Transformation of Belief Systems on Islamic Frontiers in India and Eastern Europe

The process of religious conversion is an issue which is frequently taken for granted in frontier history. In discussing the spread of world religions, it is easy to say, "Such and such a society converted to Islam." But the profound questions raised by that statement become clear when one considers the perspective of the individuals inhabiting that society. What is it that motivates them to make such a radical transformation in their belief systems? Or is the change really as radical and wholesale as the concept of "conversion" implies? And does the more active role belong to the "converters" or to the ones "converted?"

To explore this issue, this paper will compare the emergence of Muslim populations on two important frontiers of Islamic expansion: the Indian subcontinent (particularly Bengal) and the Balkan Peninsula of Eastern Europe, both of which were subject to the conquest and rule of Islamic-Turkish empires between roughly the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries CE. In both these regions, Islam established itself strongly in certain areas, so much so that conflict between the Muslim and surrounding communities has underlaid profound strife in modern times, well after the dissolution of the proselytizing Islamic empires. This comparison reveals striking similarities in the prior beliefs of the converted communities, in the conditions surrounding their exposure to Islam, and in the process by which they assimilated Islamic beliefs.

The stereotypical view is that conversion to Islam came at the end of a sword.
Like most stereotypes, this view has been accepted without proof or elaboration, and has never been developed into a viable theory of conversion. True, to some extent the stereotype has been propagated by Islamic accounts of conquerors who "forced Islam upon the inhabitants"\(^1\) or subjects who "submitted to Islam."\(^2\) But as Richard M. Eaton points out, these references are ambiguous, more likely using "Islam" to refer to the Indo-Muslim state and military than to the Islamic faith.\(^3\) This is supported by the Qur'an itself, which explicitly states there is no compulsion in Islam (2:256).

Additionally, one can question whether people under the threat of force would really submit meekly to the abandonment of entire worldviews, or instead embrace those worldviews all the more fiercely in defiance.

Much has been made of the Ottoman Empire's \textit{devshirme} system, in which non-Muslim subjects were periodically obliged to surrender their children for indoctrination as Muslims and training as \textit{yenicheri} (Janissary) soldiers or administrators. But according to Peter F. Sugar, "because those taken under this system were removed from their native land[s], this form of forced conversion\(^4\) did not

\(^{1}\text{André Wink, } \textit{Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World} (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 1997), II, p. 123.\)

\(^{2}\text{Richard M. Eaton, } \textit{The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760} \text{ (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993), p. 114.}\)

\(^{3}\text{Ibid., pp. 114-115.}\)

\(^{4}\text{It is arguable whether } \textit{devshirme} \text{ actually qualifies as forced conversion. The surrender of children was compulsory, but those children's upbringing as Muslims would presumably have been no more coercive than any other child's. Thus the use of coercion was distinct from the religious indoctrination.}\)
influence the religious composition" of those territories. So this cannot be an explanation for Islamization in the Balkans; and of course the uniquely Ottoman practice is inapplicable to India.

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Eaton further dismantles the forced-conversion hypothesis by analyzing the geographic distribution of the converted populations. The greatest Islamization actually occurred in those regions where state power was weakest and where the least military pressure would therefore have been felt. Eaton uses this same point to counter another prevailing theory, that populations converted due to the political advantages of joining Islam. The patronage of the political center would have been extremely dilute and ineffectual so far from the centers of power. It further invalidates the theory that the converted communities sought escape from prior social oppression. In these areas, the pre-Muslim state had as little influence as the Muslim state, and often less. Thus, these communities would not have been integrated into the existing hierarchy to begin with.  

Though Eaton’s thesis applies specifically to Bengal, we observe similar patterns in other Islamized communities. In the Punjab, the other principal area of Islamization in South Asia, the principal converts were again from geographically isolated communities, generally in hilly terrain, which were barely integrated into Hindu society.  

The principal Islamic regions in the Balkans, Bosnia and Kosovo, are also geographically isolated by their terrain, and were largely detached from Christendom at the time of the Ottoman conquests.

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But does this very isolation help explain their Islamization? Some argue that their lack of integration into the religious and cultural mainstream left these regions without strong religious ties, leaving them, in the words of Francine Friedman, "open to any aggressive ideology or religion that swept through [them]."\textsuperscript{9} Bosnia was home to a schismatic Christian group known today as the Bosnian Church, but it seems to have been a few isolated monasteries rather than a real church, having little involvement with or membership within the overall population.\textsuperscript{10} (This closely parallels the role of Buddhist monasteries in India. According to Wink, "the vast majority of people continued to practice one or another form of communal religion, while leaving the Buddhist... ideals to the monastic community."\textsuperscript{11})

\textsuperscript{9}Friedman, \textit{Bosnian Muslims}, p. 14.

\textsuperscript{10}Fine, \textit{Late Medieval Balkans}, pp. 481-82.

\textsuperscript{11}Wink, \textit{Al-Hind}, II, p. 342.
Friedman thus characterizes the Bosnian peasants as "religiously unengaged because of weak Christian proselytizing." Rather bluntly, she writes: "Common people must have felt spiritually adrift without an effective alternative church organization to guide them, thus increasing their vulnerability to the blandishments of Islam."12

There is clearly a bias inherent in Friedman's position. It assumes that the only alternative to membership in an organized church is irreligion. It also assumes that the mere absence of an organized religion is sufficient reason for a population to embrace the first one offered to them, as though membership in such an institution were an intrinsic human need. (These biasses are paralleled in Muslim writings about converts in Punjab. One chronicler wrote that "a great part of these mountain people, having very little notion of religion, was easily persuaded to adopt the tenets of the true faith."13)

There is no question that the Slavic peoples of the Balkans, including the Bosnians and Kosovar Albanians, were heirs to the ancient Slavic belief system, a polytheistic faith based heavily in animism and manism (ancestor worship).14 Indigenous beliefs also clearly existed in India; according to Eaton, the great world traveller Ibn Battuta "describes the inhabitants of the East Bengal hills as `noted for their devotion to and practice of magic and witchcraft.'"15 Friedman herself

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acknowledges that the Bosnians "appear to have followed an animistic type of religion," but dismisses its impact upon their lives in comparison to an organized faith such as Islam.

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But how organized was the Islam presented to the indigenous populations? In the Ottoman expansion, the vanguards of Islamic rule were the *ghazis*, a term generally rendered as "holy warriors" or "champions of the faith." It has been argued by various scholars, including Rudi Paul Lindner, that the actions of these *ghazis* were inconsistent with orthodox Islamic practices and policies: they fought against fellow Muslims and alongside Christians, pursued material gain, disregarded Islamic sexual or marital customs and retained non-Islamic or "shamanistic" customs. It has been suggested that they were simply raiders and mercenaries with no religious agenda. Cemal Kafadar counters that this takes an overly essentialist view of Islam; that although these warriors did not conform to orthodox norms, they considered themselves Muslims and called themselves *ghazi*. In short, they were adventurers and raiders who defined their actions in terms of advancing their religion.\(^{17}\) Sugar puts it more bluntly, saying that the *ghazis* were not "educated or sophisticated enough to understand the true meaning of the [religion] for which they fought.... [Their] beliefs had little to do with what the Muslim *ulema*... would have recognized as the correct understanding and interpretation" of Islam.\(^{18}\)

In short, the *ghazis*, and the Sufi mystics or dervishes who accompanied them (or were sometimes identical with them), embraced their own local variants of Islam, having little or no contact with the orthodox center. To the indigenous peoples they encountered, their religions would have seemed little different from the folk beliefs

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\(^{18}\)Sugar, *Southeastern Europe*, p. 11.
already present. As Eaton puts it, "they were not perceived as representing a `world' religion, but only the particular beliefs and practices associated with a local saint, a local qadi (Muslim judge) or the spiritual power of a local shrine."\textsuperscript{19} Sugar suggests that the "folk Islam" of ghazis and dervishes in the Balkans embodied much the same folk elements embraced by the indigenous cultures, absorbed over generations of residence in the Balkans. Thus, Islamization "was really only an easy transition from one folk level to another."\textsuperscript{20}


\textsuperscript{20}Sugar, \textit{Southeastern Europe}, p. 54.
Whether or not this was the case here or in India, the indigenous communities would have had no hesitation toward adopting foreign beliefs. In pre-literate societies, according to J. D. Y. Peel, "there is no sense of impersonal or universal orthodoxy of doctrine." Instead of a fixed cosmology and ethos printed in unchanging black and white, belief is a flexible system, pragmatically adaptable to changing circumstances. Such communities will readily adopt new spiritual tools as the need or opportunity arises.

The arrival of Islam in these instances brought both the need and the opportunity for change. In addition to new ideologies, the Muslims brought new knowledge and increased contact with the outside world. This broadening of cultural horizons motivated new spiritual exploration.

An explanation for this is offered by Robin Horton's "intellectualist theory," pertaining to indigenous cosmologies which define two spiritual tiers: a supreme deity who is detached from worldly affairs and only distantly contemplated; and a panoply of lower divinities or spirits who involve themselves directly in the world for good or ill. As these communities "have increasing contact with a world beyond their microcosm, however, people tend to give greater attention to their high god." If a monotheistic world religion such as Islam is present in the area, the expanding community may identify that faith's conception of God with its own, vaguely defined high deity.

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22 Ibid., pp. 273-75.

23 Eaton, "Comparative History as World History: Religious Conversion in Modern India" in *Journal of World History*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, Fall
Indeed, the indigenous beliefs in the regions in question did seem to take these patterns. According to the 1891 Census of India, in Bengal "[t]here is a vague but very general belief in some one omnipotent being, who is well disposed toward men, and whom therefore there is no necessity for propitiating. Then come a number of evil spirits, who are ill disposed toward human beings, and to whose malevolent interference are ascribed all the woes which afflict mankind."\textsuperscript{24} Traditional Slavic religion has been characterized as including "a belief in a single heavenly God, who ignored the affairs of this world, having delegated the governance of it to certain spirits begotten by him."\textsuperscript{25}

In fact, one of the aspects of the new knowledge brought to these communities was literacy, and a scripture-based religion. Despite this, the average, non-literate layperson would have continued to incorporate Islamic practices loosely into a pre-existing, adaptable belief structure. Indeed, the scripture itself could become part of these syncretistic practices, as seen in a striking parallel between the widely separated regions under discussion. Eaton describes a practice, endorsed by a Muslim \textit{qadi} in East Bengal, in which a written passage from the Qur'an is worn around the neck as a charm against evil spirits.\textsuperscript{26} An almost identical practice, the wearing of amulets containing written Qur'anic phrases to ward off magic spells, is part of Bosnian

\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., p. 249.

\textsuperscript{25}“Slavic religion” in \textit{Britannica}, subheading "Cosmogony."

\textsuperscript{26}Eaton, \textit{Rise of Islam}, pp. 294-95.
Muslim folklore to this day. In this practice, the significance of the Qur’anic text is seen not as a matter of semantic content but as one of talismanic magic. Thus, even the literate aspect of Islam is interpreted by the norms of a pre-literate belief structure.

This absorption of Islamic belief into existing cosmologies is only the initial stage of the process. According to Eaton, the completion of the "conversion" to Islam occurs generations, if not centuries, later, when a process of reform arises. Reform movements, Eaton explains, "are typically initiated by someone freshly returned from the purifying experience of a pilgrimage to Mecca, an experience which, among other things, heightens one's awareness of the universal truth of Islam as opposed to the local and very particularized idioms in which it may be expressed." The community which has come to think of itself as Muslim due to the inclusion of Islamic elements into its existing beliefs thus becomes aware of the more conventional definition of Muslim identity, and seeks to adjust its practices to fit that definition.

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In the Ottoman Empire, as described by Kafadar, the *ghazis* and dervishes were later followed by more orthodox educators and *ulema* (Islamic scholars) from the centers of power, who looked down on their heterodox forebears and sought to bring proper Islamic practice to the conquered lands. These are implied to be the agents of Islamic reform. However, in light of Eaton's thesis that transformation of belief can best be understood from the perspective of those undergoing the transformation, it might be better to see the scholars and educators merely as the Balkan Muslims' source of information about conventional Islam. Once that information became available, the impetus for reform may very well have come from within the Balkan communities themselves.

But even such reform movements are not the end of the process. As the earlier example of protective amulets shows, syncretic or folk elements remain in these Islamic communities through the present day. Reformers seeking to purify Islam of such heterodoxies also remain active. In a Muslim community one may find at least two kinds of people: those who define Muslim custom in terms of Islamic law, and those who define it in terms of the rituals of their own community, regardless of those rituals' ultimate origin.

From all this, we may derive the conclusion that "religious conversion" is an invalid concept, at least when applied on the level of societies rather than individuals.

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A new religion is not adopted wholesale, knocking the old religion into oblivion. Nor does it merely fill the vacuum resulting from a lack of religion. And the transformation is not driven by the industry (let alone the mere arrival) of an essential, uniform church which overwhelms an entire ideology through the force (conceptual or military) of its own.

Rather, we must see religious belief as an organic, fluid system, growing and changing in response to new stimuli. The transformation of belief is an evolutionary process, characterized more by continuity than disjunction. New beliefs are absorbed into existing worldviews, expanding and gradually modifying a community's definition of itself. Muslim (or any world-religious) identity increasingly becomes a part of the cultural identity. In time, the community is brought closer into the larger community which also asserts a Muslim identity, and thus comes to see that identity as being larger than the community identity, which is then adjusted to fit. The community is not "converted" from outside, but adapts itself to its perceived spiritual environment.

This also illustrates that religion as used by the people can be profoundly different from religion as employed by the orthodox establishment. For those whose authority is based on religious doctrine, that doctrine is a fixed, comprehensive system which must be embraced completely and exclusively; otherwise the grounds for their authority are tenuous. But to the mass of believers, religion is a system for coping with everyday life, a set of tools to be applied pragmatically; they tend therefore to adopt whatever tools seem to work for them, and neglect those which do not. This is hardly limited to Muslims arising from pagan backgrounds; we see it today in the many Americans who consider themselves committed Christians but who reject certain moral
positions of the church, or embrace "New Age" spirituality. Where the church would see paradox, the believer sees none, because religion serves them each in different ways.

This is no doubt why the question of "conversion" has been so greatly misunderstood in historical studies: because the focus has usually been on the perspective of orthodox religious establishments, which seek to remain unchanged, rather than that of the adaptable individuals and communities who actually undergo the change.