Siirt, Gerger and Tunceli are renowned to have relatively significant numbers people of Armenian descent, but the majority live as Muslims in the predominantly Kurdish territory.

The Turkish state does not consider converts proper Muslim citizens (Özuzun 2006); this is particularly true for its population registries. A convert who applies for state employment is

considered neither a Muslim nor a non-Muslim (minority). Likewise, converts do not receive better treatment from their families. They are frequently showered with pejorative slurs such as traitor, treacherous, scoundrel and impostor. The Patriarchate of Armenian Apostolic Church is equally suspicious of the postulants who approach the Church for support and membership. Not surprisingly, the established Armenian community in Istanbul is reluctant to accept converts as authentic Armenians. This hesitance to recognize the Islamized Armenians as their peers, even their antipathy toward them, is perhaps understood from their perspective. Those Armenians who accepted Islam in the years after 1915 are believed to have capitulated too quickly while the majority of deportees died to keep their Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> Key to the Patriarchate is whether the postulant is sincere or unfaithful. As the Church is suspicious of the postulants' motives, they are mandated to attend a lengthy course during which it is hoped their real intention will be revealed (see Chapter 5: Is Sincerity Secular?).

In "From Muslim Citizen to Christian Minority" I explore in detail the process of claiming Armenianness. In doing so, I aim to elicit how certain citizens in Turkey, at some point in their lives, and under certain political conditions not of their own choosing, decide to come out as Armenian, and do so in locations where, only a generation ago, other collective identities (Kurdish, Turkish, Alevi, Sunni) would have been mobilized. My ethnography focuses on return converts that claim Armenian heritage because they provide a unique vantage to understanding the crisis of citizenship in the heart of Turkish secularism; simultaneously they illustrate recent shifts in citizen identity under the *Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* or AKP (Justice and Development Party) which was first elected in 2002.

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<sup>3</sup> The Armenian Apostolic Church has sanctified those who died during the 1915 genocide rather than give up their Christian faith. Every April 24, the Church remembers these martyrs with a requiem. April 24 has become one of the most significant holy days for the Armenian people, perhaps after Easter and Christmas.

To address the first part of this dual argument: In order to attend to the crises of citizenship in Turkey, I examine in this dissertation the manner in which Turkish secularism has come to delimit, define, and calibrate minority religious practices as well as citizenship policies by tracing different categories of the secular and the religious in Turkey. Far from being disinterested in the religious organizations of minority communities, the secular Turkish state has regulated minority religious institutions can be experienced, known, interpreted, and represented. As such, I propose to study the secularization project in Turkey as simultaneously a nationalist one (Asad 2003, Ozyurek 2009).<sup>4</sup>

In order to explore the particular form that secularism took within Turkish nationalism, I choose to distance my analysis from the already well-studied domain of Kemalist secularism's relationship with the Muslim majority (Berkes 1964; Göle 1996; Kuru 2009; Toprak 2005; Turam 2007).<sup>5</sup> In this literature, Islam has a privileged status, which tends to be exclusively defined as *religion*. On the other hand, a focus on Armenian return conversions brings multiple definitions of religion and various debates about possibilities for religious pluralism into view.

Since Turkey applied to accede to the European Union (EU) in 1987, perhaps the most significant legal reform regards the national identity (ID) card. Previously, the religion of the bearer was entered on the ID card. If a citizen wanted to change his religion, she had to petition

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<sup>4</sup> Just how an ideology of universal secular citizenship is defended and promulgated in relation to specific religious traditions will, of course, vary from one locale to another, and in this sense the articulation of secularism with the nation-form is a matter of historical contingency, rather than of logical necessity. See Wedeen 2008 for a critique of Anderson's (1991) implicit adherence to the modernization thesis, by which nationalism is seen to require secularization. My concern, here, is to detail the manner in which they have come to be contingently articulated and with what effect.

<sup>5</sup> For critical assessments of Turkish Kemalist secularism see Parla and Davison 2008, Özyürek 2006, Navaro-Yashin 2002.

the court and offer a rationale that the judge would accept (Demiralp 2003). Since the new law went into effect, the ID card still has a place for religion, but the bearer decides which religion he wants to enter. When Turkey was officially recognized as a candidate for full membership in the EU in 1999, a surge of name-change cases was noticed (Kirisci 2009; Müftüler-Bac 2000; Trenz 2007). These reforms received widespread praise as a critical moment of recognition for confessions other than Islam from a broader political consensus that connected the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) to many actors such as other political parties, committees of legal scholars, NGOs, political activists, and of course the European Union. Most commentators claim that by recognizing religious and ethnic difference among its citizenry Turkey is becoming a more robust democracy as it “adopts and introduces policies that become more and more inclusive towards minorities excluded from given and established definitions of national identity” (Kirisci 2009, 1).<sup>6</sup>

Officially the AKP introduced the legislative overhaul to advance religious tolerance and to remedy social ills from Kemalist secularism. Moreover, these changes allegedly grant the long-overdue cultural and political acknowledgment of ethnic and religious minorities (Göle 2003; Kadioglu 2007; Taspinar 2007; Yavuz 2003; White 2013). The critics of Kemalist laicism supported these legal reforms because they argued that secularism had removed religion from the public sphere, but at the same time monopolized Islam. The return of secular politics was interpreted as the emergence of a liberal and tolerant model of secularism based on individual freedom and belief ideology (Kuru 2009). The debate between Kemalist secularism and the AKP

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<sup>6</sup> Examples include the restoration of ancient Armenian churches (e.g., Akhtamar Island’s early tenth century church), the abolishment of state surveillance over non-Muslims, and the restitution of minority *vakıf* (foundation) properties. For up-to-date information on the improvements in the status of religious minorities see <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012%282%29.pdf>.

was “not simply a conflict between secularism and Islamism, but rather a discussion about the true meaning and practice of secularism itself” (Kuru 2009, 164).

Scholars of Turkey are not alone in differentiating between two modes of secularism. A wide arrange of scholars argue that secularism is not one ideal model that is an invention of European culture and Christendom, and imposed to the Muslim societies (Taylor 1998; Mcclay 2001). This line of scholarship utilized the argument about two modes of secularism to argue that not all modes impose a confinement of religion to the private sphere from the public sphere. Yet, the distinction between the private and public spheres, as well as the secular and religion as analytical categories remained intact. Instead of coming to an easy conclusion of what secularism is or how many modes there exist, critical scholars of secularism have powerfully shown that argued that the blurring of public-private as well as religious and political is not exceptional but is, rather, endemic to secular politics (Agrama 2010; Asad 2006; Connolly 1999; Sullivan 2007). In this dissertation I aim to show how these supposedly different modes of secularism both work on the same principle, that is, they both reserve the power to define what religion is.

Secularism, I argue, has not simply regulated the majority religion –Islam- in Turkey but also has altered the very conditions under which the minority religions (Christianity and Judaism) are represented and governed in Turkey.<sup>7</sup> One major argument for secularism is that by curtailing (majority) religion, it provided minorities with the equal rights of modern citizenship including freedom of religion. In Chapter 2, I seek to subvert the assumption that religious

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<sup>7</sup> Building on the observation that the early Turkish Republican regime sought to wrest control of religious institutions away from traditional Islamic authorities, Davison (1998, 154) argues that secularism in Turkey has been motivated by anti-clerical rather than anti-religious principles. While usefully challenging conventional divisions between the secular and the religious, this argument, I argue, fails to interrogate what is at stake in these transformations, namely, the constitution of the concept of religion itself, along with changes in the institutional practices and sensibilities with which it articulates.

minorities are tolerated under secularism. My basic premise here is that secularism, as I study the term, writes itself into the particular discourses and practices of both the institutional landscape of religious minority organization and the dominant discourses of religious tolerance in a way that renders visible the anxieties, imaginaries, and historical sensibilities among both minority and majority populations. More specifically, I argue that categories of minority difference -from the terms in which minority "culture" and "history" are understood, to the language of citizenship, state "toleration" and "minority rights"- are imbued with the genealogy of secularism in Turkey. The recent discussions on religious tolerance under the pro-Islamic Justice of Development's Party's (AKP) neo-liberal, authoritarian rule are especially revealing in this regard (see Chapters 3 and 5).

### **Formations of Religion and Ethnicity in Turkish Secularism**

In its capacity to bear the discussions of the religious and the secular at the same time, the return conversion of the Muslim Armenians presents us with an historical moment, in which we can view the Armenian genocide as a symptom of the secularist nationalist project.

As numerous scholars have argued, the foundation of the Republic of Turkey rests on one homogenous understanding of citizenship in terms of religious identity (Cagaptay 2006). Maybe one of the most well stated parts of that argument is that Turkish nationalism attempted to create a nation of Turks out of Muslims, one that has excluded religious minorities from the national unity, no matter how well integrated or assimilated the members of the minority might have been in the past. This condition of homogeneity, so goes the argument, creates a specific kind of

secularism where the religious majority is equated with the national unity. This particular secularism has been designated as nationalist secularism or Kemalist secularism.<sup>8</sup>

Hamit Bozarslan (2002) has constructed an important account of Turkish republican history that speaks to the centrality of ethnic violence in the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Kemalist secularism, Bozarslan argues, was instituted by means of the near extermination of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915, and the exchange of the Greek Christians residing in Anatolia for the Muslims living in Greece in the 1920s (2002, 317-345). The designation of religious groups as minorities— to be classified, enumerated, and removed from one territory and relocated elsewhere, or killed to achieve homogenization – is at the heart of early efforts to craft a Turkish national community. While secularism was instituted as a constitutional principle of citizenship and sovereignty in 1937, the modern state, through the movement and killing of populations, had already established Sunni Islam as the *de facto* religion of the nation in the preceding two decades. The result was a national body that could then be framed as increasingly religiously and ethnically homogeneous.

I aim to further Bozarslan’s contribution and turn my look to the remnants of this foundational violence, the descendants of the forcibly Islamicized Armenians I propose that secularism functions to regulate minority religious difference and bursts of violence in contemporary Turkey. In their effort to convert back to their ancestors’ religion, the Muslim Armenians make visible this violent history as well as the problems of secular citizenship and legitimate definitions of religion in Turkey. Starting in the early 1990s, many Muslim Turkish citizens claiming Armenian descent sought arbitration from mid-level courts to change their ID cards, first their religion and then name. I ask: “Who is an Armenian?” and “Who decides who is

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<sup>8</sup> I follow Taha Parla’s (1994) formulation of Turkish secularism.

an Armenian?” Both questions have ambiguous and conflicting answers. When we start to ask these questions we realize, as I did during my research for this dissertation, that the definition of Armenianness is elusive and uncertain. Throughout this dissertation, I tackle this question from multiple, shifting angles and suggest how religious minorities exist legally, historically and politically in Turkey.

The Armenianness of those seeking conversion as I found out during my research- is something to be yet proven not only in the eyes of Turkish legal authorities, but also those of the Armenian Patriarchate, and the Turkish public, as well as the Armenians themselves in Turkey. The return converts that people this dissertation provide a unique vantage point on the contested nature of religious identity in Turkey, coupled with the historically fragile separation between religion, ethnicity and citizenship in secular nation-states in general. By rendering the border between Armenian and Turkish (minority and majority) communities in the Turkish Republic permeable, those who are crossing these borders challenge seemingly inclusive conceptualizations of political “citizenship” and minority “community.”

With the emergence of the modern nation-state, religion assumed an individual salience that is different than its former definition in the Empires as communal belonging (Chapter 1). This transformation of its meaning resulted in the emergence of the concept of religious minority as citizens with different a religion than the majority in a given nation-state (Mahmood 2012). Because of their difference, religious minorities were also granted rights by international agreements and national constitutions. This fact created a common problem for nation-states’ sovereignty. Some states, such as France, chose to deny the fact that there were minorities living within its national territory, whereas others, such as Poland at the end of the First World War, were forced by the international treaties to grant minority rights to their populations (Mazower

2004). The idea of rights bearing religious minorities also caused a great deal of problems for Turkish nationalist secularism. “Religion” (in the sense of a certain religious denomination) became part of minority identity. Converting in the Armenian Church suggests the minority/majority secular framework. In contrast, religious means devotion, belief and deity. Religious identity, territorial claims and genocide are components of “conversion” that require scrutiny.

Minority difference and religious tolerance acquired new meanings after the legal reform associated with the EU accession efforts since 1990s.<sup>9</sup> In today’s Turkey, secularism is criticized for being state-imposed modernization run by the Kemalist political elite (Kuru 2009). Similarly, religious tolerance has become a strategic tool to critique the West for employing Christian and imperialist agenda (Chapter 2). While in West tolerance connotes rational and pragmatic processes, in contemporary Turkey tolerance is seen as a moral and religious solution for protecting minorities and their religious freedom (Yavuz 2003). In effect, tolerance of religious minorities has become a virtue supposedly devoid of legal consequences, surviving from the Ottomans (see Chapter 2).

At the turn of the twenty-first century with the EU accession, the emphasis of secularism has been religious freedom. On the one hand, the extensive legal reforms initiated by the AKP government indexed an ostensible religious tolerance for non-Muslim minorities as part of a new official discourse critiquing the former secular notions of citizenship that exclude religious belief. On the other hand, however, the AKP administration has been targeting various oppositional groups through arbitrary arrests and detentions (**reference**). While the government has been utilizing repressive measures in one public sphere, it seems to have endorsed greater

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<sup>9</sup> For the attention the issue got from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-20028295>

liberties in another. The wave of Armenian return converts that I analyze in this dissertation followed the AKP-led legal reforms. The AKP leadership utilized the Armenian return converts to deflect EU pressure on Turkey from recognize the Armenian genocide.

### **The Decision to Convert**

Mention of genocide has ignited the anger or induced fear of the Turkey's public and the government frequently. The common sentiment in Turkey is that if the facts are known about the 1915 genocide, the republic will be undermined, destroyed and international ties would be disrupted. During Turkey's membership talks with the EU in the early 2000s, the Armenian issue was reframed as human rights, particularly to minority rights. When international actors insisted that Turkey acknowledge 1915 events as a condition to EU membership, as I mentioned above, the Turkish state initiated a series of legal reforms allowing ethnic and sectarian minorities to enjoy cultural and political autonomy to appease the EU.

Still, many laws remain on the books that are abusive of human rights. The infamous Article 301 of the Turkish Criminal Code considers a violation if a citizen insults the Turkish state, the Turkish ethnicity or Turkish government institutions. In the 2007 ruling on two Armenian journalists for having used the term "genocide," the court's decision was based on Article 301 and specifically "on the necessity to protect national security, public order and public security." The verdict stated, "Talk about genocide, both in Turkey and in other countries, unfavorably affects national security and the national interest (...). The acceptance of this claim

may lead in future centuries to a questioning of the sovereignty of rights of the Republic of Turkey over the lands on which it is claimed these events occurred”.<sup>10</sup>

These sanctions regarding any discussion of the events of 1915 were not only approved by the courts of law, but perhaps more significantly, they have affected public discourse and imagination about what constitutes “outsiders” and “traitors.”

I started to conduct my first interviews with an aim to understand how this official stance of the Turkish state on the genocide and public anxiety about the “treacherous Armenians” translates into individual experiences of exclusion and struggle. My first interview was with Sarkis Bey in the house of an elderly Armenian couple. The lady of the household was a family friend she contacted and convinced Sarkis Bey to meet me. An extremely sharp woman also curious about the issues I was researching, she kept interrupting the interview to ask her own very pertinent questions for which I was grateful.

Sarkis Bey was in his late forties and had moved to Istanbul about seven years ago. He told me that he had struggled to make the decision to convert back to his religion, and subsequently he changed his name. I was asking my questions about his struggles to get an Armenian name, his baptism in the Armenian Church and the registration of his children in Armenian schools. Suddenly the husband, in his late sixties, who had been listening to us from a distance for some time, but unlike his wife had not participated in the discussion, interrupted Sarkis Bey. In a markedly angry tone, he stated:

Our surname was Derderyan. It means son of a priest, Derderyan. My grandfather was a priest in Malatya; he studied in Jerusalem. Then Mustafa Kemal came,<sup>11</sup> and

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<sup>10</sup> Court decree, Second Penal Court of First Instance for the district of Sisli, file number: 2006/1208, decree no. 2007/1106, prosecution no. 2006/8617. On the subject of national security and Armenian genocide see Akcam 2009.

<sup>11</sup> The Republican Turkey was founded in 1923; however, the populace marks the end of the Ottomans with the advance of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to the scene. In the 1930s, the republican

my grandfather took the name Kavak, which is the name of a tree. Turks did similar things too. When the registrar saw a bird in a nearby tree, he said I am going to give you that bird's name, and they accepted it. They took new names with the Republic. Likewise, the registrar did not register Derderiyan as our family name. He was right. Why should I insist on an Armenian name, which means son of the priest? We joined the Republic correctly, so now we are part of it. Why the need to be different. (Turning to Sarkis Bey) Why are you trying to be different? The state, the laws treat us as equals. What struggle are you talking about? There is no need to struggle. The Muslim and the Christian are the same in this country. There are laws and they work very well, we are very comfortable. No need to change names or religion since there is no difference [between an Armenian and a Turk in this country]. There is no discrimination. The law protects us all.

Later, as Sarkis Bey was putting his shoes on and saying good-bye to the hosts, he turned to me and said the following words: "When I decided to convert back, my father and brothers told me what I am doing is *ayip* (it's a shame)... *Ayip*, they told me, as if I am dishonoring them, or our family's name. *Ayip!*" What appeared to be reflections on his family's reaction to his decision to convert back were comments, it seemed to me, uttered indirectly in response to our host's outburst. What Vincent Crapanzano calls as "dwelling obsessively" on a tangential but consequential event" (2011, 73), Sarkis Bey's repetitive use of *ayip*, assumes extraordinary centrality for his experiences of exclusion and loss. Through the prism of *ayip*, conversion appears to be a moral (or better an *amoral*) decision that harms a person's reputation as well as his/her family's honor and results in their consequential exclusion by their families. However, our host's reaction also invoked *ayip*, this time in relation to the state and laws that provide equality to all the citizens. In different stages of my ethnographic research, I encountered with this powerful emotion/word repetitively. I learned from Armenian priests from different ranks about other *ayips* that were done by or to the Islamized/Muslim/Hidden/Crypto Armenians. They were denied baptism, excluded from the Armenian community. Some of them on the other hand

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leadership decrees a number of policies. One of them was the Surname Law, which mandated every family to take a surname.

were pragmatists, or even worst, impostors who were not after Armenian identity but were expecting material gain. I also recognized an appeal to *ayip* from members of the established Armenian community in Istanbul. They warned the converts not to succumb into the Armenian diaspora's so-called propaganda; that is to pressure the Turkish state to accept the events of 1915 as genocide.

I argue that descendants of the forcibly Islamized Armenians make their decision to convert in the midst of these discussions around the smoking gun in the archives and the fears around national sovereignty. Yet, their decision to convert back to Armenianness goes beyond the national context; it is a very personal decision with personal and emotional consequences. This dissertation concerns the terms around which the decision is made, discussed, assessed, and adjudicated. Vincent Crapanzano (2011) writes:

Decisions, even those forced on us, are never simple affairs. Not only do they evoke their negation, not only do they reflect the ambivalence felt at the time the decision was made and, even more disquieting, the ambivalence that follows that decision; they call forth at some level, however suppressed, those less than rational, emotional factors that accompany any decision (2011, 73).

This decision to convert, I argue, is not the result of an immediate claim for an originally Armenian identity, as is often assumed in that such an original was thought to be guarded and preserved by the forcibly Islamized Armenians (see chapter 4). Certainly, many converts were caught between having to justify their *decision* to convert back as joining the ranks of Armenians and responding to the claims, however unrealistic, that theirs is, in fact, an empty struggle because the state was tolerant and that there was basically no difference between living as an Armenian and as a Muslim/Turk. These complex, multi-layered emotional factors, rational justifications, workings of the law and governance of minority difference that are involved in the decision to convert back are what I want to explore in this dissertation.

The return conversions at the center of this dissertation evolve around a huge amount of "double-talk": "It matters, it doesn't matter" (Abu El-Haj 2012,197). More often than not, they are taken to be signs of the democratization of Turkey and as harbingers of historic change in the country. They were seen as the most recent appearance of identity politics that has been on the rise since early 1990s not only in Turkey but also around the world. Some others insisted Muslim Armenians -not exactly their return conversions- shed new light on the Armenian genocide (Altınay and Türkyılmaz 2011).<sup>12</sup> And yet, return conversions did not matter because they were thought to be the matter of conspiracy theories. Like the Donme (Baer 2010)- they were taken to be imaginary conspirators, traitors within the Turkish nation (Chapter 6).

Similarly, adapting El-Haj, I would suggest that the return conversions are political, and yet not political. Although there is an abundance of news on "Hidden Armenians" (chapter 6) who are returning to their roots, journalists who report the recent "emergence" of the Muslim descendants of Ottoman Armenians present these conversions as nonpolitical: the emergence of such conversions does not index a claim about the existence of genocide (chapter 5). They simply reveal a *culturally* interesting fact and raise awareness about a heretofore little known group of people. Yet, these conversions are highly political: they reveal a history that makes the denial of the Armenian genocide harder for the Turkish state. These conversions demonstrate how in practice the relationship between religious conversion and the discussions around genocide is impossible to disentangle: These return conversions are perceived to *present* a challenge both to the nation-state's historical legitimacy and national unity, and are treated that way by the several strata of the Turkish state's judiciary, bureaucracy, and military.

While recognizing the importance of silencing as a product of power in the lives of these Islamized Armenians (as well as in the lives of minorities in general), I aim to develop different kinds of questions in relation to these narratives so as to analyze the nature of the historical, cultural and political sensibilities that mark today's "tolerant" Turkey. In doing so, my aim is to demonstrate both the reality and the illusions of agency and/or freedom": What purposes do those stories of conversion serve? What sensibilities -on minority identities, agency, human rights, religious freedom, secularism, religious change, minority religions, and citizenship among others- do they evoke? How are these sensibilities referred to in the "overly reproduced narratives" (Crapanzano 2011, 73) that return conversions produce? What are the realities and illusions of agency and freedom embedded in these decisions and their justifications?

Webb Keane has depicted religious conversion as revolving around an 'enormous amount of talk': "preachers, converts and the unconverted are compelled to explain themselves to others, to explain others to themselves, and even to explain themselves to themselves." (1997, 677). However, as Gauri Viswanathan poignantly puts it, it is one of the distortions of a [in her case colonial] modernity that "the epiphany of transcendence putatively marking the inner experience of conversion becomes a meaningless fantasy" (2001, 25). Is Sarkis Bey's conversion narrative also a "meaningless fantasy," rendered as such by the equality claims of Turkish citizenship that fail to hold? Do his inner experiences have no resonance for the modern Turkish citizens, including minorities?

*Ayip* or other variants of an appeal to morality, or reproach for its lack, sometimes finds political form as disloyalty to the Turkish state or ungratefulness to Turkish law that supposedly guarantees freedom and equality. At other times it becomes posted as an inherent quality of an individual believer. At yet other times *ayip* is condemned as a family member's failure to

comply with the family's "hidden" existence. Whichever might be the case, I argue that all these overly reproduced narratives reveal something crucial about the nature of tolerance as regulation on the one hand, and conversion as political dissent on the other. What kind of politicization is produced out of and inserted into what kind of political contexts? What do these narratives reveal about the peculiarity of the Turkish political context?

The Armenianness of return converts -as I found out during my research- is something to be yet proven in the eyes of Turkish legal authorities, the Armenian Patriarchate, the Turkish public as well as Armenians in Turkey. What is the definition of religious conversion in Turkey? What qualifies them as converts and, moreover, as return converts? It is not the Armenian efforts to pass for Muslim, but the Turkish state's efforts to "label" the subjects as "Muslim".

The Islamized Armenians who decide to convert back may be acting out of a desire to provide their children a "culturally" Armenian future, or the desire to be recognized as Armenian and to draw attention to the Armenian genocide. They may be reacting to their exclusion in a predominantly Kurdish area, their in-between position -as (Islamized or not) Armenians in a civil war between the Turkish military and the Kurdish guerrilla forces. Or they might be claiming their place in the economic redistribution in the neo-liberal economy and authoritarian political regime of the AKP. Yet, whatever the reason might be, the decision of the "Islamized" Armenians to convert back *demands* justification. Their families demand justification, as Sarkis Bey's opening vignette poignantly attests. Turkish civil officials and the judiciary (registrars, judges, prosecutors) demanded justification. The members of the Armenian community also accuse the converts of acting out of economic motives or otherwise having been disloyal and demand justification for their conversion. Finally, the Armenian Patriarchate, without whose seal

of approval conversion is not recognized, also demands proof of sincerity of their claims for their act of conversion.

In the remainder of this chapter, I describe the methodology of this study and introduce the key groups of my ethnographic fieldwork and offer overview of the upcoming chapters.

### **Research Sites and Methodology**

I conducted ethnographic and archival research for this study from 2008 to 2010. Mainly, I was settled in Istanbul. The ethnographic research was first at two mid-level civil courts of Istanbul, Greater Istanbul and Beyoğlu where conversion cases are administered, and secondly the neighborhoods of Kurtuluş and others with an Armenian or return convert population, the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, Armenian churches and related bureaucratic institutions.

I selected İstanbul as my site of investigation because the courts were all located in the city as are several archives that were vital for my research. The Basbakanlık Arsivi (the main location of the Ottoman Archives), Cumhuriyet Dönemi Gazete Arşivleri (Newspaper Archives of the Republic) are all located in Istanbul.

Although there is historical research on Armenian conversion to Islam following the 1915 genocide (Akcem 2006; Dadrian 1995; Miller and Touryan Miller 1993), there is almost no research on the conversion of non-Muslim minorities to Islam in the republican era. This archival research aimed to fill this gap. I investigated for archival documents at the Beyazıt State Library in Istanbul. I conducted a systematic survey of periodicals from 1979 to the present, covering the lead up to and aftermath of the 1980 coup when many conversions of Armenians to Islam were publicized. I explored commentaries and news items on conversion and minorities during the republican era in both Turkish and Armenian. The searched the widely circulating Turkish

dailies (Hürriyet, Tercüman, Güneş) and Armenian papers published in Istanbul (*Nor Marmara*, *Jamanak*, *Agos* and online *HyeTert*), which I identified during my preliminary trips to Istanbul. At Beyazit Library, I also reviewed legal regulations regarding religious conversion, population law (*Nufus Kanunu*) and civil law (*Medeni Kanun*) of the Turkish Republic, and EU reports and regulations on Turkey that presently form the legal basis of conversion procedures.

This method was aimed to gather the complex history of ethnic and secular politics in Turkey. I found archival research particularly important as part of my methodology since conversion has its roots in the history of the Turkish Republic. This part of the research provided rich knowledge of the historical and social background of religious conversion (Starr, Collier et. al. 1989).

I was initially interested in religious conversion and its aftermath in the form of name change trials. Since these cases are heard by mid-level courts<sup>13</sup> in one of the eighteen chambers of this higher court, they were geographically dispersed. Moreover, there was no central database that enables one to track where such cases are being tried and how many of them were held in recent years. State officials, with few exceptions, were reluctant to provide information. Additionally, the government does not release detailed annual legal statistics about change of religious affiliation or name change based on conversion. While one human rights organization kept some records of disputed name change cases, their information was mainly based on Kurdish name change cases (Aslan 2009). Nonetheless, through family contacts<sup>14</sup> I was able to enter the decision archives of singular courts to get a record of cases and read the justification of decisions that had been registered in Istanbul for the period from 2000 to 2009.

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<sup>13</sup> The exception for the appeals court is *Yargıtay* (Court of Cassation).

<sup>14</sup> My mother, father, and sister are lawyers.

One major part of the research focused on the observation of court cases involving conversion and interaction with participants in those cases in two main mid-level civil courts of Istanbul, Greater Istanbul and Beyoğlu. I managed to meet with local lawyers through contacts I had established in my preliminary research visits. This part of the research was guided by and in dialogue with the literature on the anthropology of law, that is of the ways in which the law is enacted and experienced by social actors who participate in the legal process to understand the mutually constitutive relations of the legal and the social (Merry 1990; Greenhouse 1986; Nader 1990; Nader 2002) as well as studies on legal consciousness and legal ideology (Sarat and Kearns 1995; Ewick and Silbey 1998; Conley and O'Barr 1990).

I followed of a variety of cases on and relating to religious conversion (for example, name change after the conversion) to obtain a general sense of the operation of the court, the kinds of cases raised and the reasoning behind the decisions. I focused in depth on a number of cases, approximately one per month, arranging pre-trial interviews and examining the circumstances of the case. Following the conclusion of these trials, I interviewed both the plaintiff and her or his lawyer. If other members of the family and/or neighbors accompanied the litigants to court, I also discussed the case with them, again noting any statements pointing to their treatment by the court. I analyzed the records for how arbitrations are argued and rationalized in the court, and which legal concepts are referred to (Starr, Goodale et.al. 2002).

These observations and interviews provided a record of the procedures on religious conversion in the courts. Non-participant observation in the courts helped me understand strategies converts used to establish their Armenian/Christian past (e.g. family genealogy) as well as motives for converting back to Christianity. I also interviewed judges, prosecutors, court-clerks, and civil servants in four different courthouses in Istanbul. My purpose was to learn about

the Turkish legal context, such as perceptions of the effects of recent legal reforms on religious freedom, and the different ways of addressing the issue of conversion. However, the most valuable source of information was the *cay ocagi*, the little teashop located in Beyoglu Adliyesi courthouse. The owner of the teashop, as well as his two employees filled me in on the latest news about the name change cases, as well as the personalities of judges. They guided me in my research and provided valuable information about who might be a good interlocutor for my research.

I spent nine months in the archives of five courts and their four different chambers to be able to cover all the cases on name change in the last nine years. In the Turkish legal system there are only two legitimate ways to access the actual case files. One should either request it by attending court, or should appeal to the lawyer of the case for his permission. The court archives and the lawyer offices are also the only places where one can find the complete case files. During the process of the trial, every document is produced twice: one for the court files, the other one for the lawyer's file. Sometimes the lawyer duplicates the file as in the case of petitions to the court by the plaintiff, and sometimes by the court as in the case of the judgment. After a case concludes, these are the two locations where the court records were kept.

There are several historical neighborhoods that are predominantly inhabited by Armenians in Istanbul. Kurtuluş is one of these hubs where I conducted my ethnographic research. Today, the ratio of Armenians has reduced, but still a significant number of middle-class Armenian minority members and quite a few families of descendants of the forcibly Islamized Armenians are still living there. In this part of my research, I broadened my studies towards an understanding of the lead-up to and the aftermath of conversion, and converts' ways of dealing with bureaucracy on various issues of their new status as a religious minority, such as

registering their children in Armenian schools, and the process of their integration into the church community.

The Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul served as another critical site to study the power relations between the secular state and religious institutions regulating religious conversion (Greenhouse and Kheshti 1998). Here, I interviewed several Armenian priests of different ranks in the Church and the Deputy Patriarch, Aram Atesyan. In the afternoons, after work hours, I observed the religious courses in the Armenian Patriarchate and asked the participants and the clergy to answer my questions.

I spent Sunday mornings for around nine months in a small Armenian church observing the liturgy, baptism ceremonies and gatherings of the new converts in the weekly activities of the Church. Here, I also conducted participant observation at breakfasts after the service and observed a number of rituals and rites of passage.

Last but not least, a note on names of places and people in this dissertation. I have kept the original names of the courts, the Patriarchate and neighborhood of Kurtuluş; however, I changed the names of my informants, all the other neighborhoods than Kurtuluş and the names of the local churches. All names given in this dissertation are pseudonyms. I use the real names only when their stories were published in the newspapers, or when I refer to publicly well-known figures.

### **Synoptic Overview of Chapters**

In addition to this first introductory chapter, my dissertation consists of seven chapters and an epilogue. The chapters are organized along theoretical, historical and ethnographic inquiries, hence drawing on several distinct, but mutually informing, analytical trajectories.

Chapter 1 explores Armenian conversions to Islam in the Ottoman Empire before 1915. In this first chapter I lay the historical background of Armenian conversions to Islam in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. My focus is not on 1915, but on an earlier period, the Armenian Massacres of 1984-86. The reason I focus at this earlier period is that, unlike during the time of the genocide, religious conversion was not prohibited in this earlier period. During and after these massacres there were many recorded conversions throughout the Ottoman heartlands, what became the eastern Turkey today. These conversions were, unlike the individual conversions during the genocide, en masse changes of religion. Families, even villages converted to Islam as a whole in this period and in its immediate aftermath. One striking feature of these conversions was that Armenian villagers submitted petitions to the local authorities for a permission to convert to Islam. The reason behind these permissions was the new bureaucratic regulations that were put in place by the reformers of the Islamic civil law of the Empire. In this chapter, I examine these bureaucratic regulations on conversion in a period before the genocide to explore the roots of discourses on religious freedom in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. These regulations came to establish the basis of religious freedom in the Turkish republic after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Chapter 2: Terrains of Tolerance, takes up the issue of religious freedom again, this time in Turkey and puts it in the wider context of discourses of religious tolerance. In this second chapter, I attempt a genealogy of religious tolerance in Turkey to challenge the theoretical understanding of the concept of religious minority in Turkey. I attend to the historical junctures that made "tolerance" important in the Turkish context at different times. The questions I try to answer in this chapter include: What happened to the other (earlier) terms of this vocabulary that have ceased to exist, such as the concept of *imtiyaz* (privilege)? How does an Islamic critique of

liberal secular discourse of tolerance construe the ways religion is managed, produced, and transformed? What normative conceptions of freedom, religion, community and the individual are encoded in this narrative on tolerance as it has come to be circulated in Turkey? Moving between the national to the international contexts, Chapter 2 takes the example of Muslim Armenians' conversions to examine how religious rights are defined not simply as an objective criteria to judge secular states, but as revealing the geopolitical inequalities produced by a secular, international political order. Entangled with the international debate on the Armenian genocide and Turkish sovereignty, the terms of this controversy show that the link between sovereignty and religious freedom has never been limited by the national context.

Chapter 3: Legally Armenian is on the legal reform on religious and minority rights following the AKP's EU-accession efforts starting in the early 2000s. I explore the efforts of ethnic Armenians to convert and later register themselves as members of the Armenian minority in the secular courts and in other legal/bureaucratic institutions of the Turkish Republic. Focusing on the name change cases after religious conversion, I argue that an account of the recent policies towards religious and ethnic difference is necessary to adequately analyze the current state of policies towards religion in contemporary Turkey. Based on my investigation of the specific legal form of arguments that converted Armenians and their lawyers put forward in the secular courts in contemporary Turkey, and the way the legal officers of the state respond to them, I suggest that religious tolerance is not simply a product of public/legal assertions of the recognition of minority difference. Rather, I demonstrate that the legal reform has shifted the definition of religion as the marker of minority difference in the legal sphere. The trials on name-change aim to create culturalized legal subjects, who must now not only define their rights on the basis of an individual right to belief, but also at the expense of expressing their demands in terms

of past injustices. I show that even in those cases where name-change petitions are granted, the courts simply establish the legal subjectivity of the converts as Christian citizens of Turkey while falling short of establishing the subjects' status as Armenians. In other words, tolerance accommodates religion as culture, and only as culture.

Chapter 4: Genealogical Returns, further discusses the various definitions of Armenianness in the context of the institutional particularities of Turkish secularism and nationalism. The chapter centers on the question: Is it religion (Christianity), ancestry, culture or -as some of my informants argued- genes that define Armenianness? As a way of analyzing these ambiguities and political stakes around *Armenianness*, I discuss a key term that characterizes the vocabulary of Armenian conversion in Turkey today: *genealogy*, employed to establish converts' belonging to the Armenian community. In this particular employment, *genealogical belonging* goes beyond -even contradicts- the effort to isolate religion in the realm of individual belief, and renders conversion as an effort to "return to the fold" (Viswanathan 1998) and leaves permanent scars on the purported homogeneity of the Turkish nation. In the absence of a (legal) solution for the debates around genocide, genealogy becomes "an evidentiary terrain" (Abu el-Hajj 2012, 181) for the recognition of the "Armenian identities" of the converts (Brown 1995; Markell 2003; Povinelli 2002). Through this consideration of the cultural and political practices that have emerged out of this distinction between individuals who *were* Armenian and groups who *believed* to have Armenian roots, I comment more broadly on a key constitutive logic of the "genealogical" subject.

Chapter 5: Is Sincerity Secular? focuses on the politics of *belief* in Turkey. It discusses how sincerity emerges as a trope in the process of conversion back to Armenianness to subdue the political aspects (i.e. the genocide) of the Armenian conversions. I offer an analysis of the

Armenian Patriarchate's efforts to interpret and regulate the return conversions as necessarily "sincere" and "purely religious." As the Patriarchate constructs and enforces sincerity of the converts, at the same time it counterpoises the sincerity of converts as expressions that arise from individual and internal sources against what they take to be opportunistic reasons for conversion, including political claims. I argue that this construction of the sincerity of conversions by the Patriarchate intertwines with the postulants' claims about self-realization and complicates their conversion by rendering it as a response to the dilemma posed by the immediate context of the Genocide of 1915 and Turkish denial. Sincerity emerges as one of the central categories of the modern conception of religion as individual belief (Keane 1997) which is supposed to be devoid of political claims (Asad 1993).

In Chapter 6: On Being Hidden, I investigate some of the ways in which the Hidden Armenian has grabbed Turkey's national imagination, using newspaper articles, documentaries, ethnographic material, and drawing on the individual cases of converts. I look at accusations levied against Hidden Armenians, the political consequences of the mixture of purportedly being hidden and being converted, the conspiracies the converts supposedly engaged in, the terrors they provoked, the societal dangers they embodied. In this chapter I engage in a close reading of the anxieties that purportedly hidden existence of the descendents of the forcibly Islamized Armenian throughout the history of the Turkish Republic. I think about several challenging questions, the most important of which include the following: What does it mean to be a hidden? How does their supposed hidden existence manifest itself? What types of dangers do hidden Armenian converts evoke in the national imaginary? Who decides what should be considered as being hidden? What are the legal processes that ensure they remain hidden? What is the regime of truth in the Turkish civil system to ensure that they remain hidden?

In Chapter 7: A Place for Converts, I explore the secular and sacred horizons of the meaning of conversion in contemporary Turkey. Whereas other chapters focus on the interactions of the converts with the state and the Armenian Patriarchate, this chapter concentrates on converts' tenuous experiences within the larger Armenian community and the ways these inclusions/exclusions have reflected upon an Armenian converts' sense of community. It offers exemplary stories I witnessed in the field. Based on comprehensive interviews, it contextualizes the personal and collective accounts of decisions to convert back to the religion of their ancestors. The narratives I collected provide strikingly diverse modes of self-identification and political views, as well as varied socio-economic, ethnic, and religious/sectarian backgrounds.

## Chapter 1

### The Pre-History of Armenian Conversions

Prevailing documentary evidence from the Ottoman and British archives<sup>15</sup> indicates that Christian conversion to Islam did become more frequent during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Although the official line was that “there is no compulsion in conversion,”<sup>16</sup> the number of conversion cases was increasing after the violent massacres in Istanbul and Anatolia between the years 1894 and 1896. How can we explain, the increasing frequency of Armenian conversion cases on the one hand and the official policy of secular reform and religious freedom on the other?

The establishment of the modern state is thought to lead to rule of law, peace, and stability. “When historical sociologists in particular sought to explain episodes of political violence along the path (or paths) to the modern era, they tended to see these as temporary,” (Mazower 2002) or -we should add- as deviations from the norm. The case of Ottoman Empire is not different. The last hundred years of the Ottoman Empire was a period of both secular legal reform and widespread violence. The efforts of the Ottoman state to secularize the Islamic body of law was perceived as a failure because these

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<sup>15</sup> For the Ottoman sources, I relied mainly on Selim Deringil’s book *The Well-Protected Domains* (1999). I also used primary sources such as British Vice Council’s reports that are available in <http://parlipapers.chadwyck.com/search/initSearch.do> through Columbia University’s electronic databases.

<sup>16</sup> Deringil takes the issue of conversion at the end of the Ottoman Empire as one of “the bone of contention in an international prestige war.” However, for me it is about the expansion of the modern ways of governance of the subjects rather than being an issue of international politics alone.

reforms were not successful in preventing ethnic violence and ended up with the separation of most of its former lands from the Empire.

Contrary to this understanding, this chapter proposes that the unity of modern community is constructed through the means of *both secular law and state violence* by the emerging modern Ottoman State as a religiously homogeneous one even though the state was becoming secular.<sup>17</sup> Taking as its historical point of departure the cases of conversion of Ottoman Armenians to Islam in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, I address here the implications of the modern Ottoman State's efforts to secularize the legal realm and redefine the terms of state's sovereignty over its subjects at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Related to this first point, I also want to point out to the complex outcomes of the secular law reforms in the Ottoman Empire. The two paradoxical outcomes of the efforts to modernize the Ottoman State, religious violence and secular legal reform, cannot be simply explained away by mainstream theories about the place of religion in the nation-state (Gellner 1983). Although, theories, which argue that religion is replaced by nationalism neglect the continuing importance of nationalized religion in modern identity there has been an effort in recent years to rethink the question of the nature of relationship between secularism and the liberal democratic/secular nation states. As Gauri Viswanathan (1998, xii) argues, "*Subordinated to the legal and administrative will of the nation, religion in the modern secular is less a marker of the subjectivity of belief systems than a category of identification.*" Following her statement, I will argue that religion gained a new significance in the modern Ottoman state when "secular nation" became the "normative" form of community. In approaching the subject this way, the

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<sup>17</sup> By state violence I mean seemingly religiously motivated violence of the Ottoman State against its non-Muslim subjects in the last decade of the nineteenth Century.

chapter argues that conversion, although commonly perceived as an individual act that belongs to the realm of belief, is defined as a secular act by the reformers of the Islamic law.

Central argument in this chapter follows Talal Asad's argument on the complex relation between law and violence in modern secular nation-states: "A secular state does not guarantee toleration; it puts into play different structures of ambition and fear. The law never seeks to eliminate violence since its object is always to *regulate* violence" (Asad 2003, 8. Italics in the original). Conversion, initiated by state violence, was a tool to regulate violence and establish the terms of belonging and loyalty to the modern state in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ottoman State. This view emphasizes the strong relationship between the legal reform and religion rather than (mis)recognizing the reform as a complete separation between religion and state. It also challenges the view about conversion as a religious act, as designating a change of individual beliefs and thus limiting it to the personal realm.

How is conversion, formerly an act of changing communal belonging, re-defined by the reform of Islamic law into a secular act that concerns individual belief? By asking this question, I seek to examine conversion as a secular act that redefines the loyalty of the citizen to the state and the boundaries of sovereignty. This view, I believe, provides us with clues about the intimate relationship between religion, law, sovereignty and secularism that survived in the Turkish state.

## Questions on Conversion in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Empire: Religious

### Fanaticism vs. Tolerance

The violent events that happened between the years 1894 and 1896 were known as “The Armenian Massacres.” In 1894, when the Armenians in *Sasun* refused to pay the taxes, Turkish troops and Kurdish tribesmen killed thousands of them and burned their villages. In the hope of calling attention to their cause, a small group of people, who were members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation,<sup>18</sup> seized the Ottoman Bank in Istanbul in 1896. In the massacres that followed, thousands of Armenians were killed in the Ottoman capital- and later throughout Anatolia- by their Muslim neighbors and fellow countrymen whose actions were apparently coordinated by government troops (Melson 1992, 36).

One major consequence of the massacres was the increase in the number of Armenians’ conversion to Islam. Subsequently a debate has raged around the question of whether these were voluntary or forced, and European powers immediately intervened. For example, after the mass conversions of Armenians in Birecik, the Russian embassy expressed close concern for the fate of the converts, and declared that if they were allowed to return to their original religion the news would be well received in Europe” (Deringil, 1999, 88).

A German pastor, Johannes Lepsius (1897) gives an extensive account of these events including the conversions: “Two thousand and five hundred towns and villages were desolated and 645 churches destroyed. The survivors of 559 villages and hundreds

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<sup>18</sup> The *Dashnaktsutiun* (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) led by Papken Siuni, occupied the Ottoman Bank on August 26, 1896.

of families in cities were forcibly converted to Islam. Included in this are fifteen thousand Armenians each from the provinces of Erzurum and Harput, who under threat of death thus converted” (34-35). Reports in the British archives dating back to this period also talk extensively about the conversion aspect of the massacres: “[As the result of] forced conversions ... there are absolutely no Christians left in Birecik. (...) No Christians remained in the district of Siirt. About 15.000 had been killed, 19.000 converted to Mahommedianism, and 2,500 women carried off.”<sup>19</sup>

D. W. Bebbington notes that "When in the mid-1890s news reached Britain of Turkish atrocities among the Armenians to recall those among the Bulgarians two decades before, something snapped” (2003, 19). "One almost wishes," declared the journal *Christian World*, "that Cromwell would rise again, and bring the Sultan to his knees as he did the Duke of Savoy" (1895, 21).

In describing the scenes of the 1895 Urfa massacre and the entire 1894-1896 period of Abdul Hamid massacres, the chief Dragoman of the British Embassy reported the following:

[The perpetrators] are guided in their general action by the prescriptions of the Sheria Law. That law prescribes that if the “rayah” [subject] Christian attempts, by having recourse to foreign powers, to overstep the limit of privileges allowed to them by their Mussulman (sic.) masters, and free themselves from their bondage, their lives and property are to be forfeited, and are at the mercy of the Mussulmans. To the Turkish minds the Armenians had tried to overstep those limits by appealing to foreign powers, especially England. They, therefore, considered it their religious duty and a righteous thing to destroy and seize the lives and property of the Armenians(...)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Blue Book, [n.47], Doc.No. 123, p.112, March 31, 1896.

<sup>20</sup> Foreign Office 195/1930, folio 34/187.

Hence in the eyes of the Western observers the problem was transformed into a clash between Islam and Christianity, religious fanaticism and civilization. For the West, these events were barbaric that initiated by the religious violence inherent to Islam. This emphasis on lack of modern legal protections in Islam is still the subject of most scholars writing about the period. Bat Ye'or (1985) also repeats this reasoning when she states, "Armenian quest for reforms [for equality in law] invalidated their 'legal status,' which involved a "contract" [between the Muslim ruler and his non-Muslim subjects]." (48). "This breach" she argued "restored to the *umma* its initial right to kill the subjugated minority [the *dhimmi*], [and] seize their property ..." (1985, 101). In these accounts of the period, the Ottoman Sultan, Abdul Hamid II, has been portrayed as an absolutist monarch whose religious policies, including his campaign for proselytization, had been against the secular spirit of reforms and efforts to achieve equality among the different faiths in the Empire. In fact, all these accounts argued that Islamic rule was essentially incompatible with the new emerging modern concepts like rights and liberties of the individual, and only the Christian minorities were capable of understanding and demanding reform as auxiliaries of the Western civilization within the Empire.

Writing about the Armenian massacres of 1894-96, Robert Melson also asserts, "The Armenian massacres were either initiated or allowed to take their course because the regime of Sultan Abdul Hamid II wanted to preserve the Ottoman Empire and the old order based on Muslim law and tradition" (1992, 43). "As to the sultan's ideology and beliefs, we maintain with other historians that Abdul Hamid was a deeply conservative if not reactionary head of the state who wanted to preserve his Empire even at the cost of severe repression. This readiness to use violence for the sake of the unity of the empire

may have been one of the factors leading him to “initiate or tolerate massacre against recalcitrant minorities like the Armenians” (Melson 1992, 53).

Similarly, Vahakn Dadrian argues in his influential book on the Armenian Genocide that these conversions were forced and were the result of the “cultural attitudes favoring massacre” and “traditional, Islamic policies” (1995, 160). In his account, the legal reform which was the basis of the procedures for conversion was not complete because of the Islamic residues:

(T)hough some steps in pursuance of the bureaucratic and legal reform processes had been made, the effort of legally preserving the presence of Islamic symbols in the Ottoman structure of jurisdiction was always kept. Moreover, before the Islamic communities, the Ottoman still needed to assert its social legitimacy as the true caliphate system. *The effort of maintaining Ottoman Islamic legal symbols can be traced to the dual program of 1876 of adopting the system of European codification in the process in the drafting of the law on the one hand, and on the other of maintaining the Hanafite Islamic legal substance.* (...) In the course of massacre as a method of the conflict resolution, the religious tenets of the preeminent common law destroyed the public law’s efficacy. To emphasize the religious thrust of the laws, the perpetrators performed, whenever suitable, Muslim rites while killing their victims” (Dadrian 1995, 148-158. Italics mine).

There is no doubt that forced conversion existed. However, I find it important to stress that neither all the cases were forced nor all of them happened during the massacres. Dadrian’s and other scholars arguments mentioned so far on the events of massacre and conversion don’t provide us with the analytical tools that we need to study the conversions that occurred after the massacres and that were executed in accordance with the existing legal procedures. In fact, all the above accounts of the violence represent a major line of Ottoman historiography, which states that the history of the Ottoman legal reform is in fact a history of failure. The problematization of the reform in the Ottoman Empire centers mainly on the discussion of numerous divergences in its

actual institutions and practices from the "ideal" (modular) forms of political modernity in the West. From both Western and post-Ottoman Empire era Turkish historical perspectives, these divergences have appeared as marks of impurity, incompleteness or failure- signs of difference that these scholars attribute to an essential religious "cultural" inferiority and/or to an unfortunate historical handicap personified in the religious "reactionaries." Seen from this perspective, the existence of the dual law system (Ottoman Civil Law -*Mecella*- and the European law) is the failure of an Eastern state to fully secularize its laws. The recent scholarship, by circularly quoting the same scholars contributes to the continuity of this *history of failure*<sup>21</sup>. It criticizes the Ottoman Reformers for never getting rid of the religious residues of the past and never being totally Western-thus Modern. Seen from this perspective, the adaptation of the Western laws didn't go any further from hollow imitations.

In this "story of failure" the Ottoman reform period symbolizes every "failure" that the Republican period achieved to change. Indeed, the Republican era and the late Ottoman period were constructed as two opposing poles.<sup>22</sup> Some legal scholars' periodization points to this co-existence of Islamic and Western legal codes together as the failure to blend in the Reform era, whereas Turkish Republic presents the era of genuine realization of secular Western Law (Örücü 1992, 39-52). The efforts of the Empire to grant religious rights to its subjects and bureaucratize the realm of religious acts was understood at best as a necessary but inadequate transition period to the proper secular acts, and at worst as hypocritical applications of the Western law in the hands of

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<sup>21</sup> For a classical study about the discussion see Berkes 1964.

<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the topic, see Ersanlı 2002.

the Eastern statesmen.

A discussion of one other line of Ottoman historiography is also in order. This second line argues that Ottomans behaved tolerantly towards Christians and Jews for centuries.<sup>23</sup> Writing about nineteenth-century conversions to Islam in Ottoman Empire Bülent Özdemir (2004) also asks the vital question: Why did people convert?<sup>24</sup> As an answer he points to the “voluntary and individual nature” of the conversion. His words are worth quoting at some length:

In the nineteenth century context, conversion was an individual private act. If one wanted to convert to any other religion, one could do it in his limits of privacy. (...) Apart from some nationalist historians of the Balkan states, scholars, after having done much research on the subject concluded that Ottoman state did not coerce the conversion and nor followed the policy of forced-conversion. Conversion to Islam was perceived as an individual’s own decision by the state which also saw its role as legitimating and registering the conversion cases (Özdemir 2004, 157-8).

According to Özdemir, Ottoman State, as a result of the reforms, is the protector of the freedom of conscience:

In cases of forced conversion, the Ottoman policy was precise and further strengthened by the Tanzimat reforms. Local officials were ordered to prevent forced conversion and forced converts were liberated by government intervention (Özdemir 2004, 166).

As seen from the above quotes, in order to be able to answer the question about conversion, Özdemir points out two issues. The first one is the prevalence of “tolerance” as a state policy in the Ottoman Empire. According to Özdemir, tolerance was Ottoman

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<sup>23</sup> For classical study on the subject, see Braude and Lewis 1982, 3.

<sup>24</sup> However, we have to note that Özdemir (2004) doesn’t directly speak on the Armenian conversion. His article is about the general cases of conversion in Salonica, today’s Greece. However, the existence of violence and problem of religious difference was as big a problem in the Balkan territories of the Empire as well as its Eastern territories. Thus, I will treat Özdemir’s analysis as one about the conversion in general.

empires most important feature from its very first years. This “Ottomanist” perspective emphasizes the “tolerance” of the Empire, as well as its respect for human rights and religious difference.<sup>25</sup> Ottoman Empire was “legitimizing and registering” conversion cases, but wasn’t coercing them. He understands these new bureaucratic practices as a continuation of the former practice of tolerance but not something new in essence.

The second point he raises is the personal character of religious belief. Although he recognizes that “socio-economic and socio-political reasons” may effect the decision to convert, he doesn’t attribute them the most prominent role in his story of conversions: “We should not disregard genuine spiritual transformation as one of the motives for conversion to the Muslim faith.” Thus, Özdemir interprets conversion in the 19th century Ottoman Empire as affected by the socio-economic changes of the modern day, but yet as a predominantly individual matter, limited in the realm of belief.

Is his account persuasive? Some doubts arise at this point. In the context of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire, this question hints to the nature the relationship between the modern Ottoman State and religion. There are some serious weaknesses in this theory. First, like other models that wish to explain conversion as a phenomenon limited to the realm of personal/belief, Özdemir's framework tends to be a-historic. The model bypasses historical contingency and power configurations that played a crucial role in socio-legal transformations. Secondly, Özdemir's assumption about Ottoman tolerance paints an almost utopian vision of Muslim/non-Muslim relations. Moreover, the points he

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<sup>25</sup> Another view the “Ottomanist” side of the discussion emphasizes beyond “tolerance” is the prevalence of respect for human rights and religious difference, see Aral, 2004. This approach employs “anachronistic” categories such as human rights before the establishment of the regime by UN after WWII to replace the former concept of minority rights. For a very insightful history of the rise of human rights regime see Mazower 2004.

makes about the difference between the earlier periods and the 19th Century, as the one of socio-economic character, conflicts with the "personal" interpretation of the conversion.

In concluding this discussion of Özdemir's theory, two points should be emphasized. First, the concept of "voluntary" conversion does not rule out the possibility of a "hegemonic" system and exclusion of the other religions from public realm. On the contrary, the process cannot but be "forced" in a state where the unity of the "nation" is imagined through Islam and where people were "convinced" to convert by "massacres and sackings." Secondly, what is obscured in his statement is that "force" is not limited to the direct involvement of the state regarding the individual's decision of conversion and "urging" him/her to change his/her religious beliefs. "Force" may take many forms, material as well as everyday or of a more legal character. Reducing the issue to the problem of freedom of conscience the author is ignoring the relations of power that were at play in the late Ottoman Empire.

To summarize, what these two opposite perspectives have in common is that for both the existence of the cases of conversion *needs* explanation because they were considered against law and the freedom of religion that was initiated by the secular legal reforms. The question of imposed conversion only arises for both sides of the discussion when there is a need to explain the act as something exceptional and "breaching" the law. The existence of forced conversion and violence pointed to the failure of secular reforms for both sides of the debate. This perspective has led historians to overlook the role of law in the formation of a unified Ottoman nation. The impulse to label the reform as progressive, and the cases of conversion as "derivation from the spirit of the secular

reform” obscures the complex positions that religion might occupy in a secular state. Similarly, attributing the occurrence of massacre and conversion to a “cultural or to preserve the “old order based on Muslim law and tradition” doesn’t help us much to understand the relationship between the nation-state and religion. Differing from a confessional, multi-religious empire, in the modern Ottoman state, religious conversion wasn’t a change in the tax revenue of the empire<sup>26</sup> but it was an *act of loyalty*.

Before coming back to the cases of conversion, we have to understand why these cases stood out like a deviation from the reforms and needs an explanation.

### **The Modern Citizen of the Empire**

The standard wisdom about the decline of the Ottoman state has been that it began sometime after the second siege of Vienna in 1683 and lasted until the collapse of the Empire in 1918. The most apparent reason for the decline was, it is stated, religious and ethnic violence, and the inability of the Ottoman statesmen to initiate reforms that eventually led the Empire’s disintegration. Under the light of the new studies there now seems little doubt that the empire was actually much more a part of the European state system and had an up and running legal system.<sup>27</sup> It would not be an exaggeration to say that the modern state as it is understood today –birth certificates, censuses, museums, schools, postal service, passports, modern bureaucracy, to name just a few- was constituted in the Ottoman Empire after the legal reform starting with Tanzimat in 1839.

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<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of the earlier practice on conversion see Karpas 1973.

<sup>27</sup> For the level of integration of the Ottoman Empire with European legal system in terms of reform in the court system as well as acceptance of international norms, see Adanir 2005; Rubin, 2006.

The legal vocabulary of reform aimed to cover almost all parts of the modern citizen's life.

The reform period in the Ottoman Empire beginning with the Tanzimat Edict of 1839, is widely accepted as marking the official construction of secularism and new forms of belonging that were expected to replace the former communities and forms of belonging characteristic of the earlier Ottoman Empire.<sup>28</sup> These reforms were geared toward bringing Ottoman laws in conformity with European laws. In 1850, Ottomans adapted French commercial law. Then in 1858 the French and Italian Code of Criminal and Agrarian Laws were also adapted, closely followed by the European maritime law in 1861. However, as Mazower puts it: "Nowhere was the impact of the reforms more keenly felt than the transformation of the relationship between the Empire's faiths. The sultan as Defender of the faith was now no longer appropriate for the new-look of the Empire. It was supplanted by a new creed of Ottomanism, an allegiance to the dynasty itself that supposedly crossed religious boundaries" (2000, 150). The issue of religious diversity of the Empire was at the center of the reform efforts. The main aim of the reformers was to regulate and re-organize the relations between the state and its subjects as well as the state and religion based on the modern principles of law. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ottoman Empire, religious freedom or "freedom of conscience" has been integral to the way multi-religious empire rules its subjects. The Rescript of 1856 guaranteed complete freedom in the exercise of all religious beliefs; and guarantees in the equal treatment of all subjects in matters of administration of justice, taxation and military service (Berkes 1964, 152). These decrees contained the promises of the central

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<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion on reception of the European legal system, see: Berkes 1964 and Örüçü 1992.

administration as regards administrative reforms, the standardization of conscription and the equality of all the Sultan's subjects, regardless of their religion. This last aspect was further underlined by the nationality law of 1869, which defined citizenship 'purely on a territorial basis, unconnected with religion. The Empire adopted French civil code as Empire's first Citizenship Law in 1869 (Aybay 2004). Later, the 1876 Constitution followed this law in redefining the terms of belonging in the Ottoman Empire. The Article 8 of the 1876 Constitution stated that "All subjects of the empire are called Ottomans, without distinction whatever faith they profess; the status of an Ottoman is acquired and lost according to conditions specified by law."<sup>29</sup>

Here, I would take issue with Ariel Salzman's (1993) argument that the Ottoman state became a victim of its own policies of centralization.<sup>30</sup> We have to note that the motives were surely more diverse, especially in different periods. For example, the acceptance of all inclusive citizenship laws on the European model was merely aimed to "resist" European penetration but also to "consolidate his own power and control over the countries administration of justice" (Asad, 2003, 214). The scholarship about the early citizenship laws in the Ottoman Empire mainly stated that this Law was designed to exert direct control over the non-Muslim population of the Empire, which gained much independence due to their strong economic status and foreign association. Part of the objective of these laws were to ensure that non-Muslim subjects were not trying to avoid taxation and bypass other rules that governed economic activities through becoming citizens of other states. This was, some scholars argue, becoming a significant problem

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.anayasa.gen.tr/1876constitution.htm>

<sup>30</sup> For another criqiqu of Salzman's perspective see Deringil 1998, 9.

for the Ottomans since those who acquired foreign citizenship could, and did, enjoy certain privileges that existed under capitulations.

Although the Law was adopted from the French Civil Law, the wording and the meanings of these words were different in the Ottoman Empire's context. The sense of the word "citizen" as used by the Ottoman reformers is in fact has no precedence in Ottoman legal vocabulary. The term that was used to express belonging to the Sultan and His Empire was *kul*, a word which means "slave" and "subject" at the same time. The Law refers not to Ottoman "citizens" (in the way we perceive it in English) but to Ottoman "subjects". Although the word *tabiyet* didn't exist in the previous centuries, the verb "*tabi olmak*" existed, meaning to be dependant of somebody/something, or being a *subject*. By the late nineteenth century, with the enacting of the first Citizenship Law (*Tabiyet-i Osmaniye Kanunnamesi*) in 1869, the word was included into the legal vocabulary signifying the mode of belonging to the Empire. *Tabiyet* and the noun *Tebaa* become part of the legal usage and signified those people who live in the territories of the Ottoman Empire and dependant to the Sultan. The direct equivalent term for citizenship is *vatandaslik* in Turkish, whereas *tabiiyet* (which is the word used in the Law) refers to being a subject. In fact, until the early 20th century, *vatandas* (citizen) did not appear in Turkish dictionaries.

The language of the law itself deserves attention in order to be able to grasp what is meant by the new term "tabiyet." The first article of the Law declared that anyone born from an Ottoman mother and father, or only father, as Ottoman. Hence, the basis of being an Ottoman was first and foremost defined along descent lines (*jus sanguinis*). A territorial understanding (*jus soli*) remained secondary to the Law, and was only

considered in exceptional cases. Similarly, the second article stated that those who were born within the Ottoman territories had the right to apply to become an Ottoman “subject” (Aybay 2004, 26). As reflected in the language of the law, there was no radical change with regards to the definition of the boundaries: the individual was still a subject; and the sultan was the uncontested provider and ruler. *Furthermore, the Law did not mention loyalty to the Empire, nor to an Ottoman “nation” as the basis of membership.* Rather, subjects were expected to extend their allegiance to the Ottoman sultan. Tied to this specific definition of belonging, the conception of nationhood was clearly aimed at the unification of the multi-religious population on the common basis of citizenship. The children who were born outside imperial territories, but from Ottoman parents were considered Ottoman. Here, even though descent appears to be the principal rule of acquiring citizenship, it does not have any particular reference to blood or ethnicity. In this sense, the Law provides an extensive basis for a unified citizenship based both on territory and descent, rather than ethnicity. This shows us that the main aim was to put as many people under the Ottoman jurisdiction as possible. In fact, Ottoman Empire was experiencing a big problem with its subjects’ claims about being the citizens of other states’. (Russia, Great Britain, France etc.) Clearly, these laws were signifying a shift toward more expansive claims about the authority of state law and the subordinate status of “other” law- such as capitulations. The Law also included provisions for the foreigners residing in the Empire: all (including foreigners) who were residing within imperial territories were automatically considered Ottoman subjects unless they presented the authorities with evidence to the contrary. Finally, acquiring Ottoman citizenship was allowed to foreigners who had continuously resided within the territories for a period of

five years (Cin and Akgunduz 1989, 314).

The reform movement also expressed Ottoman sovereignty over its subjects at the expense of the rival powers. In that sense, legal reform ensured Ottoman state's authority over its subjects. The period of reform represents the Empire's response to the challenge to its sovereignty on the legal and modern grounds. Bureaucratizing the religious realm and using it as its basis for power, was a modern maneuver by the Ottoman state, contrary to the belief that the state was incapable of reforming itself and understanding modern law. In Deringil's words "Operating under severe constraints, to be sure, they were nonetheless able to carve out a critical –and we should add legal- space for manoeuvre in an increasingly hostile environment." (Deringil 1999, 4). He states that Ottoman rulers still perceived the Muslim population as the basis of state power (*uss-u saltanat*), and think that the power of state will increase in proportion to the *number* of its Muslim subjects. This statement is in line with Pandey's (1999, 608) argument about the national core: "nations are established by constructing a national core or mainstream -the essential, natural soul of the nation as it is claims." This core is the loyal Muslim majority. The process of the construction of this core in the Ottoman Empire was achieved by the strengthening of the Muslim population, to which Ottoman rulers refer as the "basis of state's power."

This issue of outside "alliances" of the non-Muslim subjects of the Empire also brings the issue of loyalty to the Empire. Thus Gibb and Bowen state in their classic book about the issue, "Christians came to be regarded as the natural allies of the external enemy" (Bowen and Gibb 1950, 232). Indeed, one of the central elements in the debate in the Ottoman Empire about the incorporation of the non-Muslim communities, and

especially Armenians, in to the national society is the question of political loyalty. As in the nineteenth century Roman Catholics in Protestant countries like Britain or Holland often accused of being loyal to ‘the pope in Rome’, Armenians were either accused of being loyal to Russia or to the Ideal of Armenian Homeland. Suspicions that non-Muslim subjects of the Empire had their loyalties elsewhere was, obviously, strongly reinforced by the "protectionist" policies of especially Russia. This context produced the basic dynamic that determined the relationship between the Ottoman state and its non-Muslim subjects.

### **The Secular Vocabulary of Conversion: Sane Minds, Healthy Bodies**

The important question that we have to ask is not that if these secular concepts of belonging are applicable to non-Christian societies, but what does secularism assume and what types of new imperatives it brings. As Talal Asad (2003, 2) argues “What is distinctive about secularism is that it presupposes new concepts of ‘religion,’ ‘ethics,’ and ‘politics,’ and new imperatives associated with them.” I will argue that bureaucratic regulation is such an imperative and served to legalize the conversion and “legitimize” the place of the converts in the new nation, and as part of the imperative of modernity: new homogenous nation. The reduction of religion to a “category of identification” –in Viswanathan’s (1998, xii) terms- finds one of its most poignant moments in the modern history of nation-building. As a result of altered relations between religion and state, the *modus vivendi* of the different religions of the Ottoman Empire had necessarily to undergo drastic transformation. The formation of nations along religious and ethnic lines- forcing individuals who have lived in contiguous relations with members of diverse

communities to reconceptualize those same relations now as *differences in the quality of relations to the state*. Charges of foreign allegiance and dual loyalty were common for the Armenians and they were trying hard to deny these accusations and show their loyalty to the Ottoman state. What we should note is that, the issue here is not the “inability” of an ethnic population to convert. In fact, race was not a “category of discrimination” in the late Ottoman Empire and the basis of this non-discrimination was established with the Citizenship Law of 1869 as explained above. The Armenian (or Greek, or Assyrian or any other non-Muslim) subjects of the empire were perfectly capable of converting and living as “true” Muslims for the rest of their lives. Their “ethnicity” was not an obstacle for sincerity of their conversion.

Bureaucratic regularity to the conversion came only after the Reform Edict of 1856, which was especially concerned about the issue of religious freedom. We do not know about the existence of a “conversion law” as part of the Reform Movement in the Empire but there were certain “procedures” as we can understand from the documents in the Ottoman archives. Deringil informs us that registers of religious courts have frequent reference to conversion being carried out “according to the proper procedure” (*Usul ve nizamina tevfiiken*) to make sure that the conversion was indeed voluntary (Deringil 2000, 559).

This rationalization and standardization efforts were the backbone of the conversion cases in the Ottoman Empire. The question we should ask is: What were the aspects of this rationalization?

First, the convert or intended convert had to make her/his desire known to the local administrative council of the province (*Meclis-i Idare-i Vilayet*). These multi-

religious administrative councils in the provinces were also the result of the reforms. Its members were elected officials who was voted by Muslim and non-Muslim members of the region. Before this period, the petitions were given to the local courts or directly to the Sultan.

Second, the administrative council carried out the “official questioning” of the person, ascertaining their religion, community affiliation, and the fact that they were “free, sane, and adult” (*hur, akil ve baglig*). At this point the ‘candidate’ was asked if he/she had been “tricked, forced or coerced” (*cebr, igfal, tergib*) into conversion. Next, the person was asked by the council to repeat the sacred formula in the presence of the council and the governor or his representative. The highest-ranking religious authority available in the community of the convert had to be present at the conversion. Together with him, the convert’s parents or next of kin should be in attendance. At this point also representatives of the former community of the convert were to be represented as well as representatives of the foreign powers, in the case of a convert claiming protected status. The documents testifying the act of *legitimate conversion* were to be signed and sealed by Muslim and Christian officials alike. The procedure should not be hurried, and if a few day delay was required for the priest or the next of kin to arrive, the conversion was to be postponed. Only those children who had reached the age of puberty were allowed to convert. Also, in the case of girls who came to the ceremony veiled, the veil had to be lifted to ascertain identity.

Third, the case was then referred to the *kadi* court, where the same procedure was carried out again. At the end of all of this the convert was accepted as a Muslim and registered as such, being given a certificate of conversion (*ihtida ilami*) (Deringil 2000,

559-560).

Selim Deringil also mentions that the announcement of the conversion in the press in special columns marked as “conversion” (*ihtida*) –resembling the format of obituaries- were very common during this period. He quotes one such announcement published in one of the main newspapers of the Empire in 1887:

Kevork Efendi, a member of the Armenian millet and a notable of Diyarbekir, has made it known that he has been honored by accepting Islam. He has duly *presented a petition to the government* for the application of the Seriat procedures. When questioned according to *accepted procedure* he firmly said I have presented this petition *with complete freedom of conscience and because my conversion is the result of divine salvation*. The above mentioned is a person of considerable wealth, of some sixty years of age, sound of mind and body and is no way needy or destitute. Therefore his petition was accepted and he was offered the faith. According to his own wish he took the name of Ali (Deringil 2004, 121-122. Italics mine).

As it is evident from this example, we don't only see the bureaucratization of an earlier practice and expansion of the traditional tolerance perspective as Bülent Özdemir (2004:55) argues but -modifying Carol Gluck's 1985, 41, quoted in Deringil 1999, 3) sentence- the establishment of a new “grammar of legal ideology by which sovereignty of the state and modernity of its means to govern its subjects are expressed.” All the words, “freedom of conscience,” “accepted procedures” and the like are essential elements of a secular vocabulary that defines the new place of religion.

The cases of conversion weren't limited to individuals. Deringil also informs us that there are many mass conversion cases in Anatolia. Procedures were similar in the case of communal conversion. One striking incident, which aroused much concern in the

West, was the mass conversion incident in Birecik<sup>31</sup>. On March 3, 1895 it was reported that a sizeable population (some 200 households) of Armenians had converted to Islam in Birecik, in south-Eastern Anatolia. The debate is again raged around the question of whether this conversion was voluntary or forced (Dadrian 1995, 158). What we understand from the foreign correspondence is that the British and Russian Embassies became involved in the matter immediately.<sup>32</sup> The Ottoman government had consented to send a mixed commission to the area, consisting of two officials from the *vilayet* of Aleppo, and the dragoman of the British Embassy, Fitzmaurice. The commission had interviewed leaders of the convert community. The leaders openly stated that:

[T]hey had *not been subjected to any pressure of force* in accepting Islam but *had only acted out of fear or recent events*, being obviously *in a state of great distress and poverty* after the recent calamities and the sacking of their property (Deringil 1999, 87. Italics mine).

Again, what we should note here is that the issue of the voluntary nature of the conversion was emphasized. However, different from the newspaper ad mentioned above, acting out of fear was mentioned but is not considered as “force” and thought as in accordance with the law. The definition of “forced” conversion is limited to the immediate moment of the act and isolated from its social and historical context of the recent events, which is massacre and robbery in our case.

As we can see form the above examples, of both personal and group conversions

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<sup>31</sup> Birecik is a town in Urfa- Aleppo region where the population was mainly Arabs, Yezidi Kurds and Armenians.

<sup>32</sup> For a full account of the events and British response, see: *Correspondence Respecting the Introduction of Reforms in the Armenian Provinces of Asiatic Turkey, Blue Book, Turkey, No.1* (1896).

there are two central issues concerning the declaration of conversion of the Christian subjects of the Empire to Islam. The first important issue is the “accepted procedures.” I believe this concern about “voluntary” nature of conversion points to a certain characteristic of modern law. The parties who engage themselves into a contract should do so without any enforcement. The special emphasis about voluntary aspect, and the extra effort to “prove the sincerity” (by mentioning the convert’s wealth, etc.) points to the proper understanding of the premises of the “European” law by the Ottoman authorities which they want to adopt as “Reforms.” The western law requires the “consent” of the “individuals” and as long as it is there, the conversion is “legitimate” and thus voluntary. The act of conversion should be marked by proper legal procedures and documentation. These procedures were defined by the general principles of modern law and were standard in every case be it individual or mass conversion. However, as it is evident from the above examples, the definition of “force” might differ from case to case. What is important to note here is that the common notion that freedom of conscience can be reduced to these procedures and the “voluntary” aspect was defined by the existence of these procedures alone but not by the immediate context of violence as force. The “individual vocabulary of eligibility,” notions like mental health, wealth etc. were designed to replace the historical context. Violence “as historical context” lost its relevance for the determination of the voluntary nature of the conversion. It was replaced by a “vocabulary of freedom of conscience” best exemplified by the concepts used in the newspaper column above. This, on the other hand, was made possible by the “language of rights” we saw in the case of the Citizenship Law of 1869, the Constitution and the other legal documents.

The act of conversion, which should be “legalized” and “verified” by these bureaucratic regulations was in fact a *double conversion*: *It was a conversion to Islam as well as a conversion to “loyal citizen.”* Although the Ottoman citizens are defined in the Citizenship Law of 1869, *the loyal citizens were defined by their religion.* The place Islam occupied in modern Ottoman state was different from its place in the previous centuries. The secular vocabulary of modernity, concepts such as individual, self, sanity, and consent were combined to create the modern citizen. On the other hand, this legal grammar of modern citizenship created a new place for religion, in the form of individual belief, that is under the control of the state’s legislation. Conversion is defined as a legal act that concerns individual belief. On the other hand, Islam was not a “belief system” in the eyes of the Ottoman statesmen but a category signifying the belonging to the nation, as a necessary component for the definition of the loyal citizen. The place of the religion in the last era of the Ottoman Empire by determined by the secular legal reform as signifying the loyalty of the citizen, and something that should be kept under control.

The second central issue is the insistence upon the “sincerity” of conversion. Why was sincerity so important? The issue stems from a concern about the “exact” place of the non-Muslim subjects in the new political community called nation. It looks like not so much the converts but potential re-converts with their “different loyalties due to their religion” were a serious problem for the Ottoman. To give an example, let me go back to the mass conversion in Birecik. The *official* report of the commission ends with this sentence: “[The leaders of the convert community] also promised that they would not convert back to Christianity once the danger was over” (Deringil 1999, 87). However, Deringil draws our attention to an interesting detail: “At the bottom of the page, under the

seals of the signatories, a scrawled sentence reads: ‘18 Subat 1311. Judging from the demeanor of some of them it seems that they intend to return to their old religion.’” This note raises the question of sincerity. Why did the Turkish member of the committee feel the need to “record” his suspicions about the sincerity of the converted Armenians? As Gyanendra Pandey argues the construction of minorities and majorities in the secular nation states also brought with it a most important other notion: loyalty to the nation. However, “the test of loyalty is in fact required only of those who are not “real,” “natural” citizens” (Pandey 1999, 611). On one hand citizenship laws have become more inclusive, on the other hand the question remained: can non-Muslims be real citizens of the Ottoman Empire? The only way for the non-Muslims to prove their loyalties under the suspicious eyes of the Ottoman government was to convert to Islam and become loyal citizens. Yet, the laws didn’t feel the need to regulate the aftermath of the conversion. No schooling in their new religion or no further acts to show their “sincerity” was necessary.<sup>33</sup> The only regulation existed was to ensure the legitimacy of their conversion in the eyes of the “foreign powers.” “The whole procedure that is prescribed in cases of conversion to Mohammedanism from any form of religion is judicious, moderate, and calculated to distinguish between real and forced conversion, and to give the former coreligionists of the convert every opportunity of satisfying themselves that the conversion is voluntary” (quoted in Deringil 1999, 85). Pushing Deringil’s analysis further my claim is that, the secular law reform *enabled* the “voluntary” appearance of the conversion in a time of violence. The conversion cases and their image as “voluntary”

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<sup>33</sup> This, I mean, was not a clause in the legal procedures. The aftermath of the conversion is not a legal concern but on the local and social levels there is a necessity to convince the neighbors about the sincerity of the conversion.

were made possible by the reform of the law and the bureaucratization of the conversion procedure.

Of course such a chapter can't be written without mentioning the significance of these cases of the conversion in terms of what some scholars call as the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the violent events of 1915.

These being said, I still feel to differentiate between genocide and conversion. First of all they are different types of violence whose main difference lies on their approach to ability to pass to another sphere, namely citizenship. In the cases which I tried to analyze in this chapter, the "possibility" of conversion was still there, whereas genocide means –among other things- the closing of this possibility. In the era of genocide, the possibility of converting to a citizen via religious conversion -the double-conversion- was not easily available anymore as it was the case some decades ago. And maybe this was the moment that signified the difference of genocide.

### **Instead of a conclusion**

In this chapter I argued that secular reform to modernize the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth Century was not the tool, as some scholars of nationalism has argued, for a complete separation between the state and religion. This seemingly controversial character of the act of conversion is not due to the failure of a modernizing state to secularize its laws but drives its force from the bureaucratic reform of the Ottoman Law. In fact, these reforms were the ways for the modern Ottoman state to control the religious realm and religious diversity in the Empire. Violence and legal reform were two complementary tools that the modern state uses to create the loyal

citizen and maintain its sovereignty. In this sense, a new importance was assigned to religion in establishing the “loyal majority.”

The discussion about the enforced character of the legal reform still has a very big importance for contemporary Turkey. The rights of religious minorities are still seen as the enforcement of the European standards against national laws. A study that aims to bridge these two moments of legal reform -19<sup>th</sup> Century Ottoman Empire and today’s Turkey reforming herself to become a full member of the European Union- from national as well as international perspectives might answer some of the questions this chapter left unanswered: How can we move beyond the category of nation-state, for a study on the rights of the minorities as something determined at the intersection between international systems and national interests? How should we understand legal reform if we want to go beyond the dichotomous understanding of outside enforcement and national resistance? An ethnographic and archival study on the legal experiences of the descendants of the Islamized Armenians in Turkey might answer these questions. In the following chapter, I take up these questions in the wider context of religious tolerance in the new Republic.

## Chapter 2

### Terrains of Tolerance: Shifting Political Paradigms of Religion,

#### Sovereignty and National Minorities in Turkey

In the opening sentence of her book, *The Invention of World Religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa writes: "Poor grammar, fuzzy semantics, or uncertain orthography can never stop a phrase from gaining currency if there is enough practical demand for it in the spirit of the times" (2005,1). In this chapter, I trace the trajectory of two such terms of Turkish language: *tolerans* and *hoşgörü*. *Tolerans* [tolerance] was used mostly during the early Republican period and *hoşgörü* [literally meaning nice-seeing] was more popular at a later period. Even so, both terminologies have been used to cover -and used interchangeably with- a vast array of words of Turkish and Arabic origin (including *müsamaha*, *tahammül*, *tesamuh* and *katlanma*) to address the mode of governance of non-Muslim populations of the Ottoman Empire and, later, the Turkish Republic.

The concept of tolerance has been discussed extensively as the tolerance of religious, cultural and ethnic differences within homogeneously imagined Turkish nation (Brink-Danan 2010; Mills 2010). Several scholars also grappled with the concept of tolerance in Turkey and in the Ottoman Empire to scrutinize it as a political project of living together with non-Muslim populations (Barkey 2008; Rodrigue 1995). An analysis of the application of these concepts since 1923 (birth of the Republic of Turkey) in the context of minority rights, I am attending here, also indicates that these various uses of tolerance occupies a crucial place in the way secularism functions in Turkey. Turkish state's governing practices distinguished between the ethic/moral/religious notions of

traditional Ottoman tolerance from tolerance that was associated with secular European experience. Therefore, here, I attempt a genealogy of tolerance as a "conceptual vocabulary" of Turkish secularism and minority rights (Bajpai 2002). This analysis is critical in understanding not only the concepts of tolerance and religious minority, but also how debates on secularism and modernity were handled by the state.

In this chapter, I focus on the fundamental moments in the discourses on religious tolerance that shaped and continue to frame the relationship between the state and non-Muslim minorities in Turkey. I also analyze debates on policies on minority religions that have appeared in the international context recently. I explore the shifting terrains of religious tolerance and minorities in Turkey by examining the broader political struggles and issues, especially on how they are re-framed. At which historical juncture did tolerance become an important policy? What is the relationship between vocabularies of secularism that are employed in academia and in policies concerning religious minorities? For example, what is the relation between pluralism, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism and religious freedom? What is the history of terms deployed in past debates in Turkey? Have they ceased to exist, such as the concept of *imtiyaz* (privilege)? What normative conceptions of freedom, religion, community and the individual are encoded in the narrative on tolerance and how are they circulated in Turkey? How does an Islamic critique of liberal secular discourses of tolerance transform the way religion is managed and produced? I attempt, therefore, to an archeology of many meanings of tolerance in contemporary Turkey (see Foucault 1982).

I start with the genealogy of tolerance in the late 1950s and 1960s with the end of the ban on the establishment of political parties and with the first multi-party elections.

Next, I explore the governing pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party's (AKP) interest in tolerance toward religious minorities. I will trace the genealogy of tolerance discourses in Turkey as an integral element of contemporary neoliberal establishment and locate its theoretical foundations within the wider issues around the government non-Muslim minorities in Turkey. While minorities were previously seen as a danger to national sovereignty, even to modernity (by being an impediment to secularism/secularization), currently acknowledging minority presence has become an index of modernity. Yet, according to this discourse of tolerance that prevails since the beginning of the AKP's first term in the government in the early 2000s, *tolerans* is a Western liberal tradition that monitors religious differences; in contrast, *Hoşgörü* refers to the age-old Ottoman-Turkish political tradition of peaceful coexistence. Given the historical and philosophical differences between *tolerans* and *hoşgörü*, the regime interpreted the East and the West incommensurable. Yet the sense of injury I identified in the early classifications of tolerance continues to exist. I conclude this chapter by questioning the limits of tolerance of religious minorities and freedom. I address some of these issues in the next chapter, Legally Armenian.

### **The Emergence of Minorities in the New Republic**

The founder of the Republic was the first person to put the definition of tolerance forward about 1923-24 when the Turkish Republic was established. In his analysis of Woodrow Wilson's Principles (especially the Twelfth Principle on the protection of national minorities), Atatürk (then Mustafa Kemal) stated that the young republic would not hesitate in approving this principle since tolerance was a legacy of the Ottoman

Empire (Atatürk 1989, 1720). According to Atatürk, “if we take into consideration the privileges that non-Muslims held over many centuries since the [Ottoman] conquest [*fetih*] of Istanbul [from the East Roman (Byzantine) Empire in 1453 AD], it can be very easily gleaned that the Turkish nation (*millet*) was the most tolerant (*hoşgörülü*) and noble nation on the face of the earth. Unfortunate events that occurred to non-Muslims all took place because the minorities fell for the machinations of foreign countries and pursued separatist politics" (1989, 1728).

According to Atatürk's speech, minority privileges (*imtiyazlar*) in the new republic were established as a paradox and intimately tied to tolerance. However, the way Mustafa Kemal linked privilege and tolerance also signals a sense of regret: Turks were more tolerant than they should have been and the minorities less grateful. If anything, these privileges caused the Empire's destruction. Turkish tolerance is formulated as a double-edged sword that invokes potential injury as well as the idea of religious freedom. The history of minority privileges conjured up a strong sense of historical injury to Ottoman/Turkish sovereignty. Yet this history was also a source of pride that secured the freedom of religion for every population under the Ottoman rule, even before its institutionalization in the international realm by the Woodward Wilson's principles. In Atatürk's perspective, therefore, Wilsonian Principles were not new or foreign to Turkish political culture.

Atatürk's speech not only indexed the particular use of tolerance in the new republic, but also established the main subject of it: "non-Muslim minorities." The term minority made its entrance in political parlance with international treaties that were signed at the end of World War 1. Aron Rodrigue notes that terms that were used to

denote minorities (*ekal*) and majority (*ekser* numerical) were "regularly used in official Ottoman documents and accounts. But none of these terms had any official political meaning or connotation" (Rodrigue 2013, 42). It was only towards the last decades of the Empire, Üngör (2011b) argues, when demographic considerations began to play an increasingly important role in power relations between religious and ethnic groups, political representation was coupled with majority rule and minority status emerged as a political concept in the context of demographic calculations.

The emergence of minorities also corresponds to developments in the international context. Minorities and minority rights as categories burst on at the end of World War I with the collapse of the old Habsburg, Romanov and Ottoman Empires and the creation of new nation-states in their old territories (Mazower 2004). Moreover, the minority issue occupied much of the deliberations of the peace treaties that followed World War I.

The term minority made its very first appearance as a political term in the fourth section of the Serves Peace Treaty in 1920. Turkey was by no means alone to be coerced to deal with its minorities. As a fact, Rodrigue argues, "it was clear that these minority rights were imposed by the victorious Entente powers and were modeled especially on the Poland Treaty of 1919" (2013, 43).

The memoirs of the last Armenian Patriarch of the Ottoman Empire, Patriarch Zaven<sup>34</sup> is a valuable source on the issue of the emergence of non-Muslim minorities

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<sup>34</sup> Zaven Der Yeghiyan was the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul from 1913 to 1922 that is during the genocide and deportations. In 1916, the Ottoman government sent him to exile to Baghdad and closed the Patriarchate. In 1918, the Armenian Patriarchate was reopened, during the brief British occupation of Istanbul. Patriarch Zaven returned to his post. He collaborated with the British forces and prepared a list of perpetrators of the

from the former Ottoman *millet*s of the nineteenth century. A pivotal encounter between Patriarch Zaven and Refet Pasa (Bele), a representative of the new national government of Turkey in 1920 signals the constitutive moment of "the Armenian minority" in the new republic. In this meeting, Refet Pasa made it clear that the national government did not trust the Armenian community. The Patriarch replied in all sincerity: "We are aware of the fact that the Turkish government has suspicions about us and is troubled by our presence; and we are troubled in return by the government's (suspicious) attitude towards us. It's our wish to be allocated with a small corner in this country in which we will be governed with a [little] different [minority] regime." Referring to the discussions about a possible exchange of populations between Turkey and Greece, which was eventually realized in 1923, he continued, "We are not Greeks, you cannot exchange us. Also, no European state would accept us and they are not obliged to do so."<sup>35</sup>

Patriarch Zaven was forced by Refet Pasa to resign only a couple of months after this meeting. He escaped to Varna without resigning. His forced de facto resignation also marked the end of any request, demand and/or claim that could come from the minority

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genocide. All the persons on his list were adjudicated at the Divan-ı Harb [Special War Courts]. During his second exile, this time by the new government of the Republic of Turkey, Patriarch Zaven wrote his memoirs in Armenian, titled *Badriarkagan Huşeris Vaverakirner yev Vigayutyunner* (Patriarchal Memoirs, Documents and Testimonies), published in Cairo in 1947. He died the same year in Baghdad and was buried in Jerusalem. The only source that cites Patriarch Zaven's memoirs in the context of the current status of Armenians in Turkey is Bebiroglu (2009). The other source is Dadrian (2003), but his focus is the Armenian genocide. Here I quote from Murat Bebiroglu.

<sup>35</sup> "Türk hükümetinin bize şüpheli bir gözle baktığını ve bizim varlığımızdan rahatsız olduğunu biliyoruz, biz de hükümetin bize şüpheli bakışından rahatsız oluyoruz. Bu ülkede bize, üzerinde toplanabileceğimiz bir köşe ayrılmasını ve orada az da olsa farklı bir yönetimle yönetilmeyi isteriz. Biz Rum değiliz ki bizi mübadeleye tabi tutabilirsiniz. Ayrıca hiçbir Avrupa ülkesi bizi kabul etmez ve kabul etmek zorunda da değildir" as cited by Bebiroglu (2009, 2). All translations are mine except noted.

representatives about their status in the new republic. They were never asked or allowed to voice their opinions again.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the Armenian, Greek and Jewish communities renounced the special rights conferred on minorities to continue their own communal religious life and culture accorded by the Lausanne Treaty of 1923.<sup>37</sup> They all declared that they "wished to remain ordinary citizens of the Republic" (Bali 2012, 275). Meanwhile, the founders of the new republic believed firmly that they had solved the legal and demographic problems of minorities by a succession of events: The Armenian genocide, the Great Population Exchange between Turkey and Greece, the Lausanne Treaty and lastly by the minority communities renouncing any special rights that might have been bestowed to them. The minority problem of Turkey was believed to be "finally solved"<sup>38</sup> in the national and international context. Rodrigue also argues that the minorities were incorporated silently to believe the myth that they are the remnants of Ottoman *millet* system and a tolerant Turkish state tradition will protect them even in the absence of legally codified guarantees.

### **The Legal Debate on Tolerance: A Shield against Islam and the Rights Discourse**

In the decades following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, it became clear that the existence of minorities was a legal issue no matter how small their numbers may be. Moreover, their presence was a source of European intervention and an incessant

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<sup>36</sup> I as illustrate in later chapters, the attitude of the members of the Armenian Patriarchate in contemporary Turkey is the polar opposite of the boldness of the last Ottoman Patriarch Zaven.

<sup>37</sup> See Bali (2012) for a discussion on how the representatives of the minority communities were forced to renounce their rights granted in the Lausanne Treaty.

<sup>38</sup> Here I reference Deringil's (2009) phrasing, "Armenian Problem is Finally Closed."

test of Turkish political maturity. Declarations on the deep roots of religious tolerance in the Ottoman Empire were revived in the 1950s, this time not by Turkish statesmen or diplomats taking part in international treaties but by legal scholars. I find this intervention by legal scholars significant to understand how tolerance functions as a justification for the absence of legal rights for minorities and as a defense mechanism used by Turkish secularists when Westerners allude to Turkey's inherent Muslim character.

By 1948, Turkey had become a multi-party parliamentary system. However, that transition had been at the cost of religious policies. An outcry against religious revivalism was heard not only by the former governing party Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), the defender of secularism against the populist and purportedly religious policies of the then new governing party Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti, DP), but also by western scholars. Bernard Lewis was quick to comment on the issue.<sup>39</sup> In his article, "Islamic Revivalism in Turkey" (1952), he examined which sector of society was for revival and which was against. This article was an early example of what Lewis would become his thesis on the essential characteristics of Muslim communities that would eventually establish the basis of his arguments in his article, *Muslim Rage* (1992).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> On the revival of Islam in Turkey, see Thomas (1952) and Reed (1954).

<sup>40</sup> Two volumes edited by Braude and Lewis focus on how the Ottoman/Muslim authorities tolerate non-Muslims. In their introduction, they describe the Ottoman Empire as "a classic example of the plural society" its prime characteristic being "Christians and Jews worshipped and studied side by side, enriching their distinct cultures" (1982, 1). They further argue "similar societies in South Asia applies equally well to the Ottoman world" where people "mix but do not combine" (p. 1). Braude and Lewis's understanding of religious tolerance in Islam is reified, essentialized category.

In "Islamic Revivalism in Turkey," Lewis diagnoses the problem; it stems from "religious functionaries" and peasants' zealotry. And this is not new; this problem has deep roots in Turkish culture. He warns against the threat of Islamic revival poses for the still young and vulnerable republic, and most critically its secular aspirations. In his opinion, secularism is a very dangerous venture to be undertaken in an Islamic society in the first place. Lewis concludes his essay as follows:

In Turkey, as in other Muslim countries, there are those who talk hopefully of achieving "a synthesis of the best elements of West and East." This is a vain hope—the clash of civilizations in history does not usually culminate in a marriage of selected best elements—rather in a promiscuous cohabitation of good, bad, and indifferent alike. But a true revival of a religious faith on the level of modern thought and life is within the bounds of possibility. The Turkish people, by the exercise of their practical common sense and powers of improvisation, may yet find a workable compromise between Islam and modernism that will enable them, without conflict, to follow both their fathers' path to freedom and progress and their grandfathers' path to God (1952, 48).

With passages such as the one above, Lewis established constructs that have dominated discourses on secularism and modernity in Turkey, even to the present. Scholarship on Turkey as well as on Islam seems unable to debunk Lewis's ideological perspective on Islam such as the "clash of civilizations." In his earlier text, Lewis argues that modernization will not come as a synthesis but as a compromise in Turkey "as in other Muslim countries." By essentializing Turkish culture as Islam, he sees the impossibility of a synthesis of political cultures; modern Turkey will fail. He advised Turkish politicians that if tolerance prevails in the Muslim lands, it could only be based on its historical foundation.

In response to these conceptualizations that Turkey is inherently Islamic and incompatible with Western practices of tolerance, a defensive discourse emerged in the

1950s. It traced the roots of secularism to the Ottoman state tradition and postulated that Ottoman practices of religious tolerance were consequently the basis for Turkish tolerance. Faculty members at the prominent Istanbul Law School and the Ankara Law School started to write commentaries on the merits of secularism and the historical origins of Turkish secular tolerance. Legal scholars praised the balance achieved between the uses of tolerance to legitimize the absence of minority rights on the one hand and the defense of Turkish secularism against instability complaints on the other. The pages of the *Ankara Law School Journal (AUHF Mecmuasi)* were brimming with articles analyzing (and praising) the Turkish secular revolution and reassuring its future.

The opening lecture of the 1959-1960 academic year by the Dean of Ankara Law School, Prof. Dr. İlhan Arsel (1959), titled “The Separation of Religion and the State,” was published in *Ankara Law School Journal*, as was the custom.<sup>41</sup> Arsel argued that although the Ottoman Empire was a theocracy, followers of minority religions were never persecuted “in contrast to the West.” Using the word *müsamaha* instead of *tolerans* and *müsamahakârsızlık* for intolerance, he locates intolerance in the bigotry of the religious functionaries (*din adami*) interfering in the affairs of the state (1959, 175-6). Further, he contrasts the tolerant practices of the Empire with Europe:

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<sup>41</sup> Conveniently located in the capital, the Ankara Law School is known as the bedrock of the Turkish bureaucratic and judicial elite, the self-appointed guardians of the secular republic. Up until today, almost all the Constitutional Court judges and state prosecutors—in short important figures of the legal establishment—have been graduates of Ankara Law. The “opening lectures” of a dean or other prominent members of the faculty attract a large audience to appraise if there are any corrections, declarations or threats to the Turkish legal establishment, the governing party and the Turkish public. Speeches by the Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court and the Chief Justice of the Court of Cassation also are deemed significant.

In our history those who did not belong to the state's religion [Islam] were not tortured or persecuted, as it was the case in the West; nor were they forced to convert to Islam; nor were non-Muslim communities banned from performing their religious duties; however, we experienced intolerance in the hands of our own religious functionaries [*ulema*] and had a national calamity (1959,175-176).<sup>42</sup>

While it was new to refer to the Ottoman Empire in laudatory terms in the context of Turkish secularism, Arsel's remarks suggest two points by summoning the Ottoman past. First, to achieve a secular Ottoman past, he establishes that separation of state and religion existed in the dual legal system of the Empire, *shariat* and *kanun*. Thus, Turkish (secular) traditional law has deep roots, a tradition of secularism in the legal system. Arsel's interpretation of history purports a legal continuation. It was a proto-secular model characterized by the existence of two separate legal systems. However, the zealotry of religious functionaries destroyed this separation, eventually leading to the Empire's demise. Secularism had to be reconstituted in the Republic of Turkey and defended against extremist religious functionaries and the reactionary masses that they were easily misled. Arsel conjectures that intolerance is not a component of Islam, but its abuse by religious functionaries. More importantly, the Turkish state and political tradition were identified as the solution in the separation of the religious and secular law.

Arsel's second goal in his article is to reestablish the Empire as a tolerant state in its treatment of non-Muslims. He argues that the Ottomans were superior in their relations with religious minorities when compared to the West. Consequently, Ottoman

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<sup>42</sup> “Her ne kadar tarihimizde, devlet dinine mensup olmayanların garpte olduğu şekilde işkence ve zulme mahkum edildikleri, veya islām (sic.) dininden olmayanların islāmı kabule mecbur kılındıkları, veyahutta gayrı müslim denilen sınıfların kendi inandıkları dinde serbesce ibadet etmelerinin yasak edildiği öyle pek görülmüş değilse de biz musamahakârsızlığı asıl kendi din adamlarımızdan ve milli musibetleri de dinin devlet işlerine karışması yüzünden görmüştür.”

tolerance of non-Muslims was a traditional trope of Turkish secularism, indicating that tolerance in Turkey existed before European modern secularism, thus claiming Ottoman-modernity. This Ottoman tolerant narrative erases any discrimination experienced by non-Muslim religious communities or individuals in the Ottoman Empire. Likewise, it de-legitimizes Western claims that Turkey has mistreated its ethno-cultural and religious minorities.

### **Tolerance and its Twin Privilege**

Yet there is another function for this tolerance discourse: It authorizes the absence of rights for religious minorities in the Republic. Mustafa Emil Elöve's article "*Din İmtiyazları*" (Religious Privileges) (1953) best illustrates this issue. Elöve argues that religious functionaries' intolerance destroys the autonomous state; in other words, tolerance flourishes when the state and religion are separated. He cites several imperial edicts<sup>43</sup> of the nineteenth century that granted equal rights to all subjects. These policies aimed to contravene zealous forces that were weakening the Empire. It is curious that his tone is aggressive as in "*Esitlik imtiyaz tanımaz*" (Equality does not recognize privilege) (Elöve 1953, 338). The Ottoman state established equality of its subjects by eliminating the privileges of non-Muslims. However, Elöve believes that the reforms were a mistake: indeed, the reforms of *Tanzimat* "were not beneficial for the Turks. They were forced to remain loyal to the rules of religious functionaries *ehl-i sunnet* (those who know the ways

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<sup>43</sup> Ottoman imperial reform edicts included the 1839 (*Islahat Fermani*), the 1856 (*Tanzimat*), and the Constitutional Revolution of 1876 that guaranteed equal legal rights to all subjects, Muslims and non-Muslims. While non-Muslim subjects gradually lost the traditional legal protection offered to their communities, the reforms established their status as equal Ottoman citizens (Göçek and Ozyüksel 2012; Salzman 1999).

of Islam) and practice their Islam within the framework that was determined by the state.”<sup>44</sup>

In Elöve’s opinion, legal reforms adopted under Western pressure to protect religious minorities, the conditions of religious minorities under the Empire were even better than those enjoyed by the Turkish majority. He quotes French traveler Thévenot’s praise of Turkish morality and tolerance in *Relation d’un voyage fait au Levant*, as (Western) proof for Ottoman open-mindedness. Thus, in this secular order, religious minorities were never treated unequally. Although famous for their proclamation of the equality of all Ottoman subjects Muslim and non-Muslim alike, the reforms aimed at this equality by eliminating the privileges of non-Muslims. The term minority is considered to be a misguided cultural and legal translation from the Western context that cannot be implemented in the Turkish state because the inclusion of minority clauses was mainly to assuage Western pressure.

Legal scholars’ arguments suggested that in Turkey there was no need for a legal recognition of minority rights. Turkey tolerated its non-Muslims fully. Turkish legal secular institutions thus posit that the Ottoman state valued pluralism until the West and misguided non-Muslim subjects of the Empire betrayed its patience. If the Republic were to escape the fate of the Empire, it would have to be careful not to give any rights to minorities based on their difference.

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<sup>44</sup> Here, Elove cites a passage from S. M. Arsal’s book *Tanzimat* (1940, 326): “Fakat bu kadar arzıyla konulmuş müsavât (equality) hükümlerinden Türkler hic bir sey kazanmis olmuyorlardı.” ... Onlar ehlisunnet akidelerine sadik kalmaga, muslumanliklarini da devletce tesbit edilmis cerceveler dahilinde tecelli ettirmege mecburdu.”

Here, it is also important to note that notion of *equal citizenship* was based primarily on the established conceptualization of minorities and minority rights. Disparities between different religious communities were eliminated without endowing imperial subjects with citizens' rights (see Salzman 1999). By breaking down distinctions based on religion, language, and race, and forms of legal hierarchy between Muslims and non-Muslims, it was possible to bring Christians who, "had become protégées of foreign states [under the system of capitulations] back under the jurisdiction of the Ottoman state and its legal system" (Quataert 2005, 66).<sup>45</sup>

We also have to note that the discourse on state injury, first established by Atatürk in his *Nutuk* cited above, makes its reappearance in association with the activities of the missionaries in the Ottoman Empire. Some scholars have argued that the principle of religious liberty is closely associated with the Western (Christian) desire to win converts. In his important work on the development of Turkish secularism, Niyazi Berkes (1964) devotes long chapters to the use of international diplomacy and the foreign offices of Anglo-American governments. In *Development of Secularism in Turkey*, Berkes contends that Western duplicity propelled the Ottomans and later Turkish Republic to adopt legal reforms to eliminate differences among the subjects of the Empire.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> On dual citizenship of the non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire also see Masters (2001).

<sup>46</sup> Sharkey (2008) states that Andrew Watson, a founding figure of the American Presbyterian mission in Egypt, advocated internationally for the adoption of religious liberty in forums as diverse as the League of Nations, the Paris Peace Conference, the U.S. State Department, and the British Foreign Office. Ottomans, on the other hand, interpreted religious liberty as "the freedom to defend their religion" against dominant missionary activity and to consolidate the Islamic character of the Empire (Deringil 1998, 115).

The public debates regarding tolerance and religious freedom in Turkey in the 1950s are best represented by the publications several professors from the Ankara Law School. The discussions reveal how Turkish legal scholars understood minority rights and contributed to the development of secular sensibilities and notions of religious tolerance in Turkey. As explained above, Ottoman tolerance was posited to be the basis of Turkish tolerance in the new Republic. In other words, the Turkish public and government officials tend to show skepticism and resentment of minority protections because they saw minorities as fifth columns working against the national sovereignty for Western imperial interests.

### **The Issue of Third World Sovereignty**

Tolerance discourses have been linked to European efforts to subject weaker states to accept some form of taxation in return for the freedom of religious minorities. Such Western secular politics have been spreading to the rest of the world since the seventeenth century (Brown 2006). I argue that this expansion of Western secularism to non-Western peoples and lands should be reconsidered in light of their construction of religious minorities and discourses of religious freedom, or as it is dubbed in Turkey, the culture of tolerance. Far from being a measure of a culture's tolerance toward others, religious freedom has been tied from its very inception to the exercise of sovereign power, regional and national security, and the inequality of geopolitical power relations.

For the legal scholars cited in the previous section, conflict over the meaning and implementation of religious liberty ignored questions of geopolitical struggle and sovereignty. The Ottoman Empire initiated a quest for religious liberty that became one

of the primary idioms through which minority communities claimed Western protection against systemic discrimination. Through publications produced on Armenians as well as on the denial of Armenian Genocide, Göçek and Bloxham have described this era as marked by defensive Republican nationalist narrative (2008, 149).

Concepts of religious liberty and minority rights invented in the new Turkish republic are deeply intertwined with the principle of state sovereignty. However, the religious minorities felt like outsiders in spite of their citizenship. The sense of injury to national sovereignty was the most important concern for the founders of the republic. They consulted European and American sources to better understand their situation as if Western nations are the only normative standard or measure for nation-states. While, minority status is important for navigating the present and imagining the future for democratizing projects, nation-states are judged on their performance on minority status. Moreover, the public and policy makers, as in Turkey, monitor contemporary discourses and practices of tolerance closely; however, they are likely to be influenced by state ideology.

Saba Mahmood (2012) argues that the international protection of religious freedom, especially of minorities, has emerged as a particular problem for non-European nation-states, in that it injures national sovereignty. The national response to the production of “the minority problem” in international law has been the emergence of tolerance as the solution. Mahmood further asserts that the terms of the debate (religious freedom, minority) were defined by this international context of unequal sovereign terrain. Her argument reveals the disparities in the institutionalization of religious freedom. Third World’s colonial history must be integral component in the debates on

religious freedom. The intersecting injury claims and sovereignty issues separate the scholarship on tolerance between Europe and the United States on the one hand and the Third World on the other.

I see this to be a more complicated question than being a simple result of a colonial past. I suggest that the sense of injury is directly related to the nature of the international regime; often some states impose its right to intervene only in cases of humanitarian exigency (Cowan 2007). In turn, these interventions define the limits to an inherently tolerant regime. Constructing minority group citizens in Turkey that are the objects of toleration are generally interpreted as a historical injury to national and formerly imperial sovereignty. More specifically, this is true from the Ottoman legal reforms in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the treaties signed by the imperial and republic governments. For example, the Treaty of Sèvres of 1920 is often remembered as a foundational and treacherous moment when the problem of minorities emerged, unfortunately, it took place at a time when the nation was still young and resources limited. Later, the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 is assumed to have "solved" the problem by giving minority recognition only to a few religious denominations leaving Kurds and Alevis completely outside of the picture. Turkish statesmen's memoirs are replete of accounts of this second "better" Treaty. Riza Nur, a statesman representing the Turkish government at the Lausanne negotiations, writes in his memoirs: "With the term 'religion,' [the Europeans] were going to make two million Alevis (*Kizilbas*), who are pure (*halis*) Turks, into [a] minority" (Nur 1967, 1044). The narratives of the nationalists indicate that the new government was able to assert its own understanding of who is a minority and is not because they had been victorious in the "War of Independence."

As discussed above, scholars blamed the breakdown of harmonious coexistence in the Empire to the “evil effects” of European discourses on modernization as well as the religious minority groups’ demands for privileges. The history of international treaties is told on how minorities were a fifth column of Western imperialism (see Preece 1997; Cowan 2009). Likewise, Mahmood (2012) illustrates that the Christians of Egypt are perceived as traitors, especially those with dual citizenship who interfere in the internal affairs of the state. Minority protection in Turkey is often linked to European impositions. Luckily, tolerance is a benign concept that that does not invoke fear about national sovereignty and outside intervention. Therefore, tolerance has become an umbrella for a variety of issues including "religious freedom," “minority rights,” "pluralism," "coexistence," "human rights" (Aral 2004), "civilization," and “equality” (see Brink-Danan 2011, 45).

Tolerance wasn't only used by nationalists to defend the sovereignty of the Turkish nation. Rather it has been a common trope used by politicians from a wide array of the political spectrum. One telling example came from a prominent politician who was known for his leftist-liberal stance. As the September 12, 1980 military coup rebuilt Turkey's political system, it also drafted a new constitution through The Advisory Council. After the writing of the draft was finished, a public referendum was scheduled to obtain popular approval (Parla 2002). During this process, the European Council suggested that the new constitution should guarantee the religious rights of minorities. Against this intervention, Ismail Cem, then a prominent CHP deputy, stated that the minorities in Turkey had "led their existence in the most humane of environments, not

because of [the provisions of the 1923] Lausanne Treaty, but because of the Turkish tradition of tolerance" (cited in Bali 2012, 263).

### **The issue of Armenian Genocide**

The discourse on the rights of minority in the Republic of Turkey has a long and varied history. As I have discussed above, there was a period, in the early years of the republic, when it was argued that the Ottoman Empire, allegedly, suffered from being too tolerant toward its ethnic and religious groups. In the 1950s, legal scholars and Western academicians argued that the denial of the rights of non-Muslim citizens were legitimate. This perception of the functioning of tolerance continued to shape much of Turkish policies towards its non-Muslim minorities for years to come. In the late 1970 and 80s, the Turkish public witnessed the re-emergence of narratives of Ottoman tolerance. This time, tolerance was evoked --domestically and internationally-- as a response to the activities of an armed Armenian organization, Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and to defend the Turkish position against Armenian initiatives for genocide recognition. Through a series of assassinations of Turkish diplomats in the 1970s and early 1980s, ASALA sought to compel the Turkish government to recognize the Armenian massacres and deportations of 1915 as genocide.

Esad Uras' book, *Armenians and the Armenian Issue in History (Tarihte Ermeniler ve Ermeni Meselesi)* published originally in 1950 and republished in 1976<sup>47</sup> to defend the official Turkish thesis, namely the denial of genocide against Armenian

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<sup>47</sup> For detailed background information on Uras see Ülgen 2010, 367-368. By focusing on the biographical information on the early Republic authors that published books on the Armenian issue, Ülgen illustrates the importance of knowledge-production in the field of the Armenian issue in the new Republic.

claims. He writes, “Turkish domination is merely outward and does not reach, so to say the inner soul; so in many respects, various ethnic groups in Turkey enjoy a fuller autonomy than in the most advanced countries of Western Europe”<sup>48</sup> (Uras 1976, 175). According to Uras, Ottoman Empire was the only state in its time that that “truly respected freedom of religion” (175).

Investigating tolerance pragmatically, Uras shows that Turkey is innocent of historical crimes. As Robert Hayden explains, Uras has provided an “empirical counter in the historical ‘facts’ selectively analyzed for nationalist or multicultural politics” (2002, 206). The return of Ottoman tolerance studies propelled historians to rush to imperial archives to dig for evidence that would bolster a narrative of open-mindedness that is dramatically opposite of the Western model of minority-majority structure.<sup>49</sup>

### **“Two Competing Visions of Secularism in Turkey Today”**

In this chapter I argued that the fear of European intervention in the internal affairs of Turkey produced a defensive discourse against Western imperialism. Later this narrative posited that Turkish character was inherently tolerant of minorities. The following review of a recent discussion on tolerance and perceptions of the Ottoman-

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<sup>48</sup> Between 1950 and 1976, two Turkish scholars referred to Western accounts to support their claims on the historical roots of pluralism. To support their case with the accounts of the Western scholars, they turned to various renowned 19<sup>th</sup> century travelers. French geographer Élisée Reclus and Italian historian/journalist Abdolinimo Ubinini was among them. Here Uras (1976) cites Reclus's *La Nouvelle Géographie universelle, la terre et les hommes* (1894): “Turk hakimiyeti, sahsin, kisinin icine, derinliklerine girmez.”

<sup>49</sup> In addition to the Turkish nationalists who searched for fitting evidence for tolerance, there were others scholars who contributed to that literature. For example, Bali (2012) illustrates how the Jewish community in Turkey was used by the Turkish state to make a case about for Turkish tolerance in the international arena.

Turkish tradition of treatment of minorities will lay the groundwork for the next chapter because it is indicative of the current politics in Turkey regarding legal reform on religious freedom. In the past couple of decades, tolerance/hoşgörü have made a comeback in popular discourses to remedy the shortcomings of Turkish Kemalist secularism. As Hurd argues, “A rigid secular/religious binary, in which Kemalism has sought to monopolize the ‘secular’ side of the binary and designated rival political actors as ‘religious’ as a means of delegitimizing them, has been a powerful force in Turkish politics” (2011, 180). Yet I will explain below, the new deliberations focus on multiple secularisms, consequently, another new definition of the secular has been affixed to tolerance.

After years of attempting to erase historical evidence of non-Muslim presence in Anatolia, the current Turkish government is attempting to re-write national history (Göçek 2006). Turkish tolerance is today celebrated on many fronts. Evidently, this is an important strategy of Turkey’s self-representation on the international stage as claims on Ottoman religious tolerance allow Turkey to brag about an inherited virtue from their precedents.

Hakan Yavuz, a political scientist at the University of Utah and a Gülen Movement insider (see Gözaydın 2009b), provides one of the first illustrations of multi-secularism.<sup>50</sup> Here I quote a lengthy passage from Yavuz’s criticism of Kemalist “exclusionary history of secularism.”

In 1923, Mustafa Kemal implemented a series of reforms in an effort to forge a modern nation-state. Instead of being neutral on the question of the religious practices and beliefs of its citizenry, the Kemalist state seeks to remove all manifestations of religion from the public sphere and put them

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<sup>50</sup> For a similar argument see Kuru (2009).

under the strict control of the state... Instead of being viewed as strength, the Ottoman Islamic tradition of pluralism, tolerance, and cultural diversity was viewed as a debilitating weakness... Secularism became a strategy of exclusion and an instrument of oppression.

Secularism itself raised key questions about identity, the ethics of difference and co-existence, and social justice... There secularism has not meant simply the formal separation between religious and political authority and institutions, but rather a Jacobin form of social engineering that differs markedly from Anglo-Saxon traditions of religious pluralism. It has tended to be an authoritarian state ideology to stamp out religious and ethnic differences in the name of Enlightenment values.

There are two competing visions of secularism in Turkey today: one authoritarian, the other pluralist. The Kemalist version of secularism is a system of controlling religion and subordinating it to an official state form. The pluralist version requires a neutral state and a new tolerance for Islamic voices and institutions in civil society. Since religion infuses all aspects of human life, one cannot, and should not, try by force to exclude it from public life (2003, 59-60).

By representing the current government of Turkey as secular, Yavuz argues for an alternative secularism for Turkey, one that is achieved by a combination of liberalism and Islam. He writes, “The expanding role played by Islamic groups (such as the Nur movement of Fethullah Gülen, a faith-based social movement that brings Islam back to the public sphere by “cross-fertilizing Islamic idioms with global discourses on human rights and democracy in Turkey's media, schools, and businesses has the potential to create a new, and more liberal, society - and also a new, and more tolerant, version of Islam” (2003, 60).

Robert Hayden suggests that the Ottoman legacy also had an impact in that it is “invented” as “a tradition of tolerance and inclusion” (2002, 207) to critique Western discourses of tolerance which in turn are understood as operating with a Christian, rational, and imperialist subtext. Contrary to what is understood as the rational and pragmatic calculations of the Western states, Yavuz similarly poses Turkish tolerance,

*hoşgörü*, is as a moral and religious solution for protecting minorities and religious freedom in modern nation-states. Hence Turkish *hoşgörü* has yet again become a religious virtue, supposedly devoid of legal consequences and deeply embedded in history.

Ottoman multi-confessional legacy has been debated and reconstructed recently in various new ways, depending on the city or region (Mills 2011), even influencing foreign policy (Yavuz 1998). This reconstruction posits that Turkey's Ottoman inheritance is the key to resurrecting its former regional dominance. This time around, however, the discursive strategy is to produce the Ottoman model of tolerance that competes national imaginaries. Some have critiqued a return to a harmonious coexistence, even utopian past; surely it is not a solution for the multiethnic and multi-confessional demographics of Turkey, or for the interests of foreign policy (Yavuz 1998).<sup>51</sup> Therefore, recent debates on tolerance and religious freedom in Turkey are not merely local attempts at inventing a tradition; rather Ottoman tolerance is a challenge to Western liberal discourses of tolerance. Proponents such as Brink-Danan say, "We should not assume that tolerance or difference meant the same thing under various regimes, in distinct locales, or over time ... [and call attention to the] ... question of how tolerance of difference has been enacted, interpreted, and taken up in recent Turkish discussions" (2011, 12). However, a

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<sup>51</sup> Interestingly the notion was invented by the liberal conservative governments of the post-coup era when the Ottoman past was re-imagined to formulate a political model of cultural pluralism in agreement with modern multicultural ideas. Their intent was to counter the demands of ethnic groups and religious communities that resulted from the globalization process and the crisis of Kemalist modernization. Hence, the Ottoman legacy was mobilized to resolve internal sociocultural tensions that resulted from cultural diversity under the idea of Ottoman pluralism, which entails the peaceful coexistence of different ethno-religious and cultural groups under a political community (Çolak 2006, 587).

discussion of the category of tolerance itself—how it came to be posed as the solution for difference instead of let us say minority rights—in Turkey as well as in Western scholarship is missing from these accounts. Tolerance is accepted as an elusive virtue that marks the good governance of minority difference.

Hayden’s line of reasoning above is useful in terms of understanding the importance of tolerance for both nationalist and multiculturalist projects. A neo-imperial policy of tolerance, dubbed *hoşgörü*, as opposed to the tolerance of the nation-state, was imagined as the remedy for ethnic conflict.<sup>52</sup> Although some scholars emphasized the hierarchical character of the Islamic tradition of tolerance, or protection of the *dhimmi*,<sup>53</sup> they insist on presenting Ottoman tolerance as the model for a universal form of coexistence where a variety of forms of belief can live together peacefully. The discourse on Ottoman tolerance that resurfaces in today’s Turkey primarily from the ruling party AKP aims to protect national sovereignty. Thus Turkey is vigilant from imperial (Christian) Western powers and non-Muslim minorities lest they become a fifth column, the zenith of their fears is the recognition of the Armenian genocide.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See, for example, King 2005.

<sup>53</sup> Karen Barkey states that toleration in the Ottoman as well as other empires refer to the “absence of persecution of people but not their acceptance into society as full and welcomed members of community” (2008, 110). Further she explains that the millet system and Ottoman toleration were a form of government designed to maintain peace and order in multi-ethnic and multi-denominational contexts. The imperial state and the Turkish national experience attest that the non-Muslims, non-Sunni-Muslims and non-Turks are tolerated as long as they do not disturb or go against the Sunni-Islam-Turkish order. If ethno-cultural and religious minorities transgress, their recognition could easily turn into suppression and persecution.

<sup>54</sup> Here we should add that Turkish minorities are contributing to this discourse. Brink-Danan (2012) argues that The Jewish Museum in Istanbul was founded by the Jewish community in Turkey to praise the Ottoman Empire's recognition of collectivist

The next chapter aims to make more concrete my discussion of the re-emergence of this tolerance discourse as a cultural and religious critique of its Western versions in the legal sphere in Turkey. To foreground the key questions I pose in the next chapter, I turn to the recent policies of religious tolerance and ask: What normative conceptions of freedom, religion, community, and the individual are encoded in the right to religious freedom as it has come to be litigated in the recent jurisprudence of courts in Turkey?

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difference and as a quiet critique of the monolith nationalist culture that forces Judaism to be publicly invisible that is, Jews are recognized as a private person but not a collective one.

### Chapter 3

#### Legally Armenian: Tolerance, Conversion, and Name Change in Turkish Courts

In 2007, a plaintiff petitioned the civil court in Beyoglu, Istanbul stating in his petition that, in the civil registers (*kütükte*), his name was Mehmet but that he had converted to Christianity between four and five months prior. He wished to take the name he was given at his baptism, Agop, as his new first name. His petition was boilerplate, resembling many petitions submitted to the local courts. However, his lawyer was determined to bring up the historical and political aspects of her client's name-change request. In her petition to the court, she argued:

The village where the plaintiff was born and grew up was originally an Armenian village located in the Eastern Anatolia that converted to Islam. However, the Armenians living there never lost their Armenian Christian identities. Recently, the plaintiff converted from Islam to Christianity to go back to his own religion, and (...) registered his religion as Christian with the state's authorities.<sup>55</sup>

The court ultimately rejected the request, but this case is only one of many like it.<sup>56</sup> These cases brought the predicament of forcibly Islamized Armenians out into the national public consciousness. In the last fifteen years, hundreds of citizens claiming

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<sup>55</sup> Decision of the Beyoglu Civil Court (3. Asliye Hukuk Mahkemesi), Esas No: 2007/106, Karar No: 2007/197.

<sup>56</sup> See for the most publicized case on the issue Ermenice Isme Izin Cikmadi [The Armenian Name was not Allowed] <http://yenisafak.com.tr/Gundem/?t=16.09.2008&i=140301&k=m8> (last accessed 07-02-2012).

Armenian descent have submitted petitions to Turkey's secular legal authorities for change of name and religion in public record (see Chapter 1).

This recent wave of name-change cases followed the legal reforms and the wider context of discourses on religious tolerance that I have discussed in the previous chapter. Many note the correspondence between these reforms and the December 1999 declaration of Turkey's candidacy for membership in the European Union (EU), and assert that the move represents an effort to realize this possibility (Grigoriadis 2006; Kirisci 2009; Müftüler-Bac 2000; Trenz 2007). Officially the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) introduced the legislative overhaul as a move of religious tolerance, to remedy social ills born of "Kemalist radical secularism" (Taspinar 2007) and of the long-overdue cultural and political recognition to ethnic and religious minorities (Kadioglu 2007; Yavuz 2003). Most commentators claim that by recognizing religious and ethnic difference among its citizenry Turkey is becoming a more robust democracy as it "adopts and introduces policies that become more and more inclusive towards minorities excluded from given and established definitions of national identity" (Kirisci 2009, 1).

In this chapter I present two concerns with this analysis of the AKP's legal reforms. Firstly, the reforms are highly limited with regard to the level of social diversity that they recognize. It would be wrong to assume that democracy and democratization are simply matters of acknowledging diversity among the national population, supposedly recognizable and standard features of minorities. Questions about how the law differentiates minorities through certain definitions of religion, ethnicity, and/or language (Mahmood 2012; Povinelli 2002), or if recognition of rights and universal citizenship

solve the problems of marginalized groups (Brown 1995; Parla 2011), are never raised by the above mentioned scholarship.

Secondly, I argue that implicit in the above outlined analyses of the ongoing transformation process under the AKP rule is an idealization of tolerance that needs to be complicated by a discussion of what religious tolerance has come to mean in Turkey. Indeed, what Wendy Brown terms the “tolerance talk” (2006, 2) is a central part of the AKP’s presentation of the recent legal reforms to “improve” religious freedom. The concept of tolerance has been discussed most extensively by political philosophers of liberalism as a battle against religious intolerance and persecution in Western Europe (Mendus 1989; Mendus (ed.) 1999; Walzer 1997). Conceptualizing tolerance as a civic virtue these discussions are mostly concerned with tolerance of religious, cultural and ethnic differences within homogeneously imagined nation-states. In contrast this chapter shifts the attention to the legal realm as the locus of analysis of religious tolerance. In doing so I aim to unsettle the assumption that legal reform to improve religious tolerance necessarily prompts a mode of de-nationalized politics.

As critical scholars of secularism have powerfully shown, secularism is not a political doctrine separating religious and political life but rather a set of legal and political practices of statecraft (Asad 2003; 2006). Scholars further argue that the blurring of secular and religious is not exceptional but is, rather, endemic to secular politics and legal systems (Agrama 2010). Some even assert that the rhetoric of protecting minority differences in terms of religion in secular liberal states masks a central crisis of state secularism (Mufti 2007; Mahmood 2012) and works to further exclude religious minorities (Connolly 1998; Sullivan 2005).

Of the critical literature concerning secularism in Turkey (Akan 2011; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Özyürek 2006; Parla and Davison 2008; Tambar 2010), two studies in particular use religious conversion as a point of departure to scrutinize problematic of equal citizenship rights in Turkey resting at the heart of Turkish secularism.<sup>57</sup> Marc Baer (2004, 2009) analyzes the Dönme's<sup>58</sup> historical struggle for equal citizenship in the new Republic, where they arrived after the great population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1924. Through the Dönme's failed efforts to join as equal citizens, Baer shows how Turkish secularism connected religion to race in order to utilize both as salient features of belonging in spite of official claims that Turkish citizenship designated a purely civic relation. Esra Özyürek discusses recent conversions to Protestantism in order to shed light on the wider context of Turkish sovereignty (2009a), and nationalism (2009b). She analyzes secularism as a strategy to create a homogeneous, united and loyal body of citizens. Against the grain of the arguments that emphasize Turkish secularism's tolerance towards minority religions, she demonstrates that Turkish secularism does not recognize different identities. "What is called Turkish secularism is," she states, "a manifestation of ideological and religious state centralization" (2009b, 411; also see, Parla and Davison 2008).

In what follows I discuss my own research about a third convert population in Turkey, Islamized Armenians, to further the debates on Turkish secularism and put

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<sup>57</sup> Also see, Akan (2011) for a discussion of how studies of Turkish secularism "factored out" non-Sunni and non-Muslim minorities and considered them a separate field. He powerfully argues that this separation "contributes to reduce" the debate on Turkish secularism "to the dichotomy of Kemalist versus Islamists" (196).

<sup>58</sup> "The Dönme" are the descendants of Jewish followers of Shabbatai Tzevi who converted to Islam (Baer 2004: 682).

forward a critique of the body of scholarship that welcomes the above described reforms as measure of growing religious tolerance.<sup>59</sup>

I argue that an account of the recent policies towards religious and ethnic difference is necessary to adequately analyze the current state of state policies towards religion in contemporary Turkey. The chapter is divided into two parts: in the first part I will analyze the historical foundations of the regulation of religion and name change, by more fully and explicitly engaging with law as a site where minority difference is constructed, authorized and challenged. My aim in this first section is to show the relationship between individual names and religious denomination, and how they are regulated under same legal principles in Turkish courts. In the latter half of the chapter, I interrogate the idealization of tolerance and offer an alternative reading of how it functions as an aspect of the AKP's legal reforms. Based on my investigation of the specific legal form of arguments that converted Armenians and their lawyers put forward in the secular courts in contemporary Turkey, and the way the legal officers of the state respond to them, I suggest that religious tolerance is not simply a product of public/legal assertions of the recognition of minority difference.<sup>60</sup> Rather, I demonstrate that the legal reform has shifted the definition of religion as the marker of minority difference in the legal space. These trials on name-change aim to create "culturalized" legal subjects, who

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<sup>59</sup> There is another group of Armenians, the Hemshins, living as Muslims in Turkey. They have been converted to Islam in a much earlier period and under different circumstances. For a comprehensive study on the issue, see Hovann H. Simonian 2007 (ed.) *The Hemshin: History, society and identity in the Highlands of Northeast Turkey*.

<sup>60</sup> For a comparison with the struggles for recognition as Native American "tribes" or "nations" in the US, see Clifford 1988. Clifford describes a similar process during the 1976 Mashpee trial in Massachusetts, in which plaintiffs and defendants constructed competing representations of Mashpee history, culture, and tribal identity. For another critical perspective on "producing legal truths," see Coutin 1995.

must now not only define their rights in the basis of individual right to belief, but also at the expense of expressing their demands in terms of past injustices. I show that even in those cases where name-change petitions are granted, the courts simply establish the legal subjectivity of the converts as Christian citizens of Turkey while falling short of establishing the subjects' status as Armenians. In other words, tolerance accommodates religion as culture, and only as culture. I conclude by pointing to the differences between Brown's framework of liberal secular states and Turkey.

### **What's in a Name?**

As many scholars have argued, naming policies have been a conventional tool for states to construct a new national identity (Caplan and Torpey 2001; Lapierre 2002; Scott et al. 2002; Watson 1986). Consequently the information carried on an individual's ID card emerged as the sole means for him or her to gain recognition as a member of a minority community in Turkey (cf. Azevedo 1980; Carucci 1984; Khatib 1995), but religion became even further a matter of relation between individuals and state power as conversion was controlled under the legislative auspices of the state and was equated with changes to the religious column of an individual's identity card. Thus should an individual wish to undergo religious conversion—or in the case of Turkey's minorities a religious "de-conversion"—he or she had to change his or her identity card accordingly,<sup>61</sup> and this could only be done with an order of approval by the civil court.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> As the idea that every individual may be categorized and labeled has increasingly shaped the terms of citizenship, civil registers and identification papers have assumed a prominent place in peoples' relationships to state institutions. Changes in the instruments of classification also alter the types of identities that are legally possible for individuals to assume while still claiming citizenship (Noiriel 2001). In one sense this shift has included

Turkish law constructs naming as an essentially individual right that is an inalienable part of a citizen's legal person. Several decisions of the Court of Cassation (*Yargıtay*) attest to the notion of the individuality of the name. One 1992 decision ruled that a name is “an individual right that is closely connected to the person. (...) The name is a word that defines people and distinguishes them from others. Since everyone has a personality and an ‘essence’ (*özvarlık*) of her own, it is her right to demand that her personality should be distinguished from others’. Therefore, the right to have a name is, in its essence (*nitelik bakımından*), a personal right just like a person's honor and life.”<sup>63</sup>

This attachment of the name to the individual also worked to mark it as an indicator of the individual's religion. In this move the definition of religion changed from a matter of communal belonging to the individual right to belief (see Asad 2003; Van der Veer 2001). As the religious affiliation of every citizen in Turkey was recorded by legal authorities and registered on national identity cards at birth, the personalization of

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potentially empowering aspects based on the increased recognition of minority groups (Gordillo 2006; Longman 2001; Taylor 1994; Yngvesson and Coutin 2006). However, like property titles, censuses, surveys, and other forms that carry over from previous eras identity documentation also functions to constitute and consolidate the state's authority. As the state extends its taxonomy of acceptable names and recognizable religious affiliations, it affords individuals more latitude for official self-representation, yet at the same time the process creates visible, and hence more manageable, subjects, and facilitates discrimination against religious minorities by marking them. Either way, identification cards and civil registers provide a salient illustration of the ongoing tension between recognition and regulation.

<sup>62</sup> For a relevant case, see Sinan Işık v. Turkey, <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-97087> last accessed 06.28.2012

<sup>63</sup> Decision of the 18th Chamber of the Court of Cassation, 1992/411 E., 1992/1351 K.

religion and the significance of religion as a distinction were reflected perhaps most clearly in the format and official role of personal ID documents (Aybay 2004).<sup>64</sup>

While the marking of non-Muslims in the Turkish Republic was followed by the denial of their ability to exist within the national population on religious grounds, homogenization of the national population was pursued even further through the regulation of the names by which Turkish citizens could be accounted for. Turkish law criminalized the use of any other language than Turkish. The Language Reform of 1928 established the Latinized Turkish alphabet (Ölmez 2000; Sevincli 2006), following which prosecutors regularly opened court cases against the public use of the letters q, w, and x, which do not exist in the Turkish alphabet but does in Kurdish (Aslan 2009; Eksi 2009; Esen and Gonenc 2010).<sup>65</sup> Thus as a necessary feature of “Turkification” the state imposed linguistic uniformity upon a population whose surnames (as well as given names) were previously drawn from a multitude of languages and other traditions, outliers were forbidden (Türköz 2004; cf. Scassa 1996).

The Surname Law of 1934 required every citizen to adopt a family name, while

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<sup>64</sup> In this context, although recognition on one’s ID card was a requirement it was not a guarantee of access to minority institutions. The remaining few minority institutions were subject to the regulation of the state and minority communities lost their control over them. Moreover, access to the services of these institutions was controlled on an individual basis so for example while the Law of Education recognizes the maintenance of the Private Minority Schools where the language of education is the minority’s own language. Any language other than Turkish is otherwise prohibited in Turkish schools. Kurdish is Turkey’s commonest minority language, and the main target of this law. In order to attend minority schools, the students had to present their own and their parents’ identity cards as proof of their minority status (Hadımoğlu 2008).

<sup>65</sup> This is mainly to forbid Kurdish names. See Case of Ünal v. Turkey, Judgment of 10.11.2004, No.48616/99, <http://cmiskp.echr.coe.int/tkp197/portal.asp?sessionSimilar=29004802&skin=hudoc-en&action=similar&portal=hbkm&Item=1&similar=frenchjudgement> (29.12.2008).

also enforcing certain restrictions on the types of surnames that could be adopted. These restrictions indicated that the state's intention behind the law went beyond purely administrative motives. Article 3, for example, forbade names related to military rank and civil officialdom, to "tribes and foreign races and ethnicities," as well as surnames deemed unsuitable to "national customs" or which could be perceived as "disgusting" or open to ridicule. Surnames also had to be Turkish words.<sup>66</sup> The only exception to these two regulations on names concerned the "recognized" minorities of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. Persons in this category were allowed to take non-Muslim/non-Turkish names but only if transliterated to accord with the Turkish alphabet. This right however was not protected by law but only allowed by not explicitly abolishing the adaptation of their "religious and cultural" names in the law.<sup>67</sup>

Later developments concerning religion and name in the civil registers further consolidated state control. Three military coups (1960, 1972 and 1980) not only resulted in the suppression of political opposition and economic restructuring but also led to the strengthening of the discourse of "equal citizenship" that in fact did not leave room for dissent or difference in the name of order and state's interest (see Parla 2002). The most

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<sup>66</sup>The Article, which stipulated that children could not be given names contradicting the "national culture" and "Turkish customs and traditions," was changed in 2006 during legal reforms. The amendment dropped the terms "national culture" and "Turkish customs and traditions," prescribing only that names that disregarded moral norms or offended the public could not be given as first names.

<sup>67</sup> Demiralp (2003:177-178) quotes a circular of the Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Civil Registration and Nationality, dated 29.11.1985 that states: "There is no objection [in the law] to the names given to our Christian citizens that are in accordance with their religion and culture; in fact it is in accordance with the stipulations of the Lausanne Treaty, [and] legislations do not prohibit it; however, since the language of Turkey is Turkish, and to ensure that personal names are registered correctly in the registers, these names should be written according to the rules of the Turkish grammar."

important legislation concerning state registers came after the 1972 coup, and it updated and centralized all of the formerly stated law and regulation on the civil registrars. Where it had been a feature of identity documentation since the nineteenth century, Article 43 of the 1972 Population Register Law<sup>68</sup> officially required that the national registry note the religion of every family member in every household in Turkey.<sup>69</sup> The Law also stipulated that children could not receive names not conforming to the national culture, moral norms, customs and traditions or offending the public. This control was reinforced after the 1980 coup and in the subsequent Constitution of 1982 (Parla 2002).

When I asked one lawyer who had represented (de-)converting Armenians why it was important for converted Armenians to also adopt Armenian names, he answered that: “A Muslim name conveys the assumption that the person who carries it is a Muslim.” Hence, he continued, the main aim in such name-change cases is to “introduce the convert to the public as an Armenian.”

In Turkey personal ID cards in particular reflect the complexity of constraints enforced by the state in that they formalize religious confession and individual names and require judicial review before any changes can be made.

Falling under the mundane category of “corrections of the records” (*kayıt düzeltme*) the Turkish Civil Procedure Law’s protocol for name-change applicants appears simple at first sight. Any person eighteen years or older can adopt any name provided that he or she can demonstrate a “just cause” for exchanging the name

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<sup>68</sup> No. 1587; published in the Official Gazette on May 16, 1972 [hereinafter 1972 Population Register Law]. It replaced The Law of 1914 and remained in force until the Population Services of Law of 2006 became effective. .

<sup>69</sup> [http://www.icisleri.gov.tr/default.icisleri\\_2.aspx?content=10979](http://www.icisleri.gov.tr/default.icisleri_2.aspx?content=10979), last accessed October 5, 2011.

previously held (Ekşi 2008, 26-28,32-36; Demiralp 2003, 42). An applicant must demonstrate—with support from at least two witnesses—that for a considerable amount of time prior to the court proceedings he or she has already been known in public with the name he or she wants to assume. He or she may support this claim by providing evidence, such as phone bills, under the demanded name, but in addition the plaintiff must avow an intention to take on that name permanently. And finally, the demanded name cannot be offensive (for instance, it cannot contain racial slurs). In interviews government Population Registrars explained to me that the most common cases involve citizens who apply to officially adopt middle names that were not registered by their families on their identity cards at the time of birth. Furthermore the fact that name-change petitions are single party cases (*nisbi neshep*) as opposed to cases with an opponent party categorizes them in the Turkish Civil Procedure Law as “case[s] without a dispute” [*çekişmesiz yargı* or *nizasız kaza*] having “no opposing two parties, or a dispute, a disagreement between them.”<sup>70</sup> However the Population Registrar (*Nüfus Memuru*) and the Public Prosecutor (*Cumhuriyet Savcısı*) must be present in court where they are required to offer the presiding judge an evaluation of the plaintiff’s case (Ekşi 2008, 36). In other words, while name-change hearings are officially single party cases, state agents are present and act as de facto opponents.

Implicit in all these requirements for name-change cases is a statement about the limits of the requests that can be made to the state by individual Turkish citizens. In the Turkish legal imaginary a change of name is a basic, regular act through which an individual may take a state-sanctioned opportunity to adopt a name other than the one

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<sup>70</sup> Medeni Kanun [Civil Code] Article 27.

registered at birth. Any demand that goes beyond this—such as religious change—is left completely outside of the picture.

The significance of the presence of state officials as the opponent party becomes even clearer when we examine the conditions for what constitutes a just cause for a name-change. Here sole authority lies with the judge to rule based on the plaintiff's petition, statements (*mütalaa*) by the Population Registrar and the Public Prosecutor, and the precedence (*ictihat*) of higher courts.<sup>71</sup> A 2003 decision by the Yargıtay, after again defining the right to have a name as a personal right, explains the reasons for the regulations in the relevant law and ties it to a “just cause”:

Turkish Civil Law number 4721, taking the importance of a name as a personal right into consideration, that is protected under the Constitution of the Turkish Republic, not confining itself with the Articles that protect the personality (Articles 23-25), also regulates [names] (Articles 26-27). Accordingly, the above-mentioned Law in Article 27 stipulates that a name-change can be demanded from a judge only if there is a just cause (...).<sup>72</sup>

Therefore in light of laws regulating the adoption and use of non-Turkish names, one may recognize name-change, like religious conversion, as a source of anxiety for the state because it alters demographic patterns to the advantage of minorities (Viswanathan 1998). It also disrupts the normative connection established by the state between its

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<sup>71</sup>By “High Court” I mean the Court of Cassation (Yargıtay), Turkey’s highest civil and criminal appellate court. A separate high court exists for administrative law: the Council of State (Danıştay). There is also a Constitutional Court (Anayasa Mahkemesi). In Turkey, the Court of Cassation is the court of appeals of last resort and reviews the decisions of the lower courts to ensure standardization in legal practice. If the Court of Cassation does not agree with a decision, it annuls the decision of the lower court and remands the case to the lower court. If the lower court insists on its previous decision, the General Assembly of the Court of Cassation concludes appellate review on the lower court’s judgment and makes the final decision on the case. (More information about the Turkish Court of Cassation can be found at [www.yargitay.gov.tr](http://www.yargitay.gov.tr).)

<sup>72</sup> Decision of the 18th Chamber of the Court of Cassation, 2003/2744 E., 2003/4627 K.

“identification” of citizens at birth and the self-identification/name of a citizen as part of an ethnic or religious minority. Name-change cases to obtain Kurdish names, for instance,<sup>73</sup> provide illuminating evidence of how names became a site of minority recognition in Turkey. The growing politicization of personal naming practices among Kurds also points towards this politicization of the legal realm (Aslan 2009; Ergin 2010; Esen and Gonenc 2010).

A 2000 decision of the Court of Cassation (Yargitay) is illustrative and particularly important for how it established the precedent for the later name-change cases that I discuss in later sections of this chapter. The precedent demonstrates how name and religion are strictly tied together in defining minority difference, and in the period immediately preceding the AKP’s late-twentieth century legal reform, this decision became the precedent to refuse a name-change in other cases trying to argue for religious conversion as “just cause.”

A Muslim citizen of Turkey converted in the Greek Orthodox Church to Christianity and consequently wanted to change his current Turkish name *Enis* to a Greek one, *Teofilos*. The local civil court of first instance declined his request, ruling that “It is impossible to bring to agreement the [new] name that is subject to discussion here with our national culture and our customs and tradition.” The plaintiff took the case to the Court of Cassation to annul the decision of the First Degree Court. The 18<sup>th</sup> Chamber of the Court of Cassation (*Yargitay 18. Hukuk Dairesi*) ratified the First Degree Court’s decision in the following ruling:

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<sup>73</sup> Decision of the 18th Chamber of the Court of Cassation, 1994/7386 E., 1994/8560 K.

Religious conversion does not necessarily require a name-change. Plaintiff's name, *Enis*, means [in Turkish] companion, friend; hence no inconvenience emerges by having this name, whichever confession a person belongs to. The fact that the plaintiff was accepted into the Orthodox sect [mezhep] by the Greek Patriarchate by this name [Teofilos] does not establish a *just* cause for changing the name of the plaintiff who is a Turkish citizen in the civil registers.<sup>74</sup>

The court's statement that "the plaintiff is a Turkish Citizen" hints at the limits of the rights of citizens. A citizen's name defines the boundaries of the state's sovereignty over its subjects: a Turkish citizen is not allowed to adopt a name that is not in accordance with Turkish "national culture, customs and tradition." The unalterable link between the self-identification of a citizen by personal names and the (ethnic, religious, linguistic) identification of the Turkish citizen by the state—as embodied in legal practices such as naming—is once again stressed in the higher court's judgment by. Ironically, the plaintiff was most likely asking to re-join his ancestors' religion, considering that the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate (just like the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate of Istanbul) does not accept new converts but only return conversions of the descendants of community members.<sup>75</sup> However, the court did not acknowledge this "return" as just cause, and was unwilling to acknowledge any other evidence based on the plaintiff's ancestral religion at any stage of the court case.

At the same time, the civil courts did not reject all name-change cases that gave the reason as religious conversion. One striking example was the name-change case of an Armenian citizen who converted to Islam and wanted to change his name accordingly. In

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<sup>74</sup> Cited in Diran Bakar (2002: 274). Unfortunately the author does not give the decision number; thus I was unable to obtain the case and decision numbers of the case.

<sup>75</sup> See Macar (2003).

his case the court did not ask for witnesses although it is legally required to do so, though it did require the plaintiff to have a lawyer. His petition was granted in just one session.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, the question whether religious conversion ought to be considered a “just cause” does not produce the same answer in every case. Rather, the judiciary reserves the right to decide on this for itself.

### **Tolerance as a New Mode of Regulation**

The issue of identity cards has surfaced repeatedly in European Union (EU) monitoring reports.<sup>77</sup> Following the EU’s suggestion,<sup>78</sup> the new Population Services Law (No. 5490) was adopted on April 25, 2006 and made the indication of religion in the ID-cards optional, and changing one’s religious confession no longer required a court order.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Decision of the Beyoglu Civil Court (3. Asliye Hukuk Mahkemesi), Esas No: 2008/312, Karar No: 2008/406.

<sup>77</sup> The Commission prepared three reports about Turkey in 1999, 2000 and 2004. All three reports noted that the elimination of the religious record from identity documents would improve freedom of religion in Turkey. For the texts see:  
[http://www.coe.int/t/e/human\\_rights/ecri/5-archives/l-ecri%27s\\_work/1\\_country\\_by\\_country/CBC1-Turkey.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/ecri/5-archives/l-ecri%27s_work/1_country_by_country/CBC1-Turkey.pdf)  
[http://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/XML/ECRI/ENGLISH/Cycle\\_02/02\\_CbC\\_eng/02-cbc-turkey-eng.pdf](http://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/XML/ECRI/ENGLISH/Cycle_02/02_CbC_eng/02-cbc-turkey-eng.pdf)  
[http://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/XML/ECRI/ENGLISH/Cycle\\_03/03\\_CbC\\_eng/TUR-CbC-III-2005-5-ENG.pdf](http://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/XML/ECRI/ENGLISH/Cycle_03/03_CbC_eng/TUR-CbC-III-2005-5-ENG.pdf)

<sup>78</sup> Greece was the only EU country, where indicating religion on identity cards was compulsory. In 2000 the Greek government deleted religious faith information from identity documents to harmonize its domestic legislation with European standards. See Lina Molokotos-Liederman (2007). Not only in the context of the EU, national identity cards have been the subject of discussion and criticism worldwide. For a discussion of registration of religion in national identity cards as fortification of religious boundaries in Indonesia see, Connolly 2009.

<sup>79</sup> It became effective on April 29, 2006, after its publication in the *Official Gazette*. For a discussion of the information of individuals’ religion in the national register and national

Article 35 of The Population Services Law of 2006 now provides that: “Requests about the religious information in household registers shall be approved, modified, left blank or deleted in accordance with the written application of the concerned person.”

Contrary to the strict bureaucratic regulations concerning religious conversion in the comparable context of Israel where conversion is a way to demand citizenship or used to establish biologically constructed racial discourses of belonging (Abu El-Haj 2012; Kravel-Tovi 2012; Seeman 2009), in Turkey the process is marked by a lack of regulation after the legal reform. Seen as part of the wider politics of state tolerance, religious conversion ceased to fall under the jurisdiction of the first level civil courts. From thenceforth it is possible to convert from one religion to another just by petitioning the registrar’s office. Although the column noting a person’s religion still exists in the Turkish ID cards, its content is to be decided and changed by the bearer.

Nevertheless, after petitioning the state to record the change in an individual’s religious affiliation, name-change remains a legal procedure in which converts must solicit the state’s approval. Thus by continuing to adjudicate the terms of just cause, the courts define and redefine what religion is and not just whether it applies. Hence the management of religious and ethnic boundaries by law is still more or less intact in regulations pertaining to name-change.

In the course of my research, Population Registrars all reacted to my inquiries about problems with name-change cases in the same way: “You can’t find anything problematic,” I was repeatedly told. “It is only correction of records. Especially after the EU-led reforms, there are no controversial cases left.”

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identity cards as a violation of religious liberty in Turkey under a “neutrality” conception of the right, see Esen & Gonenc (2008).

However, contrary to what the registrars have claimed, there remain name-change cases that define the limits of this toleration of religious difference. The court cases I collected during my fieldwork in the First Degree Appeal Courts (*Asliye Hukuk Mahkemeleri*) in Istanbul illustrate the shift in the definition of religion and religious freedom as a result of the above-stated reformed legal measures. One case from 2007 is especially important for the present discussion as it replaced the precedent set in 2000 and as such exemplifies the redefinition of religion in the legal realm. The local court's decision reads: <sup>80</sup>

The lawyer of the plaintiff states in the petition directed to the court that, as it can be also understood from the civil records, his client is a Turkish citizen and belongs to the Christian confession, and his name is recorded as "Ramazan", and his client is never uncomfortable with his name, respects the religion of Islam as well as any other religion, but since he belongs to the Christian faith and since the name "Ramazan" does not represent his religion and its cultural character. [The plaintiff] requests to change his name to Daniel, the name of a prophet who lived in one of the historical places in Southern Turkey.

The local court rejected this petition on the grounds that religious conversion does not establish a "just cause" for name-change, applying the precedent literally without recognizing that the lawyer for the plaintiff distinguished his client's request from former name-change cases.<sup>81</sup> However what is important to note here is the effort of the lawyer

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<sup>80</sup> Decision of the Beyoglu Civil Court (3. Asliye Hukuk Mahkemesi), Esas No 2007/172, Karar No: 2007/172.

<sup>81</sup> As we will also see in later cases analyzed in this chapter, both the civil court and the upper court (*Yargitay*) employ the basic category of "just cause" to define religion (religious change) without further distinguishing different forms of changing religion. Thus, I argue they serve the word (Crapanzano 2001) and interpret the idea of just cause literally, only implying the established definitions of religion as an individual category that does not signify any communal belonging. Of course, as Crapanzano argues, this

to frame the conversion and the subsequent name-change in cultural terms by emphasizing the native character of the prophet Daniel with regard to Turkey's national geography.<sup>82</sup> As he relayed it to me in one interview, the lawyer tried to develop alternative non-threatening cultural explanations for religious conversion and name-change. Thus he deployed a culturalist argument by emphasizing the common roots of monotheistic religions as justification for the name-change. Accordingly, his reasoning emphasized the multi-religious character of the ancient lands on which the Republic of Turkey was founded, and which he hoped would not challenge the authoritarian nationalist understanding of Turkish culture (Tambar 2010) and customs, since it coincides with the Turkish government's recent efforts to underline tolerance for minority religions and cultures in the wake of the EU-led legal reforms.

The plaintiff took the case to the upper court (*Yargıtay*), which overruled the lower court's decision and approved the name-change: "The plaintiff converted to Christianity (...) His request to change his name, after his conversion, to a name in accordance of what he believes to represent his religion and *its cultural character*. It should be accepted as a just cause" (Italics mine). Here one can see that the struggle was not just about the name-change but also over the cultural definitions of religious difference, and that the lawyer's strategy of addressing religion in a culturalist frame was

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literal reading is not interpretation-free (or void of the judge's agency) - but another "interpretative style" that serves to regulate personal names.

<sup>82</sup> Daniel, is the Christian version of a fairly common Turkish name, Danyal. The Book of Daniel is part of the Hebrew canon, but not of the Kuran. However, he is accepted as a prophet in Islam too as he appears in one of *hadiths*. (M. Asım Köksal (2004), *Peygamberler Tarihi* [History of the Prophets] Volume 2 p.269-276). In Turkish popular Islam, he still occupies a significant place due to the belief that his gravesite is in Tarsus, Southern Turkey, also the hometown of Saul (Saint Paul) ([www.kulturturizm.gov.tr](http://www.kulturturizm.gov.tr)).

successful. The *Yargıtay* did not base its decision for name-change on the importance of registering a citizen's name (and religion) "correctly and in an orderly manner" for public benefit, as was the case with the Constitutional Court case in 1979 discussed above. Rather, evidently, a cultural vision of national territory as the homeland for different religious cultures complements the religious tolerance of the legal discourse/reforms that eased conversion. Although still considering both name and religion as essentially tied to the personal status of the individual citizen, the upper court's argument redefined religion as having a cultural character and an individual's name representing this character. We thus witness a change in the way the relationship between religion and name is defined by the law in Turkey's post-reform era in which the courts no longer regulate it strictly based on arguments about public benefit but on culture. As the party who seeks to assert cultural difference phrased as religious freedom is not the population of the disempowered minority, but rather it is the courts, thus posing a reversal of the antinomy between culture and the law (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2004; Combee 2005; Goldberg 2001; Hamilton 2009; Yudice 2003). The law has embraced culture as the central operating category of name-change cases after religious conversion. Once religion is defined as a cultural trait of individual citizens religious conversion is tolerated as a claim to cultural difference.

### **Elephants in the (Court)room**

Here, I want to return to the case with which I opened this chapter, i.e. the name change from Mehmet to Agop.

In an interview with her the plaintiff's lawyer immediately mentioned the judge's attitude and the "pact" linking the judge, the Public Prosecutor, and the Population Registrar in opposition to the claims of her client and his witnesses of being Armenian. She talked at length about an incident that occurred when the two witnesses appeared in the court to attest to knowing the applicant by the name Agop since his conversion—as he had stated in his petition. The witnesses testified to knowing the plaintiff by this name since childhood and mentioned "We used this name when playing football back in our childhood village." The judge, the lawyer went on, not knowing what to say in the face of this undeniable evidence of the existence of a village full of Armenians living as Muslims, tried to intimidate the witnesses by raising his voice and ridiculing their testimony: "Oh, you are from the same village, so all of you are Armenians?!" Nonplussed by the judge's response, the witnesses had tried to further explain the ethnic composition of their village, only to draw more of the judge's ire. He declared that the court was not the place for "football playing stories" and passed his judgment without further comment on the entirely plausible testimony. The tide had shifted and as the plaintiff's lawyer continued to press her case, the Public Prosecutor and the Population Registrar began to laugh and derisively repeat fragments of the witnesses' statements. According to the decision on record the judge followed procedure and asked for the opinions of the two state officials, and they both stated that four to five months was not enough to familiarize the plaintiff with his new religion, and thus that his petition for a name-change should be declined.

Trying to challenge the state agents' interpretation of the plaintiff's basis for adopting a new belief as indicated by the word "familiarize," the plaintiff's lawyer in turn

argued again that her client had not simply converted to Christianity but had converted back, aiming to rejoin his ancestors' community and religion. Thus, she reasoned, his case should not be considered in terms of converting to a new religion but as a return to the original religion lost during state violence against Armenians. By defining religion as an element of (Armenian) community belonging and thus making explicit its intertwined nature with ethnicity and communal history, she argued against the clear-cut boundaries of religious and ethnic identification/categorization between Muslim and non-Muslim, Turk and non-Turk upon which the state's registrars had based their argument.

The court decided against the plaintiff and rejected his petition for name-change on the basis of failure to provide a just cause, and on account of his having missed the deadline for filing an appeal with the upper court, his case never reached the Court of Cassation. However, as his lawyer recalled, "I am sad I couldn't take it to the upper court, yet I don't think that it would make a difference. The ridicule is usually the same there." Her comments indicated a certain anxiety about how she and her client would be treated in the Court of Cassation since they would still be arguing for an alternative definition of religion and recognition of a violent episode of history by insisting that her client's conversion represents a *return*. She recognized that her strategy went beyond the pale of currently established cultural limits and the legal locus (individual rights) of the relationship between name-change and religious change after the legal reform as defined anew by the upper court with Daniel's case. In the courts, Turkish citizens can argue for religious rights as individual Christian converts but not as Armenians returning to their

ancestors' religion.<sup>83</sup> The cases of Armenians applying for a name-change, and the alternative definitions of religion as suggested by their return conversions de-link conversion from individual belief and politicizes "religion." Thus if the tension between the liberal individualist notion of religious difference and communal belonging is one structural aspect of the debate in the legal realm, then a second aspect that raised in these court cases are the political connotations of these name-change cases and the contested history of the fate of their ancestor.

The legal context of this rejection is, therefore, closely tied to the historical-political context of the recent wave of conversions. Regarding the historical violence against Armenians Turkish governments have consistently rejected the accusations of genocide, characterizing the events (and resulting thousands of deaths) as "widespread partisan fighting" in which both Turks and Armenians were killed (see Akçam 2006). Until recently, statements or publications explicitly or implicitly identifying 1915 as genocide against Armenians were persecuted under Article 301 of the Turkish penal code.<sup>84</sup> Although the law does not explicitly prohibit the acknowledgement thereof, Public Prosecutors interpret such acknowledgements as "insulting Turkish identity" (see

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<sup>83</sup> I don't argue that religious conversion is secure and sanctioned by the state after legal reforms. While there is a display of legal tolerance in the courts, Özyürek (2009a) shows that conversion is understood as threatening state's security. This perception even incited a series of attacks against protestant converts, priests, and missionaries (Özyürek 2009b).

<sup>84</sup> A large number of authors, journalists and academics have been prosecuted for their writings on the Armenian genocide or even for recognizing the large number of Armenian deaths. Perhaps the most significant recent case was that of Hrant Dink, an Armenian columnist and the chief editor of the Turkish-Armenian bilingual newspaper, *Agos*. In 2006, he was charged under Article 301 for using the words 'Armenian Genocide'. Dink had received multiple death threats from nationalists during and after his court case. 'Scuffles in Turkey Insult Trial,' *BBC International News* (online), 07.02.2006, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4688992.stm> (last accessed in 30.01.2012). In January 2007 he was murdered in front of his office by an ultra-nationalist. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14282111>.

Karaca 2011). Although it was amended in 2008 in the face of EU accession reforms as well as domestic pressure (see Algan 2008), the revised iteration is still used to persecute any acknowledgement of the genocide as insulting Turkish-ness.<sup>85</sup>

One may also trace the pre-established legal limits of permissible arguments back to the Turkish Constitution of which Article 24 addresses freedom of religion and conscience and provides that: “Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, of belief and of religious conviction. Acts of worship, religious services and ceremonies may be conducted freely, provided they do not violate the provisions of Article 14 of the Constitution. (...)” However, upon considering Article 14/1 one sees that “abuse of rights” is the real concern for Turkish legal authorities: “None of the rights and freedoms embodied in the Constitution shall be exercised with the aim of violating the indivisible integrity of the state with its territory and nation, and endangering the existence of the democratic and secular order of the Turkish Republic based upon human rights.” Here, the Constitution conceptualizes the Turkish Republic as an entity that could be endangered by certain ways of using (defined as “abuse”) fundamental rights and freedoms by its citizens, including the freedom of religion.

Now, in light of Article 14/1 and above mentioned articles of the Turkish Criminal Code, the court cases of converts are essentially about the state’s right to defend the indivisible integrity of its territory and nation that should prevail over all other rights,

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<sup>85</sup> Another infamous article of the Turkish criminal code, Article 312, also used to criminalize any mentioning of the word genocide or death of the non-Muslim and/or non-Turkish subjects of the Ottoman Empire as “incitement to hostility and hatred based on racial and ethnic origin.” See U.S. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Turkey: International Religious Freedom Report (2001), available at [www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2001/5694.htm](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2001/5694.htm).)

including religion and name that is so tightly attached to the individual by law. In contrast to the tolerance towards religious conversion in the public and legal spheres, I argue that the name-change cases of converted Armenians have instigated a different political challenge to the dominant definitions of religion enforced by the secular state; one that renders conversion to Islam as another tool of homogenization in the late Empire as well as later homogenization attempts. In this sense, the struggle of the Armenian plaintiffs and their lawyers in the courts implies the unspeakability of genocidal violence. The emergence of Islamized Armenians in the courts triggered legally sanctioned resentment vis-à-vis the claims of Armenians about the violent fate of their ancestors. As another lawyer who took many name-change cases of Armenians related to me: “Name-change, in these cases, is a way to confront the state.” The conversion of Armenians back to their ancestors’ religion, which implicitly delves around this forbidden mentioning of genocide, is thus perceived as a threat to the integrity of the Turkish state. In the case of Daniel, the court utilized tolerance “as a unique way of sustaining the threatened entity” (Brown 2006, 27), exemplified by references to minority difference and the multi-ethnic, multi-religious (pre)history of the Turkish Republic, in manageable terms, such as “Anatolian cultural heritage.”

My point here is to show through these cases that tolerance does not resolve, but rather “tames” (Tambar2010) differences; it manages antagonism or hostility towards unauthorized claims for difference. In Turkey, the discourse of tolerance works through this re-definition of religion as culture, and religious freedom as an individual right to belief. The case of Agop, by explicitly referring to the ethnic aspect of their request for

name-change, does not allow this culturalization of religion to take place.<sup>86</sup> Islamized Armenians' name-change cases challenge the authorized definition of religion as "individual belief as registered in the civil registers" and touch on undesirable and *illegal* topics, including first and foremost the Armenian Genocide. Designated subjects of tolerance—in this case the non-Muslim religious minorities—remain marked as undesirable subjects that defy the established limits for name-change. The tolerance discourse has hardly changed the "aversion," following Brown's definition, expressed by the Turkish state toward any mention of the fate of Armenians at the end of the Ottoman Empire and throughout the history of the Republic. I argue that in their repositioning religion with respect to culture these court cases are—to adapt Trouillot's (2000) felicitous phase—"abortive rituals" (185). Like the collective historical apologies that are the subjects of Trouillot's text, the court cases, by failing to recognize the nature of the convert's claims, and depoliticizing them as individual cultural demands, emerge as rituals, tolerant as well as abortive, "whose very conditions of emergence deny the possibility of transformation" (2000, 185) of the discriminatory practices against the religious minorities.

I argue that different results and treatments of Daniel and Agop's cases provide vital insights into the particularities of tolerance talk in Turkey. I argue that they are not

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<sup>86</sup> In the spring of 2008 details of a court case in various Turkish newspapers brought the predicament of forcefully Islamized Armenians out into the national public consciousness. Kazım Akıncı, a local singer from the city of Malatya in South Eastern Turkey, had appealed to the civil court to change his name. Stating that out of fear his family had hidden their Armenian Christian identity for three generations, Akıncı declared that he had finally decided to stop hiding his true identity and petitioned to replace his Muslim and Turkish first and last names with Sarkis Nerseyan. One headline read, "He went [to the court] to become legally Armenian" (*Samanyolu Haber* 2008).

just another instance of the more widespread “recent global renaissance of tolerance talk” that is characterized by the culturalization of political conflict (Brown 2006, 2). Unlike the Western liberal democracies that are the subject of Brown’s study, therefore, the problem in the Turkish case cannot be presented as one of a moral claim to “own civilization” at the expense of the immigrant, Muslim, “barbaric” other. In Turkey, the conflicts tolerance discourse aims to tame and depoliticize are inextricably tied to the history of the nation-state, as well as to discourses of difference that circulate in the international realm. Tolerance is a strictly *national* matter that aims to regulate the thin line between the legal and illegal. This fact points to another difference between the Turkish context and the global resurgence of tolerance. Contrary to Brown’s argument that “within secular liberal democratic states it is safe to say that tolerance functions politically and socially, but not legally” (10), I suggest that in Turkey its main function is legal.<sup>87</sup> It is not an “alternative to full legal equality” but defines which claims are legal and which claims are not. In this sense, political conflict in Turkey does not only become *culturalized* but also *legalized*. In the case of the Islamized Armenians, the “legal context” (Dirlik 2001, 181) of religious tolerance serves to cover up the political struggles and injustices perpetrated in the past and continuing in the present. Thus tolerance-based legislation in Turkey has replaced but has not annulled the pre-reform regulation of difference by the legal authorities. The court cases are therefore grounds where the battles over what constitutes difference, and how it should be regulated take place.

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<sup>87</sup> For another argument on the distinctive relation between law and morality as the precarious basis for religious tolerance, see Asad (2003,183-184).

## **Conclusion**

The recent processes and practices that “tolerate religion” as defined by secular legal authorities of the individual citizen can thus also function to de-politicize struggles for justice and minority recognition. On the international stage, the AKP government is upheld as a model of the harmonious coexistence of democracy and moderate Islam for emulation across the Middle East, yet this new model is as yet underanalyzed. It is a topic to scrutinize especially on the eve of the Turkey’s new constitution, and in the light of the ongoing arbitrary detentions and political repression targeting various oppositional groups in Turkey, such as persons involved in the Kurdish rights struggle, university students, and other political opponents.

The politics of tolerance in today’s Turkey, like the regulation of pre-reform era, points to the fact that “the active principle of secularism is a principle of sovereign state power” (Agrama 2010, 510; see also Asad 2006). Politically more is at stake in the (in)tolerability of Muslim Armenians’ demands for name-change in the secular courtrooms of Turkey. While discussions of tolerance are concerned mostly with tolerance of religious, cultural and ethnic differences previously imagined in homogeneous terms in nation-states, my analysis seeks to unsettle the assumption that legal reform to improve religious freedom necessarily prompts a mode of de-nationalized politics. Based on my investigation of the specific legal form of arguments that converted Armenians and their lawyers put forward in the secular courts in contemporary Turkey, and the way the legal officers of the state respond to them, I suggest that religious tolerance is not simply a product of public/legal assertions of the recognition of minority difference. Rather, the legal reform has shifted the definition of religion as the marker of

minority difference in the legal space. These trials on name-change aim to create “culturalized” legal subjects, who must now not only define their rights in the basis of individual right to belief, but also at the expense of expressing their demands in terms of past injustices.

This notion of religious tolerance by way of an instrumental vision of culture sustains the operating question at the center of secular power: “where to draw the line between religion and politics so as to secure fundamental liberal rights and freedoms” (Agrama 2010, 503). In the Turkish courts, the situation is significantly more complicated. There, ethnicity and religion, the historical and the legal, and categories of “Turkish” and “Armenian” are conjured on the way to legal justice. The historical context of name-change and conversion forces the limits of existing understandings of freedom of religion in Turkey, a push that renders visible historical injustices that cannot be resolved simply through the notion of “religious tolerance” in the courts.

## Chapter 4

### Genealogical Returns: What Constitutes Armenianness?

*Dedem neydiye ben de o oldum.*

[I became what my grandfather was.]

- An Armenian return convert

The emergence of Muslim Armenians in Turkish public space centers around one main question: Who is an Armenian? In this chapter, as a way of analyzing the ambiguities and political stakes around the substance and constitution of *Armenianness*, I will discuss a key term that characterizes the vocabulary of Armenian conversion in Turkey today: *genealogy*. In particular, I pay attention to the fateful role genealogy plays in ascertaining a postulant's Armenianness to the Armenian Patriarchate when he/she applies for baptism; a rite of passage that symbolizes being an Armenian and Christian.<sup>88</sup>

In a newspaper interview, one man of Armenian descent who had chosen to continue living as Muslim (expressing, in other words, no intentions to change his religion) articulated his position about the issue. After saying that Christian Armenians look down upon Muslim Armenians, he stated: "As if we choose to be in this situation. Armenian identity should be based on ethnic roots not religion."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Seta Dadoyan (1997) illustrated that Armenian ethnicity and Christianity was not always an inseparable as they are understood today. In the medieval archives of the Fatimid Empire, she found instances of Armenians being Muslim for a long time, sometimes 200 years.

<sup>89</sup> Vercihan Ziflioglu, "Ermeniyiz elhamdülillah," *Radikal* (June 25, 2011) (online). [<http://www.radikal.com.tr/radikal.aspx?atype=radikaldetayv3&articleid=1054029&date=25.06.2011&categoryid=77&cmessageid=863353&cres=1#fc863353>].

In the next chapter I argue that sincerity is a central category of modern conceptions of religion as individual belief (Keane 1997). With sincerity at its heart, individual belief is supposed to be devoid of political claims (Asad 1993). However, the central term of this chapter—genealogy—renders conversion as an effort to “return to the fold” (Viswanathan 1998) by claiming kinship with the survivors of the Armenian Genocide. Yet, Armenian ancestry of *any type* does not immediately establish belonging; it requires documentation. In practice this often involves an appeal to some combination of official and unofficial population records, including but not limited to census data, and attestations of kinship, such as remembering one’s cousins. The questioning never ceases regarding whether those who claim to be descendants of Ottoman Armenians are truly Armenian. As I will show in this chapter, the pivotal issue here is how to assess Armenianness; should it be religion, culture, or as the above commentator said ethnic roots?<sup>90</sup>

To preview my argument below, Armenian genealogy has emerged as both a problematic and a necessary argument for explaining the reasons of conversion back to Armenianness. As genealogical belonging is shared both by the minorities and the hegemonic nationalist project, this emphasis on genealogical returns creates certain problems for the Patriarchate. Religious affiliation to the exclusive ecclesiastical authority of the Armenian Apostolic Church is strikingly parallel to the manner modern nation-states build their national unity. Turkish minority groups, including Armenians, as well as the hegemonic nationalist project share patrilineality. However, the ancestors of the Armenians and Turks are not the same. The Republic of Turkey, like most

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<sup>90</sup> Some believe that genes are also indicators of Armenianness. Sylva-MD-Poetry commented (on Dec. 11, 2011) on an article *A Lost Map on the Tramway in Istanbul* posted by Avedis Hadjian about his upcoming book on hidden Armenians. She writes: “We were Armenian before Christ ... We carry Armenian Artful Honest Gene wherever we live... Even if we change our religion we are Armenians ...this is my theory.”  
<http://www.ianyanmag.com/2012/12/04/a-lost-map-on-the-tramway-in-istanbul/>.

modern nation states, categorizes and recognizes minorities in terms of *jus sanguinis*, yet the Turkish state simultaneously marks claims of genealogical belonging to a minority community as indicative of an alternative national project, disloyal to the unity of the Turkish nation. As I will discuss, one feature of this circumstance is the way that the main element of national belonging, patrilineal lineage, is privileged—albeit in different ways—by both the state and those claiming to belong to a minority community within the population which is the subject of the state’s governance.

### **Official Genealogies and *Jus Sanguinis***

Mardik and I were waiting to meet four of his relatives and their two children on the small dead-end street where the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul and the Church of Saint Mary (*Surp Asdvazadin*) sit across from each other. "They are late" Mardik said, gasping for air. "I have been trying to secure this appointment for four months. The Patriarchate didn't want to give us one, and now these people are late. How are we going to get another appointment if we miss it?"

Though Mardik’s frustration stemmed partly from his party’s delay, his real anxiety was the onerous process that seemed endless in the best circumstances and at times christening was not reached. Having overseen his relatives’ applications, he was well aware that the Patriarchate was not accommodating of converts; moreover proving one’s Armenianness is difficult.

Since the early 2000s Turkish law no longer adjudicates conversion, thus the process has been simplified. A personal petition is needed to change the religious column on one’s identity card (to Christianity or the field is left empty). However, claiming Armenian ethnicity still requires the stamp of approval from the Patriarchate.

As Mardik knew well, the crucial component of return conversion, that is the application for baptism, is tough for more than one reason. The first concerns the required documentation, the “*vukuatli nufus kayit ornegi*” (certificate of civil registry), or VNKO certificate. This document consists of a one- or two-page printout of the postulant's lineage on his or her father's side.<sup>91</sup> A "regular" *nufus kayit ornegi* (NKO) consists solely of information about the applicant's father and mother, but a *vukuatli nufus kayit ornegi* (meaning literally a certificate of civil registry "with events") details birth and death dates and places, as well as the religious affiliation of all of one's fore-parents born after 1831, when the first official census was conducted by the Ottoman Empire.<sup>92</sup> VNKO certificates are obtained from the registrar's office in a couple of hours after application.<sup>93</sup> Genealogy, both as ancestral history and as proof of Armenianness in the form of registrars' records of family history, plays a central role in the applications for baptism in the Armenian Patriarchate.

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<sup>91</sup> When an infant is born in Turkey, instead of a birth certificate, the parents receive an ID for the infant as soon as they register their baby in the family register (*aile kütüğü*). Not only birth, but also marriage, death, conversion, name or sex change is registered in the applicant's family register. VNKOs are certificates that detail these events in the family registers for several generations and therefore called, Civil register Certificates With Events. NKOs, on the other hand, only concern individuals civil status and their parents' names and birth places. Both VNKOs and NKOs can be obtained from local civil status registration office in case of need.

<sup>92</sup> Enver Ziya Karal (1943) writes that the first Ottoman census was conducted in 1831, during the reign of Mahmud II. It covered the entire Muslim and Christian male population in Thrace and Anatolia; its purpose was to find out the number of men who could be potential soldiers and levied taxes. While women were not counted in 1831, they referred as sisters, daughters and wives. Not surprisingly, Armenian fathers were counted among minority groups. Presently, Turkey has a new population law (*nufus kanunu*); and ancestry is traced paternally and maternally. Armenian lineage is also required by the state to accept a child as a member of the Armenian community and register her/him in an Armenian school.

<sup>93</sup> these are generally used for land title claims or inheritance disputes. The standard NKO certificate suffices as a legal documentation for most bureaucratic procedures including applying for a passport, registering a birth or a death.

At the same time, however, baptism itself also poses a potential difficulty because the ultimate verdict lies with the Patriarchate in deciding whose conversions to recognize. Back at the Patriarchate with Mardik and his relatives, a high-ranking priest eventually accepted us in a big hall resembling an assembly room, with a massive table in the middle and more than twenty chairs around it. Mardik's concerns proved true, I thought, when I saw the stern face of the priest as he posed one question after another as if in a criminal interrogation.

First, he asked if all the applicants have already changed their religion to Christianity on their Turkish identity cards.<sup>94</sup> Although all replied in the affirmative, the Archbishop nevertheless went on to warn everyone in the room against the legal implications of not being registered with the Registrar's office for change of religion. "I have even reported a priest in New Jersey to the authorities here," he said. "They baptized Turkish citizens without asking them to register with the state first. You cannot do it. It is illegal. Those people came here to get married in the Armenian Church. I realized that although they were baptized in an Armenian church they still appeared as Muslims on their identity cards. I immediately called the Registrar's office. Because this is a felony!"

Failing to specify if the bride, the groom, or the priest—who may not even be citizens of Turkey—did actually receive any punishment for their "illegal" acts, the priest continued his show of authority and his strict adherence to the law. Making use of the silence that ruled after

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<sup>94</sup> The history of the registry of religion on Turkish ID cards dates back to 1881 when the Ottoman Empire's General Administration of the Population (Nüfus-u Umumi Idaresi) began issuing each individual a "certificate of identity." Essentially a reproduction of the information that was recorded in permanent civil registers, these certificates detailed each bearer's religion, birthplace, place of residence, age, occupation, health, marital status, and (for men) military service status. In 1914, following the passage of a new Population Register Law, "Identity Booklets" (Nüfus Cüzdanı) replaced the certificates. These booklets served as official identity documents for a number of years and remained in use after the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

his warning, he asked the applicants for legal proof to support their claims for Armenianness. All present except one placed their VNKO on the table—the one who didn't had left his in the car. The Archbishop asked him to bring it immediately while he checked the others' documents.

Later, an Archbishop explained to me that the main reason that VNKO certificates are required by the Patriarchate is that the Armenian Church is a *milli kilise*,<sup>95</sup> meaning specifically that the church belongs to the Armenian *millet*,<sup>96</sup> that it serves only Armenians, and that it does not allow conversions of non-Armenians. In fact, adult conversion was not practiced in the Armenian Church in the past.

While applicants like Mardik regard the Patriarchate's control over baptism and thus its authority over the boundaries of Armenianness as a second layer of control after the registrar's office and the state legislative apparatus, the Patriarchate presents its role as maintaining an age-old tradition of keeping Armenian ethnicity pure. Here, it is important to note that the Patriarchate's administration of belonging echoes legal and administrative conceptions of Turkish ethnicity that are based on "Turkish blood." While some argue that the formal definition of Turkish citizenship is based on territoriality rather than ethnicity (Kirişçi 2000), or that it is moving towards a denationalist definition of citizenship (Kadioğlu 2007), for others, Turkish citizenship is based on the political and ethnic majority of Turks excluding other ethnicities (Cagaptay 2006; Parla 2005, Yeğen 2004). The first citizenship law of 1928 gave citizenship to all those residing within the boundaries of the republic on the basis of the principle of *jus soli*.

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<sup>95</sup> *Milli* means belonging to a millet. Although *milli kilise* literally means national church, the nation here refers not to the whole Turkish nation, but a smaller "nation" within the Turkish nation-state, namely the Armenian "nation." Thus, a more accurate translation of his words would be a "church that solely serves a particular minority community."

<sup>96</sup> See Rodrigue (2013) for the slippage between *millet* and minority in today's Turkey.

However, when administered it targeted minority groups deemed not to belong to the Turkish ethnicity, thus revealing that it was in fact based on *jus sanguinis* (Cagaptay 2006).<sup>97</sup>

The significant numbers of return converts have forced the Patriarchate to recognize its role as the arbitrator of religious affairs for *all* Armenians in Turkey. However, the Patriarchate is reluctant to assume this role because the Turkish state denies the 1915 genocide. The Patriarchate's caution stems from the way in which the Turkish state has (mis)treated religious institutions of minorities, as well as nationalized and subdued religious difference since the establishment of the Republic.

Two points here deserve special emphasis here. First, the Armenian Patriarchate today administrates conversion appeals on the basis of an authority it no longer possesses. Secondly, in its administration it relies on the official records of the Turkish state (instead of the baptism certificates as the Patriarchate's own archive) in addition to its categories.

The Treaty of Lausanne (1923)<sup>98</sup> extended international recognition to the Turkish Republic as the successor state of the Ottoman Empire. The treaty was also a prime example of the international regime for the protection of minority rights that emerged between World Wars I and II (see Mazower 2004). The Treaty established the legal status of minorities in Turkey, as in return for European recognition the new state granted “non-Muslim communities” special self-

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<sup>97</sup> The statute on traveling in the Turkish Citizenship Law promises Turkish emigrants the right of return; however, Armenians who were deported in 1915 are denied repatriation. Furthermore, the law related to de-naturalization is not applied to all Turkish citizen. An applicant's ethnicity and/or religion are key on whether the candidate can regain one's citizenship. The following applied for Turkish citizenship, but lost: “Protestant Toma, son of Usugarip,” “Maronite Catholic, son of İlyas from Mersin,” “Syriac Catholic, Yusuf Efendi, son of Cercis of the sons of Istanbulu,” “Masis, son of Anderyosi or the Armenian millet,” and “Maryos (sic.) Dallalyan, an Armenian Catholic” (Cagaptay 2003; Parla 2005).

<sup>98</sup> <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/treaty-with-turkey-and-other-instruments-signed-at-lausanne.en.mfa>

governance rights based on their religious difference. However the Treaty did not specify which communities would benefit from this legal recognition and consequently the new regime state applied the terms of the treaty selectively. While Jewish, Armenian, and Greek communities within the Empire were recognized as religious minorities, neither Christian populations native to Anatolia (such as Assyrians) nor the relatively new Christian communities (such as recent converts to Protestantism) received official minority status (Özyürek 2009a). Likewise Kurds and non-Sunni Islamic sects such as the Alevis were left out. Together these “unrecognized” groups became the main targets of homogenization efforts under the discourses of “equal citizenship” (Kurban 2003). Following the terms put forth in the Treaty, a notation of “Islam” as a person’s religion of record came to connote Turkishness, and having made Muslim synonymous with Turkish, the registers denied ethnic and sectarian differences within the Muslim majority (İçduygu and Soner 2006; Smith 2005).

As a result of this international arrangement on the status of “recognized minorities” of Turkey, minority religious institutions (the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, Armenian Apostolic Patriarchate, and Chief Rabbinate of the (Sephardic) Jewish Millet being the three major ones) that formerly acted as sole authorities over the affairs of respective communities were reduced to archaic remnants of a multi-religious empire in a secular state. As the Deputy Patriarch commented in our meeting, “Burasi devlet dairesi.” (“[The Armenian Patriarchate] is a state office.”). This fact is maybe most clearly expressed by the comments of one of the members of the Turkish Lausanne delegation. Echoing the Armenian Deputy Patriarch’s comments above, Cemil Bilsel made the following statement with regard to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate: “The

Patriarch is the head of the Greek Orthodox Church and at the same time a civil servant of the Turkish state."<sup>99</sup>

As evident in Mardik's relatives' story, the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul follows the legal procedures of the Turkish state's registration system whereby patrilineal descent is considered the sole criterion to determine a person's progeny.<sup>100</sup> Yet, in Chapter 5: Is Sincerity Secular? I will demonstrate that genealogy is necessary but not sufficient reason for conversion. This, I would suggest, is due to the fact that the Patriarchate has an interest, as an institution, in circumventing the affinity between the Armenian genealogical definition of membership in the Armenian minority community and the Turkish definitions of national unity. From the position of the Patriarchate, basing membership solely on the criterion of blood/genealogy appears as a competing and dividing discourse of Armenian nationalism vis-à-vis Turkish nationalism. Thus, claims based on Armenian genealogy, such as those registered by Mardik and his relatives, index minority belonging as a competing nationalist claim that contradicts the Turkish state's conceptualization of national unity and loyalty. This fact echoes in the reactions to the emergence of "Muslim Armenians" in Turkey today.

### **Armenian genealogies as a Multicultural Project**

A number of memoirs, fiction and other genres of literature appeared in Turkey addressing the lives of Armenian girls who survived the 1915 deportations by converting to

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<sup>99</sup> "Patrik hem Rum Ortodoks kilisesinin revidir, hem de Turkiye'ye bagli bir memurdur" (quoted in Bilsel 1933:293).

<sup>100</sup> This rule has changed in the new population law, the Nufus kanunu. Formerly it was only the father's Armenian-ness that was required by the state's authorities to accept a child as a member of the Armenian community and enroll her/him in an Armenian school.

Islam, and passing as Muslims for the rest of their lives.<sup>101</sup> These publications, starting with the publication of Serdar Can's memoir, *Nenemin Masallari (My Grandmother's Tales)* (1991) initiated the public debate of the gendered aspects of these stories.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, as Altınay and Türkyılmaz (2011) note, recent studies on the various texts of this period (memoirs, Ottoman newspapers and magazines, as well as Ottoman archival records) point to significant numbers of women and children who survived through forced Islamization and adoption into Muslim families (whether for protection, free labor or sexual abuse) (Karakışla 1999; Gürsoy-Naskalı and Koç (eds) 2003; Atnur 2005).

The literature on Muslim Armenians is a review on national and gendered preferences on Armenian genealogy. Specific to the Turkish context, yet corresponding to global trends on identity politics, contemporary scholars consider Islamized Armenians significant voices in a cultural mosaic condoned by Turkish policies. Research concerning the status of minorities in Turkey asserts that in the framework of ethnicist (and racist) state nationalism any mention of 'other' identities is regarded as a “divisive threat” (Oran, 2004).

Some authors, though, felt the need to strictly differentiate between two different types of survivors. Erhan Başyurt's, *Ermeni Evlatlıklar: Saklı Kalmis Hayatlar* (2006) (*Armenian Adoptees: Hidden Lives*) argues that today one may separate Armenians who “stayed behind” and remained as “Muslims” into two groups: adopted girls on one hand, and Crypto-Armenians on the other. The former group includes children and women who were “saved” by Muslim families and have continued their lives among them. The latter category points to those families

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<sup>101</sup> The renowned journalist Bekir Coşkun (2005) and other celebrities revealed the stories of the Armenian women in their families.

<sup>102</sup> Most well-known examples of this literature are Altınay and Çetin (2009), Çetin (2004), Palalı 2005, Özdem (2007), Tekin 2008, and Yalçın (2005, 2006).

(and in some cases whole villages), “who converted to Islam to escape the deportations, but continued to live secretly as Armenians, marrying among themselves and, in some cases, converting back to Christianity” (Başyurt 2006, 121-122). While claiming to emphasize the “human aspect” of the issue of adoptee girls, Başyurt simultaneously dedicates a significant portion of his book to an analysis of “hidden Armenians” who belong to the latter category, Crypto-Armenians, in “terrorist organizations.”<sup>103</sup>

Yet not all accounts of Muslim Armenians were motivated by this anxiety. In fact recent scholarship on the issue emphasizes the importance of hearing the voices of the female survivors living as adoptees or converted wives of Muslim men as a contradiction to the homogenizing nationalist project. In this sense, they mark their stories as motivating a multicultural turn in the formerly homogenizing Turkish national discourse.

In her study of the epistemology of Jewish origins, Abu El Haj (2012) argues that “in the grammar of multiculturalism, to fail to recognize cultural difference—a failure of the liberal (settler) nation-state—is to perpetrate a fundamental injury. It is to deny what it means to be human, that is, that we are all irreducibly always already part of a linguistic community, of a culture” (2012, 182). Similar to these central arguments of multicultural recognition, the politics of recognition in Turkey functions to defend a common genealogical identity on the basis of which “Muslim Armenians” can—and indeed should—be formally identified as “Armenian.” As such it is a humanitarian project as well as a multicultural one.

The common theme in this politics of recognition is the question of exactly what components of cultural diversity must be recognized and preserved while retaining an adequate (emotional) observance of the past and continued suffering of the survivors. It is an Armenian

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<sup>103</sup> For more on this, see Chapter 6.

*survivor* identity defined on the basis of genealogical descent, and thus it is a multicultural project configured through the lens of an identity politics grounded in a “genealogical self” (Abu el-Haj 2012).

Yet it is also at the same time a "humanitarian" project as it calls to recognize the lost women as Armenian *kin*. So the question remains: how are the state policies attributable to "ethnicists and even racists" (Oran 2004) but not the "identity politics" that advocates embracing the Armenian identity through genealogy?

Altınay and Türkyılmaz's piece on "gendered silences" emphasized the absence of women as survivors "in Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish as well as international scholarly and popular histories of 1915" (2011, 25).<sup>104</sup> They go on to say:

One of the deep silences of the republican defensive narrative, until recently, has been the silence over the converted Armenian survivors. Not only does their existence remain unmentioned in canonical works, but in the “number--crunching” regarding the total Armenian population and casualties, which is central to this narrative, this particular group of survivors is treated as a nonentity (2011, 27).

Indeed, the scholarship on the forcible Islamized Armenians and their descendants is still in its infancy because until now much of the publications were diatribes. I strongly believe that these gendered silences deserve further serious academic attention; the sufferings of the orphaned, kidnapped, raped women, forced to become Muslim Turks have not been exhausted yet. Still, I do not share the faith of these studies in the stories of Islamized Armenian survivors (of particularly Armenian women and children) as posing a "radical intervention for Turkish nationalist historiography and self-understanding." To the contrary, individual human stories of suffering and survival alone do not constitute political interventions for power. One main

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<sup>104</sup> On the issue of the role gender played during and after Armenian genocide, see also Ekmekcioglu 2013, Derderian 2005, Sanasarian 1989, and Tachjian 2009.

argument of this dissertation is that secular nation-states demand these stories of identity in order to claim tolerance and recognition for religious difference.<sup>105</sup> These stories are used as showcases for the supposed democratization of Turkey. "Stories" are tolerated, but at whose and what expense? Who is left behind?

I do not mean to assert that feminist interventions such as that by Altınay and Türkyılmaz are unimportant to telling the history of the 1915 genocide and its aftermath. Gendered silences and the suffering of the orphaned, kidnapped, raped women who lived as Muslim Turks for the rest of their lives deserve continued attention. The topic I am interested in pursuing, however, is how, with its emphasis on a "cultural mosaic" and "recognition of human rights," recent scholarship on the Islamized Armenians in particular and on post-nationalist critique in general completely misrecognizes/misattributes the character of modern Turkish political identity. I don't claim that such an approach is futile; it holds extreme importance in revisiting history. Yet it does not pay full-enough attention to how "human rights," the discourse of the "cultural mosaic." I borrow Crapanzano's concern that certain stories (in our case the stories of Armenian women and orphans) "instantiate both the reality and the illusions of (...) freedom" (2011, 6) in the constellation of neo-liberal capitalism and an authoritarian-bureaucratic regime of today's Turkey (Brown 1995, 54). These stories still fall short of enabling Armenian re-converts and forcibly Islamized Armenians to reclaim their suffering, identity and property. The point simply is that a trajectory such as that followed by Altınay and Türkyılmaz in *Unravelling Layers of Gendered Silencing* is insufficient for the political articulation of ethnic and religious identity and of concrete demands in the historically-specific cultural-political register that is Turkey today.

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<sup>105</sup> also see, Brown 1995 ; Povinelli 2002.

A related second question pointing to the inner contradictions of this multiculturalist identity politics working on Islamized Armenians: how is it possible to operate on the implicitly accepted category -women- and dismiss the male voices? As I discuss in Chapter 6, "On Being Hidden," the increasing interest in the stories of converted survivors is also marked by growing anxieties over the possibility that survivors may have ulterior motives. This concern targets not only the murky question of "terrorism." Another significant aspect of the state's anxiety over converts' motivation reflects a worry over the possibility of subsequent claims for recovering land and other property that was confiscated by the state and later sold to private (Muslim) individuals after the genocide.

These anxieties about national unity, security and property have led some to mention exclusively the orphaned girls and adoptees as the only survivors who are living in provincial Turkey today. For example, when asked to express his opinions on the return conversions of the "Muslim Armenians," the chairman of the board of an Armenian church, Dikran Kevorkyan replied: "There are many hidden Armenians whose mothers or grandmothers are Armenian but changed their religion and identity due to the political conditions at the time." How should we interpret this emphasis on mothers and grandmothers?<sup>106</sup> Why are/were Armenian fathers and grandfathers not mentioned as the converts' reason for claiming Armenian identity? One plausible explanation comes from Mardik's account of the fictive kinship terminology<sup>107</sup> he employs in his everyday life:

We were known as "Armenians" back in our village although we were living as Muslims. I had to be always careful when referring to the others. It was especially tricky in my village since there everyone had at least one Armenian

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<sup>106</sup> The vagueness of the statement about the "political conditions at the time" should be problematized as well. I visit these issue further in the next chapter *Is Sincerity Secular?*

<sup>107</sup> In Turkey, terms of fictive kinship are many and frequently used in everyday life (see Kudat-Sertel 1971).

family member, in fact usually not just one, if you know what I am talking about. Therefore, when referring to people one should be especially careful. I always called them *dayi* (maternal uncle). You should never use [the more common term] *amca* (paternal uncle) if you are an Armenian. Do you know what I mean? If you call them uncle, you basically tell to their face that they are Armenians. *Dayi*, on the other hand, allows me to remind them of our affinity without "accusing" them (of being Armenian).

The clarity of Mardik's account on the importance of lineage is striking. In his village (as in the organizing principle of nation-states) ethnic, national, and familial belonging is first and foremost traced along lines of patrilineal descent. Armenian mothers and grandmothers are “acceptable” relatives who don’t necessarily determine one's belonging. After all, the Turkish imagination of national belonging, these grandmothers or mothers after all do not belong to any family since they were abducted by their future husbands or father-in-laws from their families during the deportations or orphaned during the massacres. Matrilineal affiliation does not count for ethnic belonging, whereas a father or a grandfather means almost automatically that the son, or grandson is an *Armenian* too.

Chairman Kevorkyan, by mentioning only the female Armenian ancestors, contributes to the normalization of these return conversions as a *choice* of some “grandchildren” of Armenian mothers or grandmothers rather than a(n alternative) nationalist claim for a return to Armenian roots by the descendants of Armenian families or villages that converted to Islam *en masse*. This mainly comes to mean that they do not raise legitimate claims to the property of the victims of 1915, because they lack patriarchal belonging and thus any relation at all to the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire who left their property behind.<sup>108</sup> In truth, while Armenian grandmothers

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<sup>108</sup> Bedross Der Matossian (2011) has conceptualized brilliantly the fate of the Armenian property and capital left behind in Turkey after 1915, the “taboo within the taboo” (the second taboo refers to the Armenian genocide). In the 1920s, several dozen clearance commissions (*tasfiye komisyon*) were set up in the new Turkish Republic to resettle Muslim refugees from

became a topic of widespread discourse, more or less "naturalizing" family members and making them part of the "national geographic" (Malkki 1992), male "Muslim Armenians" and their family relations remained in the margins where they still constitute a real threat to Turkish nationalism. The administration of national belonging as *jus sanguinis* indexes patrilineal descent as the main characteristic to establish belonging and ownership to property. One belongs to one's father's nation, and in return one has claim to his property. Women do not pose the same threat.

While recognizing the importance of silencing as a product of power in the lives of these Islamized Armenians (as well as minorities in general as our elderly Armenian host's argument made clear), I explore these narratives in order to analyze the historical, cultural, and political sensibilities of today's 'tolerant' Turkey, examples of "both the reality and the illusions of agency and/or freedom": What purposes do the stories of Armenian grandmothers serve? What sensibilities— regarding minority identities, agency, human rights, religious freedom, secularism, religious change, minority religions, and citizenship—do they evoke? How are these sensibilities referred to in the "overly reproduced narratives" that return conversion produces? Following Crapanzano a few steps farther, one might ask: What are the realities and illusions of agency and freedom embedded in these decisions to reconvert and their justifications? (2011, 168)

Drawing attention to gendered violence is particularly useful in the absence of male accounts that are posed as a challenge to national unity. However, while women's narratives are

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the Balkans in abandoned lands and houses, or property whose owner was unknown (*emval-i metruke*). They also sold many properties which went to the treasury to buttress the general budget (Onaran 2010). In the late 1930s, minority organizations were asked to submit lists of all their properties and the basis of their income. These documents were later used for another wave of expropriations in the mid-1970s, when the minority foundations were officially declared foreign institutions. In 1942 a heavy wealth tax (*varlik vergisi*) was imposed, the funds were put in reserve in case Turkey went to war. Nationalizing the Turkish economy impoverished and severely affected the minority communities (Aktar 2008; Bali 2005).

about gendered violence, it is still easier for both the prevailing Turkish secular and Islamic sensibilities to accept women in the midst of Turkish society and to listen to their stories, than to give the same attention to men's corresponding experiences.

In the next section, I turn to the deep understandings of legitimacy and metaphors of patrilineal descent in the context of Islamized Armenians and their return conversions. Through this consideration of the cultural and political practices that have emerged out of the distinction between individuals (women) who *were* Armenian and groups *whose members believed to have* Armenian roots, I comment more broadly on a key constitutive logic of the "genealogical" subject.

### **The Convert as Bastard**

Yakup (see Chapter 7) told me one day: "There is a saying among Muslims: 'Aslını inkar eden haramzadedir.' I take it very seriously. I won't deny my origins anymore."

As Martin Bruinessen notes, the phrase is fairly popular among Kurdish Alevites, yet even in its significant pejorative thrust "the English translation of the phrase 'Who denies his origin is a bastard,' fails to convey the strong emotive power of the Turkish original." In this use, emphasis is placed upon that fact that a bastard is not only an illegitimate child, but that s/he is also not recognized by her or his father's lineage. A bastard does not have a genealogy. In this sense a convert shares with a bastard a certain loss, that of ethnic genealogy and belonging. This all too powerful saying emphasizes the fact that loss of genealogy is a bastardization, and it is in this sense that a convert is a bastard. Thus, what makes the phrase possess a strong emotive power is less that it refers to illegitimacy, than that it casts doubt on the rootless one's *authentic* national belonging. Similarly, a convert does not only lack genealogy; like a bastard, s/he also

does not properly belong to the group that s/he claims belonging in denying her/his real roots. Put simply, on account of their Armenian origins, converts are “inauthentic” as Turks /Kurds.

Mardik's struggle is to recover this genealogy as kinship and locality, and Yakup's words clarify that conversion is the loss of genealogy. But their actions and words also have the effect of reversing the negative sentiments (such as guilt) associated with the confrontation with their families' *decision* to convert in the first place. As I tried to show in the case of Sarkis Bey (Chapter 1) and his evocation of "shame," embracing one's origins can manifest itself as a bastardization of the convert from her or his family. This saying, as it is utilized by Yakup, takes return conversion out of the semantic field of *choice* and turns it into an imperative. Embrace your roots if you don't want to remain a person with no origins, no community, no ethnicity. Embrace your roots if you do not want to bastardize yourself.

### **Genealogical Memory**

In the course of my research for this project, every time I went to an event concerning the issue of Armenians in Turkey, Armenian genocide was the central theme—whether implicitly or explicitly. The term Armenian is most often mentioned in the newspapers with genocide, either in quotation marks as “genocide,” or with a qualifier: “so-called genocide.” Every book published on Armenian memory centers on the issue of the genocide. Every book or scholarly article on Armenian history, community, or culture in Turkey is either on 1915, about Armenian life before 1915, or about survival after 1915. Yet, listening to the conversation around that massive table that day, I realized that this periodization of history and focus on the genocide do not work exactly the same way for forcibly Islamized Armenians.

To the degree that genocide is the central event in Armenian memory among people living in today's Turkey (Tugal 2007), forcibly Islamized Armenians' narratives of history are marked by the lack of such a central event. In other words, what Richard Price calls the "significant past" is missing in the narratives of the Armenian converts (1983, 5). Rather than recounting the history as a kind of collective history of shared suffering through the "collectivity" of a group, forcibly Islamized Armenians accounts are based on familial genealogies dating back to their "grandfathers."<sup>109</sup> They speak from a position of "genealogical memory." Following Abu el-Hajj, one sees that in the absence of a (legal) solution to the debates around genocide, genealogy becomes "an evidentiary terrain—an archive-around which historical claims are made plausible (or implausible), political practices are made possible and disputes adjudicated" (Abu el-Hajj 2012, 215).

To build upon this last point, I want to draw a historical comparison with Jewish understanding of genealogy and the centrality of genealogy in Armenian return conversions as exemplified by what I learned from Mardik about his experience. At the Patriarchate, having already been baptized a few years ago and already proven his Armenian genealogy, Mardik introduced the current applicants based on their relatedness to his own family: "This is the grandson of my grandfather's brother; this is his wife Maryam, she is at the same time my mother's relative from her father's side. These are their two children. This one sitting on the other side of the table is her cousin; she is also from our city and a relative. This is her husband, Agop." "*He* is not from us," Mardik added jokingly, "he is from Tozan (another village of the

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<sup>109</sup> In Chapter 2, I demonstrate how the court cases on name change illustrate the erasure of memory and history—both pointing to the censoring of the sense of collective belonging among Muslim Armenians by the Turkish legal system. Given the impossibility of using historical or collective material as evidence in the court, the Armenian converts are "subjected" to learn not to use their collective past as evidence for Armenian-ness in the public/legal space of the courts.

same district)." Mardik's playful aside—"not us"—referred to Agop's place of origin and not to his family *genealogy*. Agop was in fact another relative who just happened to be born in another village.<sup>110</sup> His genealogy was, in short, beyond suspicion. Mardik's strategic joke, which registered locality as the biggest possible divergence from the well-established *Armenian genealogy*, served only to affirm this fact.

In his critique of scholars who argue that the *exclusionary logic of lineage* was invented by Jewish people (an invention, it is argued, that would later be used in Spain to oppress and expel Jews, and much later in Nazi Germany to murder them), David Nirenberg argues that in fact an emphasis on lineage emerged in fifteenth century Spain among Sephardim and Spaniards alike. Both groups were responding to the conversion to Christianity of many thousands of Jews caused by the massacres, forced deportation, and segregation that marked the period. In the aftermath of their conversion to Christianity, Nirenberg writes, *Conversos* relied on genealogy as "a central form of cultural memory or communal identification establishing a group identity" (2002, 9).<sup>111</sup> These events "produced a violent destabilization of traditional categories of religious identity" as a result of which "lineage became a newly meaningful way of thinking about religious identity amongst Christians and Jews alike" (2002, 6-7).<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> In this and other incidents, I learned that locality meant a lot to the descendants of the forcibly Islamized Armenians as well as people from Anatolia.

<sup>111</sup> Likewise, Abu el Haj argues that the origins of religion and race in nineteenth century thought were also "an entanglement especially robust with regard to Semites in general and Jews in particular" (2012, 190). For a compelling critique of the presumed duality of race and religion in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Moor of Venice* see Anidjar (2003 and 2008).

<sup>112</sup> Also Nirenberg points out that "an equally diverse group of Jewish scholars has strenuously argued the opposite thesis, that these ideas were invented by gentiles (in this case Iberian Christians) as a way of denying converts from Judaism full membership in the Christian spiritual and social communities they sought to enter. Only later would they be adopted by the same Sephardic Jews who had earlier been their victims" (2012:19).

Like the *conversos* in early modern Spain, Armenian converts in Turkey placed an emphasis on genealogy as a response to what Nirenberg calls the "crisis of classification" (2002, 10) that emerged in the context of their forced religious conversion and the emergence of the modern Turkish state. As in Spain, "genealogy was put to the task of producing narratives or systems of knowledge around which large-scale political, social, religious, or ethnic entities might cohere" (2002, 9). Similarly, the emphasis on genealogy by the postulants of Armenian descent in order to claim a coherent Armenian belonging, and the Turkish state's majoritarian/minoritarian division of national belonging are best viewed as mutually constitutive. As minority communities are trying to mark their difference by genealogical memory (Nirenberg 2002, 19) it simultaneously functions to produce a sense of coherence within the group. It is not only Mardik and the postulants around that table that day, but in fact every single "Muslim Armenian," who has a genealogical connection to the next one, who thus has a place in this genealogical memory.

Halil's story adds another layer to my analysis of the efforts to recover Armenian genealogy by conversion.<sup>113</sup> For Halil, conversion represents a formalization of Armenian identity. When a priest at the Patriarchate informed him that he should attend a six month-long course on Armenian Apostolic Christianity in order to convert back, Halil recounted his feelings as anger for being forced to attend, and at having to put on a show for the Patriarchate to prove his own *identity*. He recounted it as forcing him to acknowledge the Patriarchate's power over him. "It felt arbitrary and archaic," he said. And, after his family revealed his "true" identity to him, he decided not to convert right away.

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<sup>113</sup> Halil appears in many chapters of this dissertation. See Chapter 5: Is Sincerity Secular and other chapters for other accounts of Halil's story.

Halil (now in his mid-40s) converted back in late 1990s. That year he gathered all his (most of them distant) relatives from Adiyaman, including one who was at the time in her seventies, and Yakup, and initiated their conversion in a small church in Istanbul. According to his account, this was the first group of converts.

My first meeting with Halil was in his cousin's law office, on one of the city's main thoroughfares. We went there upon my request to discuss some of the name-change cases with his cousin who was the lawyer of a few return converts, and ended up listening to Halil's stories for almost three hours. It was after the office had closed, so the place was completely empty. His cousin [they are the grandsons of two brothers, as Halil explained to me] was a young lawyer, still living as a Muslim. From his reactions to Halil's stories I imagined that he knew them by heart, but I found him listening attentively nonetheless. In hindsight this was not surprising; they were captivating for the familiar and unfamiliar alike.

The story of how he learned that his family was of Armenian descent exhibits many similarities to Yakup's story. Halil passed an exam for attending a public boarding school away from his hometown when he was nine years old. The week he started his new school—also his first time apart from his family—the children from his town who were attending the same school greeted him with a mocking smile and said, “See, the *gavur* (infidel/heathen) is also here.” He waited until the semester break (four months) to go back home and ask his parents about the meaning of the word and why he had been described with it. His father explained to him that the family were in fact Armenians who converted to Islam years before.

Halil said he never hid his Armenian roots/identity, but that up until around fifteen years ago it hadn't meant much to him. This lack of significance that he attributed to his Armenian background was partly due to the fact that, growing up in the Kurdish southeast Turkey, Kurdish

politics was part of his life from early on, and he had joined the Kurdish rights struggle at a very young age. During the waves of arrests against leftists and Kurdish rights activists in the 1980s, in the aftermath of the third coup d'état of the Republic's history, he was arrested for being a member of the PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party), and held in the infamous Diyarbakir Military Prison for nine years.<sup>114</sup> There he joined a hunger strike:

This was the time when I realized that people see you as an Armenian although you feel completely dedicated to the Kurdish cause. In general, in Turkey if you are an Armenian, you are an Armenian. If you are a Kurd, you are a Kurd. No one accepts people from other ethnicities into their [ethnic] struggle. I was in prison, during a hunger strike, and these people [Kurdish prison mates who were arrested for the same reason and were participating in the strike] didn't even want to talk to me because I was an Armenian. I never felt Armenian before. One of the leaders of the movement was also in the same prison with us, he called me one day, he said "I know you feel bitter, don't worry, try to find your own path." He gave me some books about the history of the Armenians. He was a great person. I don't know, maybe he was also of Armenian origin. You know, there are these rumors about the PKK leaders in fact being Armenian. Once I got out of prison, I never contacted [my Kurdish cell mates] again. I went to Armenia for a while. Found my cousins there, got married to an Armenian girl. Upon my return I moved to Istanbul, and converted back.

He shook his head in a non-approving manner and added: "This is the gift the Kurds gave us."

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<sup>114</sup> Diyarbakir prison was the center of brutal torture, which was directed against the political prisoners most of whom were Kurdish/leftist revolutionaries especially active between the 1970s and 2000s in Turkey. In April 2008, Diyarbakir Prison was included in the report published in *The Times* entitled "The Ten Most Notorious Jails in the World." The report states that in contemporary Turkey the prison has been known as the place where the prisoners carry out hunger strikes due to the routinized brutal torture conducted by the officials. It also refers to events that happened in the mid-1990s in Diyarbakir prison, about which a UN study was published describing "300 prisoners being dragged along the prison corridors where they were beaten with truncheons, iron bars, chains and clubs."

(<http://www.diclenews.com/2/1001/1/viewNews/265338>)

Today, former inmates are getting more vocal about the torture to which they were subjected. There is also a debate about restoring the building as a museum. See Çayan Demirel (documentary) "Diyarbakir Prison no: 5" For the history of this "lost" generation also see [www.78liler.org](http://www.78liler.org).

His last sentence has an intended double meaning, through which Halil referred to the effects of the Kurdish independence movement on the rise of Armenian "identity politics" among Muslim Armenians living in the (Kurdish) region of Southeastern Turkey. In one sense Halil was referring to the ways Islamized Armenians were made to realize the importance of ethnic identity, having been shown an example of the treatment of minorities in Turkey. In another sense, he referenced how Islamized Armenians were encouraged to view ethnic identity as important by expelling them from the struggle against a common oppressor once their Armenian ancestry was known. When I asked another individual about the motivating factors behind his conversion, this person used the same phrasing as Halil and further demonstrated the significance of Halil's statement by emphasizing its relationship to the wider context of the Kurdish struggle, saying finally: "I can say that it is a gift by the Kurds."

Yet Halil got another "gift," this time from the military administration of the Diyarbakir prison. Almost everyone in the prison was on a hunger strike to protest the brutality of the military administrators of the prison. "During the hunger strike," he said, "I got sick because of lack of nutrition. Now I have this thing. My brain stops all of a sudden; I forget everything even as I am speaking. I need a push to come back. If I go silent in the middle of a sentence, just remind me what I was talking about. Just tell me that I have stopped again." (His cousin smiled as if it were a joke. Seeing his cousin smiling, Halil also smiled. I did not feel like smiling but did not want to look shocked, which I was, so I smiled too).

This short-term memory deficiency that hunger left with Halil is contrasted by his constant retelling of Armenian history in general and the history of his own Armenian roots in particular. His family genealogy, going back four generations, as he managed to learn from his surviving relatives, was the orally transmitted proof of his Armenianness. And in fact, Halil's

interest in the history of the Armenian presence in Anatolia was also very strong. He named his son after one of the great heroes of the Armenian nation during WWI, Antranik.<sup>115</sup> The boy's chosen Armenian name—albeit not registered with the registrar's office and thus not official—is Armen Garo. His namesake, the historical figure Armen Garo (born as Karekin Parstimaciyan) was among the 28 members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnak Party) that took over the Ottoman Bank in 1896 in an effort to raise further awareness outside of the country for the plight of the Armenians.

When I was thinking and writing about his story I often found myself wondering if Halil's respect for oral and written forms of history and his insistence on proving/retelling the story of his Armenian roots serve as a supplement to replace his short-term memory that was lost in the struggle for another (in the sense of not his own) belonging/ethnicity. To the extent that this is the case, his Armenian genealogy (history), substitutes content for what was lost, along with the short-term memory he sacrificed to the Kurdish cause. Regardless, what is most important here is the clear fact that Halil embraced Armenian history as his own memory.

In a discussion about the case of another convert community in Turkey, Leyla Neyzi (2002) argues that the Sabbateans “remember to forget” their difference by erasing them in the public sphere. Yet both Halil's and Yakup's stories of interrelated conversion and discovery of Armenian heritage indicate that the concerns of Armenian converts are diametrically opposed to the Sabbatean wish for the public (dis)appearance of their identity. By retelling the stories of their Armenian grandparents, these converts “aim to remember what [they] chose to forget” in the words of the American poet and hip hop artist Saul Williams. In a piece called “List of Demands [Reparations],” Williams vocalizes the Black American community's political

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<sup>115</sup> Antranik is a slightly modified spelling of Antranig, the name of the Armenian hero.

demands for reparations for slavery and urges his generation to remember the injustice done to their slave grandparents, an historical episode that members of both the black American and white American communities strategically- albeit with different intent—“choose to forget.” In “List of Demands [Reparations], Williams aims to deconstruct the common-sense view of forgetting and remembering as antonyms by emphasizing that this relationship is in fact constructed by a “strategic choice.” His word-play draws attention to the fact that forgetting is a choice made for different reasons by both victims and perpetrators of a violent event.

By an emphasis on forgetting as a choice, Williams issues a call to action against inequality and injustice, where “remembrance” is implicated in the struggle for the recognition of enduring legacies of violence against African-descended people in the Americas. In a manner more similar to Williams’ call than to the strategy of Sabbetians in Turkey, Halil's story also indexes a demand for struggle -including return conversion. In the Turkish context too, past generations of converts, by living as Muslims, and the majority of the Turkish public choose to forget the existence of Islamized Armenians as well as the genocide/violence. A confluence of activity from “both sides” thus contributed to the maintenance of the status quo. In the case of the former, it was “forgetting” in exchange for security, while in the latter case, it was forgetting in the service of hegemony.

## **Conclusion**

In recent past, hundreds of Turkish citizens in Turkey have been applying to the Armenian Patriarchate for baptism and recognition as descendants of the Ottoman Armenians converted to Islam before or during the genocide. However, representations of Armenian genealogy by these claimants are not unified. Halil is an atheist (here he referred to his socialist

past as the reason) and did not have much regard for religion. Instead, he regards himself an Armenian because he *is* Armenian, irrespective of his tenuous ties to the Armenian Christian faith or his distance from the Armenian community in Turkey. In this sense, he thinks of Armenianness primarily in terms of genealogical (hence ethnic) belonging after his break with the Kurdish national/socialist struggle.

Mardik—albeit also complaining about the Patriarchate’s power—evokes Armenianness as genealogical memory that keeps the record of everyone’s existence in terms of kinship relations. He represents his own—as well as his relatives’—genealogy to boost his claims about the racial origins and lack of mixture of the group.

In contrast to Halil and Mardik, however, Yakup, borrows a term commonly used among the Alevi and refers to the initial conversions of his ancestors as a bastardization of his family. He elaborates and transforms his personal story into a narrative about roots, denial, and legitimate belonging. For him, the decision of the convert back is indefensible, as it is the decision to *stay* as a bastard.

Armenian identity took shape in tandem with changes in the policies of the nations-state as well as the claims of other minority groups. For many Armenians, elements of their personal pasts as well as future projects have become crucial to the production of new bases for self-identification, genealogy, and memory. At the same time, those genealogical returns have been guided by, and continue to be associated with, practices and political ideologies about minority rights—ethnic and religious claims that were salient prior to the recent rise of identity politics and the recent legal reform in Turkey. In addition to illustrating how law can be instrumental in transforming local cultural practices and self-understandings, the stories of return told in the preceding chapter add to reexaminations of community as an invocation of positive associations

tied to an assumed communal past. Genealogy is not a fixed link between individuals, their families, their past and the communities they claim to belong to. The practice of charting and otherwise inhabiting a genealogy, rather, changes under different socio-political circumstances.

Genealogical *facts* are supposed to reveal a history that makes possible the granting of baptism, yet only by following the choice to convert to Christianity can descendants of forcibly Islamized Armenians achieve recognized minority status in Turkey. Far from a simple matter, this choice once made, brings rights and privileges such as access to attend community schools and vote in elections for the boards of the foundations of the Armenian Churches (see chapter 7). More realistically, it is a choice with such significant relevance that it ultimately means nothing less than one's belonging in the Armenian community.

## Chapter 5

### Is Sincerity Secular?: Return Conversions, Religious Freedom, and the Subject of Modern Law

As discussed in the previous chapters, Armenian return conversions were taken by some to be a hopeful consequence of the new Turkish governing party's (AKP) efforts to enhance religious freedom for every sector of the society. One noteworthy example demonstrating this new direction in state reforms involved the restoration of several Armenian churches in Anatolia; the AKP allowed, and in some cases even contributed to, the efforts.

In 2010, the head of the “Spiritual Committee”<sup>116</sup> of the Armenian Patriarchate, Archbishop Aram Atesyan, conducted mass in the first such church to undergo restoration, the Armenian Church of *Surp Hac* (Holy Cross). It was the first service conducted there since 1915.

Located in Akhtamar Island,<sup>117</sup> in the southeastern city of Van, the historic church and the island on which it rests once occupied the center of the medieval Armenian Kingdom of Vaspurakan. Today the region is more widely known for its Kurdish communities, and as an active front in the ongoing Civil War. Like the rest of the country’s East and Southeast, between (officially) 1940-2002 (Üskül 2001; Şık 2012) the island was under martial rule, enforced by an

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<sup>116</sup> Archbishop Atesyan is currently the *locum tenens* of the Armenian Patriarchate, a position he has held since 2007, when the duties of Patriarch Mesrop II were transferred to the Spiritual Committee, over which Atesyan presides as director. Despite the transfer of leadership responsibilities, Patriarch Mesrop II still retains the title of Patriarch, a title which custom dictates may not be conferred on an elected candidate unless or until the death of the previously sitting Patriarch.

<sup>117</sup> Between 1116 and 1895 Akhtamar Island was the location of the Armenian Catholicosate of Akhtamar. Khachatur III, who died in 1895, was the last Catholicos of Akhtamar. In 1915, during the Armenian Genocide, the monks of Akhtamar were massacred, the church looted, and the monastic buildings destroyed. The Armenian name of the island is Rştunik (see Sevan Nisanyan 2008) Also see Hewsen 2001, 208-232.

occupying contingent of the Turkish military.

Before the mass, the Archbishop blessed the church “under the auspices of the office of the Governor of Van,” thus underlining the religious ceremony’s conditional nature as an event occurring only under the watchful gaze of the local officials. According to the newspapers, the motto of the day was announced on posters all over the island: *Tarihe saygi, kulture saygi* ("Respect the history, respect the culture") (Herbert 2007).

Taking advantage of a rare opportunity for government-sanctioned free passage within the region,<sup>118</sup> the Archbishop made a side trip from Van to the (Kurdish) city of Diyarbakir (site of the notorious prison), in order to visit two of his sister’s adult grandchildren, Mensure and Cihan.<sup>119</sup> This visit caught the attention of many newspapers, many of which included in their reporting the fact that both Mensure (then in his late twenties), and Cihan (then in her early thirties) were living as Muslims.

The newspapers reported that the Archbishop's "Muslim" relatives had recently petitioned to change the religion slot on their identity cards from Muslim to Christian. As the two explained to one reporter, they were only waiting for the restoration and reopening of the historical Armenian Church in Diyarbakir before getting baptized (Konuralp 2010). According to most reporting on Mensure and Cihan’s story, they regarded their decision to convert as a happy process of self-realization through the exercise of new religious freedom, and that the

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<sup>118</sup> Traveling is restricted in the area and individuals must pass through several military checkpoints. Armenian clergy receive special scrutiny, and their presence in the region is usually watched with suspicion. In light of this, they limit their travel to the region.

<sup>119</sup> Although Diyarbakir is populated by the Kurds and is the center of the Kurdish resistance, the city is historically believed to be founded by an Armenian, Prince Dikran. It is also believed that Diyarbakir is a version of the name of the city in Armenian Dikranagert, meaning the City of Dikran. The historic Armenian Church there was restored and opened for service in November 2012. See *Bells at Diyarbakir Armenian Church to toll after 97 years* (DailyNews 2012).

opportunity was a consequence of recent changes in state governance. Figured this way, Mensure and Cihan were part of a broader trend among converts who articulated the belief that the right to convert to the religion of one's ancestors is the right to claim one's ethnic and religious difference.

That view—and its shared nature—is further clarified by examples such as one male convert's testimony, which appeared in the pages of the newspaper, *Radikal*:

Many people from my (extended) family left for Istanbul [and] France. These people converted to their real identities after they immigrated. They converted to Christianity, and changed their ID cards accordingly. With time, taboos of the society toppled down, and the atmosphere of opening [*açılım*] emerged. This fact also showed me that the time was right. I got baptized six months ago and changed my name to an Armenian one (Tuduk and Işık 2010).

Likewise, another account—this time a female convert—put strong emphasis on self-discovery:

When I was 15 my mother told me that we were Armenians. I was extremely taken aback. My father used to say that after *tehcir* they were forced to behave like that [pretend to be Muslim Turks]. I married an Armenian of Istanbul when I was 28. I have also decided to *return to my roots* and got baptized (ibid.).

These accounts epitomize the common ways of narrating the conversion stories of Armenian return converts: Islamized Armenians always possessed Armenianness; upon becoming aware of their Armenian heritage, they recognized it as a defining feature of their *true* identity; embracing these aspects of their personal history appeared as a beneficial journey of reclamation and restoration; they recognized conversion as a necessary step in that journey, and one taken the sooner the better; they associated their conversion with changes in the structure and practice of governance, such as state policies of tolerance (see Chapters 1 and 2).

Woven throughout this framework is the presumption of a sharp division between the

political and the religious, and that presumption is the main theme I tackle in the following chapter. Focusing on that supposed distinction, I discuss how sincerity emerges as a heavily policed bridge between the two. As a key trope in the process of conversion back to Armenianness, it functions to blunt the political edge of Armenian conversions and to subdue projects such as the pursuit of accountability for genocide and the reclamation of land and other Armenian property taken by the Turkish state. I suggest that Islamized Armenians' accounts of self-realization are re-interpreted as "religious" through the practices of the Armenian Patriarchate to construct sincerity. Through compulsory religious instruction, and other practices that I discuss below, the Armenian Patriarchate interprets and regulates the return conversions as necessarily "sincere" and "purely religious." I will suggest that the Patriarchate's focus on the question of sincerity intersects with the postulants' claims about self-realization, and insinuates limits on those claims in accordance with the perceived danger of criminal liability vis-à-vis the state regarding any utterance mentioning the Genocide of 1915.

Examining these debates and practices around sincerity of the return conversions also facilitates an analytical rethinking of the relationship between "sincerity" and secular modernity in the anthropology of religion, as well as the subset of this scholarship that deals directly with religious conversion.

Conversion, thus conceived, is founded on the idea of the autonomous self; the authentication of a postulant's appeal is made conditional to the approval of his or her claim to have made a choice to convert that shows no trace of outside influence or of the individual's surrender to allurements or opportunistic self-interest. Such an account presumes a good deal that is worth querying directly concerning the complex linkage between the act of conversion and a subject (valorized as autonomous and sincere), as well as the desired lack of political stance

(deemed to be subversive of state hegemonies (Viswanathan 1998). Anthropological work concerning religious conversion has sought to disentangle and rethink these connections, suggesting that in the context of conversion, sincerity is itself a historically variable practice, which presupposes and produces distinctive forms of belief and selfhood.<sup>120</sup>

Sincerity, in this line of analysis, is generally considered to come from the inside of the individual and, as it appears to be a semantic problem, as embodied in the relationship between a convert's thoughts and speech (Keane 2007). Thus, sincerity is not simply an attribute of the mature, self-aware, individuated, subject; rather, sincere conversions help to fashion and cultivate subjectivity in its historically particular forms (ibid.).

Thus one sees the value of interrogating and specifying the perception of responsibility and choices of Armenian return converts. What forms of subjectivity are sustained by these practices? What institutional pressures underlie this subjectivity?

Furthermore, the case of Armenian converts demonstrates that an emphasis on sincerity in the context of religious conversion functions not only to redefine the modern subject (of the secular state, for instance), but to also redefine "the religious." In particular, as I discuss below, one sees the redefinition of religion as a category that is more complicated than simply an indicator of belief while at the same time still maintaining ties to the pre-secular definition of religion as communal belonging in other words, participation in a discursive tradition (Asad 2003) and in one's ethnicity.

How can we explain this recent rise of the emphasis on sincerity in the Turkish context? What does sincerity exactly mean in the context of Armenian return conversions? How ought one judge sincerity? How is it acted out? What are some aspects of the way sincerity and the

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<sup>120</sup> On the constructions of selfhood through the concept of sincerity and its relation to authentic self, see Trilling 1972.

modern legal subject are predicated upon each other? What does "religious" come to mean in this particular constellation of sincerity, criminal liability, and ritual? This chapter discusses the complex definitions of religion within the context of the constructions of the sincerity of Armenian conversions in Turkey.

### **Ultimate Motivations and Legal Responsibility**

A lay board member of a local Armenian church who commented on the recent return conversions in *Radikal* newspaper (*Tuduk and Işık 2010*) emphasized the crucial importance of roots for the Islamized Armenians' *self-discoveries*: "People cannot let go of their roots very easily." However, no matter how much the emphasis is on Islamized Armenians' self-realization (of their essential Armenian-ness), the central theme of *return to roots* inevitably raises questions about their grandparents' violent fate and reasons for conversion to Islam.

Whenever the initial conversion happened during the 1915 genocide, return conversions are done in the minefield of the Turkish state's denial of the genocide.<sup>121</sup> In a statement that illustrates this, the same board member warned against a possibly dangerous interpretation of return to Armenian roots:

There are numerous hidden Armenians whose mothers or grandmothers were of Armenian descent and who had to change their religion and their identity as a result of the political conditions of the period. But this does not warrant turning all this into propaganda material, [claiming] they will change their religions and convert back to Armenianness. There is also no need to go public, saying "once upon a time, such and such happened and now we are reclaiming our essence" just to go against the status quo and against the state. It is of course possible that people return to their origins, but as long as one is candid and sincere (*ibid.*).

The board member's comments express clear doubt that all Islamized Armenians could

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<sup>121</sup> See Chapter 4 and Chapter 6 .

be described as sincere. Beyond that, however, they also make an ominous though inexplicit reference to political motives that recent converts might have for claiming Armenian roots. Though choosing his words carefully so as to remain vague and indirect ("the political conditions of the period" *zamanin sartlari*) he nonetheless raises the issue of the immediate political context of these initial conversions. And with this veiled reference to the Genocide of Armenians at the end of the Ottoman Empire, Kevorkyan places all contemporary return conversions within the context of a legacy of opposition.

In referring, even indirectly, to the Genocide, Kevorkyan's rendering of Turkish history marks a departure from the practice of denial that still predominates today. Thus in a certain sense it represents a step toward reconciliation. Yet what interests me here is the way his aversion to one aspect of the proscription of Armenian interests immediately reasserts the legitimacy and continuation of that that proscription. In this Kevorkyan was explicit. "There is no need to go public ... just to go against the status quo." According to his perspective, conversion "is of course possible," but only "as long as one is candid and sincere." Thus, the argument goes, in order for contemporary return conversions to be realized, they today should be sincere. Most explicitly, they should be proven to lack political motivations. Minority politics, and in particular the Armenian project, are often glossed as "The Three 'T's" (*Taninma* (Recognition), *Toprak* (Land), and *Tazminat* (Reparation)), in effect the hallmark of insincerity.<sup>122</sup>

Stories by Armenian clergy also lend further support to the existence of a suspicious environment concerning the "ultimate motivations" for return conversion as a possible threat to the security of the state. I met Kenan, a deacon who was in touch with a small number of

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<sup>122</sup> See chapter 6 for a discussion of "ulterior motives."

Islamized Armenians, through Halil.<sup>123</sup>

Kenan was one of the few *din adami* who accepted participants in a mass which was held prior to their conversion. He stated the dangers of welcoming Muslims citizens into the Armenian churches:

Even these [small scale activities] got us into trouble. We had big disagreements with the lay board members of the church (*Tagagans*). As they relayed it to us, the police were on our tail, and they won't let us alone. They [the *tagagans*] were very scared. The *tagagans*, in return, asked us to quit our (activities) immediately. I know for a fact that later the police investigated the matter and asked around about us, but couldn't find anything. Then again, there were two people sitting in *badarag* (holy mass/liturgy) for a couple of months, watching silently. We were sure that they were undercover police officers. They disappeared after a while, never to be seen again.

Individual converts also relayed to me several episodes of this atmosphere of scrutiny. On at least one occasion, police officers used a routine traffic stop to ask Halil the date of his conversion, and subsequently detained him for several hours while performing a background check into his identity.

When he recounted the story to me he was sardonic, mixing amusement and annoyance. He said that the police officers had asked him "When did you return?" (*Ne zaman dondun?*), but that he did not immediately understand what they meant by "return."<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> See chapter 7.

<sup>124</sup> The verb *dönmek* has various meanings in Turkish: It means the act of return, as exemplified above, but it also means "to whirl" –as in the case of Sufi (Mevlevi) Darvishes, and also 'to turn' (from one side to the other). "Turning" as it is used in the context of religious change reflects more this last meaning of the verb, as it connotes 'turning' from one religion to another. Interestingly, *dönmek* as in the case of conversion also alludes to another of its side meanings, *sözünden dönmek*, breaking a promise. Similarly, *yüzünü dönmek* (literally "turning one's face" to mean "to look away") means abandonment. The act of conversion in Turkish connotes a

As it was, Halil said, he was on his way home from an appointment on the other side of the city in a neighborhood called Fatih, so he answered "I was in the traffic the last half an hour, coming from Fatih." The policeman smiled and rephrased his question: "When did you convert back?"

Religious leaders are also aware of the implicit threat of interrogation and detention by the police, and according to some accounts this fact had made them cautious about accepting Islamized Armenians for conversion. When I asked another high-ranking priest why the Patriarchate is very reluctant to accept return conversions, he told me that if the Patriarchate accepts everyone who wishes to convert, it could be accused of missionizing among the Muslim population of Turkey, which he said might have dire consequences for the safety of his congregation.<sup>125</sup> As the same priest also relayed to me on another occasion, he once asked a postulant to attend *Surp Badarak* (Holy Mass) for two years, despite the fact that the postulant owned a *vukuatli nufus kayit ornegi* (notorized population certificate, see Chapter 4) from the registrar to prove that his grandparents bore Armenian names and belonged to the Christian denomination. This emphasis on truthfulness illustrates that return conversions do not depend solely on the proof of the Armenian lineage of the postulants but also on proof of the sincerity of their conversion (see Chapter 4).

In nearly all cases, however, individual attempts to fend off police persecution are not usually enough to assuage the concerns expressed by the Armenian Patriarchate. The question remains: if surveillance turns into persecution, whom would the police blame for the conversion of Muslim Turkish citizens to Christianity? In this wider context of fear, surveillance, and doubt

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meaning that falls somewhere between these two latter meanings: breaking your promise to your former religion, abandoning it for another one.

<sup>125</sup> For the fear from Christian missionaries in Turkey see Ozyurek 2009 a/b.

surrounding the converts for not being candid and sincere in their conversions, the Patriarchate puts special emphasis on proving the sincerity of converts through courses of education and performance of ritual (baptism).

Thus, return conversions of the forcibly islamized Armenians are divided into two elements: a set of bureaucratic actions and a set of religious actions. Whereas in the former case the state passes judgment according to an individual's submission to the exterior influence of state authority, in the latter case one's Armenianness is treated as a matter of internally-originating volition, to be validated or rejected by the Armenian Patriarchate according to a person's demonstrated commitment to following the rules of the faith, all the while maintaining the nonappearance of evidence suggesting any externally-originating motivations.

As members of the Armenian clergy explained it to me, the courses of education required of postulants mainly aim at enabling them to make *sincere* choices by imparting the rules of Armenian Apostolic faith, then leaving the postulant to exercise his or her personal power of reason to determine what degree of following the rules accurately reflects his or her sincerity. The courses are time-consuming and alone represent a commitment on behalf of the postulants, especially considering that many are parents of young children who have full-time jobs, and thus in possession of only a meager surplus of time and the economic means to invest in anything beyond the necessities of daily life.

That being said, the courses are otherwise not terribly demanding, mainly consisting of attending meetings with a priest to discuss assigned readings. Furthermore, postulants are not expected to pass an examination to measure the level of their knowledge about Armenian Apostolic Christianity (cf. Seeman 2003).

One priest described to me his efforts to familiarize postulants with Armenian church

doctrine during informal meetings over the previous fifteen years: "Without boring them, I tried to explain God's love, Jesus the Savior, the structure of the Armenian Church, and as much as I can about the Armenian culture. We [educated] them for more than a year to prepare them for baptism."

Still, notwithstanding the Patriarchate's efforts to keep the instructional process as simple and flexible as possible, many converts criticize this preparation process, apart from the time involved, for questioning their Armenian roots and thus being as an obstacle invented by the Patriarchate. When we first met, Halil startled me with his sense of urgency to distinguish between Armenianness and Christianity. Five minutes after seeing each other for the very first time, he turned to me and said: "You know I had a fight with the Patriarchate." He went on to explain: "When I wanted to register myself as Armenian in the public records, I went to the Patriarchate to get the required certificate of baptism. They [the priests] told me that I needed to take courses about the Armenian religion and then get actually baptized to get the document."

I asked him, "What is wrong with attending the courses or getting baptized? Aren't they required for everyone who is trying to acquire a certificate of baptism from the Armenian Church?" His reply was direct: "I don't care about being a Christian, I want to be an Armenian again."

Halil's story of return fits perfectly into the narrative framework I derived from newspaper accounts, above. He learned that he was an Armenian from other youth in his village at a very young age. He confronted his family about this fact and got a "confession" about being Armenians. Years later, when he moved to Istanbul from his village, he converted back to what he referred to as his "true self."

Islamized Armenians' claims to convert to their true selves stand in stark contrast to the

requirements of the Patriarchate, which emphasizes individual choice and the sincerity of the conversions. However, it is not a dilemma peculiar to the Armenian conversions in Turkey. In fact, it refers to a bigger dilemma that lies at the center of belief in modernity, namely the tension between freedom of belief and responsibility as two central qualities of the modern believer. In fact the Turkish state has, itself, tended to define religion in both the coercive sense and the volitional sense. While Islam was figured as a means of assimilating oneself (Parla 2004, Ozyurek 2009b; Cagaptay 2006) to the Turkish majority, the state legally promoted religion as an individual belief. To illustrate this contradiction, I will briefly discuss a decision of the Constitutional Court regarding religion.

### **What is Religion? A Definition by the Constitutional Court**

In 1979 three Turkish citizens went to a local Civil Court of First Instance (*Asliye Hukuk Mahkemesi*) to change the religious information on their identity cards to “Armenian.”<sup>126</sup> Two of the plaintiffs asserted that “Islam” had been written both in the civil registers and in the religion column on their identity cards, while the third plaintiff maintained that the civil registers listed his religion as *Islam*, whereas his identity card listed his religion as *Catholic*.

The confusion of religious denomination with ethnic categories (Armenian) or religious sects (Catholic) on the ID cards is related to the categories in the population registers that have carried over from the Ottoman Empire. Instead of changing the plaintiffs’ religious denominations in the civil register, the Civil Court held that the statements of the plaintiffs were not sufficient to demand a correction.

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<sup>126</sup> Decision of the Constitutional Court, K 1979/004, E 1979/009 [http://www.anayasa.gov.tr/index.php?l=manage\\_karar&ref=show&action=karar&id=606&content=](http://www.anayasa.gov.tr/index.php?l=manage_karar&ref=show&action=karar&id=606&content=) (in Turkish, last accessed 06.25.2012).

In doing so the local court invoked a major premise of secularism that “religion should be regarded by political authorities with indifference” (Asad 2006, 205). The court ruled that the plaintiffs “would have to prove that they were really Armenians or Christians.”(ibid.) This in turn would require a judge to “not only inquire about, but find as a matter of fact, what a person’s religion was.”(ibid.) Such an inquiry, reasoned the civil court, would contravene Article 19/3 of the Constitution of 1961 stipulating that “No person shall be compelled to worship, or participate in religious ceremonies and rites, or to reveal his or her religious faith and belief.”

The Civil Court referred their case to the Constitutional Court and maintained in its petition that Article 43 of the 1972 Population Register Law was unconstitutional and thus should be annulled.<sup>127</sup> The Constitutional Court averred that the column containing religion in the census registers was not unconstitutional. It argued that it was permissible for the government to ask about someone’s religious belief and convictions “since a citizen’s personal status and one of its components, namely his religion, should be registered correctly and in an orderly manner, and the correction of errors by a judge’s order is of public benefit (*kamu yarari*).”

With this decision, instead of abolishing its significance, the highest court of Turkey established religion as an essential part of an individual’s legal personal status. Moreover by discrediting the declaration (*beyan*) of the individual citizen as the proof of religion, the Constitutional Court established the civil registers of the state as the only source to prove an individual’s religious denomination and reserved the right to correct these registers for the judiciary. An important question appeared: Was the religious variable in the civil registers and

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<sup>127</sup> Article 43 reads “According to the general principles of civil procedure], the very nature of trying a case assumes that the parties must prove their allegations and that judges must decide petitions by examining evidence and hearing witnesses. Judges could not deliver a verdict based solely upon the statements and petitions of the concerned parties alone.”

subsequently on the ID cards just an anomaly with respect to the secular claims of the state or was it something more?

This is not merely a question about the civil procedure nor is it an example of a discriminatory application of otherwise good, secular laws. On the contrary, all the previously stated laws and regulations of the secular legal system of Turkey work to ensure simultaneously that “religion” is a private matter but that the state has final authoritative say on both the definition of religion and upon the question of which denomination a person may profess.

In the same vein, the Constitutional Court’s decision established that the registering of a citizen’s religion on the ID cards, as an essential component of a citizen’s personal status, is in the public interest. In other words, the decision defined religion as essential for a person’s civic status. In its decision, the Constitutional Court came up with an authorized definition of religion: individual confession as registered in the civil records and subsequently indicated in the religious identity column of a citizen’s ID card.

I argue that it is incorrect to view the preceding case as an example of the failure of Turkish secularism to provide religious freedom. On the contrary this Constitutional Court’s decision actually functioned as an exercise of the state’s regulatory capacity (Agrama 2010; Asad 2003; 2006; Sullivan 2005). The means by which religion is tied to the legal personality of Turkish citizens in the highest court of Turkey marks the salience of defining religion for secular practice and power. Through declaring religion as essential to personal status, the Turkish Constitutional Court enacted its sovereign authority to decide what religion is, how it is connected to a Turkish citizen, and who belongs to which religious denomination.<sup>128</sup>

According to Wendy Brown, in the context of religion, one can find some of the earliest

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<sup>128</sup> In another chapter, *Legally Armenian*, I argue that the definition of religion is shifting towards the cultural.

traces of the centrality of the individual in Locke's 1689 "Letter Concerning Toleration." That document, Brown (2006) wrote, signaled "the emergence of an intensely individualistic and privatistic believer" (31). Likewise, the rise of the individual believer as an essential part of modernity has been noted in other studies on religion and religious conversion.<sup>129</sup> How was this "intensely individualistic and privatistic believer" able to take hold in different political and national contexts, and to what effect?

One main line of scholarship on the history of belief defines the focus on individual disposition and volition as a product of the intellectual and political history of the modern West. Donald Horowitz writes that perceiving religion as a personal act or choice, as "voluntary affiliation," or "an act of faith" is a creature and the Reformation culture of enlightenment politics following the French revolution (1985, 50). Similarly, Courtney Handman (2011, 656) argues that these Western notions of individual agency -- will and autonomy-- are "communicated to and picked up on by members of societies that do not have the same models of social relations, constituting a historical rupture driven by the forces of colonialism and globalization."

This emphasis on the dissemination of the individual believer as a western concept should be qualified however. A critical line of scholarship in anthropology focused on religious

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<sup>129</sup> "The constitutive logic of bourgeois legality constructs the subject of law both as an abstract individual, equal to and indistinguishable from other abstract individuals, and as the bearer of a unique and natural self" (Collier 1996:5). This "unique and natural" legal self is also the bearer of rights necessary for individual freedom (including religious freedom) (T. H. Marshall 1964:71). In this sense, modern practices of governance constitute the modern self, and not only in the colonial/religious context, as capable of possessing (individual) belief and elaborating on her/his acceptance/change of religion by declarations of sincerity. Modern law constructs the self as bearer of rights, religious freedom among others. Here we see how two contexts of the constitution of the modern self, conversion and the development of modern law, both shape the modern self with its rights and responsibilities including religious freedom.

conversion as contributing to the development of an *autonomous individual* who is able to express his/her own will to change religion. According to this line of scholarship, conversion as a process attached to colonialism (see Van der Veer (ed.) 1996) changed the political, social and the semantic fields. This shift occurred not only on the legal, institutional level but also the self-perception of the individual was transformed.

Talal Asad furthers these arguments by drawing our attention to the rise of the secular that both controls and defines the religious, including the self in the process of conversion. He argues that the dissemination of the individual believer as a *universal* concept was part of "the globalizing power of the behaviors, knowledges, sensibilities, and political arrangements that have come to comprise the secular" (Asad 2003). Secular law was the main mechanism that enabled this dissemination, along with other factors (government structures, torture regimes that disseminate modern conceptions of pain and torturability etc.). For the purposes of this chapter, I will limit my focus to law as a driving force behind the dissemination of the secular.

### **Three Questions on Sincerity**

Anthropological studies of protestant missions in the colonial context emphasize the role religious conversion played in the communication and construction of Western notions of individual agency, will and autonomy. The narratives of transformation offered by anthropologists regarded religious conversion as self-revelation and reflection or a transformation of the self in the process of colonization.<sup>130</sup>

In an attempt to carry the discussion around the issue of agency into the context of

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<sup>130</sup> There are several edited volumes on conversion within the field of anthropology, the most important of them being Buckser and Glazier 2003; Cannell 2006; Hefner 1993; Van der Veer P (ed.) 1996.

modern nation states, Don Seeman (2003) discusses the conversions of Felashmura—Ethiopian immigrants to Israel claiming Beta Israel descent, and Israeli bureaucratic practices concerning conversion.<sup>131</sup> Seeman criticizes the Israeli bureaucracy for its "myopic quest for monocausal explanations of human behaviors" (201).<sup>132</sup> For Seeman, agency is not so easily decipherable as the bureaucracy claims it to be. Although his criticism is a serious intervention into bureaucratic practices of conversion in Israel, he leaves out the discrepancies between bureaucratic treatments of different groups that are considered to be outside of the Israeli community in his analysis.

The problem, Seeman maintains, is not purely about the unorthodox religious customs that Felashmura might have adopted in Ethiopia, thereby purifying their faith; the problem is also a political one, where the unity of the Jewish-Israeli identity is at stake. The question remains: If conversion changes an immigrant into a citizen in "an alchemy like process," as Seeman argues, for what reason have similar practices never conferred the full rights of citizenship to Palestinians, no matter how much *alchemy* is involved? Even if everyone accepts the Felashmura's version of "truth," the question over the importance of conversion for the Israeli state remains. It is a question that goes beyond the issue of "religious gatekeeping," and points towards a racial and political gatekeeping. The problem is not in the bureaucratic procedures, but in the discrimination conversion sustains, bureaucratically marked or not. It is impossible to talk about Felashmura without mentioning the violence and injustice under which the Palestinians are fighting to survive in Israel.

Debates around the sincerity of the Armenian conversions raise similar questions about

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<sup>131</sup> According to Seeman, Felashmura were designated as unwanted economic refugees.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. the near absence of legal regulations on conversion in Turkey. In Turkey the bureaucracy pretends to be objective, not even asking for a reason for conversion. However, does that necessarily bring freedom of belief?

the intertwined nature of religion and politics. Notably, in the debates about the sincerity of Armenian conversions above, the normative conception of religion as belief facilitates claims about what counts as *responsibility*.

In his seminal study of conversion to Protestant Christianity, Webb Keane (2002) analyzes religious conversion as one of the constitutive moments of the modern self as entailing a project of fostering and authorizing autonomous, individual selves.<sup>133</sup> Keane's main argument is that sincerity, a focal concept for validating narratives of conversion, redefined the relationship between thought/inner processes of the mind, and its expressions by the individual believer. Sincerity operates on the premise that words could reflect inner states and involves us in questions about intentionality. Insincerity typically involves an intentional divergence of expression from thought (*ibid.*, 75).

“Sincerity,” Keane writes, “says something not just about speech or about speech and thought, but also something about the character of the speaker. That is why one also hears of persons, and not just particular acts of speaking, being described as sincere” (75). In/sincerity, in other words, does not only characterize the relationship between speech and thought, but also tells us about the character of a person at the moment of conversion.

In considering Muslim Armenians' accounts in the wider framework of sincerity that Keane provides, one notices a similar emphasis on the character of the converts, reflecting similar conceptions of personal autonomy and the relationship between conscience and practice. If we remember Kevorkyan's words, converts should be sincere and honest, so that we know they are converting back to their ancestors' religion for good reasons. How can we explain this shared of emphasis between the Turkish and the missionary contexts?

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<sup>133</sup> Cf. Taylor 1992.

In order to move toward an answer to this question, I want to borrow Keane's questions about the accountability of the sincerity narratives and the sincere self to reflect on the importance of the timing of "sincerity" of Armenian return conversions: "In reflecting on these public objectifications of the believing self, offered for the recognition of others," he writes, "we should not only ask who has sincerity but *when it should appear, when it should count*" (2002, 83. Italics mine). Focusing on these two latter questions allows us to reflect on the wider political and national context of sincerity.

Let us start with Keane's first question: When should sincerity appear? At what exact moment is a demand raised for sincerity? Here we have to turn to the newspaper accounts of the converts. These accounts blur the reasons for initial conversions to Islam. Instead, as it is the case with the article on Atesyan's relatives with which I opened this chapter, articles reporting Armenian return conversions briefly touched on the issue of conversions to Islam as "conditions of the times" (*donemin sartlari*), or situated them comfortably in the frame of the official state discourse on the Armenian deaths and displacement during WWI as "*tehcir*" (deportation). Thus in these newspaper accounts (and in the court rooms as well as the petitions submitted to the registrar's office, see Chapter 3 "Legally Armenian") the motive for conversion to Islam remains *historically vague*.

This vagueness disconnected motivations for return conversions from their historical roots, shifting the emphasis from political violence to the ostensible rise of tolerance for minority differences and individual freedoms in Turkey, most importantly freedom of religion. As the reasons for their ancestors to adopt Islam should remain vague (for purposes of personal security of the commentator), the historical reasons are replaced by the sincere acts of the converts, signifying a shift of focus from the historical and political "reasons" to inner "revelations."

Let us proceed, then, to Keane's second question: When should sincerity count? As Keane's first question re-establishes the connection between history and religious conversion, this next one draws our attention to sincerity's contingency upon practices.

I argue that religious instruction classes are such practices that establish "sincerity."<sup>134</sup> In the Armenian Patriarchate, in an effort to convince the deputy Patriarch that no other motivation exists for conversion (whether that be, for example, claims for the recovery of confiscated property or other reparations for genocide), converts show the *sincerity* of their appeal for baptism by attending six month-long courses about Armenian Christianity. These courses function as a performance of sincerity and as such replace the historical and political context of the return conversions. Sincerity counts in the place of history, as the *real* reason for return conversions. Agency of the converts is secured by making them the choosers of a new belief and the proof is their attendance of those courses.

One notes, however, that the classes' centrality does not come from their actual content and teachings about religion. They are mostly trivial in their content. The way they make the converts' sincerity visible and accountable is solely by attendance; it is not so much the actual knowledge as the premise to acquire religious knowledge under Patriarchate's control that matters. These courses function as a "discursive pedagogy" (Keane 2002, 216), to transform postulants with Armenian heritage into individual believers. Following that process, adults must confirm their true faith in a public performance, one of an endless series of socially grounded affirmations.

I want to ask yet a third question, this time borrowing from Talal Asad, in a way to

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<sup>134</sup> Sincerity also appears as an important factor for the name change cases in the Turkish courts, albeit in different forms. For the legal articulations of sincerity, see Chapter 3: Legally Armenian.

complicate this discussion about sincerity by way of introducing another critical concept into my discussion: responsibility (Asad 1996). Asad writes, "In brief, what is not always made clear in narratives of conversion employing the concept of agency is what theoretical work that concept is doing.... For what and to whom are agents responsible? When and where can attributions of agency be successfully disowned?" (1996, 272).

For what and to whom are agents responsible? When and where can attributions of agency be successfully disowned?

Islamized Armenians' narratives, although they emphasize the individual, still bear the danger of "being able to be stretched too far" until they have a political meaning. The Armenian church's embrace of individuality of the faith aims to put the legal responsibility on the individual believer, since agency also brings legal (criminal) responsibility. In other words, Islamized Armenians' narratives and the Patriarchate's efforts depend on the same premises about the self, its interiority and belief, that occupy the modern realm of religion. This modern realm was emptied from the previous form of religion which engaged with belonging and ethnicity. Return to their ancestors' religion cannot be solely predicated on the initial conversion of their grandparents, which would politicize (perhaps even disqualify) their conversion as it brings up issues about the genocide of the Ottoman Armenians.

On the contrary, assertion of individual self-realization relies on the concept of the individual believer. Making claims as an individual believer secures Islamized Armenians' claims to convert as "freedom of religion" (as it is granted by the new legal reform, see chapter 3 "Legally Armenian"). The Patriarchate cannot accept the claim of return to Armenian roots as the sole reason to convert, this would tie religion to ethnicity, hence conversion to genocide. Sincerity emerges as a *solution* at this exact moment by reconstructing religious conversion

specifically, but also religious belief generally as devoid of political and/or historical context and as purely based on individual choice. The courses, as a way to assure sincerity, appear as one way for the Patriarchate to avoid being accused of making political claims about the genocide of 1915.

Relying on the modern concept of the individual believer as expressing sincerity and taking responsibility enables the Patriarchate to repudiate possible political interpretations (and legal repercussions) of these return conversions by transforming them into a *rational* choice made by the individual believer. This way legal responsibility is also transferred from the Patriarchate that *conducts* baptism to the individual postulant who *receives* it by his/her free will and informed choice. As the Patriarchate constructs, assures and enforces the sincerity of the converts, it simultaneously elevates sincerity as an expression that arises from individual and internal sources and eschews what are taken to be opportunistic reasons for conversion related to political claims.

I would like to argue that legal responsibility is the twin sister of freedom of religion, and that together the two constitute a decisive relationship to the arguments on sincerity, albeit hardly articulated in anthropological theory. Modern secular law both presumes and helps to bring into being an "interiority" (Hart 1968) that is at the center of the idea of freedom of religion. Freedom, however, as Collier (et. al. 1996.) have put it, is a "double-edged sword." If people are free to act as they wish, they become responsible for the consequences of their actions" (11).<sup>135</sup>

This modern self is the "classic contractor" of legal theory who is held personally

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<sup>135</sup> Cf. "In core capitalist nations, whose wealth was increasing at the same time as their need for docile workers, the helping professions arose to take over the management of homes and individuals who failed to use their freedom appropriately." (Collier et. al. 1995).

accountable for his civil and criminal actions (Naffine 2003).<sup>136</sup> The view of persons emerging from some religious conversion regimes, such as Islamized Armenians' return conversions in Turkey, the conversion of the Felashmura in Israel, or Dalit conversions in Madras (Viswanath 2013), does not only presuppose a free, rational and disengaged individual; such persons are also supposed to be at the disposal of laws that regulate national belonging and labor regimes.

Put somewhat differently, can be held both morally and legally accountable for one's actions because one's actions are choices guided by reason. The individual is therefore a *moral* agent as described by Elizabeth Wolgast: "an individual who *first decides* and *then executes actions*, does both himself." (92, emphasis added). The individual believer, this "stick figure of modernity," in Wendy Brown's words (2006, 31), is more than an autonomous self. Then she also carries legal responsibility. Secular modernity not only manufactured the individual believer but also constructed it as a moral and rational agent of his/her choices and attributed *responsibility* to the person for his/her acts (Asad 1993). "It knows us, even as it makes us, responsible agents who are made into legal subjects." (Morris 1970)

## **Conclusion**

Conversion plays a special role in the construction of Western notions of individual agency, will and autonomy, as well as the diffusion of these notions around the globe. Religious conversion, in its colonial settings, furthered the idea of an autonomous individual who is able to express his/her own will to change religion (Van der Veer 1996). In his study of conversion to (protestant) Christianity, Keane identifies conversion as one of the constitutive moments of the

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<sup>136</sup> Naffinen, 2003. It is also important to note here the 'forensic' term person, employed by John Locke, the term which appropriates 'actions and their merits and so belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of a law, and happiness and misery' (Locke 1993 (Book 2):26).

modern self (cf. Taylor 1992), as entailing a project of fostering and authorizing autonomous, individual selves (2002, 69). In this process sincerity emerges as the central category of colonial perceptions of religion and as the key element in the constitution of the modern self.

It is in this manner that secular modernity has manufactured the hegemony of the individual believer who is a moral and rational agent of his/her choices (Asad 1993).<sup>137</sup> The case of Armenian return conversions adds another element to the discussion of the relationship between religious freedom and responsibility, ascribed to the modern subject (of law and religion): Who will bear the responsibility for religious conversion when/if the state authorities decide to interrogate this use of religious freedom? If, and when, surveillance turn into persecution, who shall be held responsible for the act of conversion? Is it the church or the convert?

Relying on the modern concept of the individual believer who is sincere and takes responsibility enables the Patriarchate to repudiate possible political and legal repercussions of these return conversions by transforming them into a *rational* choice made by the individual believer. Legal responsibility is transferred from the Patriarchate that *conducts* baptism to the individual postulant who *receives* it by his/her free will and informed choice. Conversion, thus conceived, is itself founded upon the idea that the self must be autonomous; religion ought to be freely chosen and not brought about by “seduction.”

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<sup>137</sup> Also see Anidjar (2006) for a critical approach to the intimate relationship between Christianity and secularism.

## Chapter 6

### On Being Hidden: Armenians, Traitors and Converts

The legal, administrative, and secular/religious paradoxes I have described in this dissertation (citizenship, minority status, sincerity, personal names) characterize the life of the forcibly Islamized Armenians. Yet, the most prominent paradox in their life is the way in which they came to be known as hidden Armenians in Turkey. At first glance, it seems an issue of classification, a group of Muslims whose grandparents were Armenian. This term is one of many terms by which this community is commonly described.<sup>138</sup> However, all these terms have significant limitations and problems. My informants expressed resentment against many of these descriptions, especially the crypto and hidden denominations for masking hatred against individuals with Armenian roots who lived as Muslims. The term, hidden Armenians, according to their accounts, is a highly problematic term, suggesting that they are cowards or traitors who have, in their own terms, “something to hide.”<sup>139</sup>

The term *hidden* also reflects the secular and nationalist sensibilities of the Turkish public. In Turkey context of Armenian conversions being hidden is synonymous with deception. What are the secular, nationalist and religious sensibilities on being hidden? How do hidden Armenians in Turkey evoke concerns about sovereignty, loyalty, and piety?

In his book, *A Secret Nation: The Hidden Armenians of Turkey*, Avedis Hadjian (forthcoming), an Argentinean Armenian author based in New York, describes the forcibly

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<sup>138</sup> Others are Islamized Armenians, Muslim Armenians, crypto- or Dönme Armenians.

<sup>139</sup> Muslim Armenians” look less problematic; however this term bares the danger of normalizing their precarious position vis-a-vis both the Turkish Muslim majority and Armenian minority. They are neither accepted as “Armenians” nor as “Muslims.”

Islamized Armenians as a mysterious community. Here is a quote from his forthcoming book that appeared in a website:<sup>140</sup>

In Turkey, there lives a mysterious minority known as the “secret Armenians.” They have been hiding in the open for nearly a century. Outwardly, they are Turks or Kurds, but the secret Armenians are actually descendants of the survivors of the 1915 Genocide, who stayed behind in Eastern Anatolia after forcibly converting to Islam. Some are now devout Muslims, others are Alevis—generally considered an offshoot of Shia Islam, even though that would be an inaccurate description by some accounts—and a few secretly remain Christian, especially in the area of Sassoun, where still there are mountain villages with secret Armenian populations.

Hadjian adds that they are still hidden, and their real numbers are unknown: “No one knows whether the secret Armenians are in the thousands or the few million. For the most part, they fear coming out.”

There is nothing in Hadjian’s description that suggests that this group is in fact hiding from the mainstream public. In fact, he notes that “they have been hiding in the open,” in other words, there is no effort on the side of this group to hide. Still, it is a common trope employed by the multicultural as well as nationalist scholarship on the descendants of forcibly Islamized Armenians in Turkey and abroad. Some also claim that they are coming out of hiding, “For a long time, only those who had left the ancestral homestead dared to make their Armenian roots known.”<sup>141</sup>

*Sessizliğin Sesi: Türkiye Ermenileri Konuşuyor* [The Sounds of Silence – Armenians of Turkey are Talking], another book on the group, this time an oral history by Mehmet Ferda Balancar (2012), posits that there are four different Armenian identities in Turkey today: (1) Persons living with their Armenian identity since birth; (2) Islamized Armenians who hide their

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<sup>140</sup> <http://www.iyananmag.com/2012/12/04/a-lost-map-on-the-tramway-in-istanbul/>

<sup>141</sup> <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/life-style/variety/2013/04/24/A-century-on-Turkey-s-Muslim-Armenians-come-out-of-hiding.html>

identity; (3) those who revert to their Armenian identities; and (4) those who live as a Muslim. In praise of Balancar's book, Arus Yumul, a prominent Turkish Armenian sociologist, explains the importance of Balancar's book as voicing the "stories waiting to be heard about the "others" [populations that are not part of the Turkish Sunni majority]<sup>142</sup>

Other scholars and journalists also emphasize "the importance of memory and the need for reconciliation"<sup>143</sup> focuses on the hidden Armenians and by revealing this hiding, they expose the "silences." Yet, this enthusiasm for fresh identities is blurred by the fact that the term hidden also describes the descendants of the forcibly Islamized Armenians by those who represent the Turkish nationalist ideology. Former head of the Turkish Historical Society (Turk Tarih Kurumu, TTK) Yusuf Halaçođlu is perhaps the most (in)famous spokesperson of this nationalist perspective. He shared his concern for the Hidden Armenians in Kayseri, August 18, 2008, saying: "People we call Kurds are actually of Turkmen origin, while those we think are Kurdish Alevi are really of Armenian origin." He also asserted that "most of the people in the TIKKO (Turkey Workers' and Villagers' Liberation Army) and PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) are Kurds of Armenian origin."<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> From the blurb Arus Yumul wrote for Mehmet Ferda Balancar's (2012) book jacket. <http://www.dr.com.tr/Kitap/Sessizligin-Sesi-I-Turkiye-Ermenileri-Konusuyor/Mehmet-Ferda-Balancar/Arastirma-Tarih/Ermeni-Meselesi/urunno=0000000384031>

<sup>143</sup> <http://www.no-miedo.com/2013/02/memory-of-trees-kathryn-cook.html>, also see [http://www.krcphoto.com/#/memory-of-trees/Kathryn\\_Cook09](http://www.krcphoto.com/#/memory-of-trees/Kathryn_Cook09)

<sup>144</sup> "Müslümanlığı kabul etmiş ve kendisini Türk olarak kabul etmiş insanlar gelip Anadolu'ya yerleşmiştir. Dolayısıyla bunları bir mozaik olarak kabul etmek, farkına varmadan ülke içerisinde de birtakım gruplaşmalara neden olmaktadır. Bu konuda özellikle siyasetçilerin çok dikkatli olması gerekir. Araştırmalarımızda Kürt diye bildiğimiz insanların aslında yapısal olarak 'Türkmen asıllı' olduğunu, 'Kürt-Alevi' olarak bilinen vatandaşların ise 'Ermeni kökenli' olduğunu gördük. Ülkeyi bölmeye çalışan TIKKO ve PKK terör örgütlerinin içinde yer alan insanların birçođu Ermeni dönmesi Kürtlerden oluşuyor. TIKKO ve PKK hareketi bizim bildiğimiz gibi Kürt hareketi değildir."

Halaçoğlu's argument about the "Armenian" origins of the Alevi serves a dual purpose for the Turkish nationalist thesis.<sup>145</sup> Alevi are a religious minority native to Anatolia (Tambar 2010, 2012). Alevi Kurds constitute the main obstacle in assimilating Kurds into a Sunni-Muslim majority identity. Isolating Alevi from Kurdishness while denying the real basis of their religious, political and ethnic differences, Halaçoğlu *converts* Alevi to the Turkish nation's ultimate other, the Armenians. Indeed, this maneuver aims to eradicate supposedly authentic Alevi presence as well. This is not only a comment about Alevi identity. Halaçoğlu takes aim at the large group of Armenians disguised as Alevi—embedded enemies of the Turkish Republic. Thus, hidden Armenians are automatically associated with "terrorist organizations," including the "notorious" PKK.

Following nation-wide criticism for his comments from representatives of Kurdish, Alevi and Armenian institutions as well as newspapers and Turkish scholars, Halaçoğlu met the press to support his argument with "official documents." He said:

I have a list in my hands. A list of Armenian converts [*Ermeni Dönmeleri*] based on official documents. Who are these converts, [their] Armenian names, Turkish names, all these [are in this list]. [Even] the [details] of who lives in which house. I am not saying this as a threat. I am not going to expose them, neither will I do that in the future. Now, what should I do when I learn about [the existence of this information]? Shouldn't I share it? I am not saying these to vilify Armenians. I am

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<sup>145</sup>Halaçoğlu is not alone in this quest. Salim Cöhce, a faculty member at İnönü University's Department of History, stated to the magazine *Aksiyon* around the same time of Halaçoğlu's statements: "There are between 80 and 100 thousand Armenians in hiding. Armenians were hiding mostly among the Kurds and the Alevi." It should be noted that several online news sources and printed newspapers and journals reported the "connections between terrorist organizations and 'hidden Armenians.'" These reports indicate there is much confusion about who should be considered a hidden Armenian. For example, a hidden Armenian who worked for a "terrorist" leftist organizations is *outed* on the Internet. "Armenian Christian Garbis Altinoğlu was a theorist and secretary general of the TKP/ML organization. ... His father Ohannes Altinoğlu changed the religious column of his ID card from Islam to Christianity." (<http://www.seyfislam.com/forum/image-vp104589.html>). In other words, if a father changes his religion in the official records this is proof that he a "Hidden Armenian."

saying that some Armenians "made themselves look like" Kurdish-Alevi to save themselves from *tehcir* (deportation).<sup>146</sup>

Halaçoğlu's statement about the secret list further raised questions regarding Hidden Armenians in Anatolia. If the state is knowledgeable about its minority population's "origins," as well as every conceivable detail about their lives, how can Armenians be hidden? Clearly Armenians and other minorities cannot hide from the pervasive bureaucracy of the Turkish state as I expand on this latter point below.

Shortly after Halaçoğlu's speech, the Deputy Patriarch of the Armenian Church in Turkey, Archbishop Aram Atesyan stated in an interview, "Armenians who used to live in Anatolia as Muslim Kurds are now converting back to their real identities" (Konuralp 2010).<sup>147</sup> Halaçoğlu did not miss the opportunity to respond to Atesyan's declaration. He protested that "those who accused me for being a racist when I told the truth are now making such declarations because they want to grant property (real estate) to Armenians and pave the way for [forcing the Turkish state] to pay compensation (for the Armenian genocide)."<sup>148</sup>

Halaçoğlu's last speech clearly demonstrates that the nationalists fear the Hidden Armenians. Acknowledging that there are still a significant number of Armenians living in Turkey worries the state because it may have to pay reparations, especially in real estate and land.<sup>149</sup> Therefore, the former president of the Turkish Historical Association faces a peculiar

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<sup>146</sup> "Elimde bir liste var. Resmi belgelere göre dönme listesi. Kimlerin dönme oldukları, Ermeni ismi, Türk ismi hepsi var. Hangi evde oturduklarına kadar var. Tehdit olarak söylemiyorum. Bunları açıklamıyorum, açıklamayacağım da. Şimdi ben bunları öğrenince ne yapayım? Paylaşmayım mı? Bunları Ermenileri kötölemek için söylemiyorum. Bazı Ermenilerin tehcirden kurtulmak için kendilerini Kürt Alevi gösterdiklerini söylüyorum."

<sup>147</sup> For a discussion of the events that resulted in Deputy Patriarch's declaration about Kurdish-Alevi Armenians, see Chapter 5: Is Sincerity Secular?

<sup>148</sup> <http://www.odatv.com/n.php?n=500-bin-kripto-ermenivar--2309101200> (23.09.2010 )

paradox. Halaçoğlu fears Hidden Armenians in Anatolia while he passionately tries to prove their existence.

In this chapter, I investigate the claimed *hidden-ness* of Armenians, a condition constructed by secular and national Turkish publics. Hiding is a category that overwrites other possible definitions for the forcefully Islamized Armenians in Turkey today. I explore the ways in which the Hidden Armenian captured Turkish nationalist imagination. Specifically, I focus on accusations levied against hidden Armenians, the political consequences of being hidden and being converted, alleged conspiracies, the terror they provoke, and the social risks they embody. I analyze hiding and converts' presence in the nation systematically throughout the history of the Turkish Republic (1923 to present). This raises a number of challenging questions: What does it mean to be a hidden Armenian? How does the condition of being hidden manifest itself? What types of "dangers" does hiding evoke in the national imaginary? Who "decides" the parameters of hiding? What are the legal structures that guarantee the continuation of hiding in Turkey?

### **The Alleged Ubiquity of Hidden Armenians**

In December 2008, an unprecedented and controversial petition campaign caught the attention of the Turkish public. Initiated by a group of intellectuals and journalists, the campaign was an apology for "the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians had been subjected to in 1915." As the number of signatures increased and nationalist backlash intensified, Canan Arıman, a deputy from the main opposition party (CHP), attacked Abdullah Gül, the country's President, for failing to take proper action against the petitioners. She accused the petitioners of

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<sup>149</sup> These compensations are surmised to be pre-1915 property owned by Armenians during the Ottoman Empire. The claimants are assumed to be the "Armenian Diaspora," the descendants of the victims and survivors who live today most prominently in Lebanon, United States and France (also see chapter 5).

denigrating national pride by signaling to the international community that Turkey had accepted the allegations of Armenian genocide.<sup>150</sup> Aritman went on to insinuate that President Gül was rubber-stamping the campaign because of his Armenian origins. "Abdullah Gül should act as the president of the entire Turkish nation, not solely as the president of those who share his own ethnicity. Investigate the ethnic origins of the president's mother and you will see what I mean."<sup>151</sup>

The critical moment here was when Gül released a press release immediately after the deputy's attack denying that his family has Armenian roots: "Our meticulously kept family tree from past to present, existing official documents of origin as well as past and present fellow townsmen of Kayseri [attest] to" his Turkish and Muslim lineage on both sides. In the same breath that Gül cited genealogical evidence of his Turkish-ness and Muslim-ness, he assured the nation saying, "[I] respect all of my citizens' ethnic origins, different beliefs and family ties. I see all these differences as both a fact and as the enrichment of a country with an imperial past. " He concluded by emphasizing, again, the equality of Turkish citizens: "No one is superior to another.... I am proud of my country for having reached this level of tolerance." Ironically, President Gül went on to sue the deputy for libel. He won symbolic pecuniary compensation.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Not surprisingly, it was entirely lost on Aritman that the petition actually refrained from using the word Genocide, a compromise that was adopted by a much smaller yet eloquent group of critics. Nonetheless, these critics exposed other shortcomings of the campaign beyond the nationalist stance (See Erbal 2012.)

<sup>151</sup> When Gül offered to make his family tree public, Artiman retorted, "Today, ethnic origin does not gain legal and scientific validity through family trees, but through DNA tests.... Birth records during the Ottomans were based on declarations and while recording non-Muslims, the state used to write a Muslim name as the father's name. Thus, nobody can prove their ethnic identity through a family tree." "CHP deputy insists on DNA tests for president," <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10632139.asp>

<sup>152</sup> "Buna ailemizin geçmişten günümüze titizlikle işlenen soy ağacımız, mevcut resmi nüfus kütükleri ve gelmiş geçmiş Kayserili hemşehrilerim şahittir." Gül's use of "tolerance" in this

The inherent racism in these accusations is of course striking; Aritman uses “Armenian” as a slur. What is even more remarkable is that President Gül who first declares that “no one is superior to another,” but then sues Aritman for libel. More seriously, Canan Aritman’s argument with the head of Turkish state focuses on Hidden Armenians, secret plots to “denigrate national pride,” *Ermeni Dönmeleri* [Armenian Converts] yet to be “discovered” by the authorities and the anticipated damages to the Turkish nation because of Armenian complicity. Indeed, hidden Armenians occupy a special place in the metaphors of Turkish nationalists; this limelight cannot be explained simply by the minority status of the Armenian community. “Hidden Armenians,” Armenian converts to Islam, are believed to work to “denigrate national pride” by scheming against Turkey with the help of the Armenian Diaspora and imperialist Western powers.<sup>153</sup> Aritman’s comments are exemplary of the perception of Armenian converts as a secret community aiming to subvert the Turkish nation from within.

The timing of Aritman’s attack was not incidental. Her accusations coincided with several political developments, most importantly the European Union (EU) accession process, election of the pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) for a second term, as well as the debates about lifting the ban on headscarves in the public space. Perhaps the most significant were the AKP’s legal reforms regarding the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in preparation for EU accession. Therefore, Aritman’s charges coincide with a specific historical conjuncture in which the Kemalist secularists perceive themselves as losing control over national affairs.<sup>154</sup> Yet, it is still puzzling that one of the most staunchly secular members of the

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context is hypocritical. <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2010/11/06/11-month-sentence/>. For a discussion of the uses of the concept, see Chapter 2: Terrains of Tolerance.

<sup>153</sup> See also <http://www.turksolu.org/220/aritman220.htm>

<sup>154</sup> On fears of Kemalist secularists see Tambar 2010 and Özyürek 2006.

parliament accuses the pro-Islamic President of being a Hidden Armenian, bypassing of a large number of issues more germane to the perceived threat to secularism.

Gauri Viswanathan argues that perception of conversion is a “special secular fear” that disrupts the "drama of citizenship" in secular nation-states by posing "a radical threat to the trajectory of nationhood"(1998, 9). Further, he writes that the most prominent function of secular citizenship is the imposition of fixed, unalterable identities to the formerly distinct populations of the nation-state. Turkish (Kemalist) secular nationalism adds to the drama of citizenship by controlling both majority and minority religions. In other words, it oversees Islam in its claim to modernity and it suppresses minority ethnic and religious differences as a requirement for national sovereignty. As Özyürek explains: “in its Turkish manifestation secularism functions as a state craft aiming to homogenize and ideologically control the population” (2009b, 401). Throughout its history, the Republic has managed its Muslim peoples through secular state policies, such as bestowing authority on the *Diyanet* (Gözyayın 2009a), the office for religious affairs. Concurrently, the Republic aimed to eradicate minority presence altogether through campaigns such as “the Wealth Tax” levied on Armenians, Greeks and Jews in 1942-43 (Aktar 2000; Bali 2005). That *99 percent of the Turkish population are Muslim*, a much uttered 'fact' about Turkey today, is a self-fulfilled prophesy-turned-reality through extensive demographic and social engineering by the state since its inception..

News of converts emerged at a time when the homogenization of the Turkish nation was assumed to have completed. Not surprisingly, this was a problem for Turkish secularism; more specifically the existence of converts within the national body politic was a threat to the purported stability and credibility of fixed identities. As Viswanathan succinctly says, "By undoing the concept of fixed, unalterable identities, conversion unsettles the boundaries by

which selfhood, citizenship, nationhood, and community” are defined (1998, 16). Therefore, conversion in Turkey undoes fixed identities such as Muslim, Armenian, but more importantly it unravels nationalist ideological “fixed pairings” such as Turkish-Muslim and Armenian-Christian. In her analysis of the campaign against Christian missionaries and Turkish Christians in Turkey, Esra Özyürek emphasizes the centrality of these fixed pairings. She asks: “Why is it difficult for Turkish secular nationalists to accept that one can be a Turk and a Christian at the same time?” (2009b, 400).

“Conversions to a mainstream religion are as disruptive to the state as are conversions to alternative or minority religions,” argues Viswanathan (1998, 16). Clearly, the existence of Armenian converts in Turkey blurs fixed pairings; furthermore, it heightens Turkish secularism’s “structures of fear.” as Talal Asad argues, public anxiety centers on those who do not fit into the “publicly recognizable personality of the nation” (2003, 8). The un-marked (hidden) converts who supposedly feign to be part of the Turkish majority are therefore often accused of working against the interests of the Turkish nation.

Returning to the accusation of the pro-Islamic President for being a “Hidden Armenian,” this seems to be a contradiction, or at least two aspects of Turkish nationalism, specifically the secularization project. In the wake of a perceived attack on Turkish secularism by the Islamists and the EU, Aritman expresses fear of converts because they indicate the failure of secular nationalist efforts to eradicate minority differences. Ethnic and religious others, especially Hidden Armenians and Jews<sup>155</sup> as well as Christian missionaries who are implicated in Christianizing Turks (e.g., Özyürek 2009a), are accused of operating in the midst of an assumed homogeneous Turkish nation. In short, religious minorities are not the biggest threat to the

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<sup>155</sup> In fact, when Turks talk of Dönme, they mean Jewish converts not Armenians. Erdogan and his wife are assumed to be hidden Jews (see Baer 2010).

Turkish nation in the nationalist and secular psyche. The biggest imagined threat comes from the non-Muslim who pose as a Muslim and Turk, or a Turk who becomes a non-Muslim, for they are "matter out of place," they do not conform to the fixed pairings. Furthermore, as Mary Douglas argues, this condition makes them dirty and dangerous for the national body, capable of the biggest treacheries (2006, 16). The main issue is not that hidden Armenians are in fact Armenians; rather they are hiding their origins and thus destabilizing the categories fixed by the nation-state. In the next section, I examine cases of unconverted bodies in the press to better understand the suspected connections between Hidden Armenians and the Kurdish movement.

### **Hypocrites (*Münafık*), Converts and the Unconverted Body of the Crypto-Armenian**

Muhyettin Aksak, a pro-Islamic AKP deputy, the former party of the President Abdullah Gül, in reporting the PKK attack that killed two Turkish soldiers, mentioned hidden Armenians and their secretive inclination; perhaps this was the most candid implication of *Ermeni Dönmesi* (Armenian converts):

We won't let them have their victory. We never did. As you all very well know, very recently two hundred PKK members—well, I want to use another word [for them] but today is Eid—were “neutralized.”<sup>156</sup> Well in fact I should have said bumped off. [...] These are all—if you take a [careful] look—either sold brains, or the sons of *Ermeni Dönme* or contemptible people who infiltrate our lands from Syria or Iran.<sup>157</sup>

The hidden Armenians' alleged collaboration with the Kurds has a long history in Turkey. On July 1983, when a bomb exploded in the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul killing three and injuring 21, the headline of a major national newspaper declared, “The Raider of Kapalicarsi is not Armenian,” and posted a headshot of the dead attacker. The article maintained:

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<sup>156</sup> A euphemism for killing in Turkish.

<sup>157</sup> <http://haber.sol.org.tr/devlet-ve-siyaset/akpli-vekil-aksaktan-irkci-ifadeler-haberi-58625>

The terrorist who infiltrated into Turkey from the southern border was captured dead; it was identified that he was circumcised. It was conceived that [the raid] was designed by the leaders of a separatist and destructive (*bolucu ve yikic*) Marxist terror organization outside the country and executed with the help of two neighboring nations. The clothes of the terrorist were made in France (*Tercuman* July 7, 1983)

Once again, the headline implicates Armenians and Christians in the heinous act merely by mentioning them. Furthermore, such subversion destroys the “environment of peace” (*baris ortami*) achieved by the military coup of September 12, 1980.

Defining the threat as “separatist and destructive [*bolucu ve yikici*] Marxist terror organization” is symptomatic of Turkish hegemonic fantasies regarding Armenians. These illusions revolve around the notion that Armenians are the quintessential traitors, accomplices in every attack against Turkey.<sup>158</sup> It is a fact that between 1975 and 1983 the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and Armenian Revolutionary Army (ARA) (formerly Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide) killed Turkish diplomats and terrorized the nation (see Kurz and Merari 1985; Melkonian 2008). While these groups disbanded some time ago, the Turks continue to frame Armenians.

The headline “The Raider of Kapalicarsi is not Armenian” is not only about ethnicity but also religion in the national imaginary. Christian Armenians are hold capable of establishing secret alliances with other minority groups in the country as well as with Western powers to destroy Turkey. That is to say, not only do Armenians have the skills to fight but also are disposed to be treacherous. . In addition, the newspaper’s account indicate that ethnic and religious identities are inscribed on a person’s body regardless of what official documents

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<sup>158</sup> This is also a notable numerical revision: those who are so few in number constitute the biggest threat, see Appadurai 2006.

indicate. Circumcision, the bodily indicator of Islamic faith, becomes the standard for categorizing citizens. The absence of the foreskin around the terrorist's penis proves that he is not Armenian. In other words, the center of the debate is the presence of religiosity and loyalty to Islam. In an informative article on the Dersim massacre,<sup>159</sup> Hans-Lukas Kieser (2011) states that Kurdish males underwent periodical circumcision checks by the military.

Arjun Appadurai argues that the body of the ethnic other can be deceptive. "In a word, real bodies in history betray the cosmologies that they are meant to encode. So the ethnic body, both of the victim and the killer, is itself potentially deceptive" (1998, 232). However, the Turkish case contradicts Appadurai's argument. In Turkey, regardless of all official identity documents, ethnic and religious identities are believed to be inscribed on one's body.

Therefore, Islamic perceptions of hidden Armenians parallel those of the most staunchly secularist. Not surprisingly, religious positions against converts are likewise not recent. Abdurrahman Küçük (1987), in his article published by Ankara School of Theology, *Münafıklık ve Dönmelik Üzerine bir Araştırma* (An Inquiry on Hypocrites and Converts), analyzes the proximity between *dönme* (convert) and *münafık* (hypocrite).<sup>160</sup> Münafık, he argues, are those who have "converted to Islam but do not believe in their heart in Islam," as defined in the Quran. Dönme, for its part, entered the Turkish language with Sabatay Tzevi (sic.) and his followers

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<sup>159</sup> When the Kurds rebelled against the 1934 Resettlement Law, they were massacred by the Turkish military. In 2011, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan apologized for the Dersim operation (see Ayata and Hakyemez 2013).

<sup>160</sup> Küçük, Abdurrahman, "Münafıklık ve Dönmelik Üzerine Bir Araştırma", AÜİFD, Ankara, 1987, V.29, 347-359. The article is in fact from his dissertation "Dönmeler ve Dönmelik" submitted to the Ankara School of Theology. Here we have to note again that the prejudices in the nationalist imaginary against the Jewish Dönme feeds into the discourse about Hidden Armenians, or Dönme Armenians.  
<http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=FatwaId&Id=81269>

who "appear to be converted."<sup>161</sup> Küçük implies that the converted and the *münafik* are very close or even the same thing at times when treacherous acts are involved. Further, he supports his hypothesis with the dictionary definition of *donek* (renegade and unctuous), which is derived from dönme /convert.

Next, Küçük researches Islamic sources. He finds that *münafik münafik* is considered in the *kafir* category, in fact the most dangerous of kafirs. In the Surat Al-Baqarah, the Quran mentions *münafik* thirteen times whereas *kafir* is mentioned only two times, showing that the Holy Book warns the *mümin* (believers) about the treacherous ways of the *münafiks*. In conclusion, Küçük's article reveals dislike and distrust in Turkey (and perhaps in the wider Islamic understanding of the term) towards converts; thus conversion connotes being a *münafik*.

As the *münafik* is defined first and foremost by its deceit, in Küçük 's construction the convert also becomes the symbol of dishonesty.. Thus in the contemporary Turkish imagination, dönme/Jewish converts and hidden Armenians look the same, speak the same language, and live in the same places as Turks, Kurds and/or Alevi. Furthermore, they can only be defined by their ability to *hide and deceive*. By defining Hidden Armenians (Armenian converts) as inherently deceptive, any (Hidden Armenian) who *acts* like a Turk/Kurd/Alevi is proving his deception and

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<sup>161</sup> The root of the Turkish noun *dönme* is the verb *dönmek*, "to turn," it can also mean "to convert." Specifically, the term *dönme* is used to refer to a community in Thessaloniki that converted from Judaism to Islam following the example of Sabbatai Sevi, a messianic rabbi who was forced to renounce Judaism in 1666. The nature of this conversion remains ambivalent to this day, since *dönme* developed a form of religious practice that combined elements derived from both Islam and Judaism. In 1924, after Turkey and Greece agreed to exchange their respective Muslim and Christian populations, *dönme* were considered Muslim and consequently deported from Greece to Turkey. Identifying *dönme* as Muslims remains contested and has unleashed unleashed controversies. For an excellent discussion of the perceptions of dönme in Turkey see Baer 2010. Also see, Konuk 2007.

hence his existence as a *separate* ethnic and religious group. In other words, the deception of Hidden Armenians becomes tautological, self-fulfilling, and impossible to invalidate.

In the Ottoman Empire, however, the status of converts was not as clear cut as Küçük wants us to believe. Türkyılmaz (2009), Baer (2003), Deringil (2012), Krstic (2011), Makdisi (2009) among others convincingly argue that conversion was a common policy and practice among non-Muslim minorities. It was used by the regime as a response to a number of problems, such as taxation and border control. Consequently, Küçük's arguments represent more of a nationalist sentiment than the actual historical experience of conversion.

Evidently, Armenian ethnicity was never marked by racial/bodily characteristics in Ottoman Turkey. Armenians were delineated by their *religion*, or more specifically by being non-Muslim. Still, bodily signs were important when it was necessary to distinguish real Muslims from deceptive impostors. Here, I use Turner's (2002, 2005) terms to show how the uncircumcised Armenian and circumcised Muslim penis become "body maps" which supposedly reveal the truth about ethnicity. The terrorist in the case of the Grand Bazaar is *not* an Armenian because he was circumcised. Individuals may borrow or steal an identity, but religious markers never fail to divulge the truth. Despite all the deceptions of the Armenians, Armenian difference—the truth about their real identity—their uncircumcised penis exposes their reality.

### **Hidden Armenians or Secret Archives?**

As I mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the former head of the Turkish Historical Institution, Yusuf Halaçoğlu, stated: "In the 1920s, the number of Armenians [was around] one hundred thousand. In 1915, there were Armenians who converted to Islam so they

were not deported. The state enumerated these persons home-by-home, I have these lists. If the state allows I will expose them.”<sup>162</sup>



**Figure 1:** Yusuf Halaçoğlu, past president of the Turkish Historical Society and Parliamentarian, speaking to the press (Source: Dinç 2007).

Figure 1 shows Yusuf Halaçoğlu at a press conference, holding up a document. The archival papers are not visual aids strictly speaking; yet we cannot see them because the print is too small to read. We have to rely on Halaçoğlu’s verbal declaration. The documents may not be what Halaçoğlu alleges, but his authoritative position as the head of the leading historical institution in Turkey turns them to proof, archives—at least that is what he believes.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> “1915’te sürülmemek için Müslümanlığa geçen Ermenilerin sayısı 1920’lerde 100 bin kadardı... 1936-37 yıllarında ise devlet bu kişileri ev ev tespit etmişti. Listeler elimde. Devlet isterse açıklarım...”

<sup>163</sup> For a discussion of the secret convert lists and Halaçoğlu’s declaration see Bali (2007).

The case of Armenian genocide and deportations during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire is one of the top contentious issues of the Turkish Republic; consequently, debates over the national archives have been extremely antagonistic as well. Historians from opposing sides compete for “the truth” by referring to different documents in the Ottoman archives. As a result, the archives themselves have become the target of competing claims and accusations (Ahiska 2006).

In her discussion of a similar context, Nadia Abu El-Haj observes that the epistemological power of documents might best be framed as the “demands of the archive” (2012, 191).<sup>164</sup> The archives as repositories of factual evidence stand at the primary site to authenticate the past. Not surprisingly, historians are passionate about documents and archives because these documents are the raw materials, element of their profession. Documents should be collected, classified and stored in official archives to make their search for facts productive. Since the nineteenth century, the establishment of the historical profession has been developing as a scientific project globally (Steedman 2001).

An official Internet site in English, entitled “Access to Documents and Condition of the Turkish Archives,” contains statements such as, “‘Transparency,’ which is the main principle of modern archival studies, is also a basic principle which applies to Turkish archives. In the Turkish archives classified documents are immediately available to researchers without any restrictions.”<sup>165</sup>

In spite of his professionalism, Halaçoğlu exhibited documents which were not for the eyes of anyone. Contrary to the claims of the website quoted above, the archives about the

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<sup>164</sup> For a critical discussion of the debate around the “archives,” see Deringil, 2007.

<sup>165</sup> [www.turkses.com](http://www.turkses.com)

existence of Hidden Armenians are anything but transparent. Given the centralized control of the nation-state over its population, these secret lists are theoretically able to produce the truth of Hidden Armenians in Turkey in a straightforward manner, but are they?

Halaçoğlu's "secret list" understandably generated much discussion. As it is still not clear where he obtained those secret lists, the newspaper *Hurriyet* reported a strange case from the 1980s that reveals the existence of certain records on converts in the state's population records. A columnist wrote on the curious case of an "Armenian Citizen" of Turkey who did not know about his Armenianness (Altan 1989). Thus, a Turkish and Muslim named Niyazi Gosker applied for a position in a local office of the Treasury Ministry. After passing the entrance exams to work as a judiciary clerk, he received a letter informing him that he would not be hired. Attached to the letter by mistake was a document, a photocopy of a letter from the Ministry of Interior Affairs marked as "secret" with a brief note: "The applicant is a converted Muslim Armenian."<sup>166</sup> However, it is not only the historians who are interested in archives. These are strong evidence demonstrating the existence of hidden civil registries in Turkey. Likewise, I heard similar stories during my fieldwork that suggested that there were such secret records on Armenian converts.

Murad, a young man who converted right after finishing his military service, almost ten years prior my interview, told me and a group of people gathered around the breakfast table after the Sunday liturgy (see Chapter 7) about his father's dreams of becoming a police officer. In preparation, his father attended the local training in their town. Before taking the written exam, the candidates were expected to pass a basic physical test—height and a general inspection for

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<sup>166</sup> Customarily the religious minorities in Turkey cannot hold jobs in the state institutions and they are not allowed to become officials in the military (Aktar 2000).

sufficient health to be a police officer. When it was his turn, his father was surprised to learn that his recorded height three centimeters was shorter than he really was. As a result of his “official” new height, he was informed that he is not qualified to take the entrance exams. When the father complained to the official assuming it was mistake, he received a candid response. The officer, who was also from the same village, explained: “You know who you are and also we know it. So you know the reason why you are “officially” shorter than your actual height. As long as the state measures your height, it will always come in shorter than the required height for a police officer. Don’t try to push the matter any further. With your ancestry, there is no way you can be a police officer.”

While transparency is ideal, state power may breach its own principles to support its mandate and ideology. Armenian converts whose ancestry is plainly documented in state archives experience prejudice, bias, surveillance even prosecution. The burden of history is a heavy burden. As Susan Coutin (1995) argues, surveillance and prosecution are powerful ways of knowing and therefore producing authoritative accounts of reality. The myth about hidden Armenians that remained in Anatolia after 1915 was created by the "secrecy" of the official records. Secret lists such as the one Halacagolu claimed to possess are used as a common practice to secure the purity of the Turkish nation and maintain national sovereignty against the destructive acts of the Armenians.

## Outing Hidden Armenians

In 2005, *Aksiyon*,<sup>167</sup> a magazine with explicit Islamic leanings, reported that conversions to Christianity could not be viewed as establishing a threat.<sup>168</sup> After suggesting that the number of the return converts is likely to be in the hundreds, the article concluded on this reassuring note: "In other words, this issue is one of return to roots rather than that of conversion. Namely, it consists of the revelation of real identities."<sup>169</sup> Then quickly the story moved to the prevalence of Armenians among the people returning to their roots. A family of 34 people that converted to Christianity in 1971 was acclaimed as a model to be emulated. The purpose of the *Aksiyon* piece was that all these converts were "known as Armenians in the vicinity." Indeed, Kurds and Alevis were not the targets of missionaries because in the regions where "Kurdish identities are prominent," converts have been in fact Armenians for four generations. A young woman born in 1976, although registered as Muslim and Turkish in the official records, was no exception. Her parents and grandparents were all Muslim except an ancestor called Garabed.<sup>170</sup> This unmistakably male Armenian name was the irrefutable proof for her Armenianness.

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<sup>167</sup> *Aksiyon* is a magazine published by the Islamist Fethullah Gülen Movement. For more information on the Gülen Movement, see Gözaydın 2009. <http://www.aksiyon.com.tr/aksiyon/haber-14393-34-asil-dinlerine-donuyorlar.html>. For the perceived threat about conversion to Christianity in Turkey see, Ozyurek (2009a; 2009b).

<sup>168</sup> 1916 yılından bu yana tutulan nüfus kayıtlarına göre İslamiyet'ten Hıristiyanlığa geçen vatandaşlarımızın toplam sayısı 2 bin civarında. Fakat, bu rakamların en ilginç noktalarından biri şu: Söz konusu rakamın yüzde 80'inden fazlasını köken itibarıyla Ermeni, Süryani ve Rum kökenli vatandaşlarımız oluşturuyor. Eş durumundan din değiştirenler 100 civarında... "Diğer sebepler" olarak adlandırılan nedenlerle din değiştiren Türkiye Cumhuriyeti vatandaşlarının

<sup>169</sup> "Bir başka ifadeyle hadise din değiştirmeden ziyade "aslına dönüş". Yani, bir tür aslı kimliğini açığa vurma ve ortaya çıkarma ..."

<sup>170</sup> Garabed is the Western Armenian spelling and Karabet the Eastern.

The main focus of the article was the conversions of families. Other examples included a family of fifteen and another of nine, once again with detailed information regarding their full first and last names, where they were born, the city or village they were currently living in, and most interestingly, providing the entire civil registry records of the family going back to their very "origins," namely their ancestors with Armenian names and Christian ID cards. Other details of the account had to do with which courts they had applied to change the records, and which church -whether the Patriarchate or a local branch- had provided them the baptism certificate.

One obvious question about this magazine article concerns the source of its extremely detailed, revealing information and the channels through which the magazine reached these sources. Crucial as it is, I leave aside this question for now, as well as the anxiety it created among the converts, only to revisit it and pick it up in Chapter 7.<sup>171</sup> But the outing of entire families is an ethical issue that I turn to next.

No doubt, the underlying logic of the disclosures is to effectively perpetuate the stigma attached to Armenian converts and their presumed hidden existence (see Bunzl 1997). In perhaps the most influential anthropological contemplation on the idea of secret, Michael Taussig defines public secrecy as a shared repression of information that "is generally known, but cannot be articulated" (1999, 5). In the prologue to his book *Defacement*, Taussig revises Elias Canetti's (1984) observation that secrecy resides at the core of power. Taussig suggests instead that "there is no such thing as a secret. It is an invention that comes out of the public secret" (p. 7). Taussig focuses on the processes of unmasking within the contexts of public secrecy, expanding on

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<sup>171</sup> See my conversation with Yakup in the Topkapi church. He and his wife were mentioned in Chapter 7 in the above quoted article,

Simmel's (1906) opinion that secrecy magnifies reality and separates the visible, the metaphoric exterior, from the reality of the interior.

Thus, according to Taussig, behind the public secret is in fact a truth waiting to be uncovered. Reality is revealed through defacing and unmasking. Adversarial attempts to destroy by exposure or disclosure more often result in reinforcement, as Taussig discovered in the case of the Mexican government's attempt to expose Subcomandante Marcos in the media (p. 260). Defacement and unmasking do not lead to the truth; in the contrary they produce new faces and masks. The next chapter I pursue the faces and masks that were produced by nationalist fears and the outings that were exemplified in this chapter. I concentrate on the act of conversion as a self-outing mechanism; however, as a process it brings its own fears and forms of discrimination, loneliness and hidden lives.

## Chapter 7

### A Place for Converts

#### In their *Mekan*: A Small Church in Istanbul

*We have our place (mekan)*<sup>172</sup> *many thanks [to God]. Faith is in the person.*  
[Mekanimiz var çok şukur, iman insanın icinde.]  
*Ilyas Bey* (FW-NotebookII p.62)

For nine months (September 2009-May 2010) during my fieldwork, I attended Sunday services in a little-known Armenian Church in the Topkapi quarter, Istanbul. Although Islamized Armenians and the traditional Armenian community did not live in this neighborhood, about fifty return converts frequented this church after their baptism. In this chapter I explore how the lives of these Christian Armenians endure after their conversion. I focus on their participation in this church and their activities in an association founded by a return convert.

I learned about the church from Halil early in the course of my fieldwork. He referred me to his cousin Serdar who was on the board of the Topkapi church. Initially I found it strange that other converts and members of the mainstream Armenian community of Istanbul were not aware of this church. Later I learned that these converts did not want to socialize with the

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<sup>172</sup> Here I use *mekan* or place instead of the generic space to emphasize the sense of affiliation and belonging that the converts endeavor to have with a particular space. In the epilogue, I elaborate how this goal is fraught with tensions and disappointment, thus the Turkish word *mekan* expresses more vividly their experience.

established Armenian community undoubtedly because these “proper Armenians” were oblivious of the converts’ existence.

Halil’s cousin, Serdar, was a young man, meek, polite, and helpful. He had a small store in another part of the city where he sold construction materials. He drove a mini van that seemed he used mainly for his job. Yet the van had enough room for his large family—father, mother, siblings, and cousins—to whom Serdar gave a lift every Sunday to the church. The church was at least a 30 minutes drive from where they lived. Actually, none of the members of the congregation lived nearby. The neighborhood where the church was located was poor yet central accessibly by public transportation. Many took the *banlieue* train or the bus to reach the church. I took the “Kurtuluş-Topkapi” bus every Sunday at 10 am.

Serdar usually came a few hours earlier before the liturgy. As a board member, he took his own responsibility seriously; he wanted to greet the priest and check that everything was in order. One Sunday, we were sitting alone in the small Board Room waiting for *Badarak*, I asked him about the history of the church. “I have no idea,” he replied. Surprised, I pointed to the *berat*<sup>173</sup> on the wall and asked, “Isn’t this document helpful?” He smiled, “Ceren Hanim,<sup>174</sup> you know Armenian, maybe you can read it for us? I did not have the slightest idea that this was the official foundational document of this church. I don’t know a word of Armenian.”

Is an Armenian who doesn’t know the Armenian language, and who has no contact with the rest of the Armenian community other than the small congregation of this church and his immediate family, really an Armenian, I asked myself.

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<sup>173</sup> *Berat* (Armenian) is an official decree necessary to construct a mosque or church in the Ottoman Empire. It is important to note that Turkish Republic does not allow the construction of new churches or synagogues on its territory.

<sup>174</sup> *Hanim* is lady or Miss in Turkish, an indication of respect.

I have attended to several definitions of conversion in Turkey in the previous chapters: legal-bureaucratic (Chapter 3), secular, religious and political (Chapter 5). Here, I want to pose yet another question about conversion in the Turkish and Armenian context: *What happens after conversion?*

I have already argued that the production of secular, religious and legal truths about conversion in Turkey also authorizes 'autonomous' secular subjectivities. (see Chapter 5) Yet, I also argue that paying attention to the formations of the secular and religious is not enough to attend to other aspects of the subjectivities produced in the process of Armenian return conversions. In this last concluding chapter, I focus on the narratives of the converts themselves to flesh out their predicaments of belonging after they gain (at least nominal) recognition from the state.

Much social scientific research on minorities in Turkey operates on the basis of a categorical separation of the majority from the minority population such as Turk versus Armenian. However, this separation proves highly problematic with regard to the return converts' place in the political and cultural registers of everyday life in Istanbul today. Accepting their new condition as joining the ranks of the Armenian minority, and leaving their own recent histories at the moment of conversion, and only served to re-essentialize Armenian and Turkish as exclusive categories of belonging.

Chatterjee (2004) argues that at the heart of modern politics lies a conflict between universalist conceptions of national citizenship and the particularist demands of communal populations. So after her baptism, to which community does a return convert belongs to? If, with their conversion they broke away from belonging to the Turkish Muslim majority, the question now we have is do they find a new home in the Armenian community? What are the religious

and mundane struggles of a “Christian Armenian,” as Serdar and members in his congregation call themselves?

### **A Sunday in the Topkapi Church**

According to the Armenian Apostolic Church,

The principal liturgical service of the Armenian Church is, as its name implies, the Divine Liturgy (in Armenian, Badarak). The Badarak is not merely one of the things the Church does. It is the most important expression of the Church’s faith and identity (Findikyan).

The first couple of times I attended Badarak at the church in Topkapi, I sat on the last row and took notes surreptitiously. I counted the number of benches (there were 15 rows), the number of people attending every week, I paid attention to their attire, when they arrived and with whom they talked.

That service begins with a procession into the Church to the altar, a procession with the gospel book around the altar while singing “Holy God...” [*Sourp Asdvadz*], a litany, scripture readings, alleluia, the gospel reading, recitation of the Creed, and a closing litany and prayer... (Findikyan).

Badarag started at 11am every Sunday, as it is customary in the Armenian Church in Istanbul. An elderly priest conducted the ceremony. As soon as the ceremony completed, he disappeared. Interestingly, I did not hear him give a sermon during my fieldwork. However, he corrected people on how to pray or behave, evidently because the congregation was assumed ignorant of the rules. Between prayers and hymns, the priest instructed the assembly in Turkish; for example, he would say, "Now stand up," or “Kneel,” or directed them to approach to the alter for communion. He also crossed himself every time the word *Sourp Asdvadz* (Holy God) was mentioned and gestured to the congregation to do the same. Accordingly, the priest was following the centuries’ old ritual:

Imprint yourself with the sign of the cross every time the Lord's name is mentioned, at the beginning and end of prayers, and at any other time that you wish, as a sign of faith. Bow down to the Lord when invited by the deacon ["Let us bow down to God" *Asdoodzo yergurbakestsook*] (Findikyan).

The congregation paid reverential attention to the instructions of the elderly priest, but he was there –almost in a solely instrumental way- for the purposes of the religious ritual, nothing more. In contrast to the priest's reserve, the assembly was kind, warm and friendly. They smiled at everyone who entered the church, inquired about the person's health and his family in whispers.

During the hymn "Der Voghormya [Lord of mercy]," pray for every person in the Church, by name if you can. Personalize the deacon's prayer petitions by silently adding the particular people and causes for which you would like to pray. Greet the person next to you lovingly with the Kiss of Peace, the sign of our unity as children of God"(Findikyan).

Accepting the essence of the Apostolic Church, the converts welcomed me affectionately; when I arrived they greeted with, "How are you?" "Good to see you again, it has been a while." During the Kiss of Peace, the women sitting next to me kissed me twice on the cheeks.

After the Surp Badarak, we proceeded to the room next to the main church that was utilized for receptions after baptisms, marriages and funerals. Such spacious rooms, usually adjacent to the church, were already familiar to me since they were the central place of a few funeral receptions I attended during my fieldwork. Although the church was the center of the religious ceremony in funerals, where women were a predominant presence in the receptions that followed. After the religious ceremony in the church, men took the casket to the cemetery for burial. Women stayed and proceeded to the spacious room, sat at the tables that were organized in a U-shape, the closest women relatives of the deceased (wife, mother, daughter, sister) sitting

at the bottom of the U, emphasizing their centrality to the mourning. They were the first ones to enter the room and sit; other women followed them, and started to give their condolences, forming a long line. Afterwards, the crowd also proceeded to the tables. In the meantime, young girls in the community -close relatives, family friends and neighbors of the deceased- serve *helva*<sup>175</sup> with Turkish tea.

The color of mourning is black in the Armenian community in Turkey. When a death occurs in the family, the female relatives of the deceased wear black for forty days after the funeral. Traditionally the widow of the deceased never took the black off until her own death. Older women are visible in black in Istanbul's Armenian neighborhoods.

I am describing the main purpose (funeral reception) of the room in detail for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I want to set the scene for one of the very central places of my fieldwork.<sup>176</sup> I also want to point out the great contrast it establishes to the atmosphere of the breakfasts that I attended in the same room after Surp Badarag. The latter had a joyous atmosphere; the room was rectangle in shape and sunny. At least this is how I remember it now, although I cannot recall any windows. Maybe it was because of the atmosphere of those breakfasts I attended. Women's presence was central again, yet this time they brought warmth. Every week, a couple of designated women prepared breakfast for the rest of the congregation. They were also the ones who collected money for the expenses of these meetings: food, cleaning supplies etc. This time however, the deacon was sitting at the bottom of the U with his wife and the *tagagan* (lay board members of the church). The women were sitting closer to the kitchen. I tried to sit with different

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<sup>175</sup> *Helva* is a sweet meal made of semulina, milk, butter and pine nuts and cinnamon is sprinkled on top.

<sup>176</sup> The others were the courthouses and several offices there, including the small cayhane (teahouse) at the ground floor of the main *Adliye* I frequented.

people every time, and to ask them questions. Yet, usually I spent my time answering their questions. What are you doing here? (Research) What is your research about? (courts, conversion, Patriarchate, you...) Where do you live? (New York) But, where in *Istanbul*? (Kurtuluş). Murad, a young convert, was quick to comment: “See, my dear friends! There is no justice, even here [in the home of God].” (Laughter).

Kurtuluş, the middle and lower middle class neighborhood of my research, was, as Murad later put it, beyond their reach. Almost no one in the congregation could afford to live there. They mainly lived in the poor and crowded neighborhoods alongside the Marmara Sea, far away from the city center.

### **Deacon Kenan**

I described Armenian funeral customs in detail because it allows me to introduce Kenan Bey,<sup>177</sup> a central figure in the Topkapi Church. He was friendly and referred to the congregation as "we" when delivering his homily. Deacon Kenan's first sermon that I heard was at the funeral of a young parishioner who had died exactly forty days earlier due to an illness. Kenan was giving sermons after every *badarag*. During these sermons, he was friendly, and referred to the congregation as "we". This first sermon was about their deceased friend; “how it was like yesterday that they were in the room next door after his funeral. Yet a month passed. Life passes very quickly.” I remembered hearing stories of how Islamized Armenians, after converting back, still use *Diyanet's*<sup>178</sup> funeral cars to take the body of the deceased from home, only to take it to an Armenian cemetery to bury. They did not want their neighbors to know, so they usually skipped the church part too. I remember thinking "it should be a relief for the family to be able to

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<sup>177</sup> Bey is a honorific title that means mister or lord. Male counterpart of the title *Hanım*.

<sup>178</sup> *Diyanet* is short for *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, the Administration of Religious Affairs.

conduct the ceremony in an Armenian church." Yet, I was thinking of my gravely ill uncle who was in the hospital –he died a couple of months later. The emphasis on the inevitability of death in the deacon's sermon sounded to my suffering secular ears like a cheap trick to attract the congregation's attention. I -unconsciously- refused to build a stronger relationship with him for a long time, though he was so central for my research.

Deacon Kenan was born in a small coastal town in northern Turkey to a very poor Armenian family. Like all other Armenians from Anatolia, he has a Turkish sounding first and last name betrays his rural origins, thus it was impossible for anyone to guess his Armenian roots. He did not learn Armenian when he was a child because his family did not know the language and there were no Armenian schools near close to his home. He went to a Turkish public school with all the other children in his neighborhood. While in elementary school, he climbed a tree; his teacher scolded him saying, "I am telling you dirty Armenian, if this happens again..." He was not forthcoming in talking about himself or about anyone else in Topkapi church. We eventually became friends, but this would come later.

The Armenian clergy are the ones least vocal about political issues in Turkey today. One priest explained their predicament as follows: "These issues [Islamized Armenians] are political issues. We don't like to talk about them." Deacon Kenan, too, didn't want to talk about "these issues". I asked him about the converts in the congregation. He refused to engage with my questions at first. Yet, he allowed me to be part of the congregation "as long as it won't bring any harm to our mission –what we are doing- here." He always found a way to divert my questions into other issues. This continued until the very end of my fieldwork.

Upon my return to New York after the completion of my fieldwork, however, I was to find in my department mailbox a three- page letter,- typed, single spaced, with no greeting line.

The letter contained almost all the answers I was seeking from him during my field research. It also provided an unusual glimpse into the self-conceptions of a deacon. The letter was Kenan's explanation of Armenian return conversions and his challenges with the Patriarchate:

It was fall of nineteen ninety-four. We were in the church to prepare dinner for the destitute. When Halil appeared at our doorstep with four boys and a girl, it was already after dusk. Our visitors were siblings. I hadn't met any of them before. Neither did I know Halil. He introduced himself and the ones with him. The kids were recent migrants from *Adiyaman*. I had no idea who recommended us to him; however they expressed their wish to enter the Armenian community and get baptized. Halil asked if I could take care of them.<sup>179</sup> I said yes without even thinking about it. First I met them one by one. I wanted to understand their state of mind [*ruh hali*] their conditions, what I could do for them. They were shy [*urkek*]. They had a [*tepkisel*] reactionary anger in the way they talked. It was clear that their previous experiences with the church and the [Armenian] community weren't pleasant. ... We accepted them into our group with vigor and love.

The above quoted letter of Deacon Kenan was symptomatic of many problems converted Armenians face in Turkey today, as well as the mixed feelings regarding the Armenian community and the Church.

### **Thinking about Religious Conversion in Turkey**

Anthropologists have envisioned conversion as a "colonization of consciousness" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997). It is argued to be a type of conquest in the conversion of the non-Westerners to Christianity, as the categories through which the non-Western mind thinks

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<sup>179</sup> Here Kenan Bey intends a double meaning of the term "to take care of." He uses it both in its common meaning, i.e. to oversee and protect someone, and taking care of their baptism, i.e. baptizing them.

and argues irreversibly transformed.<sup>180</sup> In her groundbreaking study *Outside the Fold*, Gauri Viswanathan (2001) provides us with a different perspective on religious conversion. She explores the ways conversion has been embraced as a mode of political action – without ever becoming any less genuinely ‘religious’ – in particular by women, dominated subpopulations, and others within and against the modern nation-state. She insists that to "see conversion less as an end point than a starting point, a method of knowledge and communication, is the challenge of the moment" (Viswanathan 2001, xix).<sup>181</sup>

I concur with Viswanathan’s call to understand conversion as a beginning that marks the formation of new subjectivities. I ask: What sort of a beginning is conversion in Turkey with its specific context of religious, communal and national? In that spirit Anidjar asks, “How can we translate conversion” (2009, 15)? I want to adopt his question here: What does conversion mean in the Turkish context? How can we translate the shy anger of the siblings in Deacon Kenan’s letter? How can we account for their experiences of exclusion from both the Turkish majority and Armenian minority?

The rejection of an old identity and the adaptation of a new one by way of conversion implies a critique or an interrogation of both. What is less acknowledged is that at times the convert selects a third entirely different identity, as in the case of the Jewish-Muslim *Dönme* in the late Ottoman Empire (Baer 2009). Sometimes the convert’s new identity is co-opted by a

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<sup>180</sup> I concur with Roberts’s (2012) critique of the colonization of consciousness argument as being rooted in a secular liberal model of the self and of religion. He writes, “The appeal of the conversion-as-conquest trope lies in its focus on power, but by building secular liberal assumptions into its theoretical optic it remains ironically blind to some of the most pervasive ways power operates today –namely, through the production of secular truths about religion, and by authorizing ‘autonomous’ secular subjectivities as normative” (2012, 273).

<sup>181</sup> For a critique of Viswanathan’s assumption of European conceptualizations of conversion categorized by the quality of "rupture," see Dube and Dube (2003).

local form of religion different from both the original and the newly adopted one (Dube and Dube 2003). The case of Armenian return converts is neither a syncretistic religion (Baer 2009) nor a local faith (Dube and Dube 2003). It is critical of both national and communal identities, at the same time the converts yearn to belong to one or both of them at the same time. The stories I heard at the Topkapi church indicates that conversion is characterized by a mixture of shame, anger and loss.

Gil Anidjar is correct in arguing that conversion is ultimately a process, a rite of passage:

Conversion, in other words, requires that we consider not only the limits of the community, its internal and external dynamics, its cohesion and beliefs, indeed, its political nature and its life; *it requires as well that we follow the event of conversion and its subject* (who appears provisionally here as individual or community in their fragile identity). For one conversion alone, the parting of one individual might be sufficient to qualify as “one of the most unsettling political events” a subject is said to undergo. But what precisely is this event, and how are we to think it? (2009, 1, emphasis are mine).

The event of conversion, beyond being an unsettling political event (see Viswanathan 1998), refers to different individual emotional states. Sarkis Bey's decision to convert (see Chapter 1) has been affected by and resulted in all the following at once: shame, insult, a sense of helplessness, the loss of dignity (*namus*) and honor (*onur*). The siblings who visited Deacon Kenan at the Topkapi church were angry at the Armenian community they met after their conversion. These feelings and sentiments, which can lead to the decision to convert, or serve to justify their decision, haunted converts' stories not only what they told but also what they refused to tell.

For many return converts, conversion signified more than only a revelation of an Armenian essence. A return convert told his story to the newspaper *Radikal* as follows:

We were known as Muslim Kurds. Both my parents were pious Muslims. One summer when we were visiting our relatives in Adiyaman, the kids called me an Armenian *gavur* (infidel) in a dispute over street soccer, but I still didn't know what it meant. One day, when I was twelve, I asked my mom and she told me that we used to be Christians but converted to Islam. When she told me that we are of Armenian origin, I cried my eyes out. They taught us at school that Armenians laid [our country] to waste and were traitors. I remember thinking, "How could I be an Armenian?" I was living a pious Islamic life to its fullest extent (İslamiyeti dolu dolu yaşıyan biriydim). I was in shock. I was caught in the middle. I fluctuated between my two identities. I moved to Istanbul. I studied the Bible (İncil'i anlamaya çalıştım). I joined the congregation of [a local] Armenian Church. When I was 19, I decided to get baptized. After my baptism, my father and my uncles [on my mother's side] stopped talking to me for a while. I have been living as a Christian for the last 17 years (Tuduk and Işık 2010).

One of my informants, Yakup also told me a similar story. His story of conversion was both about belief and a return to roots. He was born in Adiyaman, but later moved to Gaziantep. Both are cities in Southeastern Turkey, but the former is in the Kurdish-populated regions and is home to other Muslim Armenians, whereas the latter, near the Syrian border, is mainly populated by Sunni-Muslim Turks and a significant Arab(ic speaking) population as it borders to Syria. This move isolated him during his childhood from other Muslim Armenians and delayed his learning about his Armenian roots.

I met Yakup in the Topkapi Church during the Sunday communal breakfast. Once, towards the end of the breakfast, our conversation led to the issue of instances of outing by the newspapers (see Chapter 6). Yakup told me that his name, and that of his wife, had appeared in one of them, together with all their relatives. Converted and unconverted.

Yakup was confused about what to make of his and his family's sudden exposure as converts in the newspapers. On the one hand, he did not want to sound like he was denying their

“origins.”<sup>182</sup> He said, “At the end, the newspaper only said that we are retuning to our origins. It didn’t lie. It didn’t write anything bad about us.”

Yet, he was annoyed with the article but couldn’t put his finger on why. In a confused tone, he said, “But the interesting fact is how did they get so much information about us? (and here I heard despair in his voice) Isn’t it a little bit my privacy in fact?”<sup>183</sup> *At least they could have used only my initials, not the whole name.*” Perhaps it was also not being able evince a strong affirmation of embracing his roots that made him feel despair.

“What did your wife think about it when she first saw her name in the newspaper?”, I asked, hoping to learn about her perspective. Yakup went to his initial self-assurance: “Well we never hid it or something; it didn’t come as unnatural to us.”

His switching from singular to plural was to me a remarkable twist in his answer. I had asked about his wife, yet he answered by referring to both of them. Was it a way to assure himself that he had a “we” to turn to, his family, in the face of adversaries before and after his conversion?

A couple of weeks later, I visited Yakup at the small jewelry store where he worked as one of two sales people. During our conversations he mentioned several times his previous life as a devout Muslim. Before learning about his family’s Armenian roots, he had been the disciple of a sheikh. He was attending the sheik's lectures as part of his group of students. Yakup never skipped one rak’ah (prescribed prayer movements) of his namaz, he told me, as he clarified what his pious observance of Muslim ritual consisted of. After his mother expounded the family’s Armenian roots he had to end his Islamic studies. It wasn’t his choice; he wanted to continue;

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<sup>182</sup> See Yakup’s comments on bastards, in Chapter 6.

<sup>183</sup> “Aslında benim özelime girmiyor mu o biraz?”

however, his sheikh refused him as a disciple by saying “people won’t leave you alone, you cannot live as a pious Muslim with your Armenianness known. You have to leave our order.” In this more detailed explication of his fluctuating between two identities, it becomes clear that he wanted to continue living as (a practicing) Muslim, but was unable to do so because of the revelation of his ethnicity to his sheikh. For Yakup, conversion to Armenian-ness meant first and foremost conversion to Christianity. His knowledge about his roots caused a rupture in terms of ethnic (national) belonging as made clear by his comments about the incriminating things he learned about Armenians at school. His conversion aimed to reconcile his piety with his new (Armenian/old/original) ethnicity. Today, Yakup is still a pious person. He goes to church every Sunday and on important days of the church calendar as well as for festivities like baptisms. His narrative shows the difference between piousness and religious affiliation; it also shows how conversion might embody both a claim to return to origins and a commitment to piety.

For Yakup the process of conversion represents a search for a new home for his piety- as marked by his studying the Bible before his conversion and by the minimal emphasis he puts on his Armenian roots as driving his conversion. His roots caused what was for him a devastating exclusion from the Turkish-Muslim majority community. Thus, if Yakup’s story is one of rejoining ranks of the Armenians in the first instance, at the same time, it is a story of Armenian roots as abjection the reason for his exclusion from the Turkish majority and Muslim faith. Tellingly, Yakup was alone when I met him.

## The “Secular” Space: Association of the Armenians of Dersim (*Dersimli Ermeniler Yardımlaşma Derneği*)

If Yakup’s story is a search for an apt space for his piety, the next story, Miran Pırığıç’s story is a secular, yet similar search, for belonging. The Faith and Social Solidarity Association of the Armenians of Dersim, (hereafter the Dersim Association) was founded in October 2010 by Miran Pırığıç Gültekin (formerly Selahattin Gültekin), a return convert from Dersim. Dersim is the Kurdish name for Tunceli, a city in southeastern Turkey, where many return converts are from.<sup>184</sup>

Miran Pırığıç’s purpose in establishing the association was to bring together Islamized Armenians.<sup>185</sup> The association organizes panels on a variety of topics of interest to the members.<sup>186</sup> Nevertheless, he pointed out that there were also those who did not want to recognize them in the Armenian community, not to mention those who discriminated against them by questioning their Christianity.<sup>187</sup>

Miran Pırığıç is also active in posting messages on the Dersim Association’s Facebook page. An announcement for an upcoming event attracted my attention about Muslim Armenians as the other.<sup>188</sup> Here, I quote his posts as well as the exchanges they generated.

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<sup>184</sup> “Les Arméniens de Tunceli (Dersim) qui faisaient partie de cette population oubliée ont connu le destin des Kurdes en 1936. Privés des institutions sociales et religieuses qui auraient permis le maintien de la langue et de la religion arméniennes, ils se voient assignés une identité musulmane et se fondent dans la population de la région majoritairement kurde musulmane.” Akkus (2009, abstract).

<sup>185</sup> <http://dersimermenileri.blogspot.com/2010/11/neden.html>

<sup>186</sup> <http://dersimermenileri.blogspot.com/2010/11/neden.html>

<sup>187</sup> Personal communication. Also see his interviews, especially in Özdoğan and Kılıçdağı 2012.

**Miran Pırığıç:** Program of Activities: The Organization of Armenians of Dersim. On March 23, Saturday we will have a meeting in our organization: “Are the Muslim Armenians the ‘Other’ of the Christian Armenians?” We have invited our Christian Armenian friends to discuss the topic collectively before the panel.

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On March 30, Saturday, we will have a panel on, “Return to Origins. [ÖZE DÖNÜŞ]” We expect a large crowd. Panelists will include (...).

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On April 24, we will be in Dersim to commemorate the Armenian genocide.

In the “Comments” section, Diran Lokmagözyan, a Christian Armenian, responded to Miran Pırığıç’s announcement in anger. Here I quote their exchange in full:

**Diran Lokmagözyan:** “Are the Muslim Armenians the ‘Others’ of the Christian Armenians?” This question smells like a virus [sic.] that has been around a lot lately. And it is a pity that you are also on its trail. (...) The most inconsistent part of [your argument] is the fake distinction between Istanbul Armenians and provincial Armenians. I am willing to give you an award for every Istanbul Armenian you can find.

**Miran Pırığıç** responded to this outburst in the following manner:

Parev<sup>189</sup> Diran Lokmagözyan. Here is the reason behind my use of “othering” (...) A mother from Dersim is currently struggling to register her children in an Armenian school. She is yet to find a way. This mother from Dersim cannot prove her Armenianness in the population records of the state. We all know why. They were erased. I met the Honorable Deputy Patriarch Atesyan two days ago. He also stipulates that she and her kids should provide proof [of their Armenian origins] for baptism. ... What are the contributions of the

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<sup>188</sup> “The other” and “othering” are concepts widely used in Turkish public space.

<sup>189</sup> Greeting in Armenian. The rest of the conversation was in Turkish and I translated it to English.

Christian Armenians to the crypto-Armenians of Dersim in their struggle to gain their educational, linguistic rights, right to belief, or right to [participation in the administration of the community's institutions]? Armenians of Dersim were “the other” [when they were living] among the Alevi and they didn't have the [same] rights as [minorities]. Now what is the difference between our former condition and our current relations with our institutions? We still don't have a proper space for our association. I want an honest answer; don't they accept my Armenianness as the head [of the association]? In short, when will we be just like you and be able to enter these institutions freely?

**Diran Lokmagözyan** continued the Facebook correspondence:

I agree with you in practice; however, the reason for this problem is not because Christian Armenians are against Muslim Armenians.... The laws of the Turkish Republic are the main reason. It is not the Armenians who decide who has a right to attend an Armenian school. Neither the board of the school, nor the Patriarchate have a say on the issue. The thing has been happening to Armenians from Anatolia for many years ... before the digitalization of the population records. All the old records were in the old script [Ottoman Turkish, Arabic alphabet]. They had to go to Turkish schools because of this. What is more, [unlike your example] the ID cards of the parents and the children showed that they were Armenian Christians. THE LAW BANS IT. THE LAW. Since it says Christian on your ID card now, when you die, may Allah give you a long life,<sup>190</sup> you have the PERMISSION to be buried in the Armenian cemetery. However, if your mother, father, siblings are not registered as [Christians], you cannot bury them in the Armenian cemetery, no matter how much you or the whole Armenian community complains about it. It won't happen. THE LAW BANS IT (caps in the original).

What is at stake in this angry exchange between Miran Pırğıç and Diran Lokmagözyan? Evidenced Lokmagözyan's capitalized words, he argues that there was a miscommunication between Christian and Muslim Armenians. He wanted his message to be heard, loud and clear: IT IS THE LAW, NOT the Armenian community that is responsible for the hardships Muslim Armenians are experiencing after their conversion. The Armenian community, like the converts, is a victim of the same discriminatory policies of the Turkish state.

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<sup>190</sup> On the topic, see Sözbilir (2009).

On the other hand, Miran Pırğıç insisted on confronting the problem that exists between these two communities today: recently converted Christians and the existing Armenian community that gets referred to as Armenians proper. He took it as an issue of class and urban identities. Indeed, Lokmagözyan's comments about Istanbul Armenians insinuate as if being Christian and *Istanbullu* (Istanbul native) are interchangeable categories. For Miran Pırğıç, conversion defines his Armenian identity mainly through Christian faith. Actually, he decided to convert because he considered himself Armenian, later he accepted the Christian faith as a natural extension of Armenianness, though he does not necessarily consider himself Christian.

## **Epioque**

### **A Murder in Istanbul**

#### **Gender and Conversion**

What is the position of women regarding conversion? What are their stories? During my fieldwork, one statement I heard repeatedly was, "We were able to protect our Armenian-ness because we intermarried in our community. We never let our daughters' or sisters' hand to a Muslim." This was how male descendents of the forcibly Islamized Armenians argued for the continuity of the Armenianness for the communities living as Muslim. In these narratives of the male return converts, women were important for the maintenance of Armenian values within families in their biological capacity as child-bearers and in their social role as mothers (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Connolly 2009; McClintock 1997; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). They are the carriers of the community's values to the next generation.

Young or old, men in the family are the decision makers; they decide if a family should convert. They also decide for themselves; for this reason individual return converts are almost only men. After their conversion, they are also the ones who speak out about their decision to convert in the national media. They establish foundations, interact with the patriarchate, the courts, and the registrars' office. Women remain silent. Their presence was instrumental for the community, as it was made clear by the above stated quote.

I made several interviews with young women who converted together with their families after their father decided to convert. In other –rare- instances a woman converted individually to marry a Christian Armenian. In those instances the family turned against her and their ties

severed at least for a couple of years, if not for their entire lives. In this sense, women are not allowed to have decision-making power in their families. If their father or older brother decided to convert back, they had to follow. If they decided to remain Muslim, the women complied with their father's or brother's decision. Some revolted and expressed their wish to remain Muslim, "the way I was living my life" as one young female informant told me. Some, on the other hand, wanted to convert by themselves in the absence of their family's willingness to claim Armenianness.

The intermarriage of Armenian women with Muslim men is a source for concern for the return converts as it is for the Armenian community. Intermarriage is not only problematic because it might work as a gateway through which foreign men trespass a community's strictly defended boundaries (Connolly 2009). In the case of return converts, women also embody the community's claims to Armenianness. They are the proof of the uncontaminated Armenian origins of the group.

Originally, I planned to write a separate chapter on women's perspectives and included their stories in several chapters as a counterpoint to the dominant male perspective of Armenian return conversions in the Turkish press. My main aim was to show the ways women struggled and coped with the male dominant forms of religious and ethnic belonging and challenged male dominance with unique ways to make their voices heard. Yet, none of the interviews I conducted with women entered this dissertation. In its current state, the dissertation is plagued by the absence of women's voices and lacks a main element towards being completely finished. This absence has one main reason; a tragic event changed the terms of debate on the descendants of the forcibly Islamized Armenians.

A young woman, S. (who wasn't one of my informants but was related to some people I spoke during the course of my research) was living as a Christian Armenian. If she belonged to a family that converted recently back to Armenianness was unclear. She was working in a local store; where she met a young man, Z., who had Armenian roots but hadn't returned to Armenianness. They started to date and after some time decided to get married. The young woman's family was against this union since Z. did not want to convert back. The couple eloped. Couple of days after the couple got married, S's elder brother wanted to meet to set things right and make peace. They met in one of the middle class restaurants close to where Armenians and as well as recent return converts live in Istanbul. According to the eyewitness accounts, after dining together, they stepped out of the restaurant and got into the brother's car. There, he shot them both, first Z. than his sister S. on the head. They both died on the scene.

Markar Eseyan, an Armenian columnist in one of the popular dailies, wrote after the tragic event:

Will you look at this tragedy? The children of two families, one left by the genocide of 1915 as Armenians, the other transformed [by the same event] into Muslim-Kurds were killed because of their race and religion. There is no end to the after shocks of an event we that we did not yet confront (Esayan 2010).<sup>191</sup>

Another journalist condemned the murder in the following terms: "Can't help but curse a mentality that cannot tolerate differences..." (Can 2010)<sup>192</sup> Can's reference to (in)tolerance is significant. In his writing tolerance as was posed as a moral ground to hold to on to against this purported honor killing. This murder, according to the author happened because of intolerance to ethnic and religious differences.

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<sup>191</sup> "Trajediye bakar mısınız? 1915 soykırımın birini Ermeni bıraktığı, diğerini de Müslüman-Kürt'e dönüştürdüğü iki Ermeni ailenin evlatları, din ve ırk farkı yüzünden öldürülüyor."

<sup>192</sup> "Gel de farklılıklara tahammül edemeyen bu zihniyete lanet olsun deme..."

In Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation, I explored the historical roots and the contemporary rise of the tolerance discourse in Turkey. The way S. and Z.'s murder was discussed in the national media introduced new terms to the debate on tolerance. The dominant literature on tolerance in Turkey equated the term with religious freedom, a tradition survived from the Ottoman Empire. After the murder, as Can (2010) used the term, tolerance was marked by its absence in some minority communities. As Brown (2006) argued, tolerance, in the context of the killing of S. and Z., established by the Turkish newspapers as a trope that minorities *lack* and the state *possess*. Tolerance marked the essential disparity between the attitudes of the state and the minorities towards (religious and ethnic) difference.

Although the question of honor killings is not new in Turkey (Kogacioglu 2004), this particular case made the headlines as a special one. This time, the argument went, an honor killing happened in a Christian community. Journalists declared that traditional practices of the populations living in the Eastern Turkey –where S. and her family was originally from- were the main reasons for these killings.

Parla (2001) and Kogacioglu (2004) challenged the idea that traditional behavior (such as honor killings) will eventually fade out as the modern institutions of the state such as the law takes precedence in the lives of the people. They argued that honor crimes, as well as other physical violence women suffer from in Turkey, should be viewed as an effect of institutions such as the legal system that plays a role in reproducing these crimes by labeling them as related to tradition and treating them as special cases:

"When violence against women is framed as a matter of "tradition," a distinction is established between, on the one hand, traditions—which are seen to be native, timeless, and unchanging—and on the other, institutions—which appear as contemporary and timely. The utterance of "timeless tradition," in other words, serves to produce its other, the modern, enlightened institution" (Kogacioglu 2004, 120).

Following Kogacioglu and Parla's criticism, we can ask: What effect does it have to label this killing as honor crime in the case of the descendants of the forcibly Islamized Armenians?

As I was finishing the writing process of this dissertation, an end for the court case for this killing wasn't still in sight. The missing chapter is waiting for the legal system of Turkey to pass its judgment on the fate of S.'s brother. The judgment will show how the legal institutions continue to create "tradition effects" (Kogacioglu 2004) on the murders of young women.

### **The Kurdishness of Armenian Return Converts**

These stories all base about an assumption about the forcibly Islamized Armenians: the ones that remained in the Eastern Anatolia were Kurdified and adopted the Kurdish minority's customs. This fact explained the use of honor killings, and customs as buzzwords in this tragedy. These words are mainly used in these murders to describe the traditional behavior of the Kurds.

Indeed, one common perception on the identity of the Muslim Armenians in Turkey is that they were Kurdified while forced to live as Muslims, mainly because they were living in the Kurdish areas of Turkey and speaking Kurdish in their daily lives. This thesis was put forward in many public forums not only by Turkish nationalist historians (see Chapter 6) but also by liberal Turkish and Armenian scholars working on the issue. Kurdification and Turkification was equalized, without distinguishing between these identities as belonging to minority and majority and thus effecting the conversion processes of the return converts in radically different ways. I argue that contrary to this accepted perception of their Kurdified, Turkified existence, the stories of the descendants of the forcefully Islamized Armenians emphasize their exclusion from the Kurdish, Turkish and Armenian belonging, alike (Chapters 4 and 7). Also, those lived as ethnic Kurds or Kurdish Alevis converted back to

Armenianness for politically different reasons than those lived as Sunni Muslim Turks (Chapter 4). The following questions still remain to be answered: What is the (positive or negative) impact of the Kurdish ethnic politics on the return conversion of Islamized Armenians? How do the conversion stories of forcefully Islamized Armenians challenge our understanding of the formation of political subjectivities in Turkey? How does Armenianness and Kurdishness interact in the highly politicized past and present of Turkey? My dissertation attempted to contribute to critical studies on the complex relationships between religion, secularism and tolerance as they are enacted by the return conversions of the forcefully Islamized Armenians in contemporary Turkey. An exploration of how their struggles intersect with the struggles of the Kurdish minority and how the Kurdishness of Islamized Armenians plays out within the rights struggles of return converts and other minority rights movements, is yet to come.

### **Who are the Descendants of the Forcibly Islamized Armenians?**

Armenian return converts constitute an extremely precarious group in contemporary Turkey. They are not Turkish, Kurdish or Muslim; they are not exactly Armenian either. In a sense I think of them as a third group, beyond majorities and minorities. If conversion describes a political rather than purely religious moment, I am concerned about the discourses and institutions that make Islamized Armenians controversial in Turkey today. Armenian conversions are rarely framed as a political movement in post-genocide Turkey. Yet, at the individual level, through their return conversions, Islamized Armenians mirror the limits of the recent public policies that deal with the legacies of genocidal violence in Turkey. This third group recalls historical violence and loss heritage; however, the grandchildren of the 1915

converts continue to search for a place they claim as home and end their yearning for peace. Indeed, every generation has suffered the rupture of family, community and culture. The return conversions of Islamized Armenians have to deal with this loss and feelings of shame and anger. Historical evidence shows that conversion is a vital strategy for survival in the face of mass violence. Be that as it may, accounts of religious conversion also uncover the everyday violence of the exclusion that converts experience in regard to both majority and minority communities. In the eyes of the majority of the Turkish public, they are marked as imposters or hidden enemies. And more poignantly, in the eyes of the established Armenian community, conversion is seen as a form of betrayal and the converts are viewed as traitors, turncoats. After S.'s and Z.'s murder, return converts are perceived as murderers and victims of each other; as well as victims of traditions. However, their voices are yet to be heard in the shadow of an unutterable violence.

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